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March 1, 2023
Intercessory Prayer

Readings for today: Numbers 14-16, Psalm 95 (audio reading)

Yesterday we read about Moses being the most humble man on the face of the earth. Today we see his humility in action. Over and over again, the people of Israel question his leadership. Question his motives. Question his character. They accuse him of bringing them out of Egypt only to kill them. They accuse him of being power-hungry and authoritarian and a dictator. They resist him at every turn. They refuse to obey the commands of the Lord. They complain bitterly. They walk in fear not faith.

What is God's response to their rebellion? Righteous anger and judgment. He is fully within His rights to kill them all and start over which is exactly what He threatens to do on multiple occasions. The only thing standing in the way of God and the complete destruction of the people of Israel is Moses. Rather than become defensive or take their attacks personally, Moses remains faithful. He stands between them and God as an intercessor. He pours his heart out in prayer. He calls on God to be faithful to His own character. He cries out to God to stay true to His vision to make His glory known throughout the earth. He asks for forgiveness and mercy for the sins of the people and God responds to Moses' prayers by issuing a lighter sentence and extending grace.

It's an amazing interaction that demonstrates the power of intercessory prayer. Listen to it again from the Message version, "All the People of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. "Why didn't we die in Egypt? Or in this wilderness? Why has God brought us to this country to kill us? Our wives and children are about to become plunder. Why don't we just head back to Egypt? And right now!" Soon they were all saying it to one another: "Let's pick a new leader; let's head back to Egypt." Moses and Aaron fell on their faces in front of the entire community, gathered in emergency session...But, up in arms now, the entire community was talking of hurling stones at them. Just then the bright Glory of God appeared at the Tent of Meeting. Every Israelite saw it. God said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me like dirt? How long refuse to trust me? And with all these signs I've done among them! I've had enough—I'm going to hit them with a plague and kill them. But I'll make you into a nation bigger and stronger than they ever were." But Moses said to God, "The Egyptians are going to hear about this! You delivered this people from Egypt with a great show of strength, and now this? The Egyptians will tell everyone. They've already heard that you are God, that you are on the side of this people, that you are present among them, that they see you with their own eyes in your Cloud that hovers over them, in the Pillar of Cloud that leads them by day and the Pillar of Fire at night. If you kill this entire people in one stroke, all the nations that have heard what has been going on will say, 'Since God couldn't get these people into the land which he had promised to give them, he slaughtered them out in the wilderness.' Now, please, let the power of the Master expand, enlarge itself greatly, along the lines you have laid out earlier when you said, "God, slow to get angry and huge in loyal love, forgiving iniquity and rebellion and sin; Still, never just whitewashing sin. But extending the fallout of parents' sins to children into the third, even the fourth generation." Please forgive the wrongdoing of this people out of the extravagance of your loyal love just as all along, from the time they left Egypt, you have been forgiving this people." God said, "I forgive them, honoring your words. But as I live and as the Glory of God fills the whole Earth—not a single person of those who saw my Glory, saw the miracle signs I did in Egypt and the wilderness, and who have tested me over and over and over again, turning a deaf ear to me—not one of them will set eyes on the land I so solemnly promised to their ancestors. No one who has treated me with such repeated contempt will see it." (Numbers 14:1-5, 10-23)

I can't imagine the humility it must have taken for Moses to stand in the gap for the very people who rejected him. He and Aaron found themselves in the midst of a mutiny and yet fell to their knees before God to intercede on behalf of those who were seeking to kill them. Furthermore, I cannot imagine the courage it must have taken for Moses to stand in the gap before the righteous anger and judgment of God and ask Him to turn aside. Moses quite literally laid down his life in making this prayer and God honored his sacrifice.

Yesterday, I received a call from a dear friend. Her son is in critical condition in the hospital. He has struggled so much over the course of his life and, though he knows the truth of the gospel, he has yet to fully surrender to it. She wept as she shared his broken condition with me and her heart to see him healed and restored not just physically but spiritually as well. I told her I believed with all my heart that God is already at work answering her prayers. How can I say something like with confidence? Because our God truly is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. I know He looks down and sees this mother's tears. He has heard every single prayer she's offered for years on behalf of her son. And I cannot believe a child who has been so fervently prayed for will perish. God will heal and restore him in this life or the next. This is the power of intercessory prayer.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 17-20

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March 2, 2023
Shifting Blame

Readings for today: Numbers 17-20 (audio reading)

As a pastor, I do a lot of counseling. One of the most common issues I face is something called “blame shifting.” Basically, a person commits a wrong and when confronted on it, “shifts” the blame to someone else. This can be their spouse. Their children. Their parents. Even their pastor! ;-) I cannot tell you the number of times I have counseled a couple on their marriage only to have them blame me for their eventual separation and divorce. Nevermind the fact they were unwilling to put in the work. Unwilling to do the homework I assigned. Unwilling to change any of their unhealthy behaviors. Unwilling to engage each other at a different level. At the end of the day, because the counseling didn’t “work”, it must be my failure as a pastor.

We see this same dynamic in play in Moses’ relationship with Israel. How many times do they accuse Moses of failing to lead them well? How many times do they blame him for not providing water, food, or getting them to the Promised Land? Nevermind their own sin. Their own lack of faith. Their own fear. Their worship of false gods. “We wish we’d died when the rest of our brothers died before God. Why did you haul this congregation of God out here into this wilderness to die, people and cattle alike? And why did you take us out of Egypt in the first place, dragging us into this miserable country? No grain, no figs, no grapevines, no pomegranates—and now not even any water!” (Numbers 20:3-5 MSG) Over and over again, we hear this refrain. Let’s go back to Egypt. Let’s go back to slavery. You brought us out here to die. You brought us out here to suffer. It would be truly baffling if I didn’t see it everyday.

Jesus addresses “blame-shifting” in the Sermon on the Mount. “It’s easy to see a smudge on your neighbor’s face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, ‘Let me wash your face for you,’ when your own face is distorted by contempt? It’s this whole traveling road-show mentality all over again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face, and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbor.” (Matthew 7:3-5 MSG) Essentially, we have to be humble enough to acknowledge our own fears and failures and struggles and sin before we dare to confront someone else on their issues. We have to be willing to look ourselves in the mirror and honestly confront our own faults before we point out to others where they fall short. In my experience, there is plenty of blame to go around in just about every broken relationship. It’s always a two-way street.

We live in a highly critical world. A quick glance through Twitter or Facebook reveals how quick we are to blame others. We blame the system. We blame the government. We blame the church. We blame liberals. We blame conservatives. We blame Republicans. We blame Democrats. We blame our leaders. We blame teachers. We blame coaches. We blame absentee fathers. It’s like “blame-shifting” has become the national pastime. What you rarely see is anyone taking responsibility for why they find themselves in the position they’re in. You rarely find anyone acknowledging the ways they failed and how that contributed to their pain and suffering and heartache. No, it’s always someone else’s fault which makes us the “victim.” And there is great power in our culture today in casting ourselves as “victims” for it means we don’t have to take responsibility for our actions. We set ourselves beyond accountability. No one gets to confront us and we think we are safe. The sad reality is when we avoid confrontation, accountability and responsibility; we never grow. And because we never grow, we tend to experience only more loneliness, pain, and heartache. It’s a vicious cycle.

So where do you find yourself today? Are you the kind of person who takes responsibility for your failures? Is confessional prayer a regular part of your life? Do you find it easy to apologize and ask for forgiveness? When confronted, do you listen and receive what the other person is saying or do you get defensive? Do you blame shift? In Christ, we are set free from the need to be perfect. In Christ, we are set free from the need to perform. In Christ, we have nothing to fear and no need to blame. In Christ, we can accept the reality that we are sinners in desperate need of grace.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 21-24

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March 3, 2023

Salvation

Readings for today: Numbers 21-24 (audio reading)

Today's passage became a lot more real to me last summer when I was in Jordan. On the final day of our tour, I found myself standing on the summit of Mt. Nebo where Moses looked out over the Jordan River valley before he died. In addition to the beautiful church, a magnificent statue has been erected that combines the cross with the bronze serpent from today's story and the passage from John 3:14 that refers to Jesus being "lifted up" just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. Why is this reference important? John 3:15 states it plainly, "so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life."

Our God is a God of salvation. Whatever else you may say about God, you must say this. From the beginning of Scripture until the end, God reveals Himself to be a God who saves. A God who delivers. A God who rescues His people. When the people of Israel complained to God - once again - about their conditions, He sent a plague of fiery serpents. The plague raged throughout the camp, killing many Israelites and they cried out for relief. So God directed Moses to craft a bronze serpent and "lift it up" on pole tall enough for all to see. Those who had been bitten could look to the serpent and find healing, those who did not would find death. Interestingly enough, this same bronze serpent would later become an idol in the national life of Israel and it was destroyed under the reign of King Hezekiah as an act of faithfulness to Yahweh.

