

TODAY'S BIBLE

CHRONOLOGICAL DEVOTION OF THE BIBLE

By Greg Strickland

Prologue

If you are like me (and I tend to believe most of us are alike in more ways than we are different), attempts to read the Bible can often be confusing. The book we call The Bible is actually a collection of sixty-six books or letters. They were written by forty different authors (give or take) over six to ten thousand years. The Bible is, therefore, not all one style of writing or even one genre of literature. In some ways then, the way the books have been traditionally configured in our Bibles is helpful.

Bible "books" have first been grouped into two main sections: Old and New Testament. The Old Testament deals primarily with the way God worked with and through people in the world according to the covenants of Adam, Abraham, and Moses and how that covenant with God's chosen people came about and played out in ancient history.

The New Testament deals primarily with the inclusion of all the nations of the world into the family of God revealed through the Hebrew people. The story of Jesus begins as He fulfills the old covenant and begins a new one through His blood. Most of the rest of the New Testament helps us learn about this covenant by example of the way it played out in the early Church, and gives guidelines for us to live daily with God as His called-out people.

Additionally, each of the testaments is further broken down. And this is where things begin to get a little more confusing.

Each of the two sections is then divided by genre of literature. The thirty-nine books of the Old Testament are grouped as: The Five Mosaic Books of the Law, History Books, Poetry Books, Major (longer) Prophetic Books, and Minor (shorter) Prophetic Books. The twenty-seven New Testament books are grouped as: The Four Gospels, History, The Epistles (letters to individuals or congregations), and Apocalyptic Literature.

These divisions are helpful in knowing what we are reading. Knowing what we are reading is helpful to interpreting what we are reading. For example, you don't read a poetry book in the same way as a history book. History books contain factual accounts, while poetry books are full of idiomatic phrases, plays on words, figures of speech, and the like. Prophetic and apocalyptic literature is heavy with foreshadowing and symbolism. These factors and more make the groupings helpful so we know what we are reading.

However, most of the time we read the Bible with the same problem we have in our lives. We separate the "preaching" from our story. We compartmentalize what happens and what we hear on Sunday morning - never making the intended connection to our lives Sunday afternoon through Saturday. Part of the problem reading the Bible in its traditional grouping is that much of the preaching (prophets, poetry, apocalyptic literature) gets separated from history. Hence, without the "what's going on in life" of the history books, the preaching contained in other genres (written for the people of those times in history) doesn't make much sense.

So this reading of the Bible we will do chronologically. That is, we will include into history what is being preached to those of the time - not separating the preaching from the story. Some places this will be more apparent than others. It is not an exact science. More learned people may disagree with where things particularly fit - but we will come close enough to make a great difference. That difference being not only

knowing more about the Bible and what it is saying - but learning to take what we see, hear, and experience in the Sunday morning preaching and put it in the context of our 24/7/365 lives.

Additionally, the separation of Old and New Testaments sometimes makes us forget that this whole collection is one story! It's the story of a loving God who desires the fellowship of beings who would choose to love Him, yet knowing that the allowance of that choice could cost Him the majority of those beings and would cause the suffering, and ultimately, the life of His own Son. This is the story that saturates every single page - across testaments and genres of The Bible.

January 1

Reading: Genesis 1-3

"God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day."

"And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years."

(Genesis 1:5, 14)

When did you first learn about seasons? I don't really remember, but I know that even in Kindergarten I was learning songs about Winter and Spring and such. Along the way we learned that there were four seasons - Winter, Spring, Summer, and Autumn. Later, we learned why there are seasons - equinoxes and solstices and so on. But it seems that somewhere along the way, unless we are farmers, most of us began disregarding seasons.

Not. Good.

Not only did we learn to disregard seasons, we also began to disregard the order of a day. Did you notice in this passage when a day actually starts? It begins with the night.

Why should we care about either?

Because we somehow tend to think that we have a whole lot more control over life than we do. And even if we do realize we can't control things, we still try.

We will start early and finish late. We will "burn the candle at both ends" to complete our agenda if that's what it takes to "be successful" at life.

But if we really looked to the created order of things, perhaps we would have a better perspective. For most of the people throughout history who have ever read the Bible, beginning your day with night means this: Without electricity, you don't really do anything for the first nine to twelve hours of the day! Imagine a world that doesn't "start" until about 3 p.m.. (Some of you would like to!) "How would we ever get things done!"

Instead, we should think of letting God begin the next day when ours is done - at sundown. He will set the pace. He will decide the agenda. Later, when the sun is up, we will see what He's been up-to and find our place in His work.

This is the created order of things.

In some parts of the year, there are long work days (Summer). In other parts of the year, God allows more rest in short work days (Winter). We need to learn to work with God and creation - not in spite of Him and it.

If we ever mastered that concept, maybe we would also be at peace with the many other "seasons" of life. There is a season for growing-up into an adult - not being one. There is a season for raising children - not neglecting them. There is a season for hard work - and a season for enjoyment. In fact, we will learn later that there is a season for everything! (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

At this time of year that we make all kinds of resolutions, let's resolve to work with God this year. It will be the most gratifying year you've ever had.

January 2

Reading: Genesis 4-5; 1 Chronicles 1:1-4; Genesis 6

"To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of Yahweh."

(Genesis 4:26)

Are you a procrastinator?

I suppose there are several reasons why we all procrastinate from time-to-time - and several reasons why some are pros at it. But generally, when we are in pain, in danger, or having some other kind of emergency - at least one that's affecting us personally - we get right to it! There is no waiting around.

So, why is it that oft times we wait to seek God? Pride? Forgetfulness out of lack of a prayer habit?

Adam was one hundred-thirty years old when his son Seth was born (5:3), and Seth was one hundred-five when Enosh was born. Now assuming Adam and Eve left the garden relatively quickly, there was about two hundred-thirty-five years between Adam and Eve leaving the garden until the time when mankind began to seek God!

It wasn't that God was completely unknown. Cain and Abel were making sacrifices to Him long before! But evidently, no one really cared to know Him. No wonder that by the end of today's reading the entire earth was filled with such corruption that Yahweh regretted having created man. (6:6)

If you've never sought God... if you've never bothered to go beyond wondering if He's there... let me assure you this world didn't get here accidentally. And you have nothing to lose by calling on His name. I suppose if that's you, that begins with a simple prayer for God to begin to reveal Himself to you. And He will honor that. As you read these passages, He will show you Himself.

But I'd love to help bring Him into your life a little more quickly. You can message me, and I'll be glad to introduce the two of you. Once you believe and are ready to trust Him (faith), then God will be willing to extend His grace to you - grace that forgives all sin and empowers you for life by His Spirit. We simply change the direction of our lives (repentance) and call on God again - this time asking for a clear conscience. That kind of calling upon the Lord happens when we are immersed in water (baptism) with that faith to receive grace and cleansing. (Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21)

However, I would imagine that some of us Christians have been procrastinators too. We have an incredible power, comfort, and direction for life - for all parts of life - at our disposal... yet we often do not ask God. And guess what? If you don't ask, God won't help. (James 4:2b)

The best policy is to make a habit of calling upon the name of Yahweh every single day - even multiple times a day! You've taken this daily Bible reading upon you. After about three to four weeks, it will become your daily habit. Learn the habit of prayer as well.

Why do you wait?

January 3

Reading: Genesis 7-10; 1 Chronicles 1:5-16

"And those that entered, male and female, of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him. And Yahweh shut him in."

(Genesis 7:16)

Are you much for second chances? Some people are overly compassionate. They will do anything to give someone a second chance - or even a third, fourth, or more. Others, for good reason or not, are pretty content to let people suffer the consequences after one failed opportunity.

Can you imagine Noah's situation?

One, he is called on to build a boat - a massive boat! An exact replica - at least by size - has been built in Kentucky. It stands above the trees and can be seen for miles.

Two, he must get the animals together to board the boat. (I think surely God helped him do the "wrangling".)

Reckon what his neighbors thought about that? Did they make fun of him? Did they ignore him? Did they ask questions?

In the New Testament, it says that Noah was "a herald of righteousness". (2 Peter 2:5) It also says that God was patient with them as they were preached to (by Jesus, in a sense, through Noah) while the ark was being prepared. (1 Peter 3:18-20)

When the day came for them to enter into the ark, did Noah want to invite others in? Did he have compassionate feelings for them? Did he peek out the window and see fear in his neighbors' eyes as the first-ever raindrops began falling from the sky? Did he have second thoughts as people began to beat on the door in fright?

Or did he, perhaps, desire to load up one night and pray for rain to fall before dawn? Maybe he was ready to see those who paid God no heed receive justice.

What would you have done?

No matter. God alone decided. He told Noah to load up his family, and then God shut him in! Two things are significant about that:

One, it is God's decision alone as to who is worthy of salvation and who is worthy of destruction. Yes, we are to judge right from wrong, but it is always up to God to do the sentencing and execution. God's people are only "heralds of righteousness" - offerers of God's terms of pardon.

Two, it's not said that God shut anyone out - but that He shut Noah in! God will take His vengeance on Satan for sure, but in regards to mankind it is not so much vengeance as the sad acceptance of mankind's will. He will "shut in" those who wish to be carried in the ark of Jesus to saving grace by their faith through the water

of baptism (1 Peter 3:20-21). And sadly, by their own choice, He will leave out those who do not wish to live with Jesus as their eternal Lord.

Are you more of a "herald of righteousness" - by word and deed? Or are you more likely to wag your head at the words of the preacher?

On which side of the door will you stand on the last day?

January 4

Reading: Genesis 11-14; 1 Chronicles 1:17-27

"And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said, 'Blessed is Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand!' And Abram gave him a tenth of everything. And the king of Sodom said to Abram, 'Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself.' But Abram said to the king of Sodom, 'I have lifted my hand to Yahweh, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich'.'" (Genesis 14:18-23)

Of any person in scripture, Melchizedek is one of the most mysterious. Yet, he is also one of the most important. His name means "King of Righteousness" and he, being the king of Salem, is the King of Peace. (Hebrews 7:2) This causes some to believe that he is a pre-incarnation appearance of Jesus. (This is a theory with which I do not concur.)

The Hebrew writer tells us that Jesus is our Priest only in the likeness of Melchizedek. Melchizedek is definitely a type of Christ. That is, Melchizedek exemplifies and foreshadows what Jesus will do and fulfill in an ultimate way.

How so?

Melchizedek is a fella without beginning or end (Hebrews 3:3) - at least as far as we know. His history before and after he met Abram is a secret. In this way, it seems like he has always been and will always be - resembling Jesus.

But most importantly, Melchizedek is a Priest of the Most High God outside the priesthood of the Mosaic covenant. He, like Jesus, is not a son of Aaron. He is chosen by God alone, and therefore, his priesthood pre-dates and supersedes the whole of the Hebrew nation. A quick read of Hebrews 7 says that all the Mosaic priests actually served Melchizedek as Aaron was "still in the loins" of Abram at that time of his sacrifice to Melchizedek.

But, OK. So what?

This is the priesthood that all Christ-followers now share in! We are not priests by the loins of Abram, but we have been made priests by our participation in the body of Christ. We are part of Jesus' "holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). This means this priesthood is legitimate and ongoing. We hold this responsibility as believers to bless one another and be a light to the world around us - to be witnesses to the greatness of our High Priest, Jesus.

Let us also follow the example of Abram. Let us not receive from or rely on the kings of the world to better us, empower us, or enrich us - but let us be fully reliant on God. Let us live our lives in such a way as the only answer for what we accomplish, master, and even survive is the hope and faith we have in our High Priest Jesus - our Priest Who has entered behind the inner curtain to anchor our souls to an eternal hope. (Hebrews 6:19-20)

January 5

Reading: Genesis 15-17

"When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces."
(Genesis 15:17)

When I read the scriptures, I'm often reminded of my relationship with my own children. (Reckon that's one of the reasons why God gave us children?) When I see God's interaction with people in scripture - and how He wants to interact with me - it reminds me of opportunities, taken or not, I've had with my own children.

Something that often comes to mind is that kids want to "help". (At least they do before they become teens!) And it is important that they do "help". Helping in a project or chore of any size about the house develops character, trust, and teaches skills.

However, I call it "help" (in quotations) because sometimes - especially when they are very young - children aren't really much "help". In fact, usually we could do the job faster, easier, and more efficiently ourselves. But we know the value for the child; so we allow them to "help".

It really is much the same with God.

There is nothing that we "help" God with that He could not do better, faster, more easily, and more efficiently without us. But He wants us to learn. So our part is sometimes just to attend and learn - to have faith and watch.

As Abram and God make this covenant concerning Abram having his own son, a typical covenant ceremony is arranged. Blood sacrifices are made with the carcass halves separated. Then the two entering the covenant are to walk down between the halves together. It's kind of a "I promise to keep my end of the bargain or die like these animals" kind of thing.

But note what happens. Abram doesn't make the walk with God. God just wants Abram to be quiet and observe. So much so that though it seems he can still perceive what's happening and hear God's voice, he is in a deep sleep. Then God Himself - He only - makes the walk between the halves.

Did you notice something else in chapter 17? Go through the chapter and underline all the times God says, "I may," "I have," and/or "I will". Then go back and circle all the times God says what Abram (now called Abraham) or Sarai (now called Sarah) will do.

No less than fifteen times does God name things He is going to do! While Abraham and Sarah get a total of five things to do! Two of those five are not really saying what they will do, but what they will be! And they will only be that because of what God is going to do!

It's as one preacher I heard said. Most Christians get a real case of the "Dootabees". We believe that we can "do" our way into "being" what God wants. In actuality, we must be to do! And we can only be who God wants (and therefore do what He asks) when we come to Him through faith in the covenant ceremony of water immersion (where HE does all the work, mind you) and let Him make us who we are to be.

Are you trying to "help" God, or are you letting God help you?

January 6

Reading: Genesis 18-21:7

"Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet..."
(Genesis 20:7a)

Some people are, evidently, slow learners. Here in Genesis 20 we find Abraham in the same type situation he was in way back in Egypt in chapter 12. Fearing that a foreign king will take his life to legally take his own wife Sarah as the king's, Abraham lies and says that she is his sister. Which technically is not a lie - she is his half sister (20:12) - although it is deception.

But I have to wonder what King Abimelech thought of Abraham. "Really? A prophet? Some man of God!" Abraham was not only willing to lie (twice now), but in doing so offer up his own wife to someone else's bed. "Prophet? Indeed!"

But in this chapter there are two things that tripped up Abraham - two things that caused him to repeat the same sin. The same two things will hamper our walk and witness too if we allow them.

One, Abraham wrongly judged his community.

"...There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me..." (20:11)

Isn't it odd that Abraham judged the people of that place as non-God-fearing - while he chose to sin repeatedly rather than fear God?

Isn't it odd that we do?

We may look at our sins - even ones repeatedly committed - and say, like Abraham, "Well, I have my reasons!" You know what? So does everyone else. Some "reasons" may seem better than others, but in the end they are all only excuses made in an attempt to justify what we know is wrong.

It's easy enough to look at most actions and judge an action as right or wrong. However, when we look at someone and judge their character - that's another thing entirely - especially on a communal basis. Judgments applied to "them", "they", or "those people" are always going to miss the mark!

Two, while Abraham seemed to be following God's call here-to-there as Yahweh carried him along, he was following in fear - not faith. Fear keeps an eye on all the circumstances and possibilities for things to go wrong. Faith trusts that God is going to keep His promises regardless of the circumstances and overrides them with godly possibilities.

It is possible to obey God in the letter - and not live in faith. But know this friend, it will lead you to failure as it did Abraham here, and without faith it is impossible to please God! (Hebrews 11:6)

There are many places in the Old Testament where God pulls someone's fat out of the fire. Here, like those other times, we are only left to wonder what God-glorifying - possibly miraculous thing - would God have done in that life or community if His servant had only acted in faith?

Don't make us wonder about you too!

January 7

Reading: Genesis 21:8-24:67

"He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.'"
(Genesis 22:2)

My granddaughters like to look at I Spy books. If you haven't seen them, they are books filled with pictures. On each pair of pages you must find small objects within the photographic collage.

When you read the Old Testament, sometimes you forget that the collection of sixty-six books and letters in your hand is all about Jesus! You may have to look hard to find the storyline occasionally. Then again, sometimes Jesus stands out in the Old Testament like one single item to be found on an otherwise blank page.

We come near the latter in today's reading. Abraham is to take his son, his "only son Isaac"... Hold up! Abraham has another son! Yes, but Isaac is the only son born of the promise. There is a sense in which God has "many" sons. Genesis 6 describes the godly people of that day as "sons of God". They (we?) are God's "sons" by natural means. We are part of the created order.

Metaphorically, Ishmael is a son of natural means. Abraham circumvented God's plan (leading to a great deal of trouble to say the least). Isaac was the "only son" of promise. He is the son of a miracle.

See Jesus yet?

Jesus is foreshadowed here. Jesus, the only begotten (John 3:16) is miraculously born to fulfill all the promises of eternal blessing.

But there's more!

Abraham is to sacrifice him in the land of Moriah. Where's that?

It is around Jerusalem - at least that's what tradition tells us. While this passage in Genesis is not particular on the peak, the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem was built on Mt. Moriah proper.

The Jewish rabbis liked believing that it was on the future temple mound that the event took place. Of course the Samaritans preferred it was Mt. Gerizim. Muslims declare somewhere in Saudi Arabia. I personally want to suggest it was perhaps even a little less-known "peak" in the "region of Moriah". Perhaps it was Mt. Calvary?

Regardless, here is the one we do know because it is where scripture interprets itself. Hebrews 11:19, in speaking of the faith (by which Abraham is walking more fully?) says this,

"He considered that God was able to even to raise [Isaac] from the dead, from which figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."

And Genesis 22:4 says that it was "On the third day..." that this "resurrection" took place.

See Jesus yet?

What does this mean for us? It means that God had a plan; God worked the plan; And God will finish the plan. He promised redemption; He paid the price; He awaits your decision. Will you be a part of the age-old story today?

January 8

Reading: Genesis 25:1-26; 1 Chronicles 1:28-34

"Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was Jacob..."
(Genesis 25:26)

The first two of our children were named after family. Our first son was named after men in my family; our second son was named after men in my wife's. Quite serendipitously (or providentially?), both their names meant something wonderful when we looked them up. One was "Bright and Shining Gift of God" and the other "God Has Given Shelter". Once we knew this, we made mention of it often. We never pushed to make them be the gift or shelter we wanted, but placed that sort of expectation in their lives that they were something great. By the time we had our daughter, we sought a name that meant something to us as a family, but had an intentional meaning as well to share with her. "True Beginning of Precious Gold" expressed to our daughter how valuable she was in the completion (that was only the beginning) of our family.

But what if I'd hung the moniker of "Deceiver" on one of them? What if he walked around all his years growing up with everyone calling him "Deceiver" or "Trickster" or "Slick" or "Cheater". What would even a stranger having dealings with him thought about him just being introduced?

"I'd like to introduce you to my son, The Cheater."

I'm sure given the circumstances of his birth, holding to his twin brother's heel as if he were trying to hold him back and get his birthright, Isaac and Rebekah thought they were being cute. I wonder if Jacob (meaning "Deceiver") thought it was "cute" by the time he was a teen?

Most parents today don't name their children like in ancient days, they are given popular, trendy, or family names without regard to meaning. But that doesn't mean people (maybe you?) don't get hung with a sign around their necks.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, by family or acquaintances, many people are saddled with a reputation that has become their name. Maybe they have earned it; maybe they haven't. But the more it is expected of them, the more tempting it is to just live by it. If it's what people expect of you, why fight it?

People wonder why our world is the way it is today... Why is it people don't know what gender they are? Why do people hate other people for no reason? Why is there vicious greed and rampant immorality? It doesn't help that for almost one hundred years children have been told that they are accidents of a big bang - that they are merely animals. If you raise an "animal", expect an animal.

Want some good news?

Regardless of who you are, who has named you, what you have been named, where you are from, or what you've done - you can have a new name! I don't want to give away too much, but you'll see how the name "Deceiver" worked out for Jacob. And you'll see how God redeems and renames him!

In Jesus, we have re-birth! (John 3:1-21) In Jesus, we are re-made, daily! (2 Corinthians 4:16) In Jesus, we are renamed! (Revelation 2:17)

January 9

Reading: Genesis 25:27-28:5

"So he went in to his father and said, 'My father.' And he said, 'Here I am. Who are you, my son?' Jacob said to his father, 'I am Esau your first-born. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, that your soul may bless me.'"

(Genesis 27:18-19)

We have just exited a season where maybe you have enjoyed (or endured) lots of family traditions. When or how the tree is trimmed, whose house you visit on which day, whether or not gifts are exchanged or what kind, foods that are always present - all these carry a lot of tradition in most families. Or, maybe your family tradition is that you are non-traditional!

Unfortunately, other family traditions can certainly creep into our homes. Traditions that are not celebrated, but disdained. There may be ways of living that have brought heartache or mistrust. And the family of Grandpa Abraham certainly has a disruptive - if not down-right destructive – family tradition: lying.

Everyone's faith has to grow. When God demands we have faith, it's OK to start with a tiny mustard seed's worth. (Matthew 17:20) Even the Apostle Paul tells us that he had to learn to rely on God. (2 Corinthians 1:9) But there is a way to endure and grow (James 1:2-4) and a way not to. Abraham chose the latter (as we often do).

Just as we saw Abraham take matters into his own hands lying to two different kings about Sarah, so even Isaac does the exact same thing with one of the same guys! (You would think King Abimelech would have been more cautious with this family the second time around!) Deception is becoming a family tradition.

But it keeps going.

Rebekah learns the behavior from her husband and uses it to "help" God along (Remember how much "help" we are to God usually! - January 5) by making sure the right son gets the blessing God has already promised.

On to the third generation, Jacob, the Deceiver, is all too willing to play along. He's already used his wits to finagle his brother's birthright - now he wants the blessing. He's been hung with a terrible name; he'll go ahead and live up to it now!

Their family tradition of lies, deceit, and scheming brings heartache, murderous threats, and years of family tension. And it all happened needlessly. God had already promised.

In the end, all sin is a result of not trusting God. From the beginning when God said, "Don't, or...," and the devil said, "Not really," we have distrusted God and chosen wrongly.

So today, think about your family. What are the spiritual family traditions? Some may be quite wonderful! But usually, there are a few things grown on the family tree that are a result of a lack of faith. Go ahead and let God help you prayerfully prune those bad branches off today. Graft in some spiritual disciplines that will produce the fruit of the Spirit. It will be fruit that will be enjoyed - not endured - for generations!

January 10

Reading: Genesis 28:6-30:24

"Surely Yahweh is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'" (Genesis 28:16-17)

Do you have fond memories of a church house from your childhood - one that you attended with your family or friends? Maybe you just visited there with your grandparents. Or perhaps a special place for you is where you were immersed into Jesus. Maybe you were at a Bible camp or a creek nearby a church house. Perhaps, it was in a pond on your farm. Many of us have locations that are spiritually important to us, and Jacob now becomes no exception.

On his way to find a wife at Uncle Laban's ranch, he stops the night to rest. Here he has a vision and realizes the presence of Yahweh.

I say "realizes" because the vision only reveals truth. God was there all along - just like God is in your presence right now!

That's why you needn't feel bad if you don't have the kind of place I've been talking about. Those are special places to us - but not to God. He is with you anywhere and everywhere. He is always wanting to speak to you and hear from you. He desires your constant companionship. He just had to get Jacob and his mind still enough in sleep to show Him that!

Maybe, if you are a Christian, you've forgotten that.

We get attached to geological places and forget that Jesus isn't coming down a ladder to... wherever. Jesus entered our very selves when we were immersed into Him. The special place for meeting God is in you!

So is the special place we neglect Him.

Would you take a few moments right now and, as a Christian from centuries ago would put it, practice the presence of God?

I'll wait.

Doesn't that calm you?

Things kind of melt away into perspective, don't they? Just stopping to know: Yahweh, the Creator of the Universe, is in your presence. It's humbling; it's grounding; it's essential to daily life. Moses told us, "Man does not live by bread alone..." (Deuteronomy 8:3) Job, in all his suffering says,

"I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my portion of food." (Job 23:12)

Practice that presence a few more times today and see if your life doesn't begin to change. If you don't have the presence of God in your life, let's change that! Reach out!

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place
I can feel His mighty power and His grace
I can hear the brush of angel's wings
I see glory on each face
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place
Lanny Wolfe © 1977 Lanny Wolfe Music

January 11

Reading: Genesis 30:25-31:55

"So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar."
(Genesis 31:45)

Whom do you trust?

Maybe you have several people in your life that you trust. Hopefully you have at least one. But one person that Jacob for sure did not trust was Laban. And one person Laban did not trust was Jacob.

I mean, "Jacob" means "cheater"! And Laban? Well, maybe Jacob's mother Rebekah learned her deceiving ways from her family after all! Jacob has experienced nothing but years of being cheated, tricked, and deceived by Laban and his whole family. Neither of them are willing to bet much on the other.

They decide the only thing they can trust is someone with more capability than either of them! They will let God watch over them. Well, Jacob will. Laban is there already only because of his concern over his idol. He puts his trust in many "gods". Jacob, trusts only Yahweh.

I think it is with significance that the scriptures here point out that Jacob just picks up one rock. These "heaps" are to represent God (or gods) that will keep an eye out on the other. Jacob says, "You guys go pick up your rocks. I've got mine."

"Jacob took a stone..."

Jacob picks up one rock. It represents One God.

What about you? You may not have a wooden or stone idol, but what about all those rocks in your pockets?

We can claim to trust in the One True God, but then we don't pray for His will, we pray for: more money, better health, nicer friends, easy employment, happy circumstances - and the list goes on.

Rocks!

It's hard to really believe we trust Yahweh to watch over us when we're trying to stuff our pockets.

But guess what?

All the rocks in our pocket don't have any more eyes, hands, or feet to help us than Uncle Laban's heap. In fact, they serve less as a witness to someone else and more of a witness of our own foolishness. It's hard to get far in life weighed down by sacks of rocks.

The witnesses we need heed are those who have put their trust in the One God. They are the ones who have been victorious. Their lives tell a stories that push us onward and upward every day. Neither friends nor enemies need fear us when we see and replicate the trust those who have gone before us put in Yahweh.

After telling us about the faith of some Old Testament greats, the Hebrew writer goes on to tell us to "lay aside every weight". That is, lose the rocks, Church! And look to "Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith". (Hebrews 12:2)

If you're going to trust in a "rock", might I suggest the "stone that the builders rejected". (Psalm 118:22) Neither your "heap of health" nor your "heap of wealth" will be a witness of real strength or power in your life - only Jesus.

January 12

Reading: Genesis 32-35

"Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day has broken.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'" (Genesis 32:26)

We are a "get it now" society.

We have fast food and over-night express delivery. Americans have vast amounts of credit card debt because we want today what we can't pay for until tomorrow - or ever. Have you noticed all these banking app commercials on TV that supposedly allow people to get their paychecks early? We can't even live paycheck-to-paycheck anymore! If we can't have it right now - we will just have to ~~do without~~ buy something else.

Esau would have loved it. At least the old Esau from Genesis 25. What good was his birthright to him right then? He was hungry now! So he ~~sells~~ despises his birthright, as the Bible says. It's not just selling it; he shows contempt for his father, his family, their traditions, and their values.

Jacob, at least in chapter 32, finally shows us something worth emulating. Anything of real value is worth fighting for, at least that's what Jacob believes. It is worth struggle; it is worth effort; you don't give up until you get it. So, after wrestling all night with... someone...

As an aside, brilliant scholars disagree on exactly whom Jacob wrestled. Some say this is a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus - that Jacob wrestled God in the flesh. Other scholars will say, "No, it was God's angel." They believe when the Bible says Jacob "saw" and "wrestled with" God, it is in the sense that we might say we "saw God" or "heard God" through a messenger or circumstance.

Guess what I think? Go ahead and guess because your guess will be as good as mine!

Regardless, we know and Jacob knows that, in one form or way or another, he is wrestling "with God". He will not make the same mistake as his brother. He wants what God has come to give. And God is ready to give him something.

But does Jacob want to receive it? Is he one that is willing to fight to the end for the desire of God's heart? Whether an angel or God himself, Jacob would have been easily defeated by either foe if that were the objective. The question is simply, "What does Jacob want?"