So much of the Old Testament foreshadows the eventual fulfillment of salvation history. It's why the New Testament writers filled their gospels and letters with allusion after allusion to the Old Testament stories. In this way, Jesus refers to Himself as the "bronze snake" who saves. He will be lifted up at the end of His life and that those who look upon Him in faith will live. How is Jesus lifted up? He is clearly speaking of His manner of death. He will be lifted up on a cross and put on display for all to see. Those who look to Him and trust in His atoning death will be healed of their sin for all eternity while those who look away will only find judgment and death.

Friends, the message of the gospel is very simple...Jesus came to earth to die and be raised and all who believe in Him will not perish but have eternal life. I love St. Augustine of Hippo's commentary on today's passage, "Just as they who looked on that serpent perished not by the serpent's bites, so they who look in faith on Christ's death are healed from the bites of sins."

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 25-28

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March 4, 2023
Sex and God

Readings for today: Numbers 25-28 (audio reading)

Today is one of those days where I would encourage everyone to read the passage in the Message version so you don't miss the significance of what's happening. Because of the cultural distance, the meaning of the original languages is difficult to convey. The ESV summarizes Numbers 25 as "Baal Worship at Peor" while the Message titles the same chapter, "The Orgy at Shittim." The ESV tells us the people of God began to "whore with the daughters of Moab" while the Message says they "began to have sex with the Moabite women." Obviously, the translators of the ESV are staying true to the original language which I deeply appreciate and normally prefer while the translator of the Message (Eugene Peterson of whom I am a big fan) is trying to convey the meaning in modern terms which I think is helpful. Let's lay verses 1-3 side by side so you can see what I mean...

"While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel." (Numbers 25:1-3 ESV)

"While Israel was camped at Shittim (Acacia Grove), the men began to have sex with the Moabite women. It started when the women invited the men to their sex-and-religion worship. They ate together and then worshiped their gods. Israel ended up joining in the worship of the Baal of Peor. God was furious, his anger blazing out against Israel." (Numbers 25:1-3 MSG)

Why is this important? Because we often struggle to understand the depth of God's righteous anger. We feel it's unfair or unwarranted or an overreaction. This is why it's critical for us to grasp the depths of the depravity of human sin. Baal was a Canaanite god worshipped in many different ways by many different tribes. Baal is typically understood to be the storm god. The god of weather and fertility. In an agrarian culture, one can easily see how such a god would gain ascendance and become the primary object of worship along with his divine consort, Astarte. Worshipping Baal involved ritual sex. Priests and priestesses would copulate with worshippers who came to make offerings at the shrine. On high holy days, the community would gather and engage in large-scale orgies as they sought to commune with Baal. Some Baal cults went to the extreme often sacrificing children or worshipping their own excrement. Yes, you read that last part right. Their worship literally involved the uncovering of the rectum - the most shameful part of the human body according to the Jews due to its almost permanent state of uncleanness - and depositing their waste on the altar. Such was life under the cult of Baal-Peor. God hates Baal worship. Hates it for what it represents. Hates what it does to His divine-image bearers. Hates how it de-humanizes and demeans. He is disgusted by it. Offended by it. So when His own people - the people He miraculously saved and sustained - begin to worship the Baal of Peor, He responds with swift, righteous judgment. A plague is unleashed, perhaps originating from the very waste the Moabites worshipped, killing 24,000 Israelites. Things would have been much worse except for Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, who takes up a spear and kills an Israelite man and Moabite woman as they engaged in ritual sex in front of Moses and the gathered congregation at the entrance of the Tabernacle itself! This incident at Peor is so horrifying, it becomes a watchword for future generations of Israelites. It will be used as a metaphor in both the Psalms and prophetic literature to describe extreme acts of unfaithfulness on the part of God's people.

Sadly, Baal worship is experiencing a revival in our own day and age. Perhaps not in the extreme form represented by Baal-Peor but certainly in the sexual liberties of 21st century American culture. Sex has become a god in our world. Lust has been mainstreamed. Altars to Eros have been erected all over and command millions of worshippers. Sexual restraint is considered unholy. The denial of sexual desire almost criminal. Speaking out against the god of sex blasphemous. Baal has even ensnared millions of Christians as well. Pornography. Sexual promiscuity. Adultery. Homosexuality. Serial divorce. You name it, the American church has condoned it. And where has it led us? Broken marriages. Abortion. Abuse. Sexually transmitted disease. Broken families and broken relationships. The consequences are legion.

Against this rising tide of paganism stands Jesus. He affirms God's design for holy sexuality within the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. He speaks out against the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes. He calls for sexual restraint in His Sermon on the Mount. He sets us free from the enslaving power of sexual desire and He offers us the far more fulfilling life of holiness instead. Are you struggling with sexual temptation in your life? Have you experienced sexual brokenness and shame? Do you feel enslaved to your sexual desires? Jesus offers you freedom. Jesus offers forgiveness. Our faith in Jesus gives us the power to live a holy life and experience the joy that comes from submitting our sexual desires to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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March 6, 2023
SACRIFICE

Readings for today: Numbers 29-32 (audio readings)

It is important to read the Bible honestly because the text begs all kinds of questions. For example, today's reading details the enormous number of sacrifices the people of Israel were called to make on a regular basis. Anyone else wonder how they accomplished it? The logistics alone must have been incredibly complex! Not only that but why all the sacrifices? What's the deeper meaning behind all this instruction?

The first thing one has to understand is that the Book of Numbers was not written as a math textbook anymore than Genesis was written as a science textbook. Israel often reported their "numbers" collectively rather than individually and sometimes spoke hyperbolically to make a deeper point. For example, Numbers 11 talks about God giving quail to Israel to eat after they complained about the manna. One skeptic, doing the math, suggests God would have had to send 29 trillion quail if we take the calculations literally. Obviously, this is a misreading and the careful reader is able to make room for hyperbole without losing sight of the larger point. The Torah is not a system of equations to solve which is why Biblical numerology is junk science.

Having said that, it doesn't mean every detail of these stories should be taken allegorically or metaphorically. These events did actually take place. There is real truth here that needs to be teased out. So, Israel's sacrifices. Without a doubt, life in ancient Israel was a virtual slaughterhouse. Practiced faithfully, the priests would be sacrificing thousands of animals every single year. Here again the principle of representation applies as it is entirely possible one man's sacrifice would "represent" an entire family, clan, or tribe. Furthermore, considerable latitude was given in ancient near east cultures when it came to the practical application of the law. What I mean is that it's highly unlikely Israel ever truly lived up to the standards Moses set for them. At the same time, the sacrificial fires were kept burning day and night. By the time we get to the Temple in Jerusalem, the Talmud depicts priests wading knee deep in blood. Some passages describe up to 1.2 million animals being slaughtered in a single day, something the Roman historian Josephus confirms. Archaeological evidence from dumps outside the city seem to confirm these findings as well. The reality is the sacrificial system of Israel created an enormous economic engine that had to be supported by trade, animal husbandry, a literal army of priests, etc.

But why? Why all the blood? Why all the slaughter? Why all the sacrifice? What's God trying to prove? The sacrificial system's main purpose was to remind the people of Israel of their utter dependence on God. Everything they "owned" was given to them by Him. He held first claim to their harvests and flocks and lives. Making these regular offerings reminded them they were simply stewards of God's gifts. Nothing more. Second, the constant shedding of blood reminded them of their sin and their need to remain pure before the Lord. The people of Israel were human beings just like you and me. All of them had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All of them stood in constant need for forgiveness and grace before the Lord. Third, the sacrificial system set them apart. It made them different than the pagan nations around them. Israel enjoyed a special, unique relationship with God. They were His chosen race. His royal priesthood. A people for His own possession. As such, they maintained a particular, even peculiar, way of life that served as a continual reminder of their exalted status.

What does all this have to do with us? Well, I love how the writer of Hebrews puts it, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2) Jesus is our perfect, eternal sacrifice. Through His suffering and death, He lays claim to our lives. Through the shedding of His blood, we are purified from sin. Through His resurrection, we now enjoy the same unique relationship with Him that Israel enjoyed with Yahweh. This is why the author of Hebrews challenges us to keep our eyes on Christ and find daily, weekly, monthly, even annual rhythms that will draw us continually back to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 33-36

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March 7, 2023
Travelogue

Readings for today: Numbers 33-36 (audio reading)

I will admit that I used to pass over the readings for today with the exception of the daughters of Zelophehad in chapter 36. The names and places on Israel's journey didn't mean much to me. The division of the Promised Land and the assignment of the cities to the Levites didn't hold much allure or much relevance for me. But then I took a trip to the Holy Land this last summer that included a week in Jordan. We traveled the length and breadth of the country and it dawned on me that I was traveling in the same territory as the ancient Israelites after they left Egypt. I was in the ancient Biblical kingdoms of Edom and Ammon and Moab. I was catching a glimpse of their world through their eyes. It changed everything for me.

Wadi Rum is a desert valley located in the southernmost part of Jordan. It was once part of the ancient kingdoms of Midian and Edom. It is a trackless wasteland with little to no water. One can easily see how Israel, moving through this territory, would have become discouraged. Petra, the capital of Edom, is located just to the north. The Nabateans used this valley as a trade route and it's entirely possible the people of Israel used their routes as they traveled north towards Jericho and the Promised Land.

Jabal Haroun is the traditional site revered by Christians as Mount Hor where Aaron died and was buried. You can reach his shrine today via an 11km trail from the center of Petra. You can also catch a glimpse of Jabal Haroun from the tallest mountains in Petra.

Eventually, of course, they end up on the plains of Moab outside of Jericho. Moses ascends Mount Nebo where tradition tells us he sees the Promised Land before he dies. The mantle of leadership is then passed to Joshua who leads the armies of Israel across the Jordan River to begin the conquest of the Land of Canaan.

One of the things I would encourage anyone to do if they are able to take a trip to Israel is spend a few extra days in Jordan to see some of these sights. The Old Testament will come alive in ways you never imagined.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 1-3

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March 8, 2023

His Story

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 1-3 (audio reading)

When I was in college, I took a Women's Studies class to fulfill a graduation requirement. It was a fascinating experience. Probably the thing I remember most is the first day when our professor walked into the room, walked up to the board, and said, "the first thing we have to do in this class is change our language. History is too often "his story" and we're here to study "her story." She went on to change words like "woman" to "womyn" and "human" to "humyn" in order to make the point that even the language of the human race has been dominated by men. While I thought she was being overly pedantic, I took her point and truly enjoyed the class. (I also found her to be extremely fair-minded especially when I offered some counter-points in the papers I wrote.)

As we read the first few chapters of Deuteronomy this morning, I thought about how history truly is His Story. It's the story of God's interactions with humanity. Relentlessly pursuing them with His love. Remaining faithful to them despite their unfaithfulness. Rescuing them from slavery and bondage. It's why the great Jewish Rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, once called the Bible the story of "God's search for man" rather than man's search for God, as it is in every other religion. As Moses recounts the journey Israel has undertaken to get to the plains of Moab, poised to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land, he makes it clear that only God could have brought them thus far. He pulls no punches as he lists the many ways they failed along the way. He even acknowledges his own sin which will preclude him from crossing over. He wants to make sure this next generation remembers the mistakes of their ancestors so they won't repeat them. But even more than that, he wants them to remember God's faithfulness. He wants them to remember God's saving work. He wants them to remember God's miraculous deliverance at every point along the way.

There are many who don't believe the Exodus happened. Many who believe Israel appeared essentially out of nowhere. They cite the lack of archaeological evidence in the Sinai peninsula, ignoring the fact that the desert has a way of burying such evidence very quickly. (For example, a military jeep from the Six Days War in 1967 was recently found beneath 51 feet of sand.) They cite the lack of evidence in the Egyptian archives of the massive slave revolt as if the Egyptian pharaohs would allow such a defeat to be recorded under their watch. They cite all kinds of problems in squaring what we know of history with the conquest narratives of Scripture which admittedly can be tricky but only if you fail to take into account the fact that such narratives are not written with objectivity in mind. They are written from a theological point of view with a desire to honor God's faithfulness to His covenant people which doesn't mean they are any less true though they are most certainly biased. No matter what you believe about the veracity of the details of the story, without a doubt something significant must have happened. The Exodus is the seminal event in Israel's history. It shapes them profoundly to this day. God acted in history to save His people from slavery. That much must be true. The story has too much power to not be grounded in real world events.

The same is true for our Exodus as Christians. So many people try to spiritualize the death and resurrection of Jesus. Like Thomas Jefferson famously excising the miracles out of the Bible, they do all they can to eliminate the supernatural when it comes to the life of Jesus. But a fiction would not have held up especially in those early centuries when the church was undergoing significant persecution. A fiction would not hold up under the torture and martyrdom so many men and women endured. A fiction would not have prevailed over the might of a thoroughly pagan empire like Rome. All the enemies of Christ had to do was produce a body. But they could not and therein lies the

difference between the resurrection of Jesus and all the other so-called resurrection myths that exist in other cultures. Jesus was a real man who died a real death who rose again to new life, left behind an empty tomb, and appeared in the flesh to hundreds of people before ascending into heaven. This is His Story. This is our story as believers. Thanks be to God.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 4-7

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March 9, 2023
Personal God

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 4-7 (audio reading)

“I don’t believe in a personal god.” I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve heard someone say this to me over the years. Some of them have been Christians, even fellow pastors, in the denomination I once served. Some of them are Jewish and they argue that God is just too big to know and is “wholly other.” Some of them are generically Deist. They believe all religions are essentially pointing to the same, fundamental reality but that God ultimately cannot be truly known. Some are true believers who struggle to reconcile a personal God with all the evil and suffering they see in the world. Some are even agnostic. Though they doubt there’s a God, they concede if God does exist God would be, by definition, beyond human understanding.

The Bible clearly reveals God to be deeply personal. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, defining Himself by His personal relationship with His creatures. He is the God of Moses who is abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving His people to the thousandth generation while not ignoring sin. He is the God of Israel, delivering His people from slavery in Egypt and choosing them from among all the nations of the earth to be His treasured possession. He is the God of the famous shema, the fundamental confession of faith for Israel... “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 ESV) Indeed, one cannot read these chapters from Deuteronomy today without coming face to face with a God who makes Himself known. A God who makes His promise personal. A God who refuses to be God without a covenant people to call His very own.

Take a few minutes and re-read the chapters for today. Pay special attention to all the promises God offers His people. In addition to the promise of a covenantal relationship, there is the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey. A life of blessing for those who are faithful to the covenant. A life of abundance for those who work hard. The promise of wisdom and understanding. The promise of a great reputation as the nations around them look on the relationship Israel has with her God in awe and wonder. The list goes on and on.

And what about us? The Bible was written for us but not written to us so do these promises still apply? The short answer is “yes.” In Christ, all the promises of God are “yes and amen.” (2 Corinthians 1:20 ESV) The promise of a new covenantal relationship with God has been sealed in His blood. The promise of a “land” has been extended to the four corners of the earth. The promise of blessing is still in force for those who faithfully follow Jesus. The promise of a great reputation among the pagan nations is also still very much in play as Christians lay down their lives in service to the least reached and least resourced. Spend some time in quiet before the Lord. Let Him speak to you in the deepest places of your heart and remind you of His great love for you.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 8-11

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March 10, 2023
Great Expectations

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 8-11 (audio reading)

I love this set of verses from the Message paraphrase today, “So now Israel, what do you think God expects from you? Just this: Live in his presence in holy reverence, follow the road he sets out for you, love him, serve God, your God, with everything you have in you, obey the commandments and regulations of God that I’m commanding you today—live a good life.” (Deuteronomy 10:12-13 MSG) What a great message for Israel, for us, and all who would follow Christ!

“Live in His presence in holy reverence...” Treat God as holy. Honor God above every other commitment in your life. Put Him first by spending sacred, dedicated, intentional time with Him each day. Worship Him with His people each week. Humble yourself before Him by confessing your sin and offering your body as a living sacrifice.

“Follow the road He sets out for you...” Walk with open hands. Your life is not your own. Let God direct your steps. Hold your plans loosely. Never cling tightly to what you have or where you are in life. Let go and let God use you for His purposes and His glory. Be willing to risk it all for the sake of God’s kingdom.

“Love God...” Always remember God is more than your King. More than your Creator. More than your Judge. He is your Heavenly Father who loves you with an everlasting love and He chose you to be adopted as His daughter or son from before the foundations of the world. Love Him in return. Love Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love Him with all that you are.

“Serve God, your God, with everything you have in you...” Don’t hold back. Make it your singular focus to wake up every day to serve your family, friends, church, and community in the name of Jesus. Lay down your life for those you love. Love even your enemies and bless those who may persecute and abuse you. Do not seek to be served but serve and give your life as a ransom for as many as possible just like Jesus.

“Obey the commandments and regulations of God...” God’s way is the best way to live. Really the only way to live. Fear Him and you will fear nothing else. Love Him and your ability to love others will deepen and grow to levels you never thought possible. Trust Him and you will find strength and wisdom and resources you never knew existed and your life will become a living testimony to His goodness and grace.

This, friends, is the very definition of the “good life” and it should shape the expectations of anyone who would seek to follow Christ in our world today.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 12-15

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March 11, 2023
The End of Poverty

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 12-15 (audio reading)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

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March 13, 2023
Capital Punishment

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 16-19 (audio reading)

I remember seeing death row for the first time. I was serving as a volunteer chaplain at New Jersey State Prison and I was being given a tour by the head chaplain of the facility. I was not allowed on death row but I was able to see it from the outside. The men housed there had committed horrendous crimes and, as such, were isolated from one another. They were never allowed to mix with each other or the general population. They were given one hour a day outside their cell for exercise. They took their meals by themselves. They basically were running out the clock on their appeal process. The last person to be executed in New Jersey was in 1963 though the death penalty wasn't officially abolished until 2007, about five years after I finished my chaplaincy.

When I first began serving at NJSP, I was pro-death penalty. I believed some crimes were so horrendous and some people so evil, justice demanded they pay with their lives. I believed it helped the victims and their families find closure. And, perhaps most of all, I believed it was biblical. Passages like the one we read today were some of the key texts I relied on in my own thinking. "But only on the testimony of two or three witnesses may a person be put to death. No one may be put to death on the testimony of one witness. The witnesses must throw the first stones in the execution, then the rest of the community joins in. You have to purge the evil from your community." (Deuteronomy 17:6-7 MSG) I found that last statement particularly compelling. Purging the evil from the community seemed like a good thing especially when one considered the nature of the crimes that would merit the death penalty.