And I don't really think that God wrestles Jacob for God's sake; He knows Jacob's heart. But does Jacob know Jacob's heart? Does Jacob know whether or not he's just that same old schemer? Does Jacob know whether or not he is willing and able to go the distance for God's will in his life?

Jacob found he was.

Sometimes I wonder if I am though.

I've failed many times to live up to what I say I believe. In the end, do I have the stuff to make it? What about you?

The thing is this: you will only know the answer by going through struggles. You will have to wrestle in and with your faith. You will come to know your spiritual strength, but that knowledge will not come easily.

If you're struggling today, keep wrestling. If it doesn't make sense, don't let go of God until it does. Eventually it will. And if you're not in a wrestling match today, you just may be tomorrow!

January 13

Reading: Genesis 36; 1 Chronicles 1:35-2:2

"These are the chiefs of the sons of Esau... These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites."
(Genesis 36:15a, 31)

Occasionally, I'll be walking along somewhere outside with my oldest granddaughter. She'll say, "Papaw! Ya wanna race?"

No. Papaw does not want to race.

But I'm not going to spoil her fun. "Yep! Where we racin' to?"

"Just down to the end of the sidewalk!"

"OK! Ready? Set? Go!"

She takes off with all the blazing speed her six year old legs can muster. I just keep walking. "Looks like you beat me again!"

She's OK with that. Because no matter the circumstances, no matter what it takes - kids like being first!

"I won," or "I got you first!" are phrases we all remember from childhood. Yet, it seems like many adults never grow from that childish desire.

Maybe Moses writes with a bit of sadness the last real facts concerning the family of Esau. They were "mighty" - at least in their eyes. They had "chiefs"! They had kings and kingdoms long before the Israelites even settled in the Promised Land - the kingdom of Edom.

Edom.

Esau and his descendants are forever known, no longer as "Harry's" (Esau) family - but "Red's" (Edom) family. No longer known by his birth, but by his sinful, despising of his birthright. His legacy is a good start gone bad.

On the other hand, his brother "Shyster" (Jacob), once known by his birth, is now known as "God-Wrestler" (Israel). He has overcome his bad start and gained not only blessing, but a name to remind people about his desire to receive what God will give.

While Esau has what God promised his mother (that this boy would be a great nation as well) (25:23), what he has is what he earned. He has much, but has it all now. Israel hasn't even a homeland, but he has a Promise. There are no "chiefs", just shepherds. There are no kings - yet. But one's story ends here while the other's fills another 65 books.

Christian, value Jesus' words:

"So the last will be first, and the first last." (Matthew 20:16)

It is much better to be a people of The Promise than a people who "have it all". Matthew Henry said it this way:

"The children of this world have their all in hand, and nothing in hope (Luke 16:25); while the children of God have their all in hope, and next to nothing in hand. But, all things considered, it is better to have Canaan in promise than mount Seir in possession."

(Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible; Genesis 36)

January 14

Reading: Genesis 37-39; 1 Chronicles 2:3-8

"Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge."

(Genesis 39:8)

Have you ever wanted to be "great"?

Boys in particular seem to have an innate drive to become great. They want to be admired, to be accomplished, to be heroic. Few have not desired to be a policeman, a fireman, a cowboy or some other rough and tumble man of strength, greatness, and power.

I don't know if Joseph desired to be great, but it was put in his mind that he would be from an early age. Any would-be haughtiness was nixed with circumstances of his youth, however. Sold into slavery and made a servant in an Egyptian household, it would have been easy to forget all about being "great".

But Joseph didn't see greatness as power or even freedom. Joseph saw greatness in responsibility. Joseph was given so much responsibility that he actually ran the home in which he was enslaved. He said that even his master was not "greater in this house than I am". He wasn't even a free person! But he had been given responsibility.

Responsibility means that regardless of what is happening around you - you do right. You keep your charge. You fulfill your duties. Even with his master's wife hounding him day after day, he stays the course.

Many would compromise themselves at this point.

"How can I deny her? I'm a slave!"

"I just do what I'm told around here."

"She could really make trouble for me if I don't give in."

Greatness - responsibility - said, "No."

Many a Church member today has compromised their duty to Christ and His body. Living in an ungodly world, it is easy to find all kinds of would-be justification for doing what everyone else does. But I pose this question:

"Why should the way those who are less than me live cause me, one of greatness, to abandon my responsibility?"

Now before you think that it is I who am being haughty, hear me out. Those of the body of Christ are not greater than others because of their own merits. Neither are they greater than others because of others' lack of anything. The members of the Body of Christ, even as slaves, are the greatest in the "house" because of the responsibility given us.

We are:

Called with a Holy calling (2 Timothy 1:9)

Called with a High calling (Philippians 3:14)

Called with a Heavenly calling (Hebrews 3:1)

(Preachers, go ahead and steal that outline and preach it! Please!)

We are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession". These are all positions of great responsibility!

Friend, in the Kingdom of God, as the Messiah reigns in this Church age, let us fulfill our duty as the greatest in the house!

January 15

Reading: Genesis 40-41

"and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them, and he attended them. They continued for some time in custody."

(Genesis 40:3-4)

We all play the "What if?" game, don't we?

Usually, it is not a fun or satisfying game. We generally ask "What if?" with some disappointment - if not in grief or downright bitterness. My, how things would have been different "if only...!"

But instead of playing "What if?" and pretending we know how things would've been different, what if we played "What if not?" If hindsight is 20/20, though we don't know all the outcomes of our lives yet, we certainly know some that have happened. As much as we tend to look at the bad and want to fix it with good, why don't we look at the good we have and see how we got here - even through the bad?

Joseph's life is certainly an exercise in that! We haven't even gotten to the very end of his story yet, but in today's reading we can already see where things are headed. And regardless of what seemed like terrible things - his brothers' hatred, being sold as a slave, being falsely convicted and thrown into prison - it has all worked to the most magnificent conclusion! And we will soon read how not only he is saved, but a whole nation - and not the least of the great things, God is glorified as His promises are made sure.

Maybe it's time to look back and not be sad, but to look back and be at peace.

It's only because I can trace God's hand in my previous 52 years that I am living in peace and hope today. I don't always live in happiness, but I do have peace and hope. I can look back and see dark, hard times - but I can also see that though I may have lost a lot in those things, God used them to bless me. He didn't cause them. Some of the things that happened to me were wrong. But no matter how dark and despairingly I saw the world, Yahweh was faithful. And so I know He will continue to be.

Because, I am not home yet.

It's quite overused. And it's usually used when people least want to hear it. It's often even misquoted, misunderstood, and misapplied. But allow me to share the verse with you right now.

"And we know...

(this is not some pie-in-the-sky wish)

"that for those who love God...

(not a promise for everyone - sorry)

"all things...

(yes, ALL things)

"work together for good...

(not everything IS good - some things are awful, terrible, and tragic but God can make them FOR good)

for those who are called according to His purpose."

(Romans 8:28, emphasis mine)

Look back. See how God has got you this far. Count your many blessings. And know more are yet to come. Just like Joseph, God doesn't allow circumstances - good or bad - to be wasted in the lives of His faithful followers.

January 16

Reading: Genesis 42-45:15

"When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, 'Why do you look at one another?' And he said, 'Behold, I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt. Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die.'"

(Genesis 42:1-2)

Sometimes in discouragement we just give up trying. It seems like we've done all that we can do, and there are no other options. So, we just stop. We were tired; it became hard; we had no help.

It probably seemed like that to Jacob's eleven sons. What are they supposed to do? They can't control the weather and end the drought.

But Jacob looks at them and says, "What are you doin' sittin' there lookin' at one another!? Get movin'! I know where there's hope!"

Maybe you've not heard - but there's hope!

There is bread to be found. You can really live and not die. If it's not the message you need to hear, it's the message the world-at-large needs to hear!

Jesus offers us life abundant, something not found in all the other "solutions" you've already tried. Don't just stand there, go get some bread!

Preacher, don't give up! I know you've been doing your best, but that's the problem. God's work was never meant to be done by your power. Go get some bread!

Elders, I know the wolves gather 'round the flock on every side. Immorality, greed, and apathy have ravaged the sheep. Do not fear! You will have what it takes - if you will only go get some bread!

Deacons, begin serving with enthusiasm! Whether anyone notices or seems to care, God has an important role for you. Don't give up. Go get some bread!

Sunday school teacher, are you calling your students - encouraging them - and others who've never been in your class - to get there? Or did you give up a long time ago? Do you study for your lesson on Saturday night - or worse on Sunday morning - or even worse, not at all? How are you going to deliver the bread that we need in this time of famine without students and study!? Go get some bread!

Christian, quit looking around at the world. Quit thinking you can vote the world into a godly lifestyle. Quit chasing after the dollar so you can put it in your pockets full of holes. Quit trusting in health insurance. Quit being afraid of viruses, opinions, governments, and... everything. Get back into Church; get back into the Bible; get back into the prayer closet. If you are going to make it in this world, you need to go get some bread!

If you're not a Christian, if you don't yet name Jesus as your Savior and your Lord - let me tell you this: One, I know you're searching. There is emptiness in your life. There is a hunger. And, two, I know what will fill it - whether you know it - or even believe it - or not. It's Jesus. Jesus is the very bread of life.

Don't just stand there lookin' at each other! Go get some bread!

January 17

Reading: Genesis 45:16-47:27

"And Jacob said to Pharaoh, 'The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning.'"

(Genesis 47:9)

Do you ever think about your death?

I often wonder when it will be, how it will come about, who will be there. I think about whether it will be a time of great pain (I'm not afraid of dying; I just don't like pain), or will I pass from this world with a sigh? I wonder if I will have time to think about my life at its end.

As Jacob's life is coming to a close, he meets Pharaoh, and Pharaoh asks him about his life. "How old are you, sir?"

Jacob's answer is, I think, one of the saddest sentences of the Bible. I don't know if he meant them that way - if there was the bitterness in his voice that I read on the page. Or if, perhaps, he was just being philosophical about the general hardships of living.

I really think it was more the former.

Jacob had lived a hard life. He grew up in constant rivalry with his brother Esau. That whole dynamic put him on the run from his brother. He got swindled into working seven years for the wrong girl. He got accused of robbery. His wives were in constant competition with one another. He had violent sons. Finally, he lived a good number of years believing his favorite son is dead before learning the whole ugly truth in his old age.

I don't think by his life's end he had a very good outlook on it. In his mind, his days have been few and evil - not nearly the years of his ancestors.

The Cheater feels cheated.

Your life will be much more than the few (or many) possessions you leave behind. The legacy you build will be what you truly leave for future generations. The time to build that legacy is now.

None of us are guaranteed time. It may be only moments that we breathe air upon this terrestrial plane - it may be a few years, a few decades, or even a century. It is only up to us to make the most of what we have - how ever long or short it may be.

If Jacob felt that 130 years was short, I guarantee that those of us who may live to be 70, 80, or 90 years old will feel that time has given us the slip. If there are things that need doing, do them today. Words that should be spoken "some time" should be spoken now.

Are your days evil? I think we do live in an evil age. The days of our lives, in general, are very evil. However, the darker the night - the brighter the light! It is in an evil age that truly great men are made. In evil days, integrity is a beacon that shines past today and lights the paths of our progeny.

In short, don't wait until you are old to consider your life. And don't wait past today to make it what it needs to be.

January 18

Reading: Genesis 47:27-50:26

“But Joseph said to them, ‘Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.”
(Genesis 50:19-21)

Is it as hard for you to forgive people as it is for me? I think everyone has a hard time with that. That's why Joseph's brothers assumed he would be vengeful - they knew what they'd do!

But Joseph is an incredible picture of what a mature believer does in such situations. As a matter of fact, in this sense, he is a type of Christ - foreshadowing the kind of forgiveness that Jesus is willing to offer. While there

are a lot of things to be taught and learned about forgiving others, there are some significant things that Joseph shows us.

"...am I in the place of God?"

Unfortunately, sometimes, we think we are. It's easy when we've been wronged to feel we should, and are able to be, judge, jury, and executioner. But we hardly have the objective viewpoint necessary to make a judgment - much less know how someone should be punished for what they have done. Giving God His place in the situation is the first step to making things better.

If we will get down off God's throne, it is then that we will actually get more perspective. In a proper relationship with God first, we see things for what they are. Forgiveness doesn't mean that we "OK" what others have done. Joseph pointed out that they were evil! But he was able to see that God used it for something to better him. Bitterness against others and a refusal to take a second look means that we will miss what God has done and is doing.

Ultimately, forgiveness allows us to be a force for good in the world ourselves. Forgiveness is a cancellation of debt. As long as we hold a debt for others, we are only concerned about ourselves and getting what we believe is due us. Joseph's decision to give up the debt his brothers owed him allowed him to focus on the needs of others. It allowed him the power to be used by God.

It seems that forgiveness is like a lot of other issues. We can either have what we can scratch out for ourselves, or we can have what God will freely give. Wouldn't we much rather let God fix us and fill us than to wait around holding a debt over others that may never be paid?

Author's Note

Good morning, readers!

Congratulations! We have finished reading Genesis - and a few verses from 1 Chronicles that recap some of the family histories as well.

Before we continue on where the story of Genesis leaves us - God's people there in Egypt and the savior of two nations, Joseph, having died - we pause for another story from the times of Genesis.

The book of Job is basically a book written in verse. It reminds me of an epic poem. Therefore, in our Old Testament it is grouped with the other poetry books - Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.

While scholars disagree on exactly where Job fits - most all agree that his story happens sometime in the days of Genesis. I personally like to fit Job early in Genesis. I believe that certain creatures mentioned late in the book could only refer to animals that must have been dinosaurs. To be of that great size, one would think they belong pre-flood (before Genesis 6) or at least some time before the first ice age after the flood.

Other students of the Bible have admittedly good reasons to think Job's story occurs later during the Patriarchal times somewhere.

Regardless, we compromise and leave it here for you. Enjoy the next couple of weeks as we explore grief and suffering. We get a glimpse at it from all perspectives and the learning we can experience is amazing.

January 19

Reading: Job 1-4

“But he said to her, ‘You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?’ In all this Job did not sin with his lips. After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth.”

(Job 2:10; 3:1)

I'll never forget a story that preacher, professor, and writer Howard Hendricks told. It seems that one day as he was walking across the campus of the school at which he taught, he spoke to a student he happened upon and asked him how he was doing. The student replied, "Pretty good, under the circumstances." Hendricks replied, "What are you doing under there!?"

The circumstances of life can be pretty tough. In Job's case, that's an understatement. You would think that "under the circumstances" he'd be immediately crushed.

Job lost his servants, cattle, and children. Yet, “In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.” He seems to be holding up quite well.

Job lost his health and then the support of his helpmeet. Yet, “In all this Job did not sin with his lips.” What a guy!

Three friends decide they will go and “help” this stalwart of faith. They cry and – as we say in the South – “carry on” for seven days and nights. Suddenly, he is overwhelmed.

What happened?

I wouldn't doubt that "under the circumstances" it would take seven days for the shock of all this to wear off. With blow after blow heaped upon him, I would expect it might take Job a while to "come-to" and begin to feel again. It could very well take a week (or much longer) to begin to fully comprehend his losses. I don't know if that's the case, but I do know this from experience: grief and pain can very quickly overwhelm the stoutest of hearts. At some point, it will bring you to your knees.

Whether it's succumbing to the Enemy's enticement to walk by sight and seeing our situation from a worldly perspective in a lapse of walking by faith or the proverbial back-breaking straw, people with the strongest of faith can feel overwhelmed. God entrusted Job with the most difficult of trials. He knew Job was “tough”; yet, Job felt overwhelmed. Should we expect we will suffer without feeling... well – without feeling?

Even the Apostle Paul was well acquainted with loss and grief. And there were times he felt overwhelmed. But he reminds us in the midst of anything and everything that by the grace of God we always have hope. He writes:

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair."
(2 Corinthians 4:8)

Acknowledge your feelings. Take time to grieve losses - whatever they may be. But remember the hope that Jesus brings. Purpose may be found in pain. Walk in faith. Don't live "under the circumstances"; live in spite of them!

January 20

Reading: Job 5-7

"As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. His children are far from safety; they are crushed in the gate, and there is no one to deliver them."

(Job 4:8; 5:4)

It was really weird.

I had always had exceptional eyesight. But for a while, I'd noticed that my vision was a little blurry in the morning, for maybe only an hour or so. Then it was longer. Then it was longer. So, at long last, I went to the eye doctor.

He asked how old I was. I'd just turned forty.

"Yep," he said.

"Huh?"

"That's when it hits most people."

He explained that most people have astigmatism. It's an asymmetry of your eye. From birth your eye muscles are strong enough to squint your eyes for you without you noticing, and you see clearly. But, in about forty years, your eyes muscles are so tired and worn-out that they can't do it anymore. Depending on how your eyes are shaped, you are either far-sighted (able to see long distances better) or near-sighted (only able to see up-close). Long and short of it is that most forty-plus year-olds need glasses.

Spiritually speaking, it's the opposite.

We are all born near-sighted. We don't have the "faith muscle" to see too far out. Faith muscle has to be developed in order to see the "long game". Faith becomes our spiritual glasses.

That's the problem with the first of Job's friends, Eliphaz. He doesn't own any "faith spectacles". His only reference to suffering is that it comes to people who do bad things. "You reap what you sow, Job! Must be your fault."

The hard thing about what he says is that it's true!

Kinda.

The Bible itself does say that we reap what we sow.

"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap."
(Galatians 6:7)

But the wonderful thing about the book of Job is that from page one God lends us His own glasses, and we get to see clearly behind the scenes. We know that Job's suffering isn't about his own personal sin or "sowing". We know that it has to do with living in a world where God allows us to be tested by the enemy - for a variety of reasons. All the while, God promises and provides a way out (1 Corinthians 10:13) and builds our faith-muscles to see more clearly in the future (Romans 8:28).

The trouble is that, most of the time, we don't get to look behind the scenes of our own lives. And, so, sometimes we don't know how or why our current trouble has come upon us. Regardless, let us not be so foolish as Eliphaz to jump to conclusions. No matter if Eliphaz were to be right or wrong about the source of Job's suffering, he is dead wrong about Job's lack of a deliverer! We do have a deliverer! And He is able to deliver us from all our troubles - be they of our own making or not.

Don't forget to put on your faith glasses today!

January 21

Reading: Job 8-11

"Truly I know that it is so: But how can a man be in the right before God?"
(Job 9:2)

I remember sitting in my wife's grandparent's living room. Her grandpa was a tinkerer and he had some different types of puzzles that sat on their coffee table. Some were store-bought; others, ones he had seen somewhere else and had replicated with his own hands. But most all of them had one thing in common: They all had a "trick" to them. There is only one answer, and unless you know the "trick", they will never be solved.

Such is the dilemma Job and his friends have.

When Eliphaz speaks, he assures Job that his suffering is because of sin. The second "friend" says the same. But Job states the problem: "Let's say it is my fault - how can a man be in the right before God?"
Job goes on to say,

"Though I am in the right, my own mouth would condemn me; though I am blameless, He would prove me perverse."
(9:20)

How can you win against God? You open up your mouth and you're going to say something dumb. While you may be innocent in your eyes, God knows us better than we know ourselves. He is going to prove us wrong.

His next "friend" agrees as well. Zophar says,

"Know then that God extracts of you less than your guilt deserves."
(11:6b)

While Zophar's words may not apply directly to Job in this situation (and certainly are not a welcomed "comfort"), the truth is God is deeply merciful in our worst suffering - even when it truly is punishment. Eliphaz, wrong as he is about so much, asks a good question - it's the question of the ages that Job reiterates:

"Can mortal man be in the right before God?"
(4:17)

This does truly seem like an impossible puzzle. What's the trick? Job accidentally (?) hits on the answer:

"I must appeal for mercy to my Judge."
(9:15b, alternate translation in the footnote)

Yes, Job, there is an "arbiter between us [and God]". (9:33a) Jesus Christ, the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone! Jesus is the "trick" the "key" to the puzzle that would never have been solved. We cannot be right with God. We need Jesus to be right for us.

Quit wrestling with your pride. Understand that Jesus is the answer - not just for this puzzle - but all of life's dilemmas.

January 22

Reading: Job 12-14

"No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you. But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these?"
(Job 12:2-3)

Do you know the infield fly rule?

In baseball, if there are less than two outs, and runners on first and second or first, second, and third; and the infielder can catch the fair fly ball from the air (not including a bunt or line drive) with ordinary effort - the batter is immediately called out.

Got it?

Unless you're an avid baseball fan, you probably never heard of the rule, don't understand it, and couldn't care less. A lot of people who watch a lot of baseball don't even know it.

I love the sarcasm of the Bible's characters at times that show how much they are like us. After hearing three of his friends go on about how guilty people are eventually punished for their sin (implying that Job's suffering is punishment), he says, "Wow. Y'all are geniuses! Where will we find wisdom when all y'all die!? I'm no idiot! Everybody knows that!" (12:2, GSV)

Job's friends are busy telling him "Three strikes and you're out!" Job knows there are some intricacies to life that we don't always know about. When you assume you know why something has happened... you haven't gotten too deep into the Rule Book!

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that

"...as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."

To which I say, "Thank the Lord!"

I don't want a "god" that I fashion with my own hands, who is no smarter than I, or that I can stay one step ahead of. I'm glad to serve a God that is not only a few steps ahead of me, but One Who can see all the decades of my life in a split second from outside time and space.

We seldom, if ever, know what's going on in life. Ours is but to live how God wants us to live regardless. We are to listen to the One Who Sees All and step where He says to step - even when it doesn't "feel" right.

Usually, the best thing we can do - whether about our grief and trials or someone else's - is to keep our big mouth shut. Job rightly responds,

"Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom! Will it be well with you when He searches you out?"

(13:5,9, emphasis mine)

Job, again, is falling back to the best decision possible. Say all you want - but say it to God! And then? Trust Him.

"Though He slay me, I will hope in Him; yet I will argue my ways to His face."

(13:15)

January 23

Reading: Job 15-18

"If I speak, my pain is not assuaged, and if I forebear, how much of it leaves me?"

(Job 16:6)

When I was preaching in the local Church, my wife and I often facilitated a marriage course with people in the congregation and surrounding community. It was eight weeks long, and we asked people to commit to attending every session, not giving up, before the first meeting. Many times several couples would show up, eager to learn. They were excited to get their books and study materials and seemed ready to make the most of the opportunity to have a better marriage. Even after the first week with lots of homework, most remained excited.

Then came week two.

If we had people want to quit, it was always after week two. Why? Because week two was about conflict. Most people have mediocre marriages (or jobs, or families, or even churches) because nobody likes conflict. Instead, when trouble comes we just retreat. Rather than painfully work through the conflict, most will usually just retreat to a place where there is none and never grow beyond it. The only way to grow is to walk through the conflict.

Grief and loss works the same way. There is no magical treatment. Job says nothing "fixes" it. It is. Whether he speaks (as he is prone to do) or keeps his mouth shut (as his friends tell him he should) - grief and pain is there. It's not any better.

Like conflict, the only way through grief is to walk through it. You can't make it go away, you can only go through to the other side of it. And occasionally - when your mind slips back into the wrong gear - it will be revisited. But regardless, it must just be dealt with.

There are all kinds of books on "stages of grief" and such, so I won't go into that here. But like Job, we will simply feel as though we are blundering through it. One minute we are resolved in faith. The next we are crying out for justice. In the next minute we all but give up hope. Yet, if we will - like Jacob - continue wrestling with God (Genesis 32), we will get the blessing we seek. We may forever be a little "disjointed" as Jacob was from the journey, but we will make it.

Know this: the same temptations we have in this "walk through grief" are the same ones Jesus experienced. Remember that we do not have a High Priest Who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but was tempted in every way as we are - yet was without sin! (Hebrews 4:15) What Job says in chapter seventeen even sounds a whole lot like Psalm 22:

"My spirit is broken; my days are extinct; the graveyard is ready for me. Surely there are mockers about me, and my eye dwells on their provocation."
(17:1-2)

Take heart! You may have never walked the grievous road before you today that seems so long and hard, but Jesus has.

And He will walk it again... with you...

Every step of the way.

January 24

Reading: Job 19-21

"Have you not asked those who travel the roads, and do you not accept their testimony that the evil man is spared in the day of calamity, that he is rescued in the day of wrath? Who declares his way to his face, and who repays him for what he has done?"
(Job 21:29-31)

I don't really like those verses. But they're true, aren't they?

Are there parts of the Bible you don't like? It was Mark Twain who said something along these lines, "It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that bother me; it's the parts I do!"

Yep.

I know I'm not the smartest man. I can live with the fact that there are some verses of the Bible I don't really understand. I can live with guessing at what part of it means. I can gather enough context to get the gist of it and not miss any important commands of God that apply to my life. Those verses, relatively few, don't bother me.

The parts I don't like are the parts I definitely understand. When I know what God says... when I understand the implications of the truth... when I know what hangs in the balance... it is some of those passages I don't like.

I think there would've been parts of the Bible Zophar didn't like either. Zophar wants everything to be "neat and tidy". He wants things not only easy to understand, but he wants everything to be fair to his sensibilities.

He believes suffering comes from sin. He believes that all sin leads to suffering.

Again, he's half right!

The fact is this: All suffering comes from sin... it just doesn't have to be your own! It could be, but very often our suffering comes from the choice to sin someone else makes - even if we have to go all the way back to Adam. Sometimes we are to blame; sometimes we are just in the crossfire between someone else and God.

The other fact is this: Yes, all sin leads to suffering. It may be momentary, or it may be long-lasting. It may be immediate, or it may never be seen... in this world!

Job calls out Zophar for being intellectually dishonest. He asks Zophar to wake up and look around. Does he really believe what he's saying? Doesn't it always seem like it is the "good" who suffer and the evil man prospers? Haven't you noticed that people like to say, "Somebody ought to do something!" but nobody ever does?

No, that's not fair. But God doesn't need us to defend Him. God knows what He is doing. God knows what is happening. God knows who is suffering and why. God knows how it's affecting you - and others. God knows the purpose he offers in each man's pain. God knows the amount of rope each evil man needs to either rescue those he's harmed - or hang himself.

God knows.

And He also knows that in the end - sooner or later - it will be Himself who will declare to the face of the evil man his sinful ways and repay him. God doesn't need His people to open their mouths and spill out platitudinal half-truths to attempt to make Him look better to mankind.

It's OK to be uncomfortable with what's happening in life. It's OK not to fully understand. How could we? We must simply have faith that... God knows.

January 25

Reading: Job 22-25

"For you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing and stripped the naked of their clothing. You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry."

(Job 22:6-7)

We hear a lot about racism today. I don't like racism - of any kind against any race. (Between you and me, I believe there is only one race - humanity. We all came from Adam and we all started over with Noah. No way around it!) But it seems like when I was a kid, the word was not "racism"; you heard more about "prejudice".

Now, granted, usually when you heard someone accused of being "prejudiced" the accuser meant "racist". Yet, it is a better term. It is more accurate and more inclusive. (And aren't we supposed to be inclusive?)

To be "prejudiced" simply means that we "pre-judge" some one or some thing. We decide before trying something or knowing someone what we think he, or she is like. In short, to be prejudiced is to make assumptions.

Job's friends are practically olympians at jumping to conclusions, and they are the quickest "assumers" you've ever seen! This whole time they believe Job is being punished for his sin. (While we know - and Job knows - he isn't.) But now Eliphaz really gets to the heart of his... well, heart. Why does he believe Job is a sinner?

Because Job is rich.

"What have I done!?"

And the question finally seems like it is all too much for Eliphaz. I see him rising up with an indignation he's been holding back. I see him jump up from the campfire red-faced, pointing his finger as he yells at Job all the ways "You rich people take advantage of the poor [us]!" Eliphaz seems to have a heart problem that is all-too popular today: "My lack is the fault of the rich!"

Are there "rich" people who take advantage of others? Yes.

Are there "poor" people who take advantage of others? Yes.

When we are prejudiced against the rich - or any person or group of people - you are as bad as any of the worst racists the rioters of our day rage against. We are guilty of the same sin. We have the same heart.

By the way, when it comes to the rich, I want to say a hearty "THANKS!" I've never once gotten a paycheck from someone who didn't have anything! You?

And here is another thought: If you live in America, even if you have virtually nothing, you are rich to most of the world population. See, it's relative.