When I finished my service at NJSP, I was anti-death penalty. Why did my views change? After all, the nature of the crimes these men committed were still horrendous. The trauma they caused still demanded justice. The grief and pain of the victim's family and friends was still very real and heartbreaking and demanded closure. And the Bible certainly didn't change. So why my own change of heart? First and foremost, I was challenged to dig deeper into Scripture. Even in the passage cited above, it's important to pay close attention to the process God lays out when it comes to capital punishment. There must be two or three witnesses which eliminates any reasonable doubt.

Furthermore, the witnesses themselves must be so convinced that they are willing to throw the first stone or flip the switch in our case. Not only that but the entire community must be part of carrying out the sentence. It cannot happen behind closed doors or in private or in secret. This stands in sharp contrast to how we carry out the death penalty today. Second, the chaplains I worked with and trusted shared with me how elusive closure could be for the families of victims. Simply killing the person who killed their loved one often didn't bring any sense of peace and it actually robbed the person of the potential opportunity to extend forgiveness. Third, executing someone who does not believe in Jesus Christ sentences them to an eternity in hell. Add to this all the additional costs of the appeal process (it's actually cheaper to keep a person in prison for life), the lack of evidence that it acts as a deterrent, and the fact that poverty and race play a disproportionate role in convictions and you can see why my views changed.

God is a God of justice. He will by no means clear the guilty or give the sinner a pass. He gives us the law in order to restrain the evil impulses of the human heart. Evil impulses that result in abuse, violence, and so much pain and suffering. God hates what we do to ourselves and what we do to others. He cannot stand man's inhumanity to man. This is why He came. This is why He died. This is why He rose again. He breaks the power of sin that enslaves and oppresses and creates the conditions under which we commit our crimes. He breaks the power of death, commuting our own death sentence by

dying in our place. Finally, He gives us the gift - not of life in prison - but of eternal life with Him.
Praise be to God for His amazing grace!

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 20-23

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March 14, 2023

The Curse

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 20-23 (audio reading)

Today's are especially harsh to 21st century ears. Once again, we are confronted with the cultural distance between us and the world of the ancient near east. Holy war. Dead bodies. Rebellious children. Rape. And a host of odd rules regarding planting, plowing, and the mixing of fabrics. The overarching purpose of all these commands has to do with ritual purity. Something God is deeply concerned about. He wants to make sure His people are not polluted by the impurities that surround them lest they find themselves coming under the curse. This is why the punishment He doles out is so brutal and unyielding.

Buried in all the discussion today about who gets stoned for what and when is a key passage that's easy to miss. Deuteronomy 21:22-23, "When a man has committed a capital crime, been given the death sentence, executed and hung from a tree, don't leave his dead body hanging overnight from the tree. Give him a decent burial that same day so that you don't desecrate your God-given land—a hanged man is an insult to God." (Deuteronomy 21:22-23 MSG) Blessings and curses are a huge theme in Deuteronomy. If you do well, you will be blessed. If you rebel against the commands of God, you are cursed. And not just you but your family, your land, your friends and neighbors because every action we take has communal consequences. This is why God is constantly telling His people to expel those who break His law lest they defile the land.

Enter the Apostle Paul. He picks up on this theme of "blessings and curses" in the Book of Galatians. He is writing to a group of largely Gentile believers who are doing their best to keep the Law of Moses. The entire book is a forceful critique that draws a sharp contrast between life under the Law and life under the Spirit. "Anyone who tries to live by his own effort, independent of God, is doomed to failure. Scripture backs this up: Utterly cursed is every person who fails to carry out every detail written in the Book of the law...Rule-keeping does not naturally evolve into living by faith, but only perpetuates itself in more and more rule-keeping...and Christ redeemed us from that self-defeating, cursed life by absorbing it completely into himself. Do you remember the Scripture that says, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree..." That is what happened when Jesus was nailed to the cross: He became a curse, and at the same time dissolved the curse. And now, because of that, the air is cleared and we can see that Abraham's blessing is present and available for non-Jews, too. We are all able to receive God's life, his Spirit, in and with us by believing—just the way Abraham received it." (Galatians 3:9-14 MSG) Basically, Paul argues that when we seek to justify ourselves by keeping the Law, we become cursed because no one can actually achieve what the Law demands. Furthermore, he tags Abraham and reminds God's people that it is not the Law that justifies in the first place but faith! So what then happens to the Law? What happens to all the curses that have piled up over the centuries through the failure of God's people to keep it? Christ literally becomes the curse for us! He takes our place and perfectly satisfies the Law's just demands and the sign of this great salvific event is the cross. Golgotha is the place where Jesus literally hangs on a tree, becoming cursed on our behalf. As we know, He doesn't hang there all night but is buried that same day in accordance with the instructions given in Deuteronomy so even in His death, He fulfills the Law. This is incredible news but Paul's not done! Not only did Christ remove the curse through His saving death, He also unleashed all the blessings! All the promises God made to His people from Abraham forward are now ours in Christ Jesus! All the blessings of obedience are given to us because of Christ's great faithfulness!

It is so easy to make the mistake of reading Deuteronomy and get crushed by the weight of expectations. We read about the blessings and curses and think immediately of our own lives and how often we fall short. We start to wonder and question our faith in God. We immediately recognize the gap that exists between who we are and who we should be. An honest person knows they've sinned and fallen short of God's glory. An honest person knows they've done things that bring them under the curse. An honest person looks at the sin of their life and experiences deep grief over what they have done. All that is good because it drives us to Christ! It brings us to the end of ourselves. The end of our pride. The end of our self-sufficiency. And there Christ meets us with open arms. Hands and feet bearing the scars from where He hung on the tree. He embraces us. He lets us know all has been accomplished. The work of salvation has been finished. We are set free.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 24-27

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March 15, 2023
First Fruits

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 24-27 (audio reading)

“A wandering Aramean was my father, he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, he and just a handful of his brothers at first, but soon they became a great nation, mighty and many. The Egyptians abused and battered us, in a cruel and savage slavery. We cried out to God, the God-of-Our-Fathers: He listened to our voice, he saw our destitution, our trouble, our cruel plight. And God took us out of Egypt with his strong hand and long arm, terrible and great, with signs and miracle-wonders. And he brought us to this place, gave us this land flowing with milk and honey. So here I am. I’ve brought the firstfruits of what I’ve grown on this ground you gave me, O God. Then place it in the Presence of God, your God. Bow low in the Presence of God, your God. And rejoice! Celebrate all the good things that God, your God, has given you and your family; you and the Levite and the foreigner who lives with you.” (Deuteronomy 26:5-11 MSG)

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

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

These are great questions. And if we’re honest, we’ve all probably asked them. But let’s go a level deeper. Let’s bring it closer to home. How are we spending our money? Are we actually any better than the church or organization we criticize? If we were to open our personal books and give ourselves an audit, what would we find? How much money did we waste in 2022? What extravagances did we indulge in? How much did we spend on stuff that’s not important rather than helping others? It’s a sobering exercise, is it not? The reality is we are all corrupted by sin and our natural tendency is to hoard our wealth. To spend it primarily on ourselves. To make sure we improve our lifestyles. To make sure we get our needs taken care of. To make sure we get to live the lives we believe we deserve. And after we accomplish that then maybe we’ll throw a little money God’s way just to hedge our bets. We find ourselves in worship so we take out our wallet and give God a \$20. Throw Him a bone. Keep Him happy. And we walk away feeling like we at least did something.

So back to the principle of firstfruits...why is it important? It serves as a reminder that everything we have comes from the Lord. Israel was descended from a wandering Aramean named Abraham. A man of no consequence other than the fact God chose Him to become the father of a mighty nation. His descendents immigrated to Egypt where they grew into a large and prosperous people until the Egyptians felt threatened and enslaved them. For hundreds of years they suffered until they cried out to the Lord for deliverance. God brought them out from Egypt with miracles and signs and wonders. He fought on their behalf. He defeated Pharaoh and his army. He provided for them in the wilderness. Fed

them with manna. Brought water from a rock. And now He would bring them into the Promised Land. A land flowing with milk and honey. A land full of natural resources where they would flourish. None of this was their own doing. None of this happened through Israel's strength or ability or hard work. They are not masters of their fates or captains of their souls or in charge of their own destinies. They are God's people. His treasured possession. Among all the nations of the earth. So in recognition of this special status that they did not earn...they give. They offer the first and the best of what they have to the Lord.

What about us? Do we do the same? Do we live our lives in recognition of all God has done for us? Do we offer Him the honor He deserves? Do we thank Him for where we were born? The family we were born into? The nation in which we get to live? The talents we are naturally endowed with? The opportunities He's given us along the way? The gifts we've received that we did not earn? And do we acknowledge His sovereign grace over our lives by offering back to Him our firstfruits?