Be careful. When you have an attitude or when you act a certain way toward someone, check yourself: Is this because I truly need to be cautious with this person? Or do I have some sort of prejudice against them - for any reason?

January 26

Reading: Job 26-29

"Behold, these are but the outskirts of His ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of Him! But the thunder of His power who can understand?"
(Job 26:14)

Have you ever been disappointed by a "celebrity"? Why is that? Because we think we know them.

I mean, we've seen every movie our favorite movie star has made. We love all his or her characters. Some actors are so great that we believe their roles are real.

Robin Williams was a phenomenal talent. He was a believable philosopher. He could be tender. He played roles of dedicated people. He was always funny. If you wanted your movie to succeed you could hire Robin Williams. He had it all... until he hanged himself.

We didn't know him at all.

It is amazing that Job's friends believe they know God. If we are right in assessing that the story of Job comes from the time of the Patriarchs during the book of Genesis, think how little they know of God! Even less so if Job happens before Noah's flood! When Job and his friends lived THERE WAS NO BIBLE!

Not. One. Page.

Job has lots of natural revelation. He spends almost all of chapter 26 recounting some of the things he observes God doing in the world. But at the end of the chapter he concludes that all of nature and observation amount to a whisper. There is so much more to know. Nature is enough to prove the presence of God. It proves the power of God. But like distant thunder that proves something is happening a long ways off - we don't understand what. How could Job's friends possibly have any idea what God was up to!?

Obviously, God was revealing himself to some people in ways we don't perceive as "normal". He spoke directly with the first four folks on earth. He sent angels to some. He spoke in dreams to others. That Melchizedek guy we read about... where did HE come from? How did HE know anything about God?

No. Idea.

But Job knows this: God is powerful; God is His creator; God is trustworthy; He is responsible to God; He will be vindicated by God. That much Job can know.

That says something to us, doesn't it? We are people who not only live in an age like folks a few thousand years before us who could read the Old Testament, but also live after the revelation of God and His nature through the incarnation of God Himself in Jesus - and live after having received all the history, letters, homilies, and prophecies of the New Testament. If Job found himself responsible to God to trust and obey through just the limited knowledge of God he had - how much more responsible are we to follow Him?

Many Christians say:

"I wish I knew what God wanted me to do."

"I wish God would make His will known to me about..."

Why would God let you in on more things when you haven't done what you know He's already told you to do!?

God is not going to disappoint you like others you think you might know. You can trust that what He has said and what He has revealed is true. Trust and obey.

January 27

Reading: Job 30-31

"They break up my path; they promote my calamity; they need no one to help them. As through a wide breach they come; amid the crash they roll on."

(Job 30:13-14)

One of the things that is most missing in our world is grace.

No, I'm not talking about the grace that God showers upon us. Thankfully, He never seems to run out of grace for those who look to find it in Jesus - day after day, after day. I'm talking about grace between the men and women who make up all mankind.

Grace is so lacking.

The nightly news, the celebrity gossip shows, the check-out tabloids... they are all about promoting someone's calamity (as Job puts it). They dig up the dirt, throw it on top of someone 'til they are buried, and self-righteously "tsk, tsk" at the disaster they've made of someone else's life. It is so very sad.

Oh, I know that some people deserve what they get. Most definitely, many do. However, no one deserves for their calamity to be rejoiced-in, to be marketed, or to be mused at. At most their fall is to be mourned over as a member of humanity. As John Donne said, "Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

The "social death" of one is only a sad precursor to what will happen to us all - if it has not already. Job himself admits that those who are mocking him now are the sons of men he would only have thought good enough to sit with the sheepdogs. (30:1) Yet, now who is on top, and who is on bottom?

In my experience, I've found that those most able to offer grace are those who've received a lot of it! People who have experienced a kindness beyond what they deserve in their dark times have this ability that most others don't.

Note I said "ability"...

I say "ability" not "tendency" because - of all the people who should be most grace-giving - sometimes Christians are not. We - who have been forgiven of the very things that put Jesus on a Roman cross - ought to be the first to extend grace to others. People may not accept it... Yea, in pride, they may not even desire it. But of all people, we should not be ones to gloat at another's fall just so we can fade into the rabble of pointing, mocking people. We should be leading the mourning of fallen humanity and pointing to the Giver of Grace and Light of the World!

Let us be careful to be people who daily give out grace to others.

January 28

Reading: Job 32-34

"Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times, with a man, to bring his soul from the pit, that he maybe lighted with the light of life."

(Job 33:29-30)

So far, we've seen three perspectives on Job's suffering.

One, we first saw behind the scenes. The curtain in heaven is drawn back and we are privy to a conversation or two between Yahweh and Satan. We know Satan is behind Job's suffering.

Two, Job's "friends" come along. Three of them spout off a different perspective. They believe Job's sin - largely his evident misuse and abuse of the poor (as "evidenced" by his wealth) - has caused his suffering. He is simply being punished.

Three, Job's own perspective is that God has wronged him. He has no recourse. He will continue to remain faithful and trust God - but still, for some unknown reason, God "has it in" for him.

But here, finally, a fourth of Job's friends comes with another viewpoint. Even though we know the first viewpoint is correct, still, unanswered, is this question: Why is God allowing Satan to cause Job this suffering? Is it really only for sport? Is it just a cruel cosmic bet between God and His "underling-gone-bad"?

Elihu, youngest by far of the four friends, finally takes a turn, and his words speak the answer to the age-old question: Why do good people suffer?

In Elihu's mind, God speaks to mankind in two ways. Remember there is no Bible in Job's day - nor the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Elihu has observed (?) that God speaks to men in dreams (33:14-15) and "man is also rebuked with pain". (33:19)

Elihu believes three things: One, Job's friends are extremely short-sighted to believe his suffering is because he has done wrong; two, Job is wrong to think he is innocent and undeserving of any suffering (Mark 10:18); three, God allows suffering in a man's life not necessarily to punish evil, but to help the would-be righteous man along his way.

While Job is right when he says he has no standing before God, Elihu understands that what Job needs is a "mediator". (33:23) It is suffering that causes us to look for that Mediator. It is the suffering of life (learned before Moses) and the suffering inherent in law-keeping (learned after Moses) that points to our need. And without knowing it, Elihu begins preaching a gospel sermon about Jesus. He says that when there is a Mediator, suffering has the ability to lead to confession, repentance, and a calling upon the Lord. (33:26-28)

Do you suffer even when you are "good"? Jesus said none of us are good.

Do you suffer because God is punishing you? You can choose to see it that way.

But what God wants us to do through suffering is to hear His voice! He wants us to know He is calling out to us; and he wants us to call back!

January 29

Reading: Job 35-37

"Do you think this to be just? Do you say, 'It is my right before God,' that you ask, 'What advantage have I? How am I better off than if I had sinned?'

"If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against Him? And if your transgressions are multiplied, what do you do to Him? If you are righteous, what do you give to Him? Or what does He receive from your hand? Your wickedness concerns a man like yourself, and your righteousness a son of man."

(Job 35:2-3, 6-8)

"Why bother!?"

Have you ever said that? We try to do something with great discipline. We give our all to a project. We work our hardest, think our deepest, and design most creatively - only to have it all undone by some unforeseen happenstance. And so we ask, "Why bother!?"

Job felt that way with God. "God, you know all these 'friends' of mine accuse me of wrong - but You and I both know better! I've been nothing but righteous, and this is what happens to me! Why bother?"

Yes. Why bother? We get that same attitude don't we?

We somehow expect that because we work to follow Jesus that we should somehow be immune to life's woes and troubles. But remember: without pain we don't "hear" God much (33:19); we are not going to seek mediation; we are not going to look for help; we will believe we don't need grace!

Elihu points out that what we do is important not because of the affect it has on God - for it has none. We can't diminish God when we do wrong, and we can't help God when we do right. Doing good or bad doesn't have much to do with God; it has mostly to do with what we build up or tear down in our own lives.

How we live "concerns a man like yourself" (35:8). Our actions are either how we choose to build in ourselves more godliness - more Christlikeness, or how we choose to demean ourselves, hurt others, and efface the image of God in us. The circumstances around us only magnify and intensify the rate and force with which we build up or tear down our souls.

Why bother? Because every day we are either becoming more like Jesus or less like Jesus. Regardless of our pain or trouble.

January 30

Reading: Job 38:1-40:5

"And Yahweh said to Job: 'Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it.'"

(Job 40:2)

I won the 5th grade Science Fair at my school. I built an artificial ear. (Don't be too impressed, you can look up how to do it in any World Book encyclopedia. If you don't know what that is, use the internet.) It demonstrated how invisible sound waves traveled through different parts of the ear to the ear drum and finally turned those invisible sound waves into something observable. A ten year old can understand that; at least he can if it's explained to him.

But who can explain the universe and how large it is? Who can tell a person of any age why the earth continues to turn or how the Sun began burning? You can tell me why water begins becoming a solid at 32 degrees Fahrenheit, but who can explain why those molecules behave that way? There are scientific explanations for many, many things - but at some point every particle and every "law of nature" has an origin. And, except for the generalities of Genesis 1, we know absolutely zero!

Yahweh finally speaks and gets His licks in with Job. Job had sarcastically told his "friends" how "wise" they were - now God turns the tables. Like a giant, cosmic Jeopardy game, God leads Job through the different categories - "Creation" (38:4-20), "Weather" (38:22-30), "Astronomy" (38:31-38), and "Nature" (38:39-39:30).

Job's response?

"I lay my hand on my mouth." (40:4)

We had better learn to just be comfortable not knowing some things.

And it doesn't just apply to the "whys" of suffering. It applies to a lot of other whys.

Why does God call certain things sin? Why aren't some things permitted in the Church? Sometimes the Bible tells us - but then again, it doesn't. At some point we just have to realize that even if God told us every "why" - it still wouldn't make sense to us. There is still an "origin" to right and wrong, holy and unholy, good and bad that we can't understand - for it is in the essence of God Himself. And while we are called to emulate Him, we cannot be nor match Him.

Vent your frustrations to God. He can handle that. Spout your theories and share your thoughts. But understand this: in the end, we do not know much.

Walk outside. If it's day, see the creation around you and ask yourself if you could do better? If it's night, look to the sky and try counting the stars and formulating how to make something bright enough to be seen light-years away. Then, ask yourself,

"Who am I to argue with the Person did all this?"

The best we can do is trust the inerrant Word of God and seek Him in prayer daily.

January 31

Reading: Job 40:6-42:7

"I had heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."
(Job 42:5-6)

My wife and I are very blessed to be able to travel about for a living. We have had the opportunity to go places and see things that we, most likely, would never have seen otherwise. Many of them are places that I'd seen in books or in a movie. I'd received a postcard from someone at one of these places saying, "Wish you were here!" Many of the places I had heard about in history books or social studies classes in school. But for all the descriptions, photos, or even videos - it is nothing like standing there!

Likewise, how can I describe to you the peach cobbler I got to eat last week. How can I convince you that the chili con carne I had in New Mexico several days ago was the best you'd ever eat? If you've never eaten crawfish, could telling you about the gumbo I had in Texas get you to try it?

The more incredible the sight, the more delicious the taste, the deeper the emotion... the less we are able to describe things. The less justice we do. All we can say is, "You've got to see... taste... experience... it for yourself!"

How much more so YAHWEH!

Again, as we talked about several days ago, I don't know what Job knew about God or how he'd come to find out. We believe his story all happened pre-scripture. Most likely all Job knew about God was literally what he'd been told - what had been passed from generation to generation.

And it certainly shows in his theology... and most of all his "friends'" theology!

You only KNOW God when you EXPERIENCE God!

There are definitely things I'd love to tell you about God (and will tell you if you offer me the chance). And your faith will come by hearing me - or someone else - preach God's Word faithfully (Romans 10:17). But your faith is proven when you experience God - when your faith is not just an intellectual ascent, but is completed by trusting God. A faith that hasn't works is dead. (James 2:26)

That is exactly what Job comes to find out.

"Now my eyes see you;"

"Well, yeah. Sure if I saw God, I'd believe too!"

But Job is not saying he literally saw God. But Job saw God metaphorically by the way He worked in Job's life. Why? Because Job decided to trust God. Because Job said, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him." (13:15)

And once we experience God - truly know Him by a working faith - there is only one reaction: "I despise myself, and repent..." (42:6) What else could happen when you really see God!?

That's why so many congregations today are dead or dying. They don't help people experience God. They may experience a "feeling". They may experience "warm fuzzies". They may experience friendship, fun, or a host of other things - but they don't come face to face with God. The Word is avoided, seldom preached, baptistries emptied, and a challenge to commit to a working belief (faith) is never given. Congregations that don't want to let anyone feel "uncomfortable" cheat people out of knowing God. How in the world could you actually SEE GOD and feel COMFORTABLE!?

What about you?

Does your spiritual life consist of:

- a) what you've heard about God,
 - b) what you experienced with God thirty years ago,
- or
- c) a faith that is fresh from seeing God today?

Nothing happens of any use until you SEE GOD FOR YOURSELF!

Author's Note:

As we finish Job today, just a point of interest about Job's "times"...

Note first the creatures named in chapters 40 and 41 - Behemoth and Leviathan. If you have an older Bible with some footnotes, they fall all over themselves trying to tell you what these creatures are. The newer ESV Bible I use admits "exact identity unknown". But past Bibles I've seen suggest "hippopotamus" as Behemoth. Hard to see how a hippo tail is anything like a cedar! (40:17) A croc has been suggested for Leviathan. Really? A fire-breathing crocodile!? (41:19-20)

I believe these to be dinosaurs or similar extinct creatures. Both sound a lot like reptiles. The Behemoth sounds a lot like a brontosaurus or some other type of marsh-dwelling dino. Leviathan sounds basically like a large, fire-breathing sea monster. No, we don't have evidence of such, but there are "firey" insects and such that can make chemical "explosions". Certainly there are sometimes historical connections to mythical things. Perhaps there were - at one time - fire-breathing dragons?

Second, note that after all these things happen to Job - after he'd raised one round of children, etc, gone through all these trials - he lives another 140 years. We have no idea how old Job was in Job 1:1, but at the end of Genesis - after the patriarchs - Joseph "only" lives to 110 years. If Job were 45 when his first round of grown children died, he would be at least 185 years old - quite possibly centuries older.

For these reasons, as I said before, I believe Job belongs - if not PRE-flood - shortly after the flood and almost certainly before the ice age when there were still some of these large creatures and men were able to live for much longer periods of time. This all due to the believed changes in the atmosphere post-flood and before the accelerated degradation of human DNA.

It really does not have much bearing on our lives. It's just interesting stuff for "Bible nerds". However, if I'm correct (and there are scholars who think I am), I do believe it shows that dinosaurs walked the earth with mankind (as the early chapters of Genesis would already indicate), and that there is no reason for us to believe the THEORIES (unproven ideas) of "science" when they attempt to tell us all that we are products of millions of years of macro-evolution.

February 1

Reading: Exodus 1:1-4:25; 1 Chronicles 6:1-3a

"And Moses said, 'I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned. When Yahweh saw that he turned aside to see, God called him...'
(Exodus 3:3-4a)

When I began doing traveling ministry years ago, an old man who'd traveled a lot in his day told me, "Now listen! If you plan to keep this up, you've got to slow down. You can't drive 75 miles an hour down the interstate all day, every day. Get off on the side roads. Drive slower. Stop a lot. Notice stuff."

While I can't say I drive slowly, or even take a lot of side-roads for that matter, I do understand and apply the wisdom. We drive the interstate to get places quickly enough so that we can get off and "notice stuff", take a hike (or three), and see the sights. You can drive down the highway and "see" a mountain. But I want to climb it! Even though I'm one of millions who may have climbed a popular mountain trail, relative to the billions

(trillions?) of people who have lived on this earth the last 6 or 8 thousand years - barely anyone has seen some of the sights I've seen.

So it is with God.

Moses is out tending the sheep. Perhaps he's scurrying over to check on a lamb. Maybe he is needing to bind the leg of a ewe. During Moses' workday, God wants to speak to him. But God doesn't say a word to him. He just "burns". He's noticeable enough. Interesting enough (burning, but not burning up). But it's up to Moses to bother checking it out.

God seldom yells over to us, grabbing our attention in a big dramatic way. He just "burns". He's there... Waiting... Burning to be noticed during our business.

When Jesus talks about the "straight and narrow" way that leads to Him (Matthew 7:14), He's not talking about the interstate of life. Following God requires not that we speed-up to catch Him, but that we slow down to notice Him. And when we stop to "see this great sight", God will speak.

That "great sight" sits on your nightstand. Or maybe it's on your bookshelf. Your coffee table? Perhaps it's in the back window of your car - with the leatherette cover all curled up from sitting in the sun since the last time you were at the Church-house a month ago. But God waits there - waiting for you to "turn aside to see".

That "great sight" may be sitting across the table from you. Or maybe in the next cubicle at work. It could be in the line next to you at the grocery store, in the pew next to you at Church, or even sleeping next to you in bed. But God awaits. Burning to speak to you as you hear someone's story, share someone's pain, rejoice in their good fortune, or serve alongside them.

Think I'm kidding? Who would suspect God would draw someone's attention by being a fiery tumbleweed!? But there He was.

Look around today. Don't miss Him. Get off the interstate and turn aside.

February 2

Reading: Exodus 4:18-7:13

"But Pharaoh said, 'Who is Yahweh that I should obey His voice and let Israel go? I do not know Yahweh, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.'"

(Exodus 5:2)

Do you know anyone famous? Most people like to meet famous people. I remember when I was a boy, and I went with my dad and some other boys from our little league baseball team to a Minor League ballgame in Oklahoma City. Bob Feller was there signing autographs. I'd never heard of Bob Feller. He pitched more than a decade before I was born. But I stood in line like everyone else to get an autograph - of someone other people told me was famous!

In Exodus 5 (and following for another few chapters), Moses is really not trying to be a "name dropper" (someone who tries to impress others by "dropping a name" of someone famous they know), he is simply just

trying to do what God told him to do. He just goes up to Pharaoh (and yes, Moses himself - having been raised in Pharaoh's house - "knows" a few of the "rich and famous") and says,

"Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go,...' (5:1)

Well, kinda.

That's what most of your Bibles say anyway. Let me urge you to read a part of your Bible you've probably never read, even if you've read THE Bible through hundreds of times - The PREFACE. The preface of your Bible probably tells you some technical things about the translation you're reading. One of the things most all English Bibles will tell you is that when you see "the LORD", the Bible doesn't actually say "the LORD" - it says, "Yahweh" (Hebrew) or "Jehovah" (Latin). That is God's name as revealed to Moses. Moses was one of - if not the first - to actually know God's name - "Yahweh" (6:2-3). But for reasons I won't take time to explain right now (look it up on the internet if you care to), God's name has been replaced with "the LORD".

But unfortunately, it makes the Bible quite nonsensical in places.

Pharaoh knows "the Lord" (in small letters). He has LOTS of them. In fact, the Egyptians had over TWO THOUSAND different gods. Had Moses actually said, "the Lord God of Israel", Pharaoh might likely have replied, "Which one? Is the god of Israel one I worship? You only have one?"

No, Moses said, "Yahweh". Pharaoh answers truthfully, "I don't know any 'Yahweh'. Get outta here."

Another place where this translation sticks out terribly is in 1 Kings 18. Having lost a contest of gods Vs. GOD on Mt. Carmel, the Prophets of Baal (well, all the people) fall on their face and exclaim, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, he is God."

Well, kinda.

That's not what they said!

They said, "YAHWEH, He is God; YAHWEH, He is God." They had a "Lord" already - Baal! (again, among others). But here they must fully admit Who truly is God. It is not Baal - it is YAHWEH! (Like all people will eventually! [Philippians 2:10-11])

And it goes on and on throughout especially the Old Testament. I would encourage you, when you read quietly - or even aloud - to SAY GOD'S NAME! Don't read "the LORD"; read "Yahweh".

Why does it matter?

It matters for the same reason it mattered to Pharaoh. Our world is full of "Lords". It is full of other "gods". Psalm 105 says this:

"Oh give thanks to ~~the LORD~~ Yahweh; call upon His name;"

(What "Lord" are you going to call on?)

"make known His deeds among the peoples!" (Psalm 105:1)

In this Psalm, Yahweh calls for His name to be called on and made known (v.1), sung to, told of (v.2), and gloried in (v.3). He calls for His strength and presence to be sought!

"Well, I don't praise anyone else or seek strength anywhere else already!"

Honestly?

Maybe we'd do better if we reminded ourselves just exactly Who it is we are worshipping! Be excited! You can - or at least can have an opportunity to - be a "name dropper"! Unlike Pharaoh, you DO know (or you can know) Yahweh! And He is the most famous, rich, and important Person of all time – and eternity!

February 3

Reading: Exodus 7:14-9:35

"But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you My power, so that My name may be proclaimed in all the earth. You are still exalting yourself..."

(Exodus 9:16-17a)

Generally speaking, Onus and I were friends. We played on the same football team in 4th and 5th grade; he played tackle on the defensive line, and I played tackle on the offensive line. We both played as defenders on the same soccer team. We usually got along fine.

But one day, as boys are likely to do, we got into it over something - just exactly what it was escapes me. I can't remember because it probably didn't matter even way back then. It became a bit of a schoolyard row. I kinda impressed myself that day (and the other boys) because I defeated Onus in our little tussle. We were all impressed (except Onus, I suppose) because, while I was a pretty big youngin' myself - Onus was even bigger. But I learned that day what we all have heard: "The bigger they are - the harder they fall."

Pharaoh was pretty prideful. Yahweh knew he was already a hard-hearted individual when this whole situation between Pharaoh and Moses began. (7:14) Pharaoh was a big man, so to speak - a world leader. Moses, though very familiar to Pharaoh (having grown up together?), was no longer part of the Egyptian royalty. Moses was a stinking shepherd. Egyptians loathed shepherds.

But isn't that usually God's way? God takes the "smallest" in the world's eyes and uses them to crush the strong.

In fact, have you ever wondered why it is that throughout history mean, ruthless, prideful, destructive men have ruled nations? Yahweh tells Pharaoh exactly why he came to power over Egypt... so he might tear him down.

"...I have raised you up to show you My power..."

If Yahweh is more powerful than Pharaoh and their 2000+ gods... Yahweh will surely be proclaimed!

But poor Pharaoh - he just kept exalting himself. Moses, Israel, Egypt, Pharaoh, all his soldiers, and, yes, the whole known world would come to see: "the bigger they are, the harder they fall."

Which side of this are you on?

Are you like Moses? Are you a servant of Yahweh just humbly and obediently serving Him? Or are you more like Pharaoh?

You have a window of opportunity right now. But the window will someday close and all you have will be lost! Don't keep trying to exalt yourself; humble yourself and God will exalt you! (James 4:10)

February 4

Reading: Exodus 10-12

"Moses said, 'We will go with our young and our old. We will go with our sons and daughters and with our flocks and herds, for we must hold a feast to Yahweh.'

"But [Pharaoh] said, 'Yahweh be with you if ever I let you and your little ones go!... No! Go the men among you...'"
(Exodus 10:9-10a, 11a)

Isn't it funny how some things are good or bad based on the context?

Compromise, for instance, is generally seen as a valued ability. When two young children both want their way, they are taught to "compromise" so that each gets some of what they want.

In politics, the compromise is a much sought-after solution to grid-lock. Henry Clay was known as "The Great Compromiser".

So, how is it that Moses can't just compromise with Pharaoh. Pharaoh didn't say he couldn't go and worship Yahweh! He just asked that Moses do it a particularly different way. "Worship Yahweh! Fine! Just leave the women, children, and livestock here."

That seems about as reasonable as the demands that governments make on the Church today.

"Look! We don't have a problem with you worshipping God! Just...

"Don't meet in person; meet over the internet."

"Don't serve communion"

"Don't pass the offering plate."

"Don't shake hands."

"Don't sing." (Yes, really. Congregations in Canada have been instructed not to sing.)

But friends, every single one of these things are either commanded by God that we do or are things we do by New Testament example. (OK, hand-shaking... Would you rather kiss?)

"But look! You can still worship Yahweh. Just not like that right now!"

Sorry. I'm not compromising.

If you will change your way of doing things - for any reason - it is no longer a conviction that you have. You only have a preference. Once the government - or anyone else for that matter - sees that it's only a preference, not a conviction (a knowledge that God requires this of you) - no longer are you free to worship as God instructs. Outside forces will simply say, "You changed your mind in that instance! Why not this one? You obviously don't feel it's necessary."

Save the compromises for the playground, Christian! Do what God has called you to do, and do it today!

February 5

Reading: Exodus 13-15

"Yahweh said to Moses, 'Why do you cry to Me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground.'"

(Exodus 14:15-16)

Some of y'all need to quit prayin'!

I bet you never thought you'd hear a preacher say that!

Some of y'all need to start prayin', but there is a mighty big contingent of Christians: Elders in God's Church, preachers, and a lot of pew sitters - that need to quit praying!

I don't mean forever. And I really don't mean that you shouldn't pray at all. But there are a lot of people who name Jesus that have "analysis paralysis". They excuse their lack of obedience in what they know they are to be doing while they whine about and wait for God to answer concerning something else.

For instance...

I was in the home of a preacher one day. The preacher's wife was really pushing for her neighbor who was there in our company to go with her on a mission trip to Africa. The lady said she really did want to go. It sounded so exciting. There were definite plans and preparations though she needed to make - so she wasn't sure. The preacher's wife kept pressing her and saying, "Just pray about it! Just pray about it! I think you need to go."

I was really hoping that I wouldn't be asked about it.

No such luck.

Be careful what you ask me to weigh in on!

"Greg, what do you think she should do? Don't you think she ought to go with us to Africa?"

They had to ask...

"Well, honestly, you just spent the last fifteen minutes telling us why you hadn't been to church services in over a month because you had this or that 'club' commitment. You told us a while ago that you couldn't afford

to tithe because of 'x, y, and z'. You also mentioned that you didn't know if you could evangelize in Africa because you've never 'witnessed' to anyone before. So I guess I just have to wonder how in the world you would ever take two weeks off when you can't take off a day - how you can spend thousands when you can't give a tenth - and how God could use you in Africa to do something you aren't obedient enough to do next door!?"

The discussion ended, and I don't think the preacher's wife was too happy with me.

I told you... be careful when you ask my opinion.

Let's not spend so much time wondering about things we don't know when there are a whole slew of things that we know for certain God has commanded we do.

February 6

Reading: Exodus 16-19

"Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword."
(Exodus 17:11-13)

Sometimes when we read the Bible, we get to thinking that these men of renown are somehow better than we. We think they had something "supernatural" about them. But these followers of Yahweh, particularly in the time before Jesus, were "ordinary" men. Men like Moses, though they obviously had a deep relationship with God, did not even have the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit that we today are blessed with as immersed believers in Jesus!

In today's reading, at least three times we see Moses' "humanity" and his need for help. And, today, our leaders - though hopefully being led by and listening to the Holy Spirit - need our help as well.

As Moses overlooks the battle in which God's people are engaging, he stands high atop the hill - in sight of all the warriors - and raises his staff above his head. Now, I don't know what was going here exactly... if God was miraculously doing something... or if it was just the sight of Moses - that mighty leader with that staff that parted the Red Sea - that so encouraged and strengthened the weary troops... But regardless, the warriors needed a leader. The leader was human. And he needed help.

Are we raising up the hands of our spiritual leaders - the representatives of God and His power - as we march into the world daily? How we treat our Church leaders makes a difference! (Hebrews 13:17)

At least one other guy besides Aaron and Hur recognize Moses' need. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, sees his weariness and lends some good advice. (18:21-22)

Or are we - as in another instance in our reading - grumbling? As the people grumble to Moses and Aaron about their "lack" ("But did you die!?"), he reminds them, "Aaron and I are nobody! You're grumbling against God!"

Our leaders are just people. They don't always know why you are "suffering" what you are. They are not responsible for your physical upkeep - or even your happiness. They are simply there to help you look to Yahweh for those things!

Are you helping your leaders? Or are you a grumbling hinderance? You may argue that your leaders are not being/doing what God has called them to. That could be true. But maybe they gave up that a long time ago because everyone expected them to be super-human. Maybe we can help them and pray them into being the leaders God wants and we need.

Just a thought.

February 7

Reading: Exodus 20:1 - 22:15

"You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain, for Yahweh will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain."