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 28-30

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March 16, 2023
Faith isn't Simple

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 28-30 (audio reading)

Obey God and you will be blessed. Your family will flourish. You will never be defeated. Your crops will never fail. Your flocks will only grow. You will be healthy and wealthy and prosper in all that you do. Disobey God and you will be cursed. Your family will suffer. Your enemies will be victorious. Your crops will fail. Your flocks will miscarry. You will be sick and poor and everything you do will turn to ash.

If only things were that simple...

This is perhaps the most misused and misunderstood part of Deuteronomy. Perhaps even the entire Bible. Prosperity preachers love this part. Especially Deuteronomy 28:12-14, "The Lord will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail, and you shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them, and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them." They love to tell their listeners that if they will just obey God by sending in their money - "Sowing a seed" is the phrase they commonly use - God will make them the head not the tail. Their fortunes will only go up and not down. They will find healing for all their hurts. They will accumulate more possessions and earn more money than they know what to do with. All because they had faith and obeyed God.

If only things were that simple...

Life is not that simple. I've seen God's faithful suffer. I've seen their families struggle. I've seen the stock market crash and take their savings. I've seen natural disasters strike and destroy all they owned. I've seen cancer come out of nowhere and take the lives of some of the most godly people I've ever known. I've watched evil flourish. I've witnessed dishonest people get ahead. Horrible, manipulative, ungodly people flourish. And I've asked God how I can square what I've seen and experienced with what He says in His Word.

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

It's just not that simple...

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

So is He?

Maybe it's simple after all...

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 31-34

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March 17, 2023
Learning to Sing Your Song

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 31-34 (audio reading)

As we finish the Book of Deuteronomy, we need to pause for a moment and reflect on the life of Moses. Miraculously saved at birth. Raised in the palace of Pharaoh. Exiled for murder. Bedouin shepherd. Husband. Father. Called late in life to save Israel. Prophet. Miracle-worker. Deliverer. Spiritual and political leader of a nation of wandering ex-slaves. His life, especially the last third, was marked uniquely by his close relationship with God. Now we are at the end. Now the people stand on the borders of the Promised Land. Now he's on a mountain looking over at the fulfillment of all God has promised. Now is his last chance to share with his people all he has learned in his 120 years of walking with the Lord. So Moses sings them a song...(Deut. 32:1-43 MSG)

“Listen, Heavens, I have something to tell you. Attention, Earth, I've got a mouth full of words. My teaching, let it fall like a gentle rain, my words arrive like morning dew, Like a sprinkling rain on new grass, like spring showers on the garden. For it's God's Name I'm preaching— respond to the greatness of our God! The Rock: His works are perfect, and the way he works is fair and just; A God you can depend upon, no exceptions, a straight-arrow God...” For Moses, everything begins with God. God's faithfulness. God's steadfast love. God's enduring grace. Without God, he is nothing. Without God, the people of Israel are nothing. Without God, they would still be slaves in Egypt. If God had abandoned them, they would have died in the wilderness. If Moses is going to sing about anything, it will be about the greatness of God! The glory of God! The majesty of God!

“His messed-up, mixed-up children, his non-children, throw mud at him but none of it sticks. Don't you realize it is God you are treating like this? This is crazy; don't you have any sense of reverence? Isn't this your father who created you, who made you and gave you a place on Earth? Read up on what happened before you were born; dig into the past, understand your roots. Ask your parents what it was like before you were born; ask the old-ones, they'll tell you a thing or two.” Moses also sings of the people he has served. He boldly reminds them of the truth. They are sinners. They are broken. They are rebellious. They despised God. They abandoned God. They doubted God. They disobeyed God. He sings, eyes wide open to the reality of their condition. He pulls no punches. He's not interested in sentimentality. This is his last chance to speak and he's not going to waste words on empty flattery.

“When the High God gave the nations their stake, gave them their place on Earth, He put each of the peoples within boundaries under the care of divine guardians. But God himself took charge of his people, took Jacob on as his personal concern. He found him out in the wilderness, in an empty, windswept wasteland. He threw his arms around him, lavished attention on him, guarding him as the apple of his eye. He was like an eagle hovering over its nest, overshadowing its young, Then spreading its wings, lifting them into the air, teaching them to fly. God alone led him; there was not a foreign god in sight. God lifted him onto the hilltops, so he could feast on the crops in the fields. He fed him honey from the rock, oil from granite crags, Curds of cattle and the milk of sheep, the choice cuts of lambs and goats, Fine Bashan rams, high-quality wheat, and the blood of grapes: you drank good wine!” Moses takes them back to God. It was God who first called Jacob. Found him in the wilderness. Loved him. Nursed him. Cared for him. Taught him how to walk. Taught him how to live. Guided him along the way. Always protecting. Always providing.

“Jeshurun put on weight and bucked; you got fat, became obese, a tub of lard. He abandoned the God who made him, he mocked the Rock of his salvation. They made him jealous with their foreign trendy

gods, and with obscenities they vexed him no end. They sacrificed to no-god demons, gods they knew nothing about, The latest in gods, fresh from the market, gods your ancestors would never call “gods.” You walked out on the Rock who gave you your life, forgot the birth-God who brought you into the world.” What was the response of the people? Again, rebellion. As they grew strong and prosperous, they forgot God. They started going their own way. Doing their own thing. Forgetting God. Seeking to be their own gods. They repeated the sin of Adam and Eve. They fell for the original temptation of the evil one. They gave in, wanting to live like gods themselves.

“God saw it and spun around, angered and hurt by his sons and daughters. He said, “From now on I’m looking the other way. Wait and see what happens to them...” God judged them. Disciplined them in his wrath. He sought to purify and sanctify them through suffering. Through exile. Through wandering. Through defeat. He was faithful to remind them they held no power of their own. They had no strength of their own. All they had achieved had come via the mercies of God. He would not allow their illusions and self-deceptions to stand.

“Yes, God will judge his people, but oh how compassionately he’ll do it. When he sees their weakened plight and there is no one left, slave or free...He’ll say, “Do you see it now? Do you see that I’m the one? Do you see that there’s no other god beside me? I bring death and I give life, I wound and I heal—there is no getting away from or around me! I raise my hand in solemn oath; I say, ‘I’m always around. By that very life I promise...Celebrate, nations, join the praise of his people. He avenges the deaths of his servants, Pays back his enemies with vengeance, and cleanses his land for his people.” It took God forty years to bring his people to their knees. But the long years of wandering were not in vain. Now they knew God. Now they saw God. Now they understood God. They submitted. They surrendered. They repented. And they were ready to enter the land He had promised.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 1-2, Psalm 105

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March 18, 2023
Dangerous Waters

Readings for today: Joshua 1-2, Psalm 105 (audio reading) (Introduction to Joshua)
Introduction to the History Books – Joshua thru Esther

We are done with Deuteronomy! Great job everyone! Well done! You have now completed the Torah. The Pentateuch. One of the most important sections in all the Bible! I know it wasn't easy and I know the reading begged a lot of questions. This should happen every time we read Scripture reflectively and honestly and deeply. I love these verses from Joshua, "In the same way I was with Moses, I'll be with you. I won't give up on you; I won't leave you. Strength! Courage! You are going to lead this people to inherit the land that I promised to give their ancestors. Give it everything you have, heart and soul. Make sure you carry out The Revelation that Moses commanded you, every bit of it. Don't get off track, either left or right, so as to make sure you get to where you're going. And don't for a minute let this Book of The Revelation be out of mind. Ponder and meditate on it day and night, making sure you practice everything written in it. Then you'll get where you're going; then you'll succeed. Haven't I commanded you? Strength! Courage! Don't be timid; don't get discouraged. God, your God, is with you every step you take." (Joshua 1:5-9 MSG) They were some of the earliest I memorized after I became a Christian. But when we meditate on Scripture, it confronts us and forces us to grapple with some hard questions. This is especially true as we enter into the books of Joshua and Judges. Here are just a few of the questions you might find yourself asking in the coming weeks...

How can God, as Father, judge His children so harshly?

How can God, as Creator, be so cruel to His creation? Especially non-Jews?

Why do the innocent seem to suffer along with the guilty?

Does God really sanction jihad or holy war?

Where is Jesus in all of this?

I remember the first time I went white-water canoeing. It was a beautiful day on the Snake River up in Wyoming. The guide started us out in the calmest waters. It seemed like things would be easy. Then we started hitting the rapids. Things got tougher. The water got rougher. Things got hard. We found ourselves paddling like crazy as we navigated between the rocks and other obstacles. Unfortunately, there was a moment when things got away from us. The canoe my partner and I were paddling got stuck against a tree that had fallen over the river. The next thing I knew, I was caught in the undertow and taken under the tree. If I had gotten hung up on the branches, I would have drowned. Thankfully, I came out the other side but with a MUCH deeper appreciation for the dangers of the river and the power of the white-water.

I think something similar happens when we wrestle with Scripture. God invites us to ask Him the hard questions. He's a big boy and can handle our frustration, anger, and disillusionment. If we grapple faithfully and well, we come out the other side with a much deeper appreciation for who God is and what He's all about. And just like our guide gave us some pointers on how to navigate the river, I want to give you some pointers as well as we start to hit the rough waters of Joshua and Judges.

The key to understanding this stretch of the Biblical text is to try to put ourselves in God's shoes. Imagine you are a Father/Mother and you have children who are absolutely bent on self-destruction. They lie. They steal. They murder. They abuse each other. And this isn't just an occasional thing. It literally happens every hour of every day over weeks and months and years. It never ends. They are sociopathic in a way. They never stop. Now imagine you are not only a parent but you are also the primary civil authority in their lives. You have the power to punish. To judge. To sentence. And so you bring them before your "court." You show them mercy. You show them grace only to have them go out and continue their criminal activity. They are a danger to themselves and others. How would you respond? Would it not force your hand?

The same principle applies even more to the second question above...How can God, as Creator, be so cruel to His creation? Especially non-Jews? The Canaanites were even more self-destructive than Israel. Their evil knew no bounds. They had no law to restrain them. No prophet to teach them. It's essentially the story of Noah all over again. The evil in the world grew so great, God as the Righteous Judge, was well within His rights to wipe them out. But God made a promise. Never again to destroy the earth. So what's God to do? How are crimes to be punished? As the evil in humanity grows, how can it be restrained? Remember, we aren't just talking about a few sins here and there that we feel bad about. We're talking the worst kind of evil. The worst kind of crimes happening over and over and over again. Every hour. Every day. Every week. Every year. It's relentless. It's not cruelty to sentence a murderer to death even in our world. It's not cruelty to sentence a rapist to life in prison. It is justice.

Justice really is the key. What the Old Testament teaches us - and what we have the most trouble grasping in the 21st century - is that sin is serious. It is a crime against a holy God. Every sin is an act of rebellion. Seditious. Treason. And again, I cannot stress this enough, we commit these crimes every hour of every day of our lives. And the non-Jews in the Old Testament were much, much worse because they didn't have the Holy Spirit living inside them restraining their sin. It was a brutal, violent, evil world. Our God is not just a Father. He is a King. And justice and righteousness are the foundation of His throne. They are just as real and personal as love and grace and mercy. God is all of these all at once. So when we consider our sin or Israel's sin or the sin of the non-Jews in the Old Testament, we have to view it through the lens of God's justice system. Sin is not just bad behavior but criminal activity flowing from demonic forces and justice demands a reckoning.

Now you might be asking...what about me? What about the justice I deserve? The prophet Isaiah writes in 64:6, "All of us have become like one who is unclean and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags..." Friends, we are not worthy. In our natural condition, we deserve death. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. And this has been the natural state of every single human being who has ever lived or ever will live. But God..."being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us...makes us alive together with Christ." (Eph. 2:4-7) Christ is worthy. I am not. He has perfectly satisfied the demands of God's justice where I could not. This is the heart of the gospel and why it is such good news!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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March 20, 2023
The Importance of Memory

Readings for today: Joshua 3-6 (audio reading)

“Joshua called out the twelve men whom he selected from the People of Israel, one man from each tribe. Joshua directed them, “Cross to the middle of the Jordan and take your place in front of the Chest of God, your God. Each of you heft a stone to your shoulder, a stone for each of the tribes of the People of Israel, so you’ll have something later to mark the occasion. When your children ask you, ‘What are these stones to you?’ you’ll say, ‘The flow of the Jordan was stopped in front of the Chest of the Covenant of God as it crossed the Jordan—stopped in its tracks. These stones are a permanent memorial for the People of Israel.” (Joshua 4:4-7 MSG)

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

Of course, preserving the institutional memory of Israel was not the only purpose for these altars. There was an “evangelistic” component as well. “In the days to come, when your children ask their fathers, ‘What are these stones doing here?’ tell your children this: ‘Israel crossed over this Jordan on dry ground.’ “Yes, God, your God, dried up the Jordan’s waters for you until you had crossed, just as God, your God, did at the Red Sea, which had dried up before us until we had crossed. This was so that everybody on earth would recognize how strong God’s rescuing hand is and so that you would hold God in solemn reverence always.” (Joshua 4:21-24 MSG) Remember, God’s great aim is to fill the earth with His glory. His great vision at the end of time is that of every tribe, tongue, and nation coming to bow in submission before His throne. Even here, Israel is being reminded of her calling to be a light to the nations. To reflect to the world the greatness and glory and majesty of God. Sometimes that will mean executing divine justice on the pagan tribes before them. Other times it will mean showing great mercy as will happen to Rahab and her family in Jericho. Through it all, God is making Himself known to the world in and through His people.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 7-10

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March 21, 2023

Judgment

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

There are fundamental assumptions baked into the text of the Bible. If you don't keep these in mind, it becomes difficult to understand how all the different stories go together. For example, how does one square what we read today about all the God-ordained death and destruction with the idea that God loves everyone? How does one reconcile the fact that God actually fought on the side of Israel against her enemies with the God who promises to bring peace on earth? How does one come to grips with the execution of Achan and his family with the God of mercy, forgiveness, and grace? As you wrestle with the text, here are the things you need to keep in mind.

First and foremost, God is holy. He is righteous. He is just. He alone has the right and authority to judge the peoples of the earth. He alone determines when that judgment takes place and the instrument He will use to execute His judgment. God will by no means clear the guilty. Sin is a capital offense. The punishment for sin is death. So when we see God using Israel to execute His righteous judgment on the Canaanite tribes, we can be confident He is being eternally consistent within Himself.

Second, humanity is unholy. We are unrighteous. We are not just. Human society is rife with inequality, oppression, tyranny, abuse, immorality, etc. Human beings are responsible not only for the ways we participate in such systems but for our passivity in accepting these evils as "normative." Furthermore, we perpetuate these gross injustices every day in the personal choices we make. The sins both of commission and omission. The ways we relate to one another. The ways we treat one another. The ways we fight one another. None of us are innocent. We are conceived in inquiry and born with an orientation towards selfishness and sin. The reality is we've earned God's judgment so when we see God use His people to wipe out entire cities and societies, we can be confident that the people living in those places were guilty of sin and deserving of their fate on some level.

Why does God not wipe out all of humanity then? Why privilege some over others? Why choose some and not choose others? Why does Israel get a pass when the other tribes and nations do not? This is the great mystery of election. God is well within His rights to erase humanity completely. But He made a promise after the Great Flood never to destroy the earth again and must remain faithful to Himself. God is playing the long-game here. He wants to save humanity from herself but He also chooses to use humanity as His primary instrument to accomplish His plan of salvation. Sometimes that plan manifests itself in judgment along the way. Sometimes that plan manifests itself in mercy. God sits outside time and space and is not bound by our timelines or our notions of what is right and wrong. He sees the human heart. He knows every human thought. He is aware of every action we take both privately and publicly. Nothing is hidden from Him. Nothing is secret. If God chooses to execute judgment, it is a just response to the evils of this world. If God chooses to delay judgment, it is a merciful response to the evils of this world but make no mistake all will one day appear before the judgment throne. There will be a reckoning.

Where does that leave those of us who believe in Jesus Christ? Did we somehow escape judgment? Did we get a pass? Not at all. Jesus took our place. The punishment we deserved, He took on Himself. The sentence we deserved, He willingly served on our behalf. The full measure of God's judgment fell on Christ on the cross and was perfectly satisfied. To put a fine point on it, Jesus was "devoted to destruction" so that we might be spared. Thanks be to God for His salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: [Joshua 11-14](#)

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March 22, 2023
Honest Perspective

Readings for today: Joshua 11-14 (audio reading)

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

That's usually when God brings me some perspective. It might be a news story. It might be an experience overseas. It might be meeting people along the way who have come face to face with humanity's inhumanity and lived to tell the tale. For example, several years ago I was at a dinner party with some new friends. One of them does a lot of work in Rwanda with the mountain gorillas. He and his family have been engaged over there for decades helping with the research and preservation of the species. As it turns out, he was there during the genocide in 1994. He saw the bodies piled up in the streets. Stacks upon stacks. He can never get the images out of his head. And it forced him to ask a couple of very hard questions. First, how could a good God allow such suffering? Second, how could a loving God not respond with wrath over the atrocities? Third, how could a just God not punish the guilty forever? You see, hell becomes a lot more palatable when you've come face to face with horrific violence. Eternal damnation seems almost necessary if God is going to truly address evil. His wrath and anger at human sin makes perfect sense to us when we see children dying or the vulnerable suffer. If we are courageous enough to take an honest look at human history, we know humanity's inhumanity seemingly knows no bounds. The Killing Fields in Cambodia. The purges in Maoist China and Stalinist Russia. The Holocaust. And those are just the 20th century examples! The Mongolian conquest. The Crusades. The African slave trade. The British occupation of India. Rome's brutal conquest of the Germanic tribes. For as long as human beings have walked this earth, there has been war. There has been violence. There has been suffering. There has been evil. And God - if He is who He has revealed Himself to be - must respond.