(Exodus 20:7)

Do you wince when you hear someone take Yahweh's name in vain?

I was out on a trail recently and I heard this woman just giving-it-to her husband. (He seemed a little hen-pecked.) As she was berating him - loudly... in public... letting some expletives fly - "God" entered into the sentence at least once.

And it wasn't in a worshipful way.

Immediately I made several judgments. None of which I feel guilty of - I'm just observing some fruit here. One, as mentioned, "Boy, that fella must have it rough. Don't think I could live with her!" Two, "That lady is no lady!" Three, "I'm a little offended that she threw God in there with all her cursing and carrying-on." I thought about saying something to her, at least on that count.

Well... hang on. Maybe I feel guilty on one point.

Probably not the one you think?

I might should have been a little more introspective on the "involving Yahweh's name in vain".

No, I don't utter curses. Furthermore, I don't and would under no circumstances use God's name in a curse. But is that all that commandment means?

Here's a thought (or two):

What if me labeling myself a "Christian" - a Jesus follower - for any reason other than glorifying Him as my Savior... what if that is taking His name in vain?

If I say, "Well, I'm a Christian!" in order to: Make someone think better of me; Make someone feel worse about themselves; Make someone trust me; Get a discount or more favorable treatment... aren't these things taking His name in a way that doesn't glorify Him?

What if I call myself a Christian and then I don't act like Jesus?

What if I attribute certain things to the Holy Spirit that are not of Him? Eg., I don't study or prepare well and tell people that "I just rely on the Holy Spirit to speak to me when I preach or teach." I've heard preachers and Sunday School teachers say that! Don't blame the Holy Spirit for your laziness and poor preparation!

For that matter, what if we do work hard on sermons, lessons, or even songs - that don't speak real spiritual truth about God?

What if I pray selfish, thoughtless, or even sinful prayers (Luke 18:11) and tack "in Jesus' name, Amen." on the end of it? I think more Christians take the Lord's name in vain during prayer than any other place - maybe more than any other people!

Let's endeavor today (and every day) to THINK about how we speak. Let's especially endeavor to pay attention to how we address and speak about Yahweh.

February 8

Reading: Exodus 22:16 - 24:18

"If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him."

(Exodus 23:4-5)

Somehow, I had always thought of "The Golden Rule" (Matthew 7:12) as kind of a "REactive" rule. That is, I always thought of it in the sense of how I'd respond to someone. I also think most of us might look to enact The Golden Rule on someone we actually like! We, like the lawyer who questioned Jesus ("and who is my neighbor"), want to pick out who we treat kindly - not look for "just anyone" who needs good done to them (the person Jesus says is our neighbor)!

But here - way before Jesus - is kind of an example of the Golden Rule - and it breaks both those assumptions!

Before we get deep into the "test case", we find that second assumption blown-up.

"If you meet your enemy's..."

I'd like this to read, "If you meet your enemy's donkey on the loose, say, 'Too bad; So sad,' and walk on."

But it doesn't. God expects me to not just respond in the right way, but to be pro-active in treating people rightly - even if they are my enemy.

OK, my own case in point.

I was upset with someone about how they were treating someone in my family once. "You know," I thought, "They ought to..." And I had a whole list of how they should treat my relatives, because of a, b, and c. Trouble was? I'd never treated his relatives like that.

God's people are to be people on the lookout to help anyone and everyone in time of need. Friends or enemies. It doesn't mean we are irresponsible or enabling, etc... but when we see a need we can fill, a right we can wrong, something we can fix - let's try.

That's a big enough assignment for me today!

February 9

Reading: Exodus 25-28

"And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty."
(Exodus 28:2)

The other day my wife and I were hiking in Death Valley National Park (beautiful place, btw!). There is a cave on one of the hikes that was in a deleted scene of Star Wars Episode 5. Luke Skywalker finishes building his light saber in a cave in Death Valley! (Much of the planet Tatooine in Episodes 4 and 5 were filmed in Death Valley.)

My wife and I hiked up the long hill to the cave and peeked in the now barred-off area. Not having ever been a fan of the Star Wars movies (she's just endured them with me) she says, "OK. I guess I should rewatch some of the movies and see this stuff. I just get lost in the story and all the characters and can't understand it."

My response?

"OK! Well, really it's easy to follow! You see..."

I launch in to Jedis, Sith Lords, Trade Federations, clones, midi-chlorians... and two sentences into my explanation she says, "Never mind. I don't want to know."

Honestly, I know for us today, a lot of Exodus and practically all of Leviticus sound the same as Star Wars "mumbo-jumbo" to most people. It's foreign culturally, religiously, chronistically... To put it another way, it's like hearing the adults on the Peanuts cartoons. "Wah, wah, wah, wah - wah wah wah wahhh."

We get the gist of it because of the context, but we don't really understand or appreciate it.

But we should.

Yes, there are details! TONS of details! And today's reading calls out at least a few purposes for that. Specific to 28:2, "for glory and beauty". It's all for purpose and pleasure.

What a wonderful God!

Yahweh is not capricious and arbitrary in His commands. Those are characteristics of men. And that is why, without God, we constantly search for purpose and beauty! That doesn't mean we always understand the purpose - but God assures us that it's there.

Another thought is this: the incredible detail... well, I wonder if all of Israel actually knew it? I mean, yeah, they HEARD it - just like we read it... but how could you keep up with it all!? Thankfully, the priests - and specifically the High Priest - would shoulder that load. They would be there to lead, guide, and instruct the folks on what they needed to do, and they would take care of their part.

This is a real picture of Jesus!

God knows all the details of our lives, our friends' lives, our enemies' lives, the lives of folks we don't know... He knows the purpose that each moment plays (or at least can play) in His plan for the redemption of the world. Our High Priest Jesus understands it. He keeps it all straight. And, in the person of the Holy Spirit Who indwells every repentant and immersed believer - He leads, guides, and instructs us on how to follow Him ...while Jesus takes care of the heavy lifting!

Our job is simply to report for duty each day and say, "OK, Father. Here I am. What are You working on today? What is Your plan? Where do I fit?"

The devil is not in the details (as is often said!) - God is!

February 10

Reading: Exodus 29-31

"You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people."
(Exodus 31:14)

Do you keep the Sabbath? Few things in scripture are so clear, yet so misunderstood. The Sabbath has been "recognized" in many ways.

If you could go back in a time machine to just "Yesterday, when I was young...", I would wish you luck trying to do so much as to get gas for your car on Sunday. You would find practically nothing but church houses open on the Lords' Day. In addition, it was our family's tradition that usually we didn't have friends over to the house on Sunday. It was the one day a week my dad didn't work, and it was a "family day" - meant to be spent going to Church services and spending a quiet day at home together as a family.

That day has passed.

Oh, there are still some who believe in not working on "the Sabbath" - but they go to the Cracker Barrel after Church on Sunday and make someone else work on "the Sabbath".

Other "brands" of Christianity "keep the Sabbath" by worshipping together on Saturday.

"Saturday! The seventh day of the week is the Sabbath!," they say. "God commanded that we worship and refrain from working on Saturday!" (I guess they don't mind their preacher working on the Sabbath!) "It was the Catholics changed the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday!" they'd argue.

Listen, you certainly should have at least one day a week that you rest from your work! God did! Are you better or more able than He? It is the created order of things - even before this law given to Moses - that there is a day of rest. There are "hours" of rest that the day begins with. There are seasons of rest. (January 1 reading) But this verse clearly states: "You shall keep the Sabbath because it is holy for you". "You" Hebrews! You people under the law of Moses!

Again, I believe it's godly to rest a day. I believe the Lord's Day (the proper term for Sunday) is special. When you read the book of Acts and Revelation, there are examples of important, worshipful things happening on The Lord's Day. But it is also recorded that they met together daily. (Acts 2:46-47) There was no changing of the Sabbath day. As Christians, we don't "keep the Sabbath" as the Jews did.

That doesn't mean we still don't choose to keep the Sabbath! We just don't do it as the Jews did!

"For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on." (Hebrews 4:8)

While the Jews had a "Promised Land" Moses was leading them to... and were lead into by Joshua (we will see later)... they still did not have the real rest God wanted them to have... rest like He had. As the Promised Land over on the Mediterranean was only a picture of the place of rest God has for us in heaven, the Sabbath was only a picture of the time of rest He will provide us in eternity!

"So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience." (Hebrews 4:9-11)

As those redeemed by Jesus, when we are ordained as Kingdom Priests in our immersion into His death, burial, and resurrection - we enter into rest. Just as the Holy Spirit is a "deposit" on what is to come (2 Corinthians 1:22), so our souls find rest - however imperfect - in Yahweh now. His joy and peace that He even now shares in time and space is certainly a "rest". But even more so, we have a "Sabbath rest" to come in heaven.

And, like the people of God in Moses day, you are invited to partake of rest - or not. You can have the "picture" of heavenly rest when you enter into the body of Christ, today - or not. You can remain a faithful member of Christ's body and enter, one day, into the eternal Sabbath - or not.

The same consequence of not "observing the Sabbath" remains... death.

Are you a Sabbath keeper?

February 11

Reading: Exodus 32-34

"I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."

"When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments."
(Exodus 33:2-4)

When I was a child I loved Christmas for the presents! Don't get me wrong; it was fun to see family, to eat lots of good food, to celebrate Jesus... but the presents... that's what I looked forward to.

They used to have these big books of shiny pages, hundreds of shiny pages, that would show up in your mail box about September or October of every year – chock-full of all kinds of toys and gifts. It was called... a catalog! In the Christmas catalog was everything a kid could want. I remember perusing it almost daily - dog-eared pages, making lists of item numbers and page numbers for my Christmas list.

So many times, this is the way it is for kid-like Christians. Oh sure, there is a lot about Christianity that's "ok" - but for them, being a Christian is about how they can be blessed. They care more about God's presents than God's presence!

Of all people, even the Israelites knew that when God said, "I'll provide for you, but I'm not going with you," - that was a problem! As stubborn and stiff-necked as they were... as much as they complained to have more... they were scared to go anywhere without the presence of God - even if they did have His "presents".

Moses said this to Yahweh:

"For how shall it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct...from every other people on the face of the earth?" (33:16)

See, lots of people have stuff. For goodness' sake, even Job knew that evil people often prosper and good people still suffer. Having "presents" and material blessing - even temporal victory - is hardly a sign of anything special. It was the presence of God with them that made them special! And it is the presence of God in Christians that makes us special! Yea, even unbeatable! Greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world!
(1 John 4:4)

So today, which will you put more stock in? Are you most concerned with God's presents - or His presence? Practice some of His presence right now as you contemplate this message in prayer. Then, think of Him throughout the day. His presence with you will come to mean so very much.

February 12

Reading: Exodus 35-36

"and said to Moses, 'The people bring much more than enough for doing the work that Yahweh has commanded us to do.' So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp, 'Let no man or woman do anything more for the contribution for the sanctuary.' So the people were restrained from bringing, for the material they had was sufficient to do all the work, and more."
(Exodus 36:5-7)

Can you imagine that while you are sitting in Church this coming Sunday, an elder walks up the aisle of the auditorium. He steps up onto the stage and into the pulpit.

"People, we have a problem. Y'all are just giving too much! We've got more than enough to do God's work here, folks!"

At that, there is a sharp murmuring that increases into shouting.

"You said we could help!"

"I want to give! I haven't had a turn to give yet!"

"I didn't have a chance to give all I wanted to give!"

People begin opening up their wallets, digging through purses... a man rushes for the offering plates. Deacons restrain him from taking up an offering. People are throwing money toward the front in a last-ditch effort to contribute something, anything.

Impossible?

At least, improbable! ...highly improbable!

But that's what happens here. Why? Because everyone was doing what God called them to do. I've often said that if everyone would just give what God moves them to give, the Church would have more than enough to make disciples!

This particular instance happened because people gave:

What they had.

God didn't ask them to give what they didn't have. (There's a story here about a guy who had one pig, one sheep, two cows, and a conversation he had with the preacher. If you don't know it - ask any preacher!) But the point is that God doesn't ask for what He hasn't already put in our possession to give!

With joy.

And God loves a cheerful giver! (2 Corinthians 9:6-8)

When their heart was moved by God!

Moses repeats that three times. We need to get in the habit of doing what God's Spirit moves us to do! But... that would mean we need to get in the habit of asking God and listening for the answer.

Out of willing, generous hearts. God called the generous - not the greedy.(35:5) You don't want to give? God would just as soon you keep it. Trust Him - don't trust Him... it's always your decision.

But when we try to manufacture something to give, we will get frustrated. When we give under compulsion, we will be resentful. When we do what we want with our own agenda and time frame, we muddy God's plan. And greedy hearts will never be blessed without faith.

Which way do you give? Or do you give to the Lord's work at all?

February 13

Reading: Exodus 37:1-39:31

"Bezalel made the ark of acacia wood.... He also made the table of acacia wood.... He made the altar of burnt offering of acacia wood...."

(Exodus 37:1a, 10a; 38:1a)

The short story is that in 1965 an incredibly large mahogany tree was found by loggers in a forest that is now part of Belize. "The Tree", as it has come to be known, was over 100 feet tall and 10 feet in diameter. It is estimated that "The Tree" was a sapling in the late 1400's!

The loggers believed they could harvest the treasure, even with their meager tools. After weeks of axe-chopping, it was finally ready to fall. The problem? It fell the wrong way! It went backwards and fell into a deep ravine. Weeks of work were wasted and there was no way for them, at the time, to retrieve it.

Skip forward 10 years.

A sawmill owner looking for good timber noticed the tree and understood its value. At great labor and expense, he began getting the tree to his mill. Today, wood from "The Tree" is a sought after commodity. It has a beautiful quilting design in the wood and has been used - according to legend - to panel George Lucas' San Francisco office, as well as make other high-dollar furniture and - because of its rich tonal-wood qualities - make several very expensive (\$30k) acoustic guitars.

An Oakland, California, area guitar accessories maker got a few small sheets of unusable veneer from "The Tree" to make some very small custom projects. My most prized guitar is adorned with three different very small diamond-shaped chips from "The Tree".

Just an interesting story you can read in more detail here:

<https://www.stewmac.com/video-and-ideas/online-resources/reference/the-tree-the-most-notorious-tonewood-in-the-world/>

But there is another tone-wood that my guitar is made of that is more valuable to me.

My Taylor T5 is made of Koa. Now Koa, while an expensive tone and furniture wood, is not nearly as rare as "The Tree". But interestingly enough, Koa is a species of Acacia. Acacia was a beautiful and valuable furniture wood even in Bible times. This is the wood from which God selected the ark, the table, and the alter to be made.

I think often about the sacrifice of praise (Hebrews 13:15) my guitar lends to us as we worship. That sound bursting forth from an "alter" of acacia wood, so to speak. What a connection!

But we know that neither my simple guitar nor that incredible piece built by Bazalel is really the most important alter.

THE Tree that counts is that one fashioned into a cross over two thousand years ago. But it was not the tree itself that mattered, but what was done upon it. It was not a tree that panels a famous movie writer's wall, or

makes guitars. But it was another tree touched by God. For from that tree a sacrifice would be made - "once for all". (Romans 6:10) The very Lamb of God, Jesus of Nazareth, the Only-Begotten Son of God died upon it.

Most of us have material things that we hold as very valuable, if not priceless (at least to us). But don't ever let anything become more important than what Bazalel, with all his craftsmanship, was pointing to with his finery in his day. Remember the cross!

February 14

Reading: Exodus 39:32-40:38; Numbers 9:15-23

"Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of Yahweh was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys."

(Exodus 40:36-38)

I'll admit it. I'm an "I-want-it-yesterday" kind of person.

It may take me a while to decide on something, but once I have, I don't want to wait. I want to get it, go there, take care of it, fix it, or do it now!

Sometimes that's a problem when it comes to my walk with Jesus.

As someone once said, "Every prayer has three possible answers, 'Yes,' 'No,' or 'Not right now.'" There have been times I'd rather just deal with being told "No," than "Not right now." I guess you'd say that patience is not my forte.

Maybe your like me.

Or, maybe you are opposite me.

You don't want anything from God. Including and most of all any instructions about moving, doing, changing, or the like. You don't mind the idea of being "religious". You definitely don't want to go to hell... but other than that - "Let's just leave one another alone God. You go Your way, and I'll stay right here and do my thing. I'll holler if I need you."

You could be a combination of the two, I suppose, as well.

The point is we need to be like the Israelites. We need to always be looking to Yahweh, waiting to see if this is the time to move or the time to stay. There are plenty of things to be done here, and there is plenty to do if we are picking up to go on to the next adventure. "Here" and "there" are both places that require faith, trust, endurance, and obedience. Just be ready to discern which place you are to exercise those.

Unfortunately, we don't have a cloud or pillar of fire guiding us around. But we do have the Holy Spirit. We do have His Word. We do have prayer. We do have preaching in the assembly. There are all sorts of ways that God can and will communicate to us if it's time to stay or go... if we will but listen.

It's not always obvious, but I believe that if we are making a concerted effort to hear Him, God will make sure we get the message.

February 15

Reading: Numbers 7

"And when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with Yahweh, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim; and it spoke to him."
(Numbers 7:89)

Some of the most satisfying DIY projects I've done involve old trucks.

My first old truck was a 1968 IHC. It had a small 1958 International V8, but the design was very simple. There was ample room under the hood so that you could almost stand inside with the motor underneath it. I hadn't grown up working on vehicles, so this was a great way to be introduced to varying degrees of repair. With an uncle and a cousin often guiding me - then solo - I began to repair or replace various things as needed.

My second "old" truck was a 1999 Ford F250. While I didn't do any engine repairs, I did get under the hood for a new alternator, replace the mirrors, headlight lenses, and the latches on both rear doors.

What made both those trucks so satisfying was that when I got the instructions and followed them carefully - surprise! Everything actually worked! The guy with no training at all succeeded!
Can you imagine how Moses must have felt with all the instructions he'd received? (If he thought he'd received detailed instructions then...! Wait 'til we begin Leviticus!) Can you feel the pressure of leading millions of people and trying to get this all correct?

I don't know how long it had been since Moses had heard God's actual voice, but here after twelve days of full-on work consecrating the temple... he stands in the Holy of Holies... Can you imagine the anticipation? He walks in, and as if he is trying out a newly installed switch, waits to see what happens...
And then... Moses hears it.

The voice of Yahweh!

What satisfaction he must have felt - what relief, what comfort! The mercy flowing from above that mercy seat must have been palpable. All was right between him and the Creator of the Universe.

Fortunately, you don't have to be a prophet called by Yahweh to have the same feeling - or even the same communication. There's not a list of requirements for a place to meet. There is no ceremonial hub-bub. There is no wondering if the "prayer switch" will really "work". If we are covered by the righteousness of Jesus the Christ, we have the opportunity to simply walk in, sit down, and have a conversation with Yahweh. The lines of communication can be clear, open, and oh, so satisfying.

Have you taken time to go talk with God today? Do that now! He's waiting.

February 16

Reading: Numbers 8:1 - 9:14; Leviticus 1:1 - 3:17

"And those men said to him, 'We are unclean through touching a dead body. Why are we kept from bringing Yahweh's offering at its appointed time among the people of Israel?'"

(Numbers 9:7)

I really, honestly try to keep from doing it. Even when I am playing alone, even when there is no one else in sight on the whole course - I don't give myself do-overs.

Sometimes, on a nice, sunny day somewhere across these United States, my wife will tag-along while I throw discs across the prairies and through the woods into chained baskets. She will watch me, volunteer to carry my bag of golfing discs, and keep my score. On those rare (OK, not so rare) occasions when my tee shot ends up hitting a tree a few feet in front of me or strays in a far-off-course direction, she will say, "Aw, just do it over!"

Nope. I'm holding myself to a higher standard. No do-overs.

There are lots of folks in the world who are like that about - well, life in general!

They won't look for "do-overs". "I made this mess; I'll clean it up."

There are other people who won't let other people have "do-overs". "They made their bed; let them lie in it!"

I'm glad Yahweh is different.

As Moses is given the command that they need to begin now - since the tabernacle is finished, dedicated, and the Levites have been cleansed and stand at the ready - observing the Passover feast. Everyone, evidently, gets with the program and things are going off as planned... except for this one contingent of guys.

We don't know exactly how many of them there were, but they have a problem. They can't celebrate the Passover because they are unclean. They had touched a dead body.

We also don't know why they touched a dead body. Most likely there was no evil intent or sin that led to their uncleanliness. Perhaps a close relative had died. Someone had to prepare the body. Maybe they had been extra nice-guys - sacrificing their "cleanness" to do the work of the body's preparation.

But they are not too proud to ask for a "do-over" - a second chance. They so want to worship Yahweh - they are so intent on bringing their sacrifice... "Surely this is a technicality, Moses! Why can't we participate?"

Some people would say, "Oh well. I'll save that lamb and pick back up next year."

Some people's god would punish them - not just for being unclean, but for then missing a feast because of their uncleanliness.

But that's not Yahweh.

Yahweh is a God of second chances.

In His mercy and grace, Yahweh says, "Yeah, go ahead and take a month. Go through the process of becoming clean again, and then come and bring your offering a month late." He even makes a provision for people who may have been off on a long journey and don't get home in time! (9:9ff)

What about you?

Do you let your pride stand in the way of grace? Will you just stay in your sinful state to prove you're "man enough to take what you got comin'"? Let me tell you, you're not.

Do you let others stand between you and God? Will you listen to people who say you've "gone too far", "done too much", and "sinned too greatly" to receive grace? Those people don't know anything about grace - because they don't know anything about Yahweh!

In Jesus, there is always an opportunity to be right with God. The Passover Lamb is always available if you would avail yourself to Him - even if your problem is your fault. That's what grace and mercy are about!

God won't leave you out in the cold while everyone else parties - just ask for a do-over!

February 17

Reading: Leviticus 4-6

"If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity."
(Leviticus 5:1)

For a long while, my wife and I were hooked on the TV show *Forensic Files*. (Any others of you?) It came on a cable station at 10pm every night, just as we were getting ready for bed. From the master bath while brushing my teeth, I would listen to Peter Thomas' soothing, yet intriguing, voice introduce the case and draw us into the plot. We would continue the show from under our warm blankets, and many was the time I never knew what happened as I fell asleep before the end.

But I think those shows intrigue me because I've always wanted to be able to "break the case". Who hasn't wanted to see that license plate on an amber alert? Who hasn't thought of being able to identify that person whose drawing is shown on TV? While I know that being part of a trial isn't actually fun, we love the romantic notion of the "big witness" in the case on *Perry Mason*. (Look it up if you don't know who that is.)

Even though we are not bound by Mosaic Law under Christ, the principle is clear here in this verse: If you know the truth, tell it! Tell the truth - not just when it benefits you - but even when it benefits others or society as a whole. Tell the truth! Tell what you know.

Jesus said that the fields are "white unto harvest". (John 4:35) There are rafts of people waiting for someone to "break the case". People are dying and going to hell every day because people are unwilling to take the witness stand and "tell the truth" - tell what they know about Jesus!

The second epistle of the Apostle John tells us that many deceivers have gone out into the world. That is, there are people out telling lies about Jesus! (See most any PBS show about Jesus or the Bible [tax-payer

funded garbage that violates what any self-respecting liberal would call "Separation of Church and State"].) There is a greater need than ever before for someone who knows Jesus personally to take the stand!

Will you?

Or will you "bear the iniquity" of being called to trial and keeping your mouth shut?

February 18

Reading: Leviticus 7-8

"but the person who eats of the flesh of the sacrifice of Yahweh's peace offerings while an uncleanness is on him, that person shall be cut off from his people."

(Leviticus 7:20)

I remember when my kids were young. Like any child, they loved to imitate certain things. My little girl had "dress-up" clothes - fancy play shoes, purses, and jewelry - to look like a princess, ballerina, a movie star... Both my boys had cowboy hats, stick horses, cap pistols, and the like to capture all the bad guys - or even perhaps be one!

We are even told in the Bible to continue what we learned as children when it comes to imitation. Ephesians 5:1 says this: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children."

Children imitate those whom they love - and as God's children, Christians are to be no exception. We are to imitate, the next verse says, Christ's love and sacrificial nature. But if we do that, there are others ways in which we cannot be imitators. To imitate Jesus means we walk in holiness, not pretentiousness.

It would have been easy enough for many people to feign cleanness. There are certain ways to become unclean that no one would no about but you. The condition of being "unclean" was not a physical uncleanness, but it was spiritual. It had to do with a person's spiritual standing. So, if no one else knows...

But you know.

And God knows.

So it was a "big deal" to eat the sacrifice whilst being unclean.

It still is.

"Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." (1 Corinthians 11:27-29)

God doesn't require any waiting period. He doesn't require a cleansing (save that cleansing of our souls in the rebirth of water baptism). He doesn't require we stand and yell, "Unclean!" All God asks is that we be honest with Him - and mostly with ourselves - about our continual need for mercy and grace.

When New Testament Christians come around the Lord's Table weekly to remember the sacrifice of Jesus, we not only do that, but in our participation we are proclaiming to the rest of the congregation that we still believe and are walking with Jesus. Don't pretend; don't just be an imitator. Be real with God - and yourself.

February 19

Reading: Leviticus 9-11

"And Yahweh spoke to Aaron saying, 'Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that Yahweh has spoken to them by Moses.'" (Leviticus 10:8-11)

I'm not one that will tell you it's wrong to drink alcoholic beverages.

I'm not one to try to pass off what Jesus created in His first recorded miracle at a wedding as something other than what we know as wine.

I'm also not one to encourage you to drink alcohol in Christian freedom.

Here's the thing:

Nadab and Abihu used "unauthorized fire" in an offering to the Lord. We aren't exactly sure what that means, but it wasn't done how it was to be done. And it got them killed! (10:1-2) We aren't exactly sure why they fell into this blunder except that it is then that Yahweh makes the rule - "no drinkin' hard stuff on duty". Perhaps alcohol was, once again, a contributing factor to tragic circumstances.

Through the ages of recorded ancient history even before the time of Moses and Aaron, alcohol has already been a grave problem. Alcohol led Noah to lie drunk, naked, and exposed leading to the sin of Ham. (Genesis 9:21-25) Alcohol was present when Lot was drunk - not just one night but at least two - and unwittingly committed incest with his daughters (Genesis 19:30ff). The scriptures are full of people who said, "Hold my beer and watch this!"

I am not the Israeli High Priest. (Whew!) But I am a priest! I am a priest in the Kingdom of God. It is not because I'm a preacher; it is because I am a Christian. I have been made part of a Kingdom of priests! (2 Peter 2:4-5) And my job is not just 'sometimes', "here and/or there", or "on and off"... I serve Jesus 24/7.

As a Christian, how can I do my best as a priest when my mind is clouded by alcohol? How will I be able to do the work of a priest - knowing what is holy and unholy and teaching it to those around me? When the New Testament reiterates to us as priests to "be holy in all your conduct" (1 Peter 1:15), to be "sober-minded" (1 Peter 5:8), and to not be filled with "spirits" like wine but to "be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18) - it is going to necessitate that we keep our minds as clean, clear, fresh, and alert as possible.

Are there other things that we do or ingest that cloud or change our thinking? Oh, very definitely. My dentist gave me some pain killers once that were effective at killing my pain and rendering me unthinking! However, alcohol is one thing that we can choose not to partake of without any ill effects. Alcohol doesn't make

anything better. Alcohol can only make things worse. It doesn't guarantee that it will make things worse - but they sure ain't gonna get any better!

Let's be careful, friends, not to indulge in anything that will hamper our Lord's work. The fate of the world depends on us!

February 20

Reading: Leviticus 12-14

"The priest shall take some of the blood of the guilt offering and the priest shall put it on the lobe of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot."
(Leviticus 14:14)

You learn a lot when you finally become a parent. I saw my kids doing to me what I did to my parents. And now that I have grandchildren, I see my grandchildren passing along those frustrations to my children!

One of those things that frustrated my parents, frustrated me, and now frustrates my children (and has always and will always throughout the ages) is when kids do something wrong, and they say, "Sorry!"

Now, you might say, "That's what you should say!"

And you'd be right.

After the first time!

After you hear it a few times, it begins to ring hollow, doesn't it? In frustration I remember saying, in response to their "sorry"... "No, you're not! If you were sorry, you'd act differently!"