So what does a good, loving, and perfectly just and righteous God do about the evil in the world? He executes judgment. He uses human being as His instruments to punish the guilty. Not just guilty people but guilty societies. Guilty systems of oppression. Guilty nations locked in idolatry and sin. And what we read in Joshua is but a foretaste of the judgment God levels on His Son and the judgment He will finally bring upon the world when His Son comes again. This is why the Lord appears to Joshua in 5:13-15. We read this story just a few days ago. Before the conquest, before the fall of Jericho, the commander of the Lord's Armies appears to Joshua. Joshua falls on his face before him and asks him if He is for Israel or for their adversaries. It's a great question. It's a common question. Essentially, he's asking the angel, "Are you for us or against us?" Are you on our side or their side? Are you team Israel or team Canaanite? I love the angel's response. "No, I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come." Basically, the only "side" I'm on is my own! I am no tribal deity. I am not like the other gods. I reign and rule according to my own sovereign purposes and plan. And I will execute my judgments on the earth against the powers of evil, sin, and death.

The fundamental truth we don't want to face is that - deep down - we want God to be just. We want God to punish the guilty. We want God to confront and overthrow evil and sin. We want God to

eradicate systems of injustice and oppression. We are in favor of all these things...for other people. We approve of all these things...for other nations and societies. We are good with all these things...as long as we receive mercy. This is what makes these readings so hard. We cannot fathom how God could be justified in going to war against the difference Canaanite tribes. We cannot understand the depths of the evil that would elicit such a harsh response from God. And that's because we have yet to fully appreciate the seriousness and weight of our own sin. The evil we carry in our own hearts. Like the Apostle Paul, I do things I know I should not do. I don't do things I know I should do. Every day is full of sins of "commission" and sins of "omission" that negatively impact the lives of those I love and the lives of those I am around. The evil in the world is not just "out there" but inside of me as well. So I try to read with the understanding that but for the grace of God, I too deserve judgment. I too deserve punishment. I too deserve death and destruction. And that moves my heart to praise and thanksgiving for what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 15-18

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March 23, 2023
Finishing Strong

Readings for today: Joshua 15-18 (audio reading)

The key is not how we start the race but how we finish. I remember running in my first 5K when I was a young boy with my brothers. It was the Denver Symphony Run in downtown Denver. I remember the day was dreary and rainy. I remember pushing my way to the front of the start line with my brothers. I remember the starting gun going off and the three of us sprinting to the front of the pack. We led the race for about the first 100 yards. You probably can imagine what happened next. We spent the next three miles alternating between jogging and walking as we struggled to finish. It was a painful experience.

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 19-22

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March 24, 2023
We Need A Witness

Readings for today: [Joshua 19-22](#) ([audio reading](#))

“We built this altar as a witness between us and you and our children coming after us, a witness to the Altar where we worship God in his Sacred Dwelling with our Whole-Burnt-Offerings and our sacrifices and our Peace-Offerings. “This way, your children won’t be able to say to our children in the future, ‘You have no part in God.’” (Joshua 22:27 MSG)

We all need a witness. We all need stories of God’s faithfulness. Memories we hold onto of where God touched down in our lives. Markers and monuments of God’s saving acts in our lives. I think of the many times I have sat with men and women facing all sorts of difficult trials and so often we look for hope in the stories from their past where God has shown up. The same was true for Israel. Now that the conquest was completed, the tribes of Reuben and Gad and Manasseh were headed home. But as they crossed into their territory, they became concerned that the Jordan River might become a boundary that would eventually separate them from the rest of Israel. So they built an altar as a “witness” that they were all part of one big family. They wanted a monument to remind everyone of their common kinship with Abraham and their covenant with God. They didn’t want to be left out so before they crossed the Jordan to take possession of their inheritance so they made sure to build an altar of “imposing size.” Not for burnt offerings. Not for sacrifices. But as a witness. Every time an Israelite would pass by the monument, it would “witness” to their shared history.

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: [Joshua 23-24](#), [Judges 1](#)

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March 25, 2023
Perseverance

Readings for today: Joshua 23-24, Judges 1 (audio reading)

One of the more challenging aspects to the Christian faith is perseverance. Remaining faithful to God over the long haul. Staying obedient to His will. Living a life of repentance before Him. It's far too easy to start to coast. Far too tempting to rely on our own strength. Our own gifts. Our own wisdom. When we start to trust ourselves more than God, the horizons of our life begin to shrink. What was once possible with God becomes impossible for us. There are simply too many obstacles. Too many reasons why we can't or shouldn't or won't. This is nothing new. Consider these words from Joshua to Israel at the end of his life...

“Now, stay strong and steady. Obediently do everything written in the Book of The Revelation of Moses—don't miss a detail. Don't get mixed up with the nations that are still around. Don't so much as speak the names of their gods or swear by them. And by all means don't worship or pray to them. Hold tight to God, your God, just as you've done up to now.” (Joshua 23:6-8 MSG)

Joshua understood the fickleness of human nature. He knew the people of Israel would struggle to remain faithful in the years ahead. He knew there was still much of the land to conquer. Much of their inheritance to claim. He knew it would be a fight and he knew how easy it would be to settle. To fall into the trap that they had done enough. To fail to complete the conquest of the Promised Land God had given them. To allow the pagan nations to remain and begin to accommodate their pagan ways. Joshua charges Israel to set a different course. Choose this day whom you will serve. Either the pagan gods of the lands you came from/are going to or the God who delivered you from slavery and bondage in Egypt. His words are worth reading again...

“So now: Fear God. Worship him in total commitment. Get rid of the gods your ancestors worshiped on the far side of The River (the Euphrates) and in Egypt. You, worship God. If you decide that it's a bad thing to worship God, then choose a god you'd rather serve—and do it today. Choose one of the gods your ancestors worshiped from the country beyond The River, or one of the gods of the Amorites, on whose land you're now living. As for me and my family, we'll worship God.” (Joshua 24:14-15 MSG)

Every day we are faced with this same choice. Either we will worship the gods of capitalism, materialism, fundamentalism, or whatever “ism” you want to insert or we will worship the True and Living God who revealed Himself fully and completely in Jesus Christ and delivered us from the powers of sin and death. Either we will obey our own wants and desires, do what seems right in our own eyes, rely on our own strength and wisdom to make our way in the world or we will seek the Lord with our whole heart, obediently walk in His way, believe in His truth, and receive His life. Take some time today to prayerfully reflect on your life and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you the choice you have made.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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March 27, 2023
Intergenerational

Readings for today: Judges 2-5 (audio reading)

Every time I read the Book of Judges I think about the consequences when one generation fails to pass on the faith to the next generation. The people of Israel serve the Lord faithfully while Joshua and the other leaders from his generation are alive but after they pass, a new generation rises that knows nothing of God. This is how the Book of Judges describes it, “Eventually that entire generation died and was buried. Then another generation grew up that didn’t know anything of God or the work he had done for Israel.” (Judges 2:10 MSG) How is this possible? How is it possible that the generation who just passed failed to tell the next generation of the miracles of God? How did they fail to tell their children and their children’s children of the deliverance of God from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the manna in the wilderness, and all the other wonders they had seen? How did they not tell their kids about the special relationship God desired to have with them?

The Bible is silent on the issue but I think I can make an educated guess. They simply got caught up in living. The holy rhythms established by Moses and Joshua had yet to take hold. They were still working hard to conquer the land and drive out their enemies. They were working hard to plant their fields and build their homes. They were working hard to dig wells and tend their flocks and establish themselves in the land. These things became higher priorities than knowing and serving God. As a result, their faith began to fail. Their courage left them. They settled for less than what God wanted for their lives.

Don’t we all do the same? Don’t we get so caught up in living that we forget all the things God has done for us? Don’t we take His presence for granted? Don’t we cheapen His grace? I cannot tell you the number of times I’ve heard someone say to me, “I’ll focus on God later. Right now, I’ve got to build my career. Right now, I’ve got to make sure my son or daughter makes the team. Right now, I have to focus on my health or retirement or any number of other priorities that get in the way of God.” The sad reality is the person rarely actually returns to faith. They rarely ever make room for God in their lives. And the result is a whole lot of heartache, pain, anxiety, and broken relationships. We’ll see this pattern play itself out over the next week in the Book of Judges. The people of Israel will forget God and it leads to all kinds of horrific sin and corruption and oppression and violence. Then God raises up a judge to remind them to turn back to God. And for a time there is peace and freedom and worship but then the judge dies and the people return back to their pagan ways.

So what’s the answer? How do we keep from falling into this same trap? We must build relationships across generations. Relationships built on a spiritual foundation. Relationships centered on Jesus Christ. Each generation must take seriously their call to pass on the faith. To make sure that those who follow in their footsteps know all God has done. They must tell their stories of God’s faithfulness over and over again. They must root themselves in holy rhythms like daily time with God, weekly time in corporate worship with God’s people, small group interactions where one can be truly and fully known, finding a place to serve God, and sharing their faith with those who do not yet know God. They must invite older and younger people into the journey alongside them. This is how God designed the faith to pass from one generation to the next. May we be found faithful when our time comes, having passed on a legacy of faith to those who come after us.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 6-9

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March 28, 2023
Waiting on the World to Change

Readings for today: Judges 6-9 (audio reading)

One of my favorite tunes from John Mayer is “Waiting on the World to Change.” The song began running through my mind as I read the story from Judges this morning about Gideon. Here are the opening lines from first verse...

Me and all my friends
We're all misunderstood
They say we stand for nothing and
There's no way we ever could
Now we see everything that's going wrong
With the world and those who lead it
We just feel like we don't have the means
To rise above and beat it

So we keep waiting (waiting)
Waiting on the world to change
We keep on waiting (waiting)
Waiting on the world to change

Gideon clearly felt the same way. He could see all that was wrong in the world. He suffered alongside his people in grinding poverty under his Midianite oppressors. He felt small and weak and unable to do anything about it. He had no power. No position. No wealth. No army. What’s a man like him to do but keep on waiting for the world to change? But then the Lord shows up and Gideon is commissioned to actually become the change the world needs.

“One day the angel of God came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, whose son Gideon was threshing wheat in the winepress, out of sight of the Midianites. The angel of God appeared to him and said, “God is with you, O mighty warrior!” Gideon replied, “With me, my master? If God is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all the miracle-wonders our parents and grandparents told us about, telling us, ‘Didn’t God deliver us from Egypt?’ The fact is, God has nothing to do with us—he has turned us over to Midian.” But God faced him directly: “Go in this strength that is yours. Save Israel from Midian. Haven’t I just sent you?” Gideon said to him, “Me, my master? How and with what could I ever save Israel? Look at me. My clan’s the weakest in Manasseh and I’m the runt of the litter.” God said to him, “I’ll be with you. Believe me, you’ll defeat Midian as one man.” (Judges 6:11-16 MSG)

Gideon wanted to God to deliver Israel but God is quick to remind him that deliverance always comes through a deliverer. A leader God raises up from among His people with the courage and faith to trust God’s plan and provision and protection. Notice how God doesn’t promise Gideon a massive army. He doesn’t promise Gideon the road will be easy. He doesn’t promise Gideon will one day rule Israel. He simply promises to be with him. To defeat Midian through him. It’s the same promise God offered Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and Joshua. This is how God works and it is the only way our world changes for the good.

God has made us the same promise, friends. He is with us! All He asks is that we believe Him and become the change our world needs. Do the work He has called each one of us too. Advance His Kingdom and His righteousness and His justice here on earth in the name of Jesus. Wherever God has you today, He has a plan for you. Wherever God puts you today, He has something He wants to accomplish through you. Believe this! And trust in His grace, love, and power!

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 10-13

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March 29, 2023

The Danger of Accommodation

Readings for today: Judges 10-13 (audio reading)

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

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

It's a story that baffles us on a lot of levels. How could Jephthah sacrifice his own flesh and blood? How could Jephthah's daughter willingly lay down her life? And where is God in all of this? Is He pleased? The cultural distance between this world and our own is almost insurmountable. However, one key to understanding is Judges 11:23-24, "It was God, the God of Israel, who pushed out the Amorites in favor of Israel; so who do you think you are to try to take over? Why don't you just be satisfied with what your god Chemosh gives you and we'll settle for what God, our God, gives us?" Everyone in the ancient near east believed in the gods. Dagon for the Philistines. Chemosh for the Amorites. Molech for the Ammonites. Every tribe had their own deity. Make the right sacrifices and you were awarded with great wealth, military might, and political power. Make the wrong sacrifices and your deity would turn his face from you, resulting in defeat. One some level, the same held true for Israel. As they adopted the ways of the Canaanites, Yahweh ceased, on some level, to be the One True God and became just another tribal deity to be appeased. Thus, Jephthah's tragic choice to sacrifice his daughter and her tragic choice to accept her fate. And the most important takeaway from the whole account is God's silence. Nowhere does the Bible say God is pleased with Jephthah's decision.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 14-18

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March 30, 2023

Clay Feet

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

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

As I got older, I began to learn about all the stuff my Sunday school teachers left out. Adam and Eve's rebellion and descent into sin. Noah and his family being saved but at an incredible cost. Moses parting the Red Sea but often getting into violent clashes with others that would end in entire families being wiped out. Joshua devoting entire cities to destruction. And Samson. Morally compromised. Selfish. Immature. A man who seemed to use his God-given gifts for his own gain and self-gratification. What are we to make of such unlikely heroes? Men and women who are subsequently enshrined in the great "Hall of Fame" of faith in Hebrews 11?

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

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

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

Why drive us to such despair? And what makes such despair holy? The goal here is to teach us yet again of our desperate need for God. Over and over again, the same narrative is reinforced. Humanity is helpless to save themselves. From Adam and Eve to the Great Flood. From Noah to the Tower of Babel. From Abraham to slavery in Egypt. From Moses to the end of Judges. With each generation,

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

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 19-21

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March 31, 2023

Moral Collapse (commentary by Johnny Long and Lucy Long)

Readings for today: Judges 19-21 (audio reading)

The unifying theme of Judges 19–21 is the utter failure of Israel to care for her most vulnerable, ultimately contributing to the failure of the nation.

This theme is the culmination of two different agendas within the story.

The first and more obvious is the backstory of a devastating civil war due to the collapse of hospitality, a value central to Israel's national identity.

The second is an illustration of Israel's moral degeneracy that could only be reversed (or so they thought) through a new form of government, a monarchy. Like concern for the "least of these" shrouded in Israel's hospitality rules, Israel's moral collapse is symbolized in its degenerate treatment of women, both through an individual and the broader group she represents.

This story is so troubling that commentators throughout history have tried to avoid it. Then as now, they struggled with how to demonstrate any hope that could speak to the Jewish and Christian faiths. In truth, it is a story that does not intend to show hope, but to serve as a warning through illustrating the moral depths to which humanity can fall.

Because of Jesus we are a new Israel. Not a kingdom of lust and violence, but one empowered by self-sacrificing love and mercy.

Readings for tomorrow Ruth 1-4.

Dividing Line through Every Human Heart (commentary by Doug Resler)

Readings for today: Judges 19-21

Today we encounter some of the most difficult material in all of Scripture. We see Israel at one of her lowest points. She has forgotten Yahweh. She has become like all the pagan tribes around her. She is more focused on her own gratification than she is on serving and honoring the Lord. Her world is full of idols and sexual perversion and violence. Yes, she still goes through the motions. She still makes her sacrifices. She still prays. Fasts. Appears before the Lord at the appointed times. But it's all empty at this point. Everyone is doing what seems right to them. They are all following their own ways. They are plumbing the depths of sin. They are pushing the boundaries of evil. Unspeakable atrocities are taking place in Israel such as the gang rape of a woman whose body is then dismembered resulting in a genocidal war that basically annihilates an entire tribe. It's madness.

One of my favorite books is the Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. With penetrating insight, he describes the nature of man. Given the right conditions. Given the right set of circumstances. We will all succumb to temptation. In the book, Kurtz sets himself up as a god to be worshipped. He exploits those around him. He uses them for his own personal gratification and enjoyment. He is evil and selfish and insane. Towards the end of the story, he finds himself dying as he "returns" to civilization. His life flashes before his eyes. He reflects back on all he has done. And his final words are, "The horror! The

horror!” Reminds me of the great Russian novelist and dissident, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who spent years in the Russian gulag for criticizing the Soviet Union, once said, “The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either - but right through every human heart - and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained.” Of course he noted the opposite is also true. Even in hearts overwhelmed by good, small bridgeheads of evil are retained. Basically, all of us have the capacity within us for both great good and terrible evil.

There simply is nothing redemptive in the story we read today. Nothing good. Nothing godly. Man’s inhumanity to man is on full display. It’s dark. It’s evil. It’s terrifying. “Horror” is a good word to describe what’s going on in our world today. One only has to scroll through a Twitter newsfeed to see the hate that leads to violence that leads to death and then return the next day to watch the cycle repeat itself. Consider yet another shooting at yet another school involving children. If we’re totally honest, all of us are perpetrators on some level. All of us are victims. We are the Levite. We are the concubine. We’ve sacrificed others and we’ve been sacrificed for the sake of self-protection and self-gratification. In the Bible’s judgment, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (Romans 3:10)

Perhaps it’s providential that we read this section of Judges on the cusp of Holy Week. Over the next week, we will reflect on the most significant events in Jesus’ life. The most significant events in human history. God Himself riding into Jerusalem to the adoration of the crowd only to find betrayal, torture, and death at the hands of some of those same people a few days later. We will reflect on the cross a week from today. A day we call Good Friday. A day we spend intentional time prayerfully thinking over the death of God. The most horrific act in human history. We reflect on the price Jesus paid. The blood He shed. The penalty He bore. We will reflect on the depth of our sin. The depravity of our nature. The darkness of our hearts. We reflect on the cost of our salvation. On what it took to redeem us from sin and death. To deliver us from evil.

But Holy Week ends not with despair but celebration! It ends not in defeat but in victory! Jesus is alive! And on Easter morning, we will gather with those we love to rejoice over our salvation! God plunging Himself into the horror of our condition! Plumbing the depth of our darkness! Immersing Himself in the breadth of our madness! And embracing us as His own! Today we declare there is hope for the Levite and his concubine! Today we declare there is hope for the Kurtz’s of our world! Today we declare there is hope even for us! And that hope is found in Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Ruth 1-4

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