Sometimes "sorry" isn't "sorry". It's just, "Let's just put this behind us and avoid punishment until the next time I want to do the same thing."

There are a lot of people that act that way with God. They walk the aisle, confess their belief in Jesus, and are ~~baptized~~ dunked in water. I cross out baptized because they weren't really immersed. Nothing actually happened because they were not repentant! They never even come back to Church meeting - except for maybe Christmas, Mother's Day, or Resurrection Day.

Others actually are repentant that day. They actually do begin a new life in Christ. They're forgiven. They're pronounced clean. But they fall back into sin. (Should we not use "they" here but we?) WE fall back into sin. We are yet growing in Christ; we will falter. But when we again repent, we are to change our mind and our direction!

This is what the actions of the priests represent in our text. Not just a ceremonial cleansing, not just a one-time cleansing to send them off to once again become unclean - but a picture that is repeated from the priests' ordination ceremony. (8:22-23)

Blood is applied to the ear lobe, the right thumb, and the right big toe. The point?

God now claims our ears, our hands, and our feet. Our whole lives, represented in these body parts, are now redeemed. He has bought back our ears to be open to His voice, our hands to be provided for His work, and our feet are bought to take us only holy places. In short, when we come to Him for cleansing, we are at His beck and call to do and go as He says.

We all still struggle with sin. Don't just say, "Sorry!" CHANGE!

February 21

Reading: Leviticus 15-16

"And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for Yahweh and the other lot for azazel. And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for Yahweh and use it as a sin offering, but the goat on which the lot fell for azazel shall be presented alive before Yahweh to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to azazel."

(Leviticus 16:8-10)

This whole thing is kind of strange to us, so let me see if I can skip the introductions and just cut to the chase here, ok? Cool.

The High Priest takes dice - one marked "for azazel" (just means "for sending away") and one marked "for Yahweh". They are placed in a box and without looking the High Priest reaches in and picks one up in each hand simultaneously - one in his right hand - one in his left. He also has a goat on each side of him before the altar. Each goat was designated "for sending away" or "for Yahweh" based on whichever die was in the hand of the High Priest over that goat's head.

Now generally, we think of that which is offered in sacrifice to God to be the animal symbolically bearing sin. But in this sin offering on the Day of Atonement, something different is happening. One goat is in fact offered to Yahweh, but it's not the one that bears the sin. The goat that "receives" the sin of the people is the one that is then "sent away" into the wilderness. That goat, the "scapegoat" ("escape - goat"), carries the sin of the people away from them. That sin is never to be seen again, while the other goat that represents the people is now "able" to be offered to God.

This is a little different angle on the sacrifice of Jesus. While He was literally sacrificed for our sins, it is that bearing of our guilt - guilt that is taken far from us and never to return - that allows us to be offered to God.

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual act of worship." (Romans 12:1)

Jesus didn't carry away your sins just so you could be forgiven. He didn't bear your guilt just to save you from hell. Jesus took the blame, became our scapegoat, so that our lives could be an acceptable offering - a sacrifice - to God!

Worship doesn't just mean showing up for Church or even praising God and thanking God; it means giving our whole selves to Him every day for His service. This living sacrifice of ourselves is real worship.

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily [get on the alter before God every day!] and follow me." (Luke 9:23)

February 22

Reading: Leviticus 17-19

"Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I Yahweh your God am holy.'"
(Leviticus 19:2)

One of the most enjoyable parts of my life thus far was when we were involved in planting a new congregation. We started from the ground-up with our family of five and one other family of five. We didn't have an organization behind us; we just asked people to help, trusted God, and went.

The first thing I did on the new field of ministry was to get involved in the community. One of the ways I did this was to get involved with a civic group. Every morning at the town cafe, I would hear a group of men chatting together over coffee. They were Lions - Knights of the Blind. I decided to introduce myself and see if I couldn't become part of the Lion's Club as well. They welcomed fresh faces and more help in their civic projects, so I was quickly a part of the group.

I enjoyed it. We did some good, worthwhile stuff for our community. But we weren't holy.

Oh, I don't mean we weren't good. I wasn't the only preacher in the group, and I definitely wasn't the only Christian. But that's not what "holy" means.

To be "holy" is to be "set apart" as a special people for a special purpose because we serve a special God! And while the other men and women of the Lion's Club were special people, dear friends, in their own way... and while they did do some great things... they were no more good or special than anyone else, and our projects were things anyone with a desire to do could do - no matter who they cared to serve.

When God calls us to be holy, He means we are special in a different way. Everyone, as a creation of God, is special - important. But Christians are special because they've been recreated! And they are given a special thing to do - to be a Kingdom of Priests.

But how can the Church be "special" when it's just like the world!?

This is the great problem of the Church today. In a rush to be "relevant", many segments and congregations of God's Church have embraced sin - mainly in the area of sexuality. Fornication is winked at and homosexuality is fully embraced in many "Christian" circles today. Friends, this is not right. Leviticus 18 is almost fully devoted to sexual sin that cannot be tolerated - chiefly incest and homosexuality.

Some people will say, "Well, there are several other 'laws' in these chapters you don't keep! There are laws here you say are no longer in effect! Why cherry-pick these sexual sins!?"

I'll tell you why.

There is a difference between murder and a speeding ticket. Murder is an issue of character and morality. Driving a particular speed is a municipal rule without morality (other than that of keeping the rule). Sexual sin as talked about in Leviticus 18, God says, is not just a civil law (like many of the other things listed in our reading today and throughout Leviticus), but it is a moral law. It is an abomination (18:22), a perversion

(18:23), and comes from a depraved character (18:17). It is not a civic law for the nation of Israel, but a moral law written on men's consciences - the violation of which is iniquity that brings uncleanness even to those who do not worship Yahweh.

But that is just an example from this reading. There are many ways in which we must take care to refrain from accepting worldliness in God's Church and our individual lives. The lifeguard can't save lives while he himself drowns, and the Church can't save souls while it takes the wide road to hell.

"Be holy because I am holy." (1 Peter 1:16)

February 23

Reading: Leviticus 20-22

"And when anyone offers a sacrifice...from the herd or from the flock, to be accepted it must be perfect; there shall be no blemish in it. Animals blind or disabled or mutilated or having a discharge or an itch or scabs you shall not offer to Yahweh or give them to Yahweh as a food offering on the alter."
(Leviticus 22:21-22)

The next time you are at your church building - or anyone else's church building if you dare - go snooping around.

Go into the kitchen. What kind of microwave is there? How old is the stove? Does the refrigerator belong to this century?

Head over to the room that the high school youth uses. What kind of furniture does it have? If it has living room type furniture in it (or in any room of the church building for that matter) would you have it in your home? Or is it covered in a flowered velour upholstery that reminds you of your grandparents' homes?

Go and check the custodial closet. How many vacuums are there? How many look like they would actually work well or are something you'd have in your home?

Look at the paint on the walls. Is the building painted like your home is? Or is it painted with mismatched colors that were leftover or on sale?

Is there a "clothes closet" at your church for the poor and needy? Go look in there. Are there any clothes you'd wear? Or are they leftovers from yard sales and the stuff that didn't sell after great grandma's estate sale?

Is there a food pantry? Look in there. Is it full of canned corn and canned green beans and Campbell's cream of mushroom soup?

If we could stop time and go through the offering plate as it passed by, I wonder what we'd see? Of course we wouldn't know "who gave what" or what they gave in relation to what they have - but I'm sure that a lot of what is represented in that plate is second-thought leftovers after a week of indulgent spending.

Are you getting the picture?

These things are not the only measures of our devotion, in fact they are only very superficial ones, but they are telling ones nonetheless. The people of Israel were not to give Yahweh the "cast-offs", but they were to bring their best. If we don't bring God (or those we serve in His name) our very best, I wonder what it says about our hearts and our love for Him?

I remember helping a mission go through a lot of their stock-piles of things - clothes, food, teaching materials, etc, etc. There was so much that was worn-out, out-of-style, out-of-date... a lot of stuff that was largely unusable. There was discarded furniture and appliances that didn't work well enough for people's homes or was even broken, but was "good enough for a missionary". I asked the missionary if we couldn't go ahead and throw out a lot of that stuff that was just taking up valuable space.

"No! If people find out we throw away stuff they give us, they will quit giving us anything!"

What a sad commentary on our priorities.

Are you giving to God your first and best?

February 24

Reading: Leviticus 23:1-25:22

"Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, 'These are the appointed feasts of Yahweh that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are my appointed feasts.'"

(Leviticus 23:2)

The definition of a holy convocation is simply a special gathering of people who have been called together. Just last night we had a feast of convocation at my house. A friend and I sang at a revival that was in our home town, and we invited her, her husband and sons, another couple from our church, and the evangelist and his wife to our home for a meal afterward. My wife had cooked a veritable feast, and we all sat down and enjoyed a nice meal at the end of a long day. It wasn't very long until talk turned to some old revivals, evangelists, and things God had done in and through them. In a very real way, it was a "holy convocation".

God institutes for His people in our reading today six special feasts. All of them were role-playing celebrations of what God had done in and through His people as they went from Egypt to the Promised Land. From the Passover celebration when the people remembered and recounted to their children how God spared them before leaving Egypt, to Pentecost fifty days later when they celebrated the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, to the Feast of Booths where the people actually went out and lived in tents for a week to commemorate the wilderness trip of Exodus - God felt it important for all of it to be remembered through the ages.

Still today we have prescribed, holy convocations in God's Church.

The biggest and most frequent "calling-out" is like the first convocation mentioned in our passage today - though not a feast. It was a weekly calling out - the Sabbath Day. While Christians don't "keep the Sabbath" (regardless of what you've heard about it being changed by the Church from Saturday to Sunday [FALSE] and the need for all people to have a day of rest each week), we too are called to a weekly convocation. Hebrews 10:24-25 says,

"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the day when everyone was celebrating the covenant of the Law God had with Moses, Peter and the other Apostles introduced a New Covenant between God and man - and over 3000 people entered into it on that first day. Ever since, Christians have met in a holy convocation - mostly on the Lord's Day, but early-on daily - to stir-up one another to serve God and to encourage one another. This traditionally happened including a meal of fellowship in which folks broke bread together and remembered what Jesus had done for them. (Acts 2:42-47)

Unfortunately, it has become the habit - as the Hebrew writer says - of many to forsake the assembly of God's saints - His special people. I hope dear brother or sister that is not true of you. There is a reason we gather together at least once a week, not the least of which being that it is a command of God.

Maybe we ought also spend more time around the table with one another. Not just at our Lord's table in a Church service, but also around dining room tables, kitchen tables, and coffee tables. Maybe those times ought not just include our brethren in Christ, but also those we would hope to see meet Jesus - recounting and being witness to the mighty, mighty things God has done in our lives.

Are you ready to eat?

February 25

Reading: Leviticus 25:23-26:46

"If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last to the time of the grape harvest, and the grape harvest shall last to the time for sowing. And you shall eat your bread to the full and dwell in your land securely. I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. And I will remove harmful beasts from the land, and the sword shall not go through your land."

(Leviticus 26:3-6)

Did you ever think, "Life would be perfect if I didn't have to go to work!"

I'm sure that thought has crossed my mind somehow, sometime... but it's just not true.

Oh, maybe I need to choose different "work". Maybe I'm in the wrong job or in the wrong place. But when the world was perfect, there was work to be done. When God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the garden, He put them there to work. It was less "toilsome" to be sure - but there was a purpose and a product to life's hours.

Here in today's passage, God makes promises to the Hebrew people. "You keep the law, and I'll look out for you." I've heard my co-worker preach often something along the lines of: "As long as you are where God says you are supposed to be, He will be responsible for your care." God does promise to be responsible for their care here. He will give them a great harvest; He will give them peace in their nation. God promises it.

But he doesn't promise ease.

There is a law to be kept. And yes, God will make their work fruitful - but work it will be! And yes the harvest will be large - large enough to keep them busy working until the next time to start the work over!

I've often said that my job as a local preacher was to work myself out of a job. And when I tried my best to do that - when I did all the things God asked of me as an evangelist, a father, a husband, etc - I was the most happy... and the most busy. And I never did work myself out of a job because the work done in the Lord bears fruit (John 15:5) that must continually be harvested and seed that must be replanted, re-watered, re-weeded, re-harvested, replanted, etc, etc, etc.

Are you weary of work? Make sure you're doing what God wants, when He wants it done, where He wants it done, why He wants it done, to whom He wants it done, and how He wants it done. Work done this way will bring joy, fulfillment, purpose, fruit, and contentment.

Sounds good, doesn't it?

February 26

Reading: Leviticus 27; Numbers 1

"And if someone is too poor to pay the valuation, then he shall be made to stand before the priest, and the priest shall value him; the priest shall value him according to what the vower can afford."
(Leviticus 27:8)

Down through the years, I've "helped" a lot of people. I say "helped" (in quotes) because sometimes my help wasn't really too much help. For instance, when I would say to my wife's cousin, "Would you help me put some new brakes on my pickup this weekend?" What I really meant was, "Would you put some new brakes on my pickup this weekend while I stand by diligently and hand you what tools you need?" It wasn't that I didn't have a desire to help... I really wanted to help... but my usefulness just didn't match my heart.

So it was with these folks in our reading today. Their heart for worship was so great that perhaps they wanted to "dedicate themselves to God" for... a length of time, a particular act of service, or for whatever thing for which they might wish to vow the gift of themselves. Maybe they had a new child - or even a toddler or teen - and they said, "Lord, you've been so gracious giving us such a wonderful child! I want to dedicate him/her to You!"

What a wonderful heart of worship!

The only problem was: A) They certainly couldn't sacrifice themselves (or anyone else) on an alter (though pagan worshippers of Molech did do such things to their children), B) They couldn't possibly find jobs for all the people that made such vows around the Tabernacle, and C) If they did have enough jobs they were not qualified to do them as non-Levites.

How then could a man give himself, his family, or his possessions wholly to the Lord? This chapter explains that.

They could make a vow, and then immediately fulfill it with a financial gift to the Tabernacle treasury based on the valuation of that person or thing. It was really just a voluntary financial gift given in symbolism. And that

valuation was made based on a person's physical ability and usefulness or the strict value of the property (unless it was a clean animal that could actually be sacrificed).

Today, though, as a Kingdom of Priests, every member of the body of Christ has the ability - even the requirement - to dedicate Himself to serving God! We can fully give ourselves in worship and work in the Temple because the Temple of Yahweh is indeed our own selves when the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our immersion into Jesus. (Acts 2:38)

But wait! Are we actually able to "help" God?

YES!

That's why the Holy Spirit is given to us! God never asks us for something that He's not already given us the ability to sacrifice back to Him. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God enables even the least of us - through the redeeming price of the crucified Jesus - to do super-spiritual works of God in this world with our very limited natural selves.

Don't be afraid to give yourself wholly to the Lord. In Him, we can do all things He calls us to do!

February 27

Reading: Numbers 2-3

"Then the tent of meeting shall set out, with the camp of the Levites in the midst of the camps; as they camp, so shall they set out, each in position, standard by standard."
(Numbers 2:17)

As I learned this years ago, I don't know where these statistics came from so I cannot verify them, but I don't doubt their truthfulness.

It was said that in today's western Church, the time from which a man became a follower of Jesus to the time when he became a "leader" in the congregation (elder, deacon, Sunday School teacher...) was about - on average - seven years. There was also a study done that illustrated how, eventually, people who enter the Church lose ties with non-Christian or un-Churched people. Want to guess how long that takes?

About seven years.

What does that mean?

It means that our congregations' men become leaders at the same point that they have completely lost their effectiveness to reach the lost.

Think about that.

The Church's mission is to make disciples. (Matthew 28:18-20)

Making disciples involves moving "God seekers" to being "Christ followers" to being "disciple makers" themselves.

"Leaders" are to LEAD.

How will leaders set the pace, show us how, and lead the Church in its mission when they don't even know - let alone have relationships with - any lost people!?

There is a great picture of how the priesthood should work here in these simple (?) instructions about setting up camp in today's reading. Note in our particular verse (2:17) that the Levites (the tribe of priests) - and the Tabernacle itself - was to encamp directly in the middle of all the people. That's a beautiful picture of where the Church should be dramatically and powerfully "encamped" today.

The Church should not be separated from society (though many today harp on "Separation of Church and State" - believing that it means freedom from religion rather than freedom of religion), but should be being lived out among all the people. It is not "mixed in" to the other camps - but yet also always "in the face" of the whole community (John 17). It is always accessible to the whole nation - yet calling them, beckoning them to repent and worship I AM.

But always remember, God's priesthood today is not made up of men in black suits with funny white, stiff collars. The priesthood includes preachers, elders, deacons, Sunday School teachers - but also Christians who are firemen, police officers, public school teachers, homemakers, business men, lawyers, soldiers, sailors, warehouse workers, department store associates, grocery store cashiers... you name it!

In our love for "all things Jesus" - let us not lose our love for the souls of men around us He died to redeem! Let us live among the "tribes" of our national (and international) brothers that they might always see, hear, and follow (hopefully) our beloved Jesus!

February 28

Reading: Numbers 4-5

"Let not the tribe of the clans of the Kohathites be destroyed from among the Levites, but deal thus with them, that they may live and not die when they come near to the most holy things: Aaron and his sons shall go in and appoint them each to his task and to his burden, but they shall not go in to look on the holy things even for a moment, lest they die."

(Numbers 4:18-20)

I love Roadie work.

"Roadies" are the people that go in before the "talent" in a show and do all the set up. Whatever may need doing... setting up chairs, hauling up light scaffolds, plugging in cords, setting up audio equipment, restringing guitars.... And as Jackson Browne said in his song, "The Loadout",

"They're the first to come and the last to leave, working for that minimum wage. They'll set it up in another town."

I love it.

A lot of people don't. For them, that kind of stuff is drudgery. Musicians are a very picky lot, and they like things "just-so". So, a good roadie doesn't just need to know his job, he needs to know his place as the "hand" and not the "face".

Being as the "Tent of Meeting" - where the Holy of Holies was located and contained the Ark of the Covenant and the glorious manifestations of Yahweh - was a "mobile" temple, there had to be "roadies". And being that it was such particular things and things had to be done so particularly, it needed to be a large crew that had various responsibilities and could be rotated through being "on duty". Chapter 4 verse 48 says that Yahweh had 8,580 "Roadies"!

Now when you look at their duties, at first blush, you might say, "What's the big deal? It's puttin' stuff up and takin' it down!" (In fact, later on we are going to see some Levites who really aren't all that content with their roadie assignment.) But the thing we must remember - and they should have - is that it is Yahweh's "stuff"! In fact, the handling was so important for the Kohathite clan that they could die if they didn't handle God's things and "space" with the proper respect.

As priests of God's Kingdom today, I don't know that there are any "assignments" that - if handled incorrectly - will receive a swift death sentence from God. However, when the Priesthood of the Kingdom of God fails to properly do its job...

Lives. Are. Lost.

For eternity.

When I was in located ministry, people would often criticize me and/or be annoyed with me (sometimes rightly so) for being "over-zealous" about some things. I made sure the opening chord of music was struck as the big hand hit starting time. (My favorite line was, "If the sign says '10 am' and we start at 10:01 - we lied!") I made sure there was childcare in every service regardless of whether we "anticipated" children being there or not. Everything was rehearsed, dutifully prepared, and run meticulously. Revivals were well-planned. Events had evangelical purpose. Elders were pressed to be pastors. Deacons had specific jobs they were ordained to do.

Again, I won't say that I always did everything right. I won't say that my own pride never got involved. But I can say this with all honesty from the depth of my heart... it all started with an earnest fear that people were dying and going to hell - and I wanted everything I did to be a holy detour to heaven - not a welcome sign to the wide road to hell.

Preacher, preach your heart out! Elders, shepherd your flock! Deacons, serve! Teachers, study! Students, learn! Cooks, cook! Encouragers, love! Givers, give! Singers, sing! Do everything - every assignment of God - as if you were doing it for the Lord (Colossians 3:23-24)... because you are.

Priests, if we don't consecrate our ear lobe (hearing), our thumb (our actions), and our toe (our travels) to the Lord (Leviticus 14:14), someone could die! Don't take yourself too seriously - it's not about you. You're the "hands". We're just "roadies". But take God very seriously! It is all about Him! He is the Star!

March 1

Reading: Numbers 6, 10

"Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, "Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them:

'Yahweh bless you and keep you;
Yahweh make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
Yahweh lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.
So shall they put My Name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.'"
(Numbers 6:22-27)

One of my classes in college was a "field experience" course. It was basically a small group meeting of some student ministers with our professor each week, culminating in our professor visiting a service at our congregation. Each week we'd meet and talk over the week's work. Sometimes there were great victories to share, sometimes we had to encourage one another through trying times. But at the end of every meeting, our professor prayed for us and, after the final amen, would say, "Now! Get out there and give'm heaven!"

In a sense, that's what God wants Aaron and his sons to do. He wants them to be like that professor. Even among all these laws... laws and rituals and sacrifices and regulations - certainly meant to glorify and bless God - God wants His people blessed. He wants all of them blessed. Lest they misunderstand, before they head out from Mt. Sinai, God says, "Aaron, make sure you bless the people!"

The blessing not only prays that God will smile upon them and give them a peace (shalom) that covers their whole life (perhaps a peace that "passes all understanding"?), but also He says it will put His name upon them. That is, when they experience these things daily, they will remember why and from Whom this blessing, joy, and peace comes!

God wants His people blessed! Isn't that wonderful?

I wonder if we as priests in God's Kingdom today are the blessing that God wants us to be? Do we spend much time thinking about how we can bless others? Do we seek to pray over them in this manner - a prayer that they actually hear and will do for them what this prayer did for Aaron's hearers? That's something to think about!

Maybe you could say this blessing - or one like it - in someone's presence and hearing today! Get out there and give'm heaven!

March 2

Reading: Numbers 11-13

"Then the men who had gone up with him said, 'We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.' So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, 'The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height.'"
(Numbers 13:31-32)

When I was a very young minister, our congregation was running out of space. Our body was growing, and our building was very old. We had classes that were, more or less, meeting in closets, and we had very little office space. So, it was decided to build an addition.

With much excitement and great expense, our people worked. There were certain things to be torn down, things to be prepared, and a large new building to be erected. It was beautiful, functional... and did I mention expensive? While we were making the payments, leaders looked at the reports each month and moaned.

One Saturday, a man pulled up in a big Lincoln. He explained to the youth minister, who just happened to be there, that he'd been baptized in that old church building when he was just a boy. He lived far away now, had come for a visit, and wondered if he might look around.

The youth minister let him in, and soon he was touring the newest and largest part of the building. He was impressed with it and loved it. He said, "It must have cost quite a lot!"

"Well... yeah..."

"How much?"

Sheepishly, the youth minister told him in round numbers what it cost and the large amount that was still owed. The man replied, "That's not too bad."

The next week a check arrived in the mail for \$100,000 that all but paid-off the new building. The people were so happy! With their faithfulness rewarded, they exclaimed, "Whew! We'll never do that again!"

Wait... what!?

All along the way from Egypt, God had provided and protected. You would think that walking across an ocean bed on dry land while a fire kept your enemies from following... Being able to walk out into three feet of quail and gather in meat... you'd think...

But no.

When ten twelfths of the spies came back and reported how big the cities and people were - they disbelieved. I guess they never thought that the cities were so big and so nice and so wonderfully fortified because God had blessed those people (as evil as they may have been) so that they'd have things prepared for His people to take over!

Joshua and Caleb said, "...do not rebel against Yahweh. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us..." (14:9 - but I'm getting ahead of myself).

He understood that just because some people were stewards of God's blessings now, didn't mean that God wasn't going to move his material assets over to a different holder!

God doesn't tell us it will be "free". He doesn't say it won't require some effort. (Remember, God created the world and put people in a garden!) But when God says, "Go!" Let's GO! You never know what blessings lay around the corner!

March 3

Reading: Numbers 14-15

"And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness."

(Numbers 14:33)

One of the biggest lies about our sin?

"I'm not hurting anybody but me!"

Oh, if it were only true.

You know, God loves every one of us enough that His Son died for us. And it wasn't "just" the sin of a whole world He died to redeem. The sin of just two people set the plan of redemption in motion. I truly believe that God would have made the sacrifice for even just one of us - for you or me.

So, even if... Even if your sin only effected you... It's still enough to send Jesus to the cross.

However...

Your sin, no matter how private doesn't just effect you. It effects...everyone.

Think about it. Can you have a deadly disease and not know it? Yes.

People have been diagnosed with things that they never knew they had until they were weeks or even days from dying of it. The very same thing is true in the Church. The body of Christ may look very healthy on the outside, while one member of it is filled with a lethal disease that is causing the body to falter. We will see a prime example of that when we get to the book of Joshua. (I don't want to give it away yet. Remind me later.)

If it's not bad enough that you yourself suffer for your sin... If it doesn't give you pause that your sin effects the Body of Christ in today's world... What about your children? Do you care about their sufferings for your disobedience and unfaithfulness?

These folks would suffer for disbelieving God, yes. But why would their children have to suffer? Forty years of wandering, warring, and whining would have to be endured. The King James Version puts it even more dramatically:

"And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcasses be wasted in the wilderness."

(Put that way, it reminds us that our sin also effects God! Our sin is unfaithfulness to a covenant relationship on par with adultery.)

In another part of Joshua (besides the one I just alluded to), an event harkens back to this that is a very real suffering. In Joshua 5:2ff, Yahweh commands Joshua to make flint knives and go through the camp and circumcise all the males. For forty years, God's people had not even kept the law insomuch as this one physical

thing. (This is the reason for the book of Deuteronomy. The "Second Telling" of the Law was necessary because for forty years God's law was not followed, let alone taught.) What should have been a small thing at the age of 8 days old, became something that caused a lot of suffering across the whole nation when many of the men were nearly forty years old.

Our sins don't effect our children that way, but sin can: change our attitude, damage our character, rob us of time, steal our money, and do a host of other things to us that will greatly impact our families.

Repentance is not a "one-off". Look through your life today. Is there sin - however small, private, or unnoticeable to others - that needs to be circumcised from your life?

March 4

Reading: Numbers 16-18

"They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, 'You have gone too far! For all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and Yahweh is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of Yahweh?'"

(Numbers 16:3)

Have you noticed that in today's culture it's NOT OK for EVERYONE to NOT be able to do EVERYTHING? If one person "gets to" do/be/participate in something - then everyone has to be able to.

If boys get to be Boy Scouts, then girls should get to be Boy Scouts too!

If girls get to compete on girls swim teams, then boys should compete against the girls too (as long as they pretend to be a girl).

If men "get to" be combat soldiers, then so should women.

If children who win get a trophy, so should everyone else.

If I benefit from being a citizen of my country, then everyone else - regardless of their legal status - should too.

What is good for one must be, under every circumstance, good for all.

Nope.

Korah and friends come to Moses and Aaron here in this text, and their complaint is that they also should get to do the work of the priests. Korah is a Levite - why doesn't he get to offer sacrifices? Why does he only get to be a "roadie" and a "custodian" of certain temple furnishings? For that matter, friends Dathan and Abiram... they are Reubenites. How come they don't get to do anything around the Tabernacle at all!? They complain that Moses and Aaron have set themselves up as better than everyone else.

"Aren't we all people of God!? We are all holy! THAT'S NOT FAIR!"

Long story short...

Moses said, "OK. Fine by me. Let God pick who is holy. Y'all show up with your fiery censers, and Aaron, you bring yours, and let's see what happens!"

Well, of course Aaron and Moses are chosen by God (we already knew that), and Korah and company fall into the earth alive while those who presume to bring their own fire to the Tabernacle get burned - literally.

Why?

Because the fact that all God's people are called to be holy (true enough, Korah), doesn't mean that they don't have different gifts, callings, purposes, abilities, etc. God hands out the assignments; we learn to fulfill them. That's how obedience works. No, Korah had not been called to offer sacrifices and lead the people... but neither had Moses the authority and honor of being a steward of the holy Tabernacle furnishings!

Paul would address the same issue in the Church centuries later. The Corinthians all wanted the supernatural ability to speak in other languages they'd not learned (speaking "in tongues"). Paul says, "That'd be cool if y'all all did, but that's not the purpose God's given you in the Kingdom."

Later, fortunately, Korah's family* learns this lesson. They aren't bitter about the fate of Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their followers. They actually become song writers. One of the most telling songs of their family is Psalm 84. I bet many of you have sung these words many times:

"...my heart is satisfied within Your presence... For better is one day in Your courts, better is one day in Your house...than thousands elsewhere" (Psalm 84, paraphrased)

Don't let pride, envy, and covetousness get in the way of being the person God created you to be! Can't we learn to be satisfied in God's presence - serving in the way He has called us?

**[Today's text says that the earth opened up and swallowed "all the people that belonged to Korah". How then were there any descendants left to write Psalm 84 (and other Psalms)? One of a few guesses, "People that belonged to Korah": a) Means people that participated in rebellion - not necessarily family. b) Doesn't include young children that could not have made their own decision. c) Did not include older children that no longer lived in his household. By context, my opinion is "C"]*

March 5

Reading: Numbers 19-21

"Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?"

(Numbers 20:10)

"Shall we?..."

Most of the times I've heard this passage preached or taught, I've heard that God punished Moses - leaving him out of the passage into the Promised Land - because he struck the rock (as he was instructed to in Exodus 17's miracle) rather than just speaking to it as he was instructed here. I'm not sure that's all that's involved.

Yahweh said, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy..."

While it is true that disobedience is not treating God as holy, and while this disobedience was in front of the whole crowd, it was surely not Moses' first sin. What Moses did do was take credit for what God was doing before the crowd.

"Shall we?..."

Just who is WE!? Did he mean him and Aaron? Did he mean him and God? Either way, he was either taking credit for the miracle or putting himself on par with God. This sounds much more like treating God as less than holy.

It's not just disobeying God, but also believing that we - not "believ[ing] in [God], to uphold [Him] as holy" - are responsible for the wonderful things that we do or have and not God. Herod had this same problem in the book of Acts. When people proclaimed, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" he just let them proclaim it. He didn't promote himself to God - he just didn't UNpromote himself! He came to the same end - just a little more quickly and dramatically. (Acts 12:21-23)

What about us? Do we believe that we are responsible for decisions made after our sermon? Do we believe that we are responsible for the good our children do? Do we believe that the Church can't do without us?

The Bible says that "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights,". (James 1:17) Do we recognize that, thank God for it, and thereby treat Him as holy?

March 6

Reading: Numbers 22-24

"Then Yahweh opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of Yahweh standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face. And the angel of Yahweh said to him, 'Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me.'"

(Numbers 22:31-32)

Talking donkey aside, what is going on in this passage? Why is it that after God tells Balaam he can go and see Balak (with the caution to only say what Yahweh tells him to), God's anger is kindled (v.22) and Yahweh's angel stands with a sword to oppose him?

There are a few conclusions: A) There's more to the story we don't know (maybe), B) You just can't trust Yahweh, He'll change His mind - then you'll be in trouble (nope, 23:19), C) God is angry with Barak, not necessarily Balaam (probably? but there's still the angel thing), D) Maybe God intends Balaam to throw his wide-eyed, angel-seein' donkey under the bus and say, "Well, I'd come, but..."

I think there is another option.

God needs, even on the way, to remind Balaam of what he said. That's the message the angel has for him (v.35). But Balaam, being a "perverse" man, can't see the angel and, therefore, can't hear the message.

Several years ago, a company had a commercial that said, "So easy, even a caveman can do it." Well, the angel - the way of Yahweh - the message of God - was so CLEAR even a DONKEY could see it! A DONKEY could see it, but not the "seer"!

Don't we have this same potential problem?

Sin - the perverse (an obstinate desire to do what is unacceptable), easily-traveled road on which we are likely to occasionally find ourselves - can blind us to the message and messengers of God. Continuing on in sin, not paying heed to the truth even a donkey could see, will end in our own destruction.

Listen to the Word! Listen to God's preacher of God's Word! If all else fails, find a donkey! But don't stay on sin's road! Hear the reminders that God knows you need every day.

March 7

Reading: Numbers 25-26

"When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly. Thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped."
(Numbers 25:7-8)

I was reading some squaller on the internet the other day that was defaming the name of Yahweh because of some violence in the poetry of a Psalm. I don't have to guess what that person would have thought if they'd read this passage (and others like it - always out of context and without a full understanding, of course) where Yahweh actually brought plagues upon people and instructed people to be killed! It is offensive to the senses of some moderns.

I can see them reading today's case... "Who was Phinehas to do such a thing!? Who was he to judge! What is it to him 'who someone loves'? How was that couple bothering him!?" ...and on and on.

Here's the thing: I think there are lots of cases in the Bible where God just cuts to the chase.

We often think we want God to do that. "God, enough already! Will you punish the wicked (them) and reward the good (me)! Why won't you give us (me) justice?"

Well, here (and many other places, mostly in the Old Testament) He does.

"They were not hurting anyone!"

Oh yeah?

People were dropping like flies all around them because of the same sin. (See 25:1-5) The end of the passage says that by the time it was over, 24,000 people died! Leaders were being hanged for not stopping their people from this idolatry and immorality. Where was this guy, Zimri!? Hadn't he watched the news? What kind of gall!?

"But why did God send a plague on them? How was what the whole nation doing hurting anyone?"

It was hurting people because of the end result - the result that no one but God could yet see - the eternal loss of their souls because they were choosing demonic worship and perverse behavior rather than the way of life - and teaching others to do the same. They were going to die in their sin regardless; God sped things up a bit and showed the rest what that behavior led to.

But back to ol' Phinehas... Phinehas had a zeal and a jealousy for Yahweh (v.11). He would not allow this guy Zimri and his Midianite hussy, Cozbi, to strut their stuff in the midst of the pain of a nation that they themselves were such a cause of. God used Phinehas as a priest of the nation to bring their sin and their ultimate end to light in (as we've seen God do multiple times) a dramatic way.

Today? Ha! You let the preacher look crossways at a fornicating couple who are living together outside marriage but claiming to be part of the Church and see how long he has his job! Let him preach against abortion, homosexuality, drunkenness, gossip, and a host of other sins - any sin... Let a preacher simply speak against sin and see what the "Church" thinks!

We need some men like Phinehas (well, not just like Phinehas - we are not advocating the spearing of any "sinner" [like ourselves] in any way!) - but we need men who will stand up for what's right! We need preachers and elders who will be unashamed and unafraid. And we need Church members who will hear it and obey!

March 8

Reading: Numbers 27-29

"Moses spoke to Yahweh, saying, 'Let Yahweh, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of Yahweh may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.'" (Numbers 27:15-17)

Several years ago, the late, great country singer George Jones moaned-on in a country hit:

"Who's gonna fill their shoes,
Who's gonna stand that tall?
Who's gonna play the Opry
and the Washbash Cannonball?
Who's gonna give their heart and soul
to get to me and you?
I wonder. Who's gonna fill their shoes?"

Well, frankly... I couldn't care less.

What I am concerned about is "Who is going to fill America's pulpits!?"

Who will stand and unswervingly proclaim the gospel when what's left of faithful preachers are gone? Who will still believe in preaching? Who will still be willing to have a revival meeting in their Church because they truly believe that when God's Word is preached, something happens? Many of the men standing behind pulpits today don't even believe enough in the power of the spoken Word to offer an invitation for people to respond to what they themselves have said people ought to respond to!

I'm passionate about that because, well... I'm a preacher. I'd like to think I'd care as much if I wasn't though.

But how about this:

Are you living the kind of life that you hope someone will carry on with after you're gone?

Are you the kind of preacher... the kind of elder... the kind of deacon... the kind of dad... the kind of mom... the kind of... whatever you are - that the world needs more of?

As Moses saw the end of his days drawing near, he cared so much about the job God had called him to do that he asked God for a replacement.

"God, we're not done here. Your people still need me, and I can't go. So, give me and them a replacement."

Moses cared enough about His people that he wanted them to have someone who loved them as much as he did. But Moses had been discipling that person all along. Joshua had been a lot of the places Moses had - there by his side. Joshua had spoken-up for and with Moses. And we need to follow that example.

If we don't have the kind of... (whatever you are today that you believe the world needs more of), guess whose fault that is? YOURS.

You think there should be more of (whatever you are)? (If you don't, you really need to change your lifestyle, attitude, or calling!) Then it's up to YOU to fill that! YOU are to be the one praying and looking for your replacement in life.

Know why we need preachers? Because preachers have abdicated their responsibility to disciple and train young men to replicate themselves! (And you can replace "preachers" with any other worthwhile calling in short supply.)

The best investment you'll ever make is in the life of another person! Start banking your life today!

March 9

Reading: Numbers 30-31

"They killed the kings of Midian with the rest of their slain, Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian. And they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword."

"Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against Yahweh in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of Yahweh."
(Numbers 31:8, 16, italics mine)

Well, well, well... here is ol' Balaam, son of Beor, again! This time he is numbered among the slain of God's enemies. Why?

Well, it seems Balaam could not set aside his perversity. (See March 6) While Balaam was careful, and seemingly faithful, to only say what God told him to say - he wasn't all that hip on doing what God said to do!

As a matter of fact, while he was careful not to "curse" Israel with words, he was more than willing to tell the Moabites and Midianites how to get Israel to - in effect - curse themselves!

"Tempt'em with good-lookin' women! They always fall for that!"

Balaam somehow thought that because he said all the right words among God's people - he could live however he wanted among God's enemies.

Weird right?

Well, we sure have a rash of that going around today!

We have a president who claims he's a Christian, but promotes the murder of children. We have preachers who preach holiness in pulpits while they carouse with friends at the bar. We have pew sitters that pray public prayers and stand around the Lord's Table, but they act the same as everyone else when they get to work Monday. There are thousands who name the name of Jesus to people, but have forsaken their brothers and sisters on the Lord's Day in the name of a virus while they go to Walmart.

Friends, there may be a great revival in words - but where are the deeds!

When you get to the end of this life, you will not enter heaven based on what you said - even if it was saying a non-biblical prayer to "ask Jesus into your heart". You will not enter heaven based on the preponderance of good deeds over your bad ones. You will not enter heaven simply because you were dunked in some water once (as necessary as it is that you are immersed into Christ!). You will enter heaven based on whether or not your words came together with your deeds - trusting in the gospel of Jesus Christ!

Do your words and deeds match in a faithful life?

March 10

Reading: Numbers 32-33

"But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell."

(Numbers 33:55)

Every once in a while, when I might be in a Christian bookstore (How can a store be "Christian?"), I see on a rack of Jesus junk, a Bible bookmark that has "Promises of God" on it. Or sometimes, here or there, I might even see a whole book of "Bible Promises". I generally really like all the promises they choose to list. I like most of the promises I come across in scripture; promises are something I underscore as I read.

But I don't like all the Bible promises.

Our verse today isn't a Bible promise that publishers generally like to put in their books. It's not very "feel-good". But it is as sure as all the other promises of God just the same. As a matter of fact, we will eventually read all about how this promise came to fruition. The Israelites did not drive out the inhabitants of the land... and things were just as God had said.

Good thing we don't have to worry about that.

Well... we do... sort of...

While this was a promise made to a specific people in a specific time - and we are not those people and that is not our time - we should take it to heart. We too, if we know Jesus, are God's people. We too are journeying to a promised rest. And, in a sense, we have already entered it as we become part of God's Kingdom. In addition, we too have "inhabitants" of our lives - former residents of God's temple (our heart) - that must be dealt with.

They are our sins.

It is not enough that Jesus moves in to our lives. It's not enough that we just clean ourselves up once without becoming truly Kingdom people (Matthew 12:43-45). Unless we bring Jesus in and put sin out, we will experience great trouble. Those inhabitants of every natural human heart will be a barb in the eye and a thorn in the side of anyone who thinks they can live with both Jesus and sin.

Don't try it. It won't work. And that's a promise!

March 11

Reading: Numbers 34-36

"then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there."
(Numbers 35:11)

At a church building recently, I saw a picture. It was a picture of Jesus.

(OK. Sidebar... I mean, I guess it was supposed to be Jesus. I mean, it's weird isn't it? How we see a picture of a friendly looking fella with a beard in a church building, and we just "know" it's Jesus?...Anyhow...)

In the picture, from afar, you saw the face of Jesus, but if you looked closely - up close - you saw that the picture was several "scenes". Each scene was a scene from Jesus life - or a symbol, like the cross, connected with Jesus.

Such are some passages and concepts in the Bible - especially in the Old Testament. All - and I do mean all - of the Bible is about Jesus. He doesn't show up by name until Matthew, but the whole volume of sixty-six books is about Him from cover to cover. Sometimes He "shows up" just in events and concepts, and as such is He found in our passage today. The picture in Numbers 35 is a picture of Jesus, and it's made up of several smaller pictures.

The main part of the picture of Jesus is a picture of a city. Or, should I say "cities" (plural). There are six of them in this picture - they are the "Cities of Refuge". While in reality they were literal cities, they helped create a picture of Jesus. Jesus is our refuge. The New Jerusalem - His Church - is made up of folks who - because of their guilt - have run to Jesus for refuge. They are guilty as guilty can be - but finding refuge in Him.

Note that these cities are not out of reach to any man (v.13). Yes, a man has to admit wrong-doing; he has to desire refuge; he has to seek it and go in. But there are six throughout the nation of Israel. There are three on each side of the Jordan River. Almost symmetrically spaced parallel to one another - one in the North on each side of the river, one in the central on each side of the river, one in the South on each side of the river. They are - as Jesus - accessible to anyone who needs refuge.

While it's not mentioned in scripture, Jewish history tells us that: the roads leading to the cities were kept in thorough repair; obstructions were moved that might hinder those who are fleeing to refuge; there were bridges over any rivers; there were signs to point the way; folks there in the city helped them settle in and find work. Which leads to another part of this picture of Jesus - His body is there. "The congregation" as it is called in verse 25 restores him if he is found to have run to refuge rightfully. The priests would have done all these aforementioned things to make sure that those who needed refuge could find it. Today, his body, a Royal Priesthood, has much the same job: To clear a path to Jesus, to remove obstacles to Him, to point the way, to welcome them to the Church, to help them serve Jesus.

The picture also shows how freedom comes to the one who flees: the death of the high priest. (v. 25) In the end, it is the death of our High Priest, Jesus, that makes us free indeed. So stay in Jesus! You do have the option of leaving Him! But without Him you are once again subject to "eye-for-an-eye" style justice. It will cost you your life!

What a picture! Never read the Old Testament without looking for Jesus. He's in there! He's in there everywhere!

March 12

Reading: Deuteronomy 1-3

"Do not contend with them, for I will not give you any of their land, no, not so much as for the sole of the foot to tread on, because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession.

"And Yahweh said to me, 'Do not harass Moab or contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land for a possession, because I have given Ar to the people of Lot for a possession.' (The Emim formerly lived there, a people great and many, and tall as the Anakim.

"The Horites also lived in Seir formerly, but the people of Esau dispossessed them and destroyed them from before them and settled in their place, as Israel did to the land of their possession, which Yahweh gave to them.)"

(Deuteronomy 2:5, 9-10, 12)

A few things to remember here from today's chapters:

One, God is dealing with folks other than you. He'd made promises both to Lot and Esau, and we see God has kept and continued to keep those promises - even though they were not part of the people He was using to bring redemption into the world. We can get kind of conceited and believe that we are (read: "I am") the be-all-end-all, and if God's not super-concerned with us - He ought to be. Well, God is super-concerned with you; He is super-concerned with His Church; He is super-concerned with everyone else too!

Two, in the same way the Israelites were not given everything on a platter and without faith - neither were the people of Lot and Esau. The Bible has a lot to say about faith, and I chiefly remember that "without faith it is impossible to please God". (Hebrews 11:6) Again, though these folks weren't the ones God was particular using and recording history about at the time, they were not exempt from having to use faith in the promises God had made to them! AND, interestingly enough, in some sense, they were more faithful than the Israelites! When they encountered giants in the land, they conquered their giants to receive their promised inheritance from God.

Three, later on in chapters 2 and 3 God does have the Israelites to battle other nations. Why? Because, after they had evidently rejected Yahweh, He hardened their hearts. Again, God was using and recording the history of the Israelites for His redemptive purposes, but it certainly looks a lot like God was still speaking to and dealing with other nations as well.

How do we respond to those truths?

Know this: Before you ever come on the scene, God has been working in the life of the other person. Whether they know Jesus as Savior or not, God loves them, has been faithful to them, has blessed them, and wants to use them in His redemptive work. They are prepared by Him to hear what you have to say and/or to work with you - or reject you and suffer the consequences.

This should give us great confidence. We are not out in the world on our own. Even the enemies of God have heard of - and fear - His Kingdom (regardless of their bluster). Others are ready to receive the call of pardon if we will extend it.

God is working with everyone. Are you allowing Him to work with you?

March 13

Reading: Deuteronomy 4-5

"You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of Yahweh your God that I commanded you."

(Deuteronomy 4:2, italics mine)

One of the things that men are famous for is not following instructions. Most of us (men), upon receiving a big box of "whatever" with "some assembly required", can be so anxious to see the finished product that we skip the reading of the instructions. I've never seen an instruction manual (when I finally did look at it) that didn't say something like, "Please read all the instructions first before beginning assembly." That's because there is a reason to do what they are going to ask you to do - and they know you're likely to bypass it! Many times, have I backtracked through an assembly because things weren't working - only to see I'd not followed the instructions as written.

When God tells us how to live, it's not to stop us from having fun and enjoyment. It's to make sure we have fun and enjoyment! God created the world, and there's only one way that it works properly - God's way. There's only one way to get what God intended for life - a life that's good for us in a relationship with Him - God's way.

When it comes to our spiritual lives, we are usually like me when I run ahead of the "assembly instructions", it's not that I don't want things to work - I just figure: A) "I know where this is goin' so I'll skip ahead, B) "That's a dumb design, I can make this better/easier/faster/more powerful". (Add Tim "The Tool Man" Taylor grunts here.) When trying to follow Jesus, it's not necessarily that we are disrespectful of God, we just think He could use some help with the instructions!

God points out here that if you "add to the Word" or "take from it" you will not be able to assemble the life He intends! Read the WHOLE of the instructions; understand the project; begin following the instructions; consult regularly for assurance and problems.

When life goes wrong, here's a guarantee: somebody... you, someone you know, or Adam himself... didn't follow the instruction manual. There are some things that are past repair (that's what the new heaven and earth to come is about), but if you really want to "live your best life now" FOLLOW THE WORD!

March 14

Reading: Deuteronomy 6-9

"For you are a people holy to Yahweh your God. Yahweh your God has chosen you to be a people for His treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that Yahweh set His love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples."

"Do not say in your heart, after Yahweh your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that Yahweh has brought me in to possess this land, whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that Yahweh is driving them out before you.'"

(Deuteronomy 7:6-7; 9:4)

Most of Deuteronomy happens in one day. Yes, there are forty years of tales here, but they are re-tellings of the histories in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. (That may be why you feel you've read this all before!) None of the people now with Moses, save Joshua and Caleb, are over 60 years old. All the folks over 20 were destined to die from forty years in the desert when they would not enter the Promised Land the first time. So, Moses spends the day recounting Who God is - and who they are! (And you complain about the length of your preacher's sermons!)

Among all the things that he tells them is some hard-hitting reminders. Namely: God - good! They - bad! Many people think mercy and grace are concepts Jesus "came up with" in the New Testament, but He has been pouring it out since Adam and Eve left the garden.

Moses' sermon here touches on at least two things that we usually think will put us "in good" with God: Our qualities and our character.

Moses says, "Nope."

God didn't choose them because they were numerous, talented, respected, important... Neither did He choose them because they were such righteous, upstanding people of faith. Moses reminds them, "You're the smallest, the weakest, and you've been nothing but rebellious since I met you!" (9:24) God said He chose them

so He would be glorified, because the time was up with the other nations He'd evidently been dealing with, and because He'd made a promise to their forefathers. (9:5)

Why do you think God has called you (or is presently calling you) today? I can tell you this: It's not because you're "hot stuff"! It's because you're so weak and rebellious that when you finally listen to God, people will say, "What a God that guy/gal serves!"

"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does Yahweh require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

March 15

Reading: Deuteronomy 10-12

"You shall not worship Yahweh your God in that way, for every abominable thing that Yahweh hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods."
(Deuteronomy 12:31)

History tells us about some of the worship practices of the Canaanites (that the Israelites were not even to ask anyone about lest they try to incorporate any of them). One of them was the worship of the god Molek. Molek has generally been pictured as a brass idol with the head of a bull. It's arms outstretched and a fire built in it's belly to produce searing heat throughout. Into the open arms of this idol, the Canaanites would place their children in sacrificial worship of this pagan god. God called this practice "abominable".

That seems obvious enough to us.

Doesn't it?

Yet, aren't people sacrificing their children today?

It's easy for Christians to stand back and point to the abortion industry. And, yes, most definitely, children are being - literally - sacrificed there for a number of reasons. The abortion clinic is an alter to the gods of convenience, shame, fear, money... just to name a few. It is brutal, painful, deadly, and consequential.

But there are other alters and other gods.

Any time we give up what is best for our children's physical, emotional, and - most importantly of all - spiritual needs in the interest of chasing after something other than our Creator... aren't we then sacrificing our children to idols? If we abdicate the training of our children to godlessness and falsehood, if we look to someone else to teach them even the basic truths of faith and godliness... what price are our children paying for our lack of desire and effort?

Please don't misunderstand, I've been no perfect parent. I've got regrets concerning ways I parented. I also know that, as a Church, we must stay vigilant to help mothers of unwanted children birth them, and we must accept those who've repented of their bad choices (just like all the bad choices we've made). But as those we've a first responsibility to teach (6:4-9), let's make sure we don't sacrifice our children for us - but sacrifice ourselves for the spiritual benefit of our children!

March 16

Reading: Deuteronomy 13-16

"If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods, which you have not known, and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams...."
(Deuteronomy 13:1-3a)

"He must be telling the truth! Look how big his congregation is!"

"God must be pleased with them; look at all the good they do in the community!"

"My parents taught me this; they wouldn't have taught me something that wasn't right."

We need to be very careful about who we follow. Note here that these false prophets God warns about were only false in their direction; they were not false in their predictions. A broken clock is correct twice a day! Just because someone seems to be successful and what they are saying seems believable doesn't make them the people to follow.

Family?

Not family either.

In verses 6-11, God tells His people that your family members who lead you astray are to suffer the same fate as the false prophet. They are to be put to death. While we aren't going to follow the rules of ancient Israel, it would be wise not to have much to do with people - even family - who are attempting to get us to stray from God's leadership.

Verses 12 and following talk about whole cities following after people. Kinda sounds like today's politicians, right? "I mean, a lot of people I know are following him... smart people... educated people... even godly people."

Nope. Still doesn't mean anything.

I always remember what former Bible college professor Wallace Wartick wrote:

"If a 'prophet' tells me something the Bible says already, I don't need it.
If a 'prophet' tells me something the Bible doesn't say, I reject it. It's wrong."

Stick with what God says! Read your Bible! No matter how great the works - how close the relationship - or how influential the personality - if God didn't say it, it's not right!

March 17

Reading: Deuteronomy 17-20

"You shall not sacrifice to Yahweh your God an ox or a sheep in which is a blemish, any defect whatever, for that is an abomination to Yahweh your God."

(Deuteronomy 17:1)

While I do think that we in the non-denominational congregations should maybe pay a little more attention to the "Church Calendar" (We already recognize when Resurrection Day is... we might put a little more emphasis on Pentecost and such...), we need to be careful about some of the celebrations this time of year.

As of the time of this writing, we are in the Lenten season of this year. It is a "celebration" of no celebration. Among those who "celebrate" Lent, certain foods must be abstained from (except on Sunday... oh, and maybe Saturday). This carries on from Ash Wednesday until the week before Resurrection Day (Easter) to commemorate the forty days of Jesus' fast in the wilderness and prepare people for entrance or restoration to the Church.

Let me get on a soap box a minute.

No disrespect intended to Lenten observers... but are we really sacrificing anything when we "fast" from only certain things - and not on the "weekend" when we want to relax and have fun? Was Jesus only "juice fasting" or just not eating fish in the wilderness? Did He take a couple of days off once in a while to eat what he wanted? When I hear of Christians who give up Dr. Pepper or chocolate cake or the like "for lent" to "focus more on the sacrifice of Jesus"... I want to puke. Jesus went to the cross, but you'll suffer through a few days without chocolate cake!?

Granted, maybe what they are doing is helping them focus on Jesus more than I - I don't know. But I do know that Jesus asked me to think of Him as often as I gather with believers and partake in a meal together... does that count? Why take forty days to prepare for baptism? The Ethiopian that Philip spoke with heard the gospel, said, "Look here's water! What prevents me from being baptized?" Did Philip say, "We'll be having a baptismal service 40 days from now..." or "Next quarter you may." No, he said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may!" (Acts 8:37)

God told His people that second best - sacrifices that were not costly, cut-rate, or easy - doesn't get it. Our God is a consuming fire! (Hebrews 12:29) He wants all of you - today!

March 18

Reading: Deuteronomy 21-25

"You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep going astray and ignore them. You shall take them back to your brother. And if he does not live near you and you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home to your house, and it shall stay with you until your brother seeks it. Then you shall restore it to him. And you shall do the same with his donkey or with his garment, or with any lost thing of your brother's, which he loses and you find; you may not ignore it."

(Deuteronomy 22:1-3)

Recently, my four year old granddaughter was doing something she shouldn't. When my son said something to her about it, she said, "No, I can't get in trouble for this because you didn't say not to do it!" Touché!

When we read through Deuteronomy (or Leviticus and parts of Numbers), it can seem like God is really trying to cover all the bases. Sometimes there are just things you don't think you'll ever have to say to your kids ("Quit licking the window."), but people, being people, think up all kinds of imaginative things and have lots of half-baked ideas. But if you'll notice in our reading today, though it covers a lot of ground, most of it could be summed up this way:

Be kind.

Slow down and think about other people once in a while.

I could do better at that.

Our selected verses even go against playground logic we learned from early in life. No, "finders keepers/losers weepers" is not a rule. Think about how you'd want someone to react if they found something valuable of yours!

There are: Rules of justice and fairness in marriage and children (21:17; 22:13ff; 25:5ff), Rules of safety (22:8), Ways to be clean and decent (23:12ff), Financial obligations toward others (23:19ff; 25:13ff). If there was a way for us to hurt one another and be selfish, God knew we would search it out and do it.

Even still, with all the rules, somehow the rules didn't stop us. Imagine! So we needed a sacrifice. Interestingly enough, God uses one of his own rules to cover the ~~mistakes~~ disobedience we are guilty of in the rest of them.

"And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God..." (21:22-23a)

Jesus hung on a tree - not guilty of his own death sentence, but ours. He became cursed by God because we thought only of ourselves. We can be thankful for that!... while we try to walk more closely to the Savior who paid for our failures.

March 19

Reading: Deuteronomy 26-29

"Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.' This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike."
(Deuteronomy 29:18b-19)

Somehow, we always believe that we are different. We can beat the house - beat the odds... whatever game we're talking about.

"They've never met the likes of me! I know some people can't handle it, but I can."

"Other people may get caught, but I won't."

"That rule doesn't really apply to me. That's for people who don't know what they're doing."

God's Word makes it clear. Don't think you are going to get by with something God said will destroy you. You're not that clever. The law of God is every bit as concrete as the law of gravity. You may be able to escape it for a while, but sooner or later everything that goes up must come down.

Galatians 6 says that, "God will not be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." There will not be one person who gets to the end of life who can say, "HA! I did what I wanted! I didn't care anything about God; I didn't bother with Jesus; 'I did it my way' and I got away with it."

What God says will stand.

Note something else about our stubborn pride in verse 19. So often people say, "I'm not hurting anyone but me!"

False.

You can't have cancer in just one part of the body and the rest not be affected! Eventually, the whole body will fall ill. It is the same with sin. The hangnail sin today can become the life-threatening infection if it's not dealt with. It will spread through you, your family, your congregation, and your community.

Don't be the one who "blesses himself". Blessing only comes by following Jesus.

March 20

Reading: Deuteronomy 30-34

"Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by Yahweh, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph! Your enemies shall come fawning to you, and you shall tread upon their backs."
(Deuteronomy 33:29, italics mine)

Every generation has a happy song.

In 1967, the Cowsills sang about The Flower Girl:

"And I knew (I knew, I knew, I knew, I knew),
she could make me happy (happy, happy)"

In 1988, Bobby McFerrin sang:

"Here's a little song I wrote,
you might wanna sing it note for note
Don't worry. Be happy."

In 2013, Pharrell Williams got everyone movin' while he sang:

"(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth"

Moses wasn't a real - what you call - prolific song writer, but he did have a few hits. We will see another of his songs tomorrow (Psalm 90). There is a real, mostly downer of a song God gives him (Deuteronomy 32) that is meant to be a witness against Israel in the coming ages. But then he finishes up with the secret to real happiness in this song/blessing/prose that includes today's selected verse.

Even after all the warnings, Moses says, "Happy are you!"

Why?

'Cause ain't nobody like the people that are saved by Yahweh! In the end, that's what matters. All the other songs of men through the ages press and extol happiness - but flower girls, good wishes, and feelings all fade. If you want to find happiness, be saved! Know (not feel) that regardless of all the circumstances around you - as harshly tragic or terrible as they may get from time to time (or all the time) - it will only turn out to be for your good (IF you love God and live by HIS calling... Romans 8:28). Know that in the very end, there is awaiting you a weight of glory that is incomparable to all the pain and struggles of this earth! (2 Corinthians 4:17)

Even as we do look around and see the scary parts of life, Moses - even in his "downer song" - writes this:

"For their rock...

(note the little "r")

"is not as our Rock;

(big "R")

our enemies are by themselves."
(32:31, italics mine)

God and His people's enemies are "more to be pitied than scolded".

So, yes... "don't worry; be happy". But happiness only comes because of GOD and His faithful, saving love. THAT is the key to real happiness!

March 21

Reading: Psalm 90

"Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God.

"So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."
(Psalm 90:1-2, 12)

I was made for the road.

Before I was married, I'd lived in: fifteen different houses, in eleven different towns, in four different states, in those twenty years. Since being married, I've lived in: thirteen different houses, in ten different towns, in three different states, these almost thirty-two years. I am hoping that in another quick four years the home I currently own will become the place I've lived longest, as well as the place I will live the rest of my years.

When Moses writes, "Lord, You have been our dwelling place...", he does so with some of that same experience (or really a lot more). Born into a humble Hebrew home, transferred to the palace of Pharaoh, run-off into the desert, back to Egypt, picking up a tent and moving we-don't-know-how-many-times through the wilderness (sometimes daily?) another forty years... He'd not had much of a proper home among his family for any of the one hundred twenty years of his life! But Moses recognizes what we all must - even if we have somehow managed to live all our lives in one house - God must be our real dwelling place.

What structure can give us the protection He provides? What luxuries can give us His peace? What routine can give us His familiarity? What family can give us His history?

What then is the end lesson for Moses?

"So..." (v.12), Like the word "therefore", "So" is a neon arrow that points back to everything that's been said before. i.e., "because of what we've seen from all this, Lord"

"...teach us to number our days..."

Understand the importance of each new day (that is "renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; [vv. 5b-6a]) and make it count! (Lamentations 3:22-23)

"...that we may get a heart of wisdom."

As Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." And the examination that Moses makes of his life is simply this:

"Satisfy us in the morning with Your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days."

God's always been there, always will be, live in Him and be satisfied.

March 22

Reading: Joshua 1-2

"...And they went and came into the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab and lodged there."
(Joshua 2:1b)

Ever been around a "name dropper"? Name Droppers love to try and impress people by saying things like, "Well, I was talking with "(insert the name of someone rich, famous, or influential here)" the other day, and..." or "My friend "(insert someone else)" said,...".

Joshua here drops an important name. It's funny that it is one that had probably been uttered a lot in Jericho... but not because she was impressive or important - although maybe she was "popular". Few would find it impressive to drop the name of a prostitute - but Joshua does.

It might seem like coincidence until you remember that "all scripture is God-breathed". (2 Timothy 3:16) And I'm sure the Holy Spirit wanted it put there for a very specific reason. Probably so it could be included along with a lot of other relatively uninspiring, conniving, lying, otherwise-unmentionable people that God used to redeem the world. (Matthew 1:2-16)

A couple of things to learn here:

One, the people we think are - probably are not all that impressive. Worldly power and influence they may have. Riches may be at their quick disposal. Yet, God is not impressed with those outer things for God looks upon the heart. (1 Samuel 16:7)

That may bring you and me a lot of encouragement on a second point. Regardless of how little I think I may have or how unrecognized I may be - or even how infamous I may be - I can still be redeemed for God's use. I can still bring Him glory and help other people find redemption as well.

Stay humble; stay faithful. He will lift you up!

March 23

Reading: Joshua 3-6

"...'As soon as you see the ark of the covenant of Yahweh your God being carried by the Levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place and follow it. Yet there shall be a distance between you and it, about 2,000 cubits in length. Do not come near it, in order that you may know the way you shall go, for you have not passed this way before.'"

(Joshua 3:3b-4)

Maybe you're like me. Maybe it's been quite a long while since you played a simple game of "Follow the Leader". For those uninitiated with such simple games, if my memory serves, it was simply walking about with friends in a line - combined with a little of "Simon Says". You walk along following the leader - going where the leader goes - doing what the leader does. Now I suppose that if the line were really long, you'd just have to trust that the person in front of you is actually following the leader! You'd have to put your faith in a person other than the leader.

Here in Joshua 3, God wants no such thing happening! The people haven't really been good at following human leaders - He wants them to follow Him!

If you could imagine, the number of all the camps of Israelites were probably a "million-ish" people - give or take. If everyone crowded about the ark (the visible representation of God's presence), not everyone could see it. They'd have to trust in the people in front of them. But God, in His wisdom, says, "You wait until you see 'Me' come by, then you go - but stay back, because you don't know where I'm going. You need to see Me!" And so they are instructed to lay back about 3,000 feet - about 30 football fields - from the ark so more folks could set eyes on the Leader. (And nobody but Joshua and Caleb were over 40 - so their eyes were probably pretty good!)

A couple of things to think about:

First, Don't follow men; follow God.

It's easy to get our eyes on others, people we believe are following God. And yes, God even gives us leaders. But we are only to follow them as they follow Jesus! The Apostle Paul said,

"Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1, italics mine)

God has sealed those who have put their trust in Jesus with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit allows us to see and follow God. Leaders will help us, but Jesus is the Leader! Follow Him!

Second, to that end, most all of us are a leader to someone! Whether we are a preacher, an elder, a deacon, a teacher, a mother, a father, a boss, or just someone's friend - somebody is looking at and to you! Are you allowing them, helping them, to see the Leader, Jesus? Or are we obstructing the view?

When my kids were young and they'd stand in front of the TV where I couldn't see, I'd always say, "Hey! Ya know, you make a better door than a window!" Unfortunately, the same could be said about many people in the Church!

Keep your eyes on the right person; don't obstruct the view; and head for the Promised Land!

March 24

Reading: Joshua 7:1; 1 Chronicles 2:7; Joshua 7:2-9:27

"So the men took some of their provisions, but did not ask counsel from Yahweh. And Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation swore to them." (Joshua 9:14)

These poor guys. They learn a real lesson here about trusting people and appearances.

It's terrible to feel you can't trust people, but well... I guess we have to be more skeptical than stupid - even when we so desire to be compassionate toward people. The story they get from these wanderers seems plausible enough. They tell a good story: They're not from around those parts, but they've heard about Yahweh. They figure they'd up and leave and make their home among His people.

("I mean, who wouldn't want to be a part of us, right!?!")

Well, you've heard it said, "Politics makes strange bedfellows." Truth. Nothing will band people together like a mutual hatred of God. (Joshua 9:1-2) Jesus said, "...be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." (Matthew 10:16) And here God's people get taken by con-men.

Remember that God always sees the big picture. Even when it seems fairly obvious, even when it seems we'd be foolish to not trust our eyes - always consult God! Once we make one wrong turn, the good choices get slim. Joshua only had two roads before him now. He could break a covenant and not be a man of his word, or he could keep alive the enemies of God - both sins.

Sinful decisions breed sinful choices.

God will always bring about our good (if we love Him and are following His calling and purpose) (Romans 8:28) even when our trouble comes at our own hand. But we will never know how much better it might have been if we had looked to God in the first place.

That's why we must hear Jesus' words: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me." (Luke 9:23, italics mine) Without laying down our agenda every day and seeking Him, we are sure to make the wrong decisions.

March 25

Reading: Joshua 10:1-12:6

"At that time Joshua spoke to Yahweh in the day when Yahweh gave the Amorites over to the sons of Israel and he said in the sight of Israel,

"Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and moon, in the Valley of Aijalon."

"And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies. Is this not written in the Book of Jashar? The sun stopped in the midst of heaven and did not hurry to set for about a whole day."

(Joshua 10:12-13)

Before I get to a quick comment on today's passage, I want to tell you about something you may have seen years ago. If you haven't, don't worry, stuff like this comes back around.

Fifty-plus years ago, a chain-letter (the way urban legend was transmitted before email or social media) went about touting the undeniable and provable truth of the Bible. It seems that our great and powerful computers at NASA had discovered the "lost day" of Joshua. The fantastic computers at NASA, aided by the genius and understanding of one "Professor Harold Hill" with their atomic clocks and what-have-you "noticed"? twenty-four hours of the clock unaccounted for. (That's the gist of the story.)

"See!" the letter said, "The Bible is really is true! Science has made it true."

There are other versions and origins of the story, as well as other versions of the legitimacy of the existence of this "Professor Harold Hill". But if you're a music lover... doesn't it strike you as strange that the professor has the same name as the charlatan band leader in "The Music Man"!?

Clearly, I have no idea what God did or how He did make it happen. I believe the Bible account that God gave Joshua the daylight he needed that day - in a miraculous way - to finish the work God gave him. (Though, I think it may be a case where we take the Bible literally, not literalistically, and understand that scripture uses idiom and figures of speech the same as we do today.)

But I digress.

God doesn't need anyone to prove what He says. We weren't there (as we weren't for any of scripture's miracles), and neither was anyone else to disprove it! But Jesus supported the validity of the scriptures, and

the relatively recent history of His life and work supports that He is the risen Son of God. What God has written, He has written; you will find it true when we live in faith - without having to support it with twigs of silliness in urban legend.

The point of the chapter is this: God told Joshua, "Do not fear them..." i.e., "Go ahead and go." (10:8) God constantly invites us, like Joshua, to participate in His work - and then goes ahead and does the bulk of it for us! (vv. 10, 11, 13, etc)

Do not fear what you may face today. If God has "OK'd" it - He will be there to strengthen, provide, and give you the victory.

March 26

Reading: Joshua 12:7-15:63

"I was forty years old when Moses the servant of Yahweh sent me from Kadesh-barnea to spy out the land, and I brought him word again as it was in my heart. ...And now, behold, I am this day eighty-five years old. I am still as strong today as I was in the day that Moses sent me; my strength now is as my strength was then, for war and for going and coming."
(Joshua 14:7, 10b-11)

A very close friend of mine, always extolled the virtues of the Dodge brand of vehicles. Long story short, his motto was: "Mopar or no car!" Being as I trusted his judgment and saw his faith and conviction toward the Lord, I had no doubt in his words.

When it came time for me to travel about the continent preaching, I selected a brand new Dodge Grand Caravan. I'll have to say, it served me very well. I drove it almost 1/4 of a million miles when I sold it to one of my sons, and it still - to this day - it is mechanically perfect and in top running condition.

But imagine my surprise a few years ago when my friend bought a Chevrolet!

Now I don't know why he did. But here is the point: What I believed in his life to be a conviction - was only a preference.

Preferences are just that - what we prefer. I may prefer a Dodge, but... if the price is enough better, if it's what my wife really wants, if I really need a vehicle but a Dodge is not available... I'll buy something else.

Convictions are different. A conviction is something you believe so strongly that it effects everything thing you do. You do it because you believe God has called you to it, and anything less is sinful. You don't change because it's uncomfortable, difficult - or maybe even dangerous!

When Caleb says he brought word back to Moses "as it was in my heart", he is saying his heart convicted him. It had to be this way. It was this way - or no way.

And that's the way he did it. Forty-five years later - eighty-five years old - he still lived by his convictions. He was convicted by God's promise, and he was determined to see his life of faith through to the end.

What about you, Christian?

Is your faith a conviction... or just a preference?

Do you prefer to be "in Church"... but given mandates, comfort, fear of viruses, etc - you will stay home and watch on the internet (or not)?

God demands conviction!

Do you prefer to take communion on the Lord's Day... but if you like the music, style, building, chairs... of a "denominational congregation" better - will you go there?

God demands conviction!

Do you prefer doing what God says... but find it nice to occasionally "let your hair down" and "color outside the lines"?

God demands conviction!

We will all falter from time-to-time. And Caleb wasn't perfect either. But let us live with real conviction and repent when conviction has not moved us to obedience!

March 27

Reading: Joshua 16-17

"Yet the people of Manasseh could not take possession of those cities, but the Canaanites persisted in dwelling in that land. Now when the people of Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not utterly drive them out."

(Joshua 17:12-13)

Pride and arrogance.

Some of you who know me really well may find it laughable that I'm going to write about that today. Hey... what can I say. I can take my lumps just like I give'm out. I'm willing to let God's Word speak to me today... you?

While folks from other tribes failed to do all that God commanded them at times too, Manasseh seems like a particularly arrogant tribe of folks. After our selected verses in chapter 17, they complain that they are a large people and need more space. In actuality, according to Numbers 1:33, 35, Manasseh was the smallest of the tribes. In addition to that, they had already split themselves between both sides of the Jordan River making them even a smaller group of people. Yet, they are "blessed people".

No doubt they are, but they seem to think they are more bless-ed than the others. Perhaps because they are the descendants of the great Joseph - 2nd only to Pharaoh in Egypt. Do they feel they should be above everyone else?

Perhaps their pride and arrogance is also the reason for today's selected verse.

They do not go and take possession of all the land God had told them to (perhaps they'd not been so "cramped" if they had), but instead just made slaves of the people there. (Joshua's response to them kinda

makes it sound like they might've been afraid of hard work too.) All in all, it seems that rather than do what God says, they believe they are strong enough and special enough to take a short cut. They're tough. They can handle the pagan community and even use them to fast-track their riches.

And here is the pride and arrogance of many of us today.

We too believe that we are strong enough... that we are wise enough... that we can bend the rules. We believe that what is too much for some will be easily handled by us. We can play with fire and not get burned. We can walk the tightrope and never fall. We can widow-shop sin and never buy. As a matter of fact - we can use our worldly knowledge to get ahead.

Listen, here is the plain truth.

NEITHER YOU - NOR I - ARE ABOVE FALLING.

There was only one Man that beat the devil at every turn... AND YOU AIN'T HIM!

The longer you live with the Canaanites, the more assuredly YOU WILL FALL!

Why?

Because at some point, what is handle-able will begin handling YOU.

Gary S. Paxton said the cigar smokes the man... the car drives the man....

I could add, the guitar plays the man... the clothes wear the man... the money spends the man... the bottle empties the man.

As the saying goes, "Sin always takes you further than you want to go, costs you more than you want to pay, and keeps you longer than you want to stay." That is, sin will eventually take you all the way, cost you everything, and keep you for eternity.

Are you OK with that?

Quit walking the tightrope! Extinguish every fire from your life before it burns you down!

March 28

Reading: Joshua 18-19

"There remained among the people of Israel seven tribes whose inheritance had not yet been apportioned. So Joshua said to the people of Israel, 'How long will you put off going in to take possession of the land, which Yahweh, the God of your fathers, has given you?'"

(Joshua 18:2-3)

Sometimes it takes me a while to decide something.

In a purchase, big or small, money is limited. You can't have everything. So what is it you will choose? But when I'm decided - I'm decided. Now that the weighing of the options is over, it needs to happen right now (if not yesterday)! What was I waiting on?

The Israelites saw God provide day-after-day, year-after-year in the wilderness. They heard Moses recount to them the history, the law, and the promises. They walked across the dry river bottom of the Jordan. Their enemies had fallen before them (when they chose to obey). The land they'd been waiting on for forty years was before them - the promise of God.

But they sat.

Even today, there are folks like Caleb, who at age eighty-five can't wait to receive God's blessing. Then there are others who say they want God's blessing, but actually put Him off when He stands ready to give to them.

Would that we were as impatient to obey God as we are to have our own way in life. You know, when God's way is the best way and God's blessing is the best blessing... Why would we ever hesitate?

March 29

Reading: Joshua 20-21; 1 Chronicles 6:54-81

"Thus Yahweh gave to Israel all the land that He swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there."

(Joshua 21:43)

I've heard a lot of people say, "Everything happens for a reason."

Well, that's true... it's just not always the comforting thought that people try to make it.

There is a reason that pencils have six flat sides on them; it is to combat the reason that a completely round pencil rolls off your school desk! It's a law of gravity.

There is a reason that tornados ravage communities and kill people. It's called weather. Although the weather - like many other things in this world - has been altered by man. The weather was not altered by "carbon emissions", but by one man several thousand years ago in a choice he made to bring sin and its destructiveness into the world (Adam).

The reason people get killed in wars is because of mankind's selfishness, greed, and thirst for power.

So... yes... everything happens for a reason. It is just not necessarily a God reason!

HOWEVER... that doesn't mean that there are not things that do happen for a God reason! Things that happen for a God reason are things that He has promised to us. When He says obedience brings blessing - He means it and He does it. When He says disobedience brings destruction - He means it and He brings it (if not temporally, eternally).

When the Israelites settled there where God said they would - it happened for a reason. It was a God reason. It happened because God said it would happen when they obeyed. God lead them there and established them there to be that Kingdom of Priests (Exodus 19:6) to the rest of the world that He wanted to redeem.

You might even look around wherever you are today. There is a reason why you are where you are - even geographically speaking. It might be a God reason. It may be because of your sin, Adam's sin, somebody else's sin, someone else's favor, your hard work... sometimes we ourselves don't even know why we are where we are! (Ask Job!)

But what I do know is this: Wherever you are... God wants to use you there! At least for now - until He puts you somewhere else.

But GOD HAS A PLAN!

Ask Him what it is today and find out how to better be a part of it... right where you are!

March 30

Reading: Joshua 22-24

"Therefore we said, 'Let us now build an altar, not for burnt offering, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you, and between our generations after us, that we do perform the service of Yahweh in His presence with our burnt offerings and sacrifices and peace offerings, so your children will not say to our children in time to come, "You have no portion in Yahweh."'"
(Joshua 22:26-27)

In 1969, John Fogerty sang, "I see a bad moon risin'". We might entitle these last few chapters of Joshua the same. As a matter of fact, the people of Reuben, Gad, and 1/2 of Manasseh - saw the trouble on the way in chapter 22.

Having completed their vow to help their kinsmen in Canaan, before they crossed back over the Jordan to the land Moses had given them - these 2 1/2 tribes built "an alter of imposing size" (22:10) on the Canaan side of the river. The other 9 1/2 tribes assumed they were already leaving Yahweh and came for a fight!

"No, no, no!" they said. "We just want to make sure that in future generations, your kids don't say, 'Those people over there on the other side of the river are not "us"! So we built an alter just like the 'official' one y'all have so that they know we are all one people! It's not for sacrificing - that's to be done on the 'official' alter - it's just a witness that 'we' are 'you!'"

They could foresee confusion, mistrust, and unfaithfulness.

And so could Joshua.

When the people Joshua preached to told him how faithful they were going to be, he said, "You aren't even able to serve Yahweh!" (24:19)

They said, "Oh yeah! Here is our stone witness!" And they threw up a heap o'stones next to the sanctuary.

And -

"Israel served Yahweh all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that Yahweh did for Israel." (24:31)

I see a bad moon risin'!

The verse says something about Joshua, the elders, and the people of that day... and it implies something that we will see in the days to follow them in the times of the Judges! Children, untaught by those elders and people of their day, are not going to be the faithful people they'd grown up under.

Today, we have much the same problem! We need to be as concerned about future generations as the 2 1/2 tribes and more concerned than the 9 1/2! Our very self must be a witness of our vows and faithfulness to God. It begins before our Church in baptism, is to be lived out among our family, proclaimed to the world, and seen by our God.

Set the stones. Raise the standard. Take your place. Make sure that even those who follow after you will know the way of truth!

March 31

Reading: Judges 1-3

"Now these are the nations that Yahweh left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before."
(Judges 3:1-2)

Who loves a test?

Nobody that I can ever remember in 16+ years of schooling ever said, "Yippee! We get to take a test today!"

Tests reveal things. They reveal how hard you've really worked or studied. They shine a light on your knowledge so that others know what your knowledge or abilities really are.

But God's "tests" are a little different.

God already knows your understanding and ability. He did not test the Israelites so He would know if they were really faithful; He tested them so they themselves would know if they were really faithful!

This younger generation after the time of Joshua was untested. Their fathers and grandfathers had fought many battles - but they had not. So Yahweh left some of the land's inhabitants there to "test" them. He did it to let them know if they were really willing and able to obey God.

"Testing" can also be used in the sense of refinement. Wars would "separate the men from the boys". Those who had no desire to obey God would fall by the wayside, and those who loved Him would be victorious.

The sad thing is that most of these tests could have been avoided. Had the previous generations cared to do what God said to do and told them all God had done and displayed obedience and righteousness to them - they would have learned without war!

Make no mistake, we will all face our own tests so that we will know our mettle. And our children will not bear the guilt of our unfaithfulness. But our children *will* indeed bear the earthly consequences of our disobedience and lackadaisical attitude toward the things of God.

Godliness is the greatest inheritance we can ever leave.

April 1

Reading: Judges 4-6

"That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless Yahweh!"
(Judges 5:2)

After a couple of ministries as a young preacher, I came to a greater understanding of who I was and what God had called me to personally. So, when I interviewed with the congregation I would next end up serving, I was upfront.

"Look, I'm not a 'pastor'. God didn't call me to be a pastor; I am not ordained as a pastor. That's the role of the Overseers of the Church. I am a preacher, ordained as a servant of God, and specifically an evangelist. If you will do your job, I'll do mine!"

The elders thought that was a fine idea. The congregation unanimously hired me and began to operate like a well-oiled machine.

One elder was responsible for introducing new visitors to the congregation and helping them build relationships in the congregation. Another elder was responsible for education and oversaw the Sunday school and small groups. A third elder was responsible for what happened on Sunday morning (minus the sermon). The fourth elder worked to get people involved in the various ministries of the congregation. Lastly, I taught evangelism and headed up efforts to reach our community and introduce people to Jesus. And from there, the whole process began again.

While elders met with the new people that began coming on a monthly basis, within a short couple of months, exciting things happened. Almost weekly there were baptisms. The attendance, within three months, went from about fifty to over one hundred.

"...the leaders took the lead...the people offered themselves willingly..., bless Yahweh!"

I won't ruin the devotion by telling you what happened when people got complacent and quit doing that. But it was a lot like the whole book of Judges.

It was American patriot and revolutionary Thomas Paine who originally said, "Lead, follow, or get out of the way!" It might be good advice for the people of God's Church. Find your place in the body, Christian, and do it with all your heart. When everybody does, there comes great victory!

April 2

Reading: Judges 7-9

"And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family."

(Judges 8:27)

What is it that makes an individual begin believing what other people say about him? Think about that a minute. (I'll wait.) Speaking for myself... it could be one of a few things.

It feels good to be praised. It boosts your ego a little. A pat on the back, a "job well done!"... those things can make you feel you've accomplished something - even if it was God who did most of the work.

In darker parts of our heart, it is what we need. Somehow, for some reason, known or unknown, deserved or undeserved - we don't think much of ourselves. Unsure of who we are, we begin to believe what people say. Sometimes they say good things, and we can become prideful. Sometimes they say bad things we let further destroy us.

For Gideon, it was the latter reason and the former end result.

Here is a guy who had to see three miracles (6:21-22, 36-40) to believe that God could actually use him to do God's work! Seems like Gideon is pretty unsure that he "has it him". Yet, God proves that he can take away over 99% of the assets Gideon does have (7:3,7) and still bring victory!

It seems that when all was said and done and folks wanted to laud him and his accomplishments, he turned it all away (8:22-23). (Who would want to be the king of these people anyway!) But as someone once pointed out, most men will fall to one of three things: Gold, Glory, or Girls. Well, it didn't seem like he wanted the glory (at first), and he already had more than seventy girls! So, I guess he thought he might as well have the gold.

Interestingly, he doesn't use it to spend - but finally decides a little of that glory might be nice. He makes a golden ephod (kind of a golden vest) commemorating himself. He puts it on display in the "Gideon 'Jerubbaal' Bar-Joash Memorial Library and Museum". And people cannot get enough of it. I imagine lines of folks walking through to read the memoirs and see the golden vest of the great Gideon. The one they believed had been their savior.

"...and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family."

Be careful, brothers and sisters. You are not who others say you are. You are neither as wonderful as they may say - nor as bad. You are who God says you are.

April 3

Reading: Judges 10-11

"And Jephthah made a vow to Yahweh and said, 'If You will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be Yahweh's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.'"

"Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter."
(Judges 11:31, 34)

Did you ever bargain with God?

My younger son did.

He told God that if God would allow his favorite baseball team to win the 2015 World Series, he would name his first-born child after his favorite team.

Ayla Mae Royal is his firstborn!

Now I doubt that God cared much about who won the 2015 World Series. But bargaining with God can be a dangerous thing. It's one thing to name your child in a bargain; it's quite another to sacrifice them!

The story of Jephthah begins so promising. The half-brother of a prostitute is put out of the house by his family. He goes off and falls in with bad companions ("worthless fellows" [11:3]) - only to rise to the top as leader of God's people.

But Jephthah's bargain with rash words shows us a great truth: When you make a bad or sinful choice, every choice after that is usually bad or sinful. He vowed it - to God. The only choices now are: keep your word (and take a human life in the process) or to sin by breaking your word.

Now, it would seem that the lesser of two evils would be to break your word, but...

There are some compelling reasons to believe that Jephthah did not actually kill his daughter, but "sacrificed" her in dedicating her to God. That is, she would never marry and only "belong" to God. (The original Hebrew language can be construed this way.) In the course of the awful things that continually happened during the time of the Judges, I tend to think the worst!

No matter, because either way, here is the sad thing: The redemption that took the son of a prostitute to the leader of God's people ended with him! Having no other children, what God began in Jephthah ended with Jephthah.

There would be no legacy of faith.

As we said March 31st, "Godliness is the greatest inheritance we can leave!" Let us remember that such a very simple thing as a few words uttered can stop the blessing of redemption for a whole generations.

April 4

Reading: Judges 12-15

"The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, 'Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house over you with fire.'
(Judges 12:1)

Did you ever know someone who had a real knack for showing up on the scene just as the work was being completed?

"Well, what are y'all doin'!? Why didn't you call me? I'd been glad to help!"

Or -

"Y'all are done already!? I thought you were startin' after noon!"

Or -

"Well, I'da been here, but I had to take the kids to the sitter..."

There is always some reason they didn't do what they should have, but they still want the credit for having been so ready, willing, and able! Well, that is the men of Ephraim all-over!

Remember back in the book of Joshua, decades earlier, that it was the tribes of Joseph - Manasseh and Ephraim - who thought their portion of the Promised Land was too small (even though they were two of the smallest tribes and had, up to then, been unwilling to work much for their territory).

They said the same thing to Gideon as they did to Jephthah back in chapter 8! "Why didn't you call on us!? Are you trying to say we're ...unworthy? ...unable? ...unliked?"

It seems they are those kind of people who never want work, but always want credit.

Jephthah doesn't respond nearly as kindly as Gideon ("Ah, I just didn't wanna be botherin' y'all with my problems. Y'all are too powerful to be botherin' with lil ol' me.") They accused Jephthah of being a renegade, and that was just too much for him! Remember, he'd been thrown out of his home by his half-brothers because his mother was a prostitute. Then Israel had come clamoring to him and his "renegades" ("worthless fellows [11:3]) for help. He had risen to become Judge over Israel... and now they want to relegate him back to "renegade"! That ain't gonna fly! Like they say, "Them's fightin' words! I'll meet you out back o'the barn!"

And they were all "brothers".

They all were serving Yahweh.

But laziness and pride caused them to not get along. And that is an understatement being as it cost the lives of 42,000 Ephraimites.

Don't be lazy; and learn to take a pass when others are rude. We are GOD'S CHURCH! We need one another!

April 5

Reading: Judges 16-18

"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."
(Judges 17:6)

I don't really watch the news anymore. I check the headlines online to see if there is something huge I'm missing, but basically it's all the same stuff.

Different names - same stuff.

And most all of it is sickening.

The problem is the same problem God's people had during the time of the Judges. And the events in the book of Judges play out just about as horrific as today's six o'clock news. Everyone then, and most everyone now, has no "king" but self.

Samson, probably most famous of all judges, was no exception. The scripture specifically states that he thought he'd just jump up and whip the Philistines again after his hair was cut (16:20). After all, he'd broken about all the other vows of the Nazirite and been OK. But he was so into himself that he never even noticed that "...Yahweh had left him."

The proud and haughty Ephraimites get another mention with a kingless fellow named Micah. Micah was a thief and an idolator. He also believed that his riches could buy him the blessing of God by hiring his own Levite priest. (17:10) It all seemed to work out OK until he found that unscrupulous people (like his Levite) will always find someone to pay them more money to do more unscrupulous things. (18:19-20)

The stories will only get worse and more heinous tomorrow - both in the book of Judges and in our communities. The only answer is a King.

If we would change the six o'clock news, someone is going to have to rule people. But Democrats can't bribe people enough to rule over them. And Republicans can't pass enough laws to force people to be moral. The will of man can only be ruled by a King who can change mankind's heart.

That King is Jesus.

And Church, that means that we are the only people who can actually give the sin-sick world any hope. But there is a whole lot of God's Church that's so sin-sick itself that, like Samson, It hasn't even noticed that God has left them! Jesus removed the lampstand from their congregation a long time ago.

The revival of people's souls must begin with our own. Who is your King?

April 6

Reading: Judges 19-21

"And when he entered his house, he took a knife, and taking hold of his concubine he divided her, limb by limb, into twelve pieces, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. And all who saw it said, 'Such a thing has never happened or been seen from the day that the people of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt until this day; consider it, take counsel, and speak.'"
(Judges 19:29-30)

Didn't I tell you it'd get worse?

Critics of the Bible will say, "What kind of God does these things? What kind of 'godly' people are so heinous? You call this a 'holy book'?"

Part of the reason the Bible is so believable is that it never whitewashes things. God didn't just include stories of faithfulness, love, peace, and kindness - but He included the unimaginable depths of depravation to which people (even His people) are capable of sinking without appropriate subjection to a ruler. While I can't imagine the motive that would have a man offering his daughter (or any person for that matter) to be raped and tortured, Judges proves that a man's heart will lead him there if he is left to his own devices.

God wants us to see the ugliness of sin.

"What loving God would allow this!?"

The God that so loves the world would. The God of the people He Himself created would. He was loving those people so much that He allowed them to chose their own path - even when it broke His heart. Even with ~~their~~ our evil, He desires our fellowship still. He desires us so much that He allowed His own Son to be as cruelly and evilly tortured as anyone ever has been in order to be our sacrifice.

God wants us to allow Jesus to be our King not just to save the world from this kind of horrific terror, but to heal the heart that devises such in the first place. Let Jesus rule your heart today - and every day.

April 7

Reading: Ruth 1-4

"Yahweh repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by Yahweh, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!"
(Ruth 2:12)

Isn't it funny how people who want to be "different", end up being the same?

Go to any high school and see all the "different" kids - wearing the same clothes. Things that look funny in today's Paris fashion show will soon be what everyone wears. It is culture's job to make us all the same - to conform to culture - even when we strive to be different.

Jesus had a different take, He said this:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."
(John 13:34-35)

The story of Ruth, though there are so many lessons throughout it that touch a variety of important subjects, proves this major point Jesus was making. This whole thing occurs "In the days when the judges ruled..." (1:1) While the disgusting acts of terror and violence were sweeping through a nation that did whatever was right in the eyes of each citizen, here is a story of love, devotion, and redemption.

It is love that is counter-culture.

It's not the "free-love" of the sixties that encourages immorality. It is not the so-called "love" that tolerates sin and enables stupidity for acceptance. It is love. It is a self-sacrificing, God-seeking, others-serving kind of care, respect, and virtue. When our lives exhibit that kind of love and seek the refuge of our Redeemer (Jesus), not only does God notice, but others do to.

A problem with many congregations today is that they seek "relevance" in their communities with gimmickry like music, lights, coffee shops, and repentance-light "talks". The world doesn't need anything else that's like itself. To stand out, be heard, and become "essential" the Church needs to love one another.

April 8

Reading: 1 Chronicles 2:9-55; 4:1-23; 1 Samuel 1

"And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, 'Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?'"
(1 Samuel 1:8)

I will freely admit it. I'm not often very observant of what others are going through or thoughtful about how they must feel. Although within the last few years there have been things that make me think more about others, I just haven't been very thoughtful a lot.
Sorry.

I'm regretful of that. I've probably at different times been more like some of the people in 1 Samuel 1.

There's Peninnah. She's worst of all to Hannah. She is the consummate "mean girl". While she has the blessing of children, she is still jealous of Elkanah's attention toward Hannah. She tries to bolster herself by making sure other people feel worse than they already do.

Am I so insecure with who I am and what God has called me to be and do that I need to be jealous of others? Can I not rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn because I'm afraid it will diminish me?

There's Elkanah. Oh, Elkanah! I feel for you. A man trying to please two women (Your fault, Elkanah!)... a man trying to please two women. We men have enough trouble trying to discern the feelings of a woman - any woman. But Elkanah... seriously, bro?

"Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

I doubt it! What you should have said (and hindsight is 20/20):

"Are you not more to me than ten sons?"

It wasn't your worth she was unsatisfied with - it was her own! Think, dude!

There's Eli. Eli has his own issues at his house, as we will soon see. But rather than be pastoral and inquire as to Hannah's hurts, he just accuses her of being drunk.

Pray today that God will help us get into the habit of looking around... at others. Not so we know who to "one-up", but so that we know who needs help.

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."
(John 13:34-35)

April 9

Reading: 1 Samuel 2-4

"Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with Yahweh and also with man."

"And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in My heart and in My mind. And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever."
(1 Samuel 2:26, 35)

I will always remember one of my professors saying, "The Bible is its own best commentary." What he meant was that one part of the scripture will very often enlighten you as to another. One part will make the other more clear. You can often interpret one passage because what another teaches negates other meanings.

This passage tells us a lot about Jesus.

Jesus isn't mentioned here, but He is all over this passage.

Luke uses practically identical phraseology in his first letter to Theophilus to talk about Jesus. Luke 2:52 says this:

"And Jesus, increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man."

What you will see in flashes and parts in the man Samuel, you will see in an ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. In theological studies, we call that typology. The "type", Samuel, foreshadows and does in small ways what Jesus, the "antitype", completes and fulfills.

What does Jesus ultimately complete that Samuel begins?

Well, while he is not a Levite (like Eli and his evil sons - Hophni and Phinehas), Samuel ministers at the temple. Jesus wasn't a Levite either, but as a priest in the Order of Melchizedek serves as our High Priest forever. This is the Messianic prophecy of 1 Samuel 2:35.

Samuel also serves as one of the final "Judges" of Israel (7:15) before the time of the Kings. Jesus is not only THE rightful King from the tribe of Judah (Matthew 1:1ff), but He is also THE Judge of the living and the dead. (2 Timothy 4:1)

Of course, as one who hears from God and tells it to His people, Samuel was also a prophet. This, of course, was also Jesus.

Samuel: prophet, priest (kinda), and kingly.

Jesus: PROPHET, PRIEST, AND THE KING!

The point though of the passage is this: what man has a great ability to mess up (and Samuel was not perfect either), God can - by His grace - always fix. What man starts and gives a small human portion of faithfulness to, God comes and finishes in a big way.

Yes, our decisions (and indecisions) have earthly consequences. Eli's lack of fathering cost the people and his family a great deal. But in Jesus, we will have what we need.

Trust Him who begins the work in you to see it through to completion. Not because we are complete - but because Jesus is!

Praise God for that!

April 10

Reading: 1 Samuel 5-8

"Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of Yahweh.... The next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground...and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold...."
(1 Samuel 5:2-3a, 4a, 4c)

One of my granddaughters was doing something she was likely to get hurt doing the other day. When her dad told her not to do that anymore, she complied. The next thing he knew, she was doing something like it - but not exactly.

"You can't get mad at me because you didn't tell me not to do this!"

Children: You must be specific; you must be thorough; you must be clear. Because I will guarantee you this: You will find yourself telling them to do things you didn't think you'd have to tell them not to do!

Just like God and mankind.

It would seem that people would understand choices. A choice is to choose between two or more things. You can't choose one thing without leaving at least one other thing behind. That's what making a choice is! Yet we are often like both sets of people in today's reading.

The Philistines try to have their cake and eat it too. They will just choose Yahweh along with their own god Dagon. They found what we will when we try that. Our own gods will never stand in the presence of Yahweh.

God literally says that!

When He said, "You will have no other gods before Me." He didn't just mean, "Don't prioritize anything before Me." He meant, "Keep your gods out of my face. You can't have Me and your gods. There is a choice to be made."

The Philistines decided to send Yahweh packing. They would rather have their "little 'g' god" that they could master themselves, than their real maker that kept making their lives crumble in His presence.

The Israelites were no better - but they knew better. In chapter seven when they get the ark back from the Philistines, they decide to keep it far from them still. For twenty years they just left it in storage. They tried to ban God from their presence. They knew what the Philistines didn't - they couldn't have both their gods and Yahweh - so they chose. They chose wrongly. They chose wrongly purposely. They chose wrongly purposely and knowingly.

And then still whined about it. (7:1-3)

You can have Yahweh or you can have your "gods". But you can't have both. And neither can you have your "gods" and the abundant life you want!

When you think about it that way, is there a choice?

April 11

Reading: 1 Samuel 9-12

"Then the Spirit of Yahweh will rush upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man. When he turned his back to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart. And all these signs came to pass that day. And when all who knew him previously saw how he prophesied with the prophets, the people said to one another, 'What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?'"
(1 Samuel 10:6, 9, 11)

When I first met him, he was an athiest. Or, well, he was at least an agnostic. Well, OK... that's how he probably would have classified himself. There are actually no athiests. Everyone knows, in his or her own heart of hearts, that God is real. They at least do in the beginning. They may eventually so delude their own thinking that His existence becomes far away from their souls... but they know.

But I digress.

When I first met him, he was an "athiest". But he attended church because it was a good thing for his wife and kids to do. He liked the moral teaching. So he came along. After a couple of years, he walked down the aisle at the invitation.

"It's time."

The only way I could respond was to give that big man the tightest hug I think I've ever given. It is truly amazing when God takes hold of a man's life. It is amazing when a man surrenders his life to God. Eventually, that man - who was an "athiest" - became an overseer in God's Church. When God's Spirit fills a person it is evident.

What about you? Me?

Do people see Jesus in you and me? Do we live, act, or respond to life in such a way as to make people say, "What (or Who) has gotten into him!?"

When we surrender ourselves every day, we allow the fruit of God's Holy Spirit to grow in our lives. That fruit shows the seed God put there. Are you watering it? Or are you ignoring it?

April 12

Reading: 1 Chronicles 9:35-39; 1 Samuel 13:1-5, 19-23, 6-18; 1 Samuel 14

"Saul was staying in the outskirts of Gibeah in the pomegranate cave at Migron. The people who were with him were about six hundred men, including Ahijah, the son of Ahitub, Ichobod's brother, son of Phinehas, son of Eli, the priest of Yahweh at Shiloh, wearing an ephod. And the people did not know that Jonathon had gone."

(1 Samuel 14:2-3)

When you were a kid, did you ever have a "hideout"?

My friends and I always tried to devise clubhouses and hideouts. We had several through the years. It was a place where you could be unseen, unknown, unreachable, and at rest.

Saul was a fan of hideouts.

On the day he was to be made King of Israel, he was hiding among the baggage! (1 Samuel 10:22) And here he is again - hiding in a cave! Along with a lot of other men of Israel who hid themselves in caves and hills. (14:11, 22)

What a leader!

This day God's "King" - the military leader of God's people was hiding. With him were hiding 600 soldiers. Also in hiding was one of God's spiritual leaders, the priest Ahijah. Ahijah was even wearing the proper priestly clothing. The ark of the covenant was there - the representation of God's presence! (14:18)

All there... in the hideout.

Unfortunately, this is where much of God's Church is today - in the hideout.

We have a victorious King Who has established His Kingdom; we number in the millions; we have men who are supposed to be hearing from God and instructing His people; we all look the part; we have received the Holy Spirit. Anything and everything that we could possibly have need of to advance the Kingdom of God in the world and crush sin is at our disposal.

But we are in the hideout.

Unreachable.

Unreachable.

Unseen, unheard, unknown.

God forgive us!

Let us advance God's Kingdom today wherever we are! We are a mighty army of God. Quit complaining about the way the world is and move to change the hearts of mankind!

Onward, Christian soldiers!

April 13

Reading: 1 Samuel 15:1 - 17:31

"For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of Yahweh, He has also rejected you from being king."

(1 Samuel 15:23)

In October of 1988 (shortly before Halloween?), famed investigative journalist Geraldo Rivera aired a prime time special called: "Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground". Geraldo investigated allegations of a widespread Satanic underground in the United States. He talked to investigators and looked at occult crimes and ritual murders that had been committed in the United States. Also interviewed were self-identified Satanists. The show, like many Rivera specials of the '80's was ratings gold.

I was in Bible college at the time, and it sparked a lot of discussion on campus and among Church-folk. One of my professors and I actually began visiting a young man who had called our college scared to death and wanting help getting out of the occult rituals he had gotten involved in.

(Of course, nowadays, that show would never air. Wicca, Satanism, and witchcraft have been accepted in society largely - even by the United States military as a legitimate religion - and Geraldo would be called a "hater".)

Still today though, most Christians would never hear to becoming involved in pagan worship or Satanic ritual. Yet, God says their sin is just the same!

God told Saul to go and destroy everything. He didn't. They spared the king (for whatever reason) and kept the best of all the good livestock. Saul pretended to have obeyed God when Samuel showed up, but Samuel called him on his disobedience.

"Uh, well, uh... yeah, well, we were going to sacrifice these animals to God. Yeah, uh, that's what we were going to do!" (15:15)

"God doesn't want your sacrifice, Saul! He wants you to obey!"

"Well, it was the people who wanted to do it, I mean, I wouldn't have, but..." (15:21)

Then Samuel tells him, "Your rebellion is the same as witchcraft."

Think about that. Would you ever consult a medium? Would you ever outrightly worship Satan? Would you ever bow before an idol, pray, and make offering to a statue of stone or wood?

God says disobedience is the same.

When we rebel against what God says, we are saying we don't need God. We can either decide for ourselves what we should do or how we should live... Or, we will look to someone or something else for our direction, comfort, and care.

That's the same as witchcraft.

What has God said that you are disobeying? Is there a part of your life that is in rebellion? Repent!

April 14

Reading: 1 Samuel 17:32-19:17; Psalm 59; 1 Samuel 19:18-24

"O my Strength, I will watch for you, for you, O God, are my fortress. But I will sing of Your strength; I will sing aloud of Your steadfast love in the morning. O my Strength, I will sing praises to You, for You, O God, are my fortress, the God who shows me steadfast love."

(Psalm 59:9; 16-17)

Have you ever felt like someone was out to get you? They might be! As I heard someone say once, "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you!" I think we have certainly all felt that way - justified or not... and many of us have actually been under attack in various ways by people.

Men of God throughout the Bible are certainly no exception, and neither is the would-be, up-and-coming king - David. Saul a intimidatingly large, handsome, masculine figure (1 Samuel 9:2) has always been insecure. He was hiding in the baggage when it was time to become king. (10:22) He was hiding in a cave as the king. (14:2) He took credit for his son's victories (13:3-4), and he was definitely jealous and distressed by the praise of people for the young warrior of his army, David. (18:7-9) From then on, David was on Saul's radar, and Saul tried multiple times in a variety of ways to kill David.

But what is David's response?

David never takes things into his own hands. At one point, he will feel immense guilt for even shaming Saul, God's anointed. He could never kill him, and, as we will see, could not even rejoice in Saul's eventual death. David takes his trouble to God.

In Psalm 59, David asks God for three things: deliverance, protection, and salvation. And then he says, "OK God, here's what I'll do... I'll wait and sing."

Not strive and stress.

Not wonder and worry.

Not fight and faunch.

Wait and sing.

Wouldn't we be quite a lot more at peace to settle down and wait on God? It's a lot easier to do that when we sing too. When we show up at Church services with other people who still believe in God too, and we all sing to and with one another about our wonderful, faithful, graceful, loving, merciful God... When our hearts sing

over the verses of scripture that we have chosen (choose any!) every morning... When we hear God's Word "sung" to us, and His Word brings faith to us as the sound waves reverberate in our ear drums, connect with our brains, and calm our hearts... we will then be able to wait.

Wait and sing, Church. Wait and sing.

April 15

Reading: 1 Samuel 20-21; Psalm 34

"Oh, taste and see that Yahweh is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!
(Psalm 34:8)

In deciding this weekend's Resurrection Day menu, our family was messaging back and forth. Someone said, "Green beans?" I said, "Green bean casserole!"

(I know, I know... You love it or you hate it!)

Someone else said, "I don't think [my daughter] likes that!" To which my daughter replied, "I think I do; I eat a lot more things than I used to!"

Isn't that true with most of us as we grow up? There are many kids who could just live on french fries and ketchup! One of my granddaughters really loved "chicken and rice" - could've eaten it every meal (and wanted to!). But as we grow we are more willing to venture out beyond what we know we like, try new things, and find out what we've been missing all this time.

What's very sad is that many people never "try out" God!

Here in today's verse though, it is exactly what David is inviting us - imploring us - to do! "Just give God a chance! Taste and see! He is good!"

When people don't try God they miss out.

And that includes many Christians as well!

Oh, they love certain things about God... They love reading the Bible (at least their favorite passages). They love singing songs of praise (at least their certain genre of favorites). They love "going to Church" (as long as they can sit in "their" seat and talk to people they already know). They were baptized, but they still haven't really gotten beyond a toddler's menu and tastes! Those things are good... but there is so much more!

Paul put it this way in 1 Corinthians 3:2:

"I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready."

These were people who believed they were spiritual superstars - exhibiting and/or desiring flashy spiritual gifts... but they were among the most immature and "tasteless" of Churches.

What about you? Are you still at the same level of faith you were last year? Or have you "tasted" and seen the goodness of God in more areas of your life?

C'mon! Try it! You'll like it!

April 16

Reading: 1 Samuel 22:1-2; Psalm 57, 142; 1 Chronicles 12:8-18; Psalm 52; 1 Samuel 23:1-14

"Look to the right and see: there is none who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for my soul."

(Psalm 142:4)

[note: Even if you are not necessarily reading all the verses of the "reading", but only reading the chosen verse(s) - I encourage you to read the whole of Psalm 142 after reading 1 Samuel 22:1-2 and Psalm 57. The Psalms make so much more sense and inform us much more when they are read in their contextual history.]

Though good leaders lead for the right reasons (their love and care for others and the calling of God upon their lives), we still sometimes believe that after having cared for others, they will care for us.

Unfortunately, that is not necessarily the case.

In 1 Samuel 22, it says that everyone in distress or debt and everyone who was bitter came to follow David. Sounds like a joyful group! But needy people flock to the compassionate and just leader. At the same time, David laments privately to Yahweh that no one is there to care for him!

To add insult to injury, David and his rag-tag band go to rescue the city of Keilah from the Philistines. His reward? The city he'd just saved would attempt to give him up to his enemy, King Saul!

Remember, Church, when we serve God - while we may love those whom we serve - we serve because we love God most! It is His appreciation, reward, approval, and - even shelter! - that we must seek. Just serve Him, and let Him take care of the rest (that's the "rest of the details" and the "rest of your soul").

April 17

Reading: 1 Samuel 23:15-29; Psalm 54; 1 Samuel 24-25

"When David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, 'Blessed be Yahweh who has avenged the insult I received at the hand of Nabal, and has kept back his servant from wrongdoing. Yahweh has returned the evil of Nabal on his own head.' Then David sent and spoke to Abigail, to take her as his wife."

(1 Samuel 25:39)

Have you ever stopped to consider the things you almost did?

Usually, we think with regret about things we did, didn't do, or almost did... But perhaps if we thought long enough, we'd remember some times when God seemingly, somehow stopped us from doing something very foolish.

David, though he loved God, was - like us - pretty inconsistent. When he simply cut the corner of King Saul's robe, he was so racked with guilt that he had to tell Saul, with a repentant heart, what he had done. That shows forethought, restraint, and godliness; he could easily have stopped his enemy cold that day. But his heart went off the deep end in a hot rage over an insult! He spared the life of Saul who'd been trying to kill him; he went to murder a man and all the men in his house over an insult!

Thankfully, God was able to use a wise woman to head off a man's foolish pursuit.

Will you be open to letting God use others to keep you on the path? Keep your heart thirsting after God. Seek first His Kingdom - like David. Pay attention to wise counsel. And pray that God will keep your hands from foolish things.

April 18

Reading: 1 Samuel 26:1-27:7; 1 Chronicles 12:1-7; 1 Samuel 27:8-29:11; 1 Chronicles 12:19-20; Psalm 56

"Yahweh rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness, for Yahweh gave you into my hand today, and I would not put it out against Yahweh's anointed."

(1 Samuel 26:23)

Honestly, sometimes I get tired of doing "the right thing". (Other times I get tired of doing the wrong thing! But that's another devotion...) I'm not perfect - far from it. But somehow, by the grace of God, I do strive to do the right thing consistently - not perfectly. But, well... sometimes, I'd rather not.

Please tell me I'm not alone in that.

Sometimes it seems like "nice guys finish last", doesn't it? Wouldn't it be easier to just "tell someone off"? Wouldn't it be easier to cheat? Wouldn't it be easier to lie? Wouldn't it be more fun to sin? Wouldn't it be nice to "go along" and "get along" instead of being so counter-culture all the time?

Ever feel that way?

But I think David was inspired of God when he said, "Yahweh rewards every man for his righteousness and faithfulness." It may not seem so now, but sooner or later - maybe not even until eternity but surely - God will reward the faithful. I always say that God's judgment on those who choose not to follow Jesus is not so much vengeance as vindication! It's not only that God will punish wrong-doers, he will reward right-doers! Their faith and trust despite living in a world that tells them to do otherwise at every turn has not, and will not, go unnoticed or unrewarded!

David could have slept many more comfortable nights - years' worth - without Saul dogging him from town to town! It would have been much easier on David to just take one of the many chances he had to kill Saul! - in the cave "relieving himself" or in his sleep... or would it? How would he have slept after doing that? It may seem easier and more fun to sin, but we all know from experience that sin is not all it's cracked-up to be! As they say:

"Sin always takes you further than you want to go, keeps you longer than you want to stay, and costs more than you want to pay!"

So, don't give up doing right! We will reap the harvest of righteousness one day. We know in Whom we have believed. I am convinced that He is able to keep the life I've committed to Him until He returns to make redemption complete for eternity.

Keep serving, Church! God sees! God will do right!

April 19

Reading: 1 Samuel 30; 1 Chronicles 12:21-22; 1 Samuel 31; 1 Chronicles 10; 1 Chronicles 9:40-44;
2 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 1

"David said to him, 'How is it you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy Yahweh's anointed?' Then David called one of the young men and said, 'Go, execute him.' And he struck him down so that he died."
(2 Samuel 1:14-15)

We've all tried to impress people right? We made our own exploits out to be more than they were (or made the tales up from our imagination altogether). We've denied responsibility for some things and taken credit for others so that someone would think more of us. Seldom has that ever gone well for me - attempting to be or pretending to have done something I didn't do...

A guy in today's reading finds the same thing!

This Amalekite fella shows up a few days after the battle in which the Philistines have killed King Saul and his sons. David asks the man for a report. "Well, the Israelites were defeated and King Saul and all his sons are dead."

"How do you know?"

Now, I wonder... did this guy have this tale all thought-up? Is that why he goes to David's camp? (Probably.) Or - did he happen to think fast on his feet? ("Here's an opportunity to get in good with the guy everyone knows will be the next king!")

Regardless, let the lies begin!

"Well... 'cause I was there! Yeah, that's right..."

And thinking that the new King (who'd been hunted and almost murdered several times by the old King) will reward him, he tops off his lies with the granddaddy of them all...

"As a matter of fact, it was me who finished the King off [for you?!]"

"Who did you say you were? And where did you come from?"

The guy at this point must be giddy! "He wants my name to go down in history!..."

I wish I could have seen his face as the glint of the steely sword approached his neck.

As we've seen, it's no small thing to David to in any way even disrespect "Yahweh's anointed". God will decide when and how He's done with the King - no one else.

But where this guy wants to impress by claiming to have killed God's anointed, we want to impress by pretending we didn't kill God's Anointed! Again, as we have seen, sin is no small thing. We need to remember that when we sin, we are raising up our hand against God's Anointed - Jesus!

It will do us no good to try and impress others - or even God - by lying and saying we are not guilty. The best we can do is admit it... our sin killed Jesus. There is nothing really we can say that will cover that up and impress anyone.

Be who you are - or at least who God is calling you to be. That's not an "impressive" person of great magnitude; it is a humble, repentant person that's died to self. There are just not any of us who are all that impressive.

April 20

Reading: 2 Samuel 2:1-3:5; 1 Chronicles 3:1-4a; 2 Samuel 23:8-17; 1 Chronicles 11:10-19; 2 Samuel 23:18-39; 1 Chronicles 11:20-47

"And next to him was Shammah, the son of Agee the Hararite. The Philistines gathered together at Lehi, where there was a plot of ground full of lentils, and the men fled from the Philistines. But he took his stand in the midst of the plot and defended it and struck down the Philistines, and Yahweh worked a great victory."
(2 Samuel 23:11-12)

Thirty-seven men of great valor and renown - these were David's "mighty men". We don't know very much about any of them, yet we get a little snippet of just a few of them. My personal favorite is Shammah.

When everyone else ran, Shammah stood.

And where did he stand?...

...in a bean field.

Lentils were specifically used to feed horses. I don't know why the Philistines set out to capture the field - perhaps they needed more horse food themselves? But I do understand why everyone else ran! It's not worth losing your life over lentil beans.

We can grow beans elsewhere.

But it was God's bean field!

There are many things that belong to the Lord that people today deem unimportant and unworthy to "die" over.

Sexual purity? "What a bean field!" Alcohol? "Bean field!" Women in the pulpit? "Bean field!" Baptism of a repentant believer by immersion in order to forgive sins? "Bean field!" Making disciples? "Bean field!" New Testament qualifications for overseers? "Bean field!"

In fact, I can hardly think of one "Do!", "Don't", or example from the New Testament that people won't give up as a bean field today. God's people hardly think there is anything in the scripture worth "dying" over!

In fact, everything in the scripture is worth dying over.

Because we are commanded to die!

...every day!

When Jesus said that those who would come after Him must deny themselves and take up their cross daily... that's what He meant! That every day we must be willing to die! Not necessarily physically (though that may happen), but He meant that it doesn't matter whether or not we think something is important. If He commanded it - it's important.

There are bean fields... and then there are God's bean fields!

You don't have to understand why it's important; you just need to know to Whom that bean field belongs.

(Credit to Bro. Ken Idleman, former president of Ozark Christian College for some thoughts he gave at a dorm devotion a few decades ago. I've always remembered these thoughts.)

April 22

Reading: 2 Samuel 5:1-6:11; 1 Chronicles 11:1-9; 12:23-40; 13:1-14; 14:1-2, 8-17

"Of Issachar, men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do, 200 chiefs, and all their kinsmen under their command. Of Zebulun 50,000 seasoned troops, equipped for battle, with all the weapons of war, to help David with singleness of purpose."

(1 Chronicles 12:32-33, italics and underscoring mine)

Two tribes stand out to me, of the men who came to see David officially agreed upon as King (...as if God needed them to agree with the anointing that He'd already given David!). They are the kind of men we need so desperately today.

The men of Issachar, though seemingly a smaller group than many of the rest, are men "who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do". Don't we need men of understanding today?

We need men of understanding in God's Church!

We need men who understand that Jesus has called us to make disciples, not fill seats with entertainment seekers. We need men who understand that they are to be diligently consulting the Word of God, not "Church consultants". We need men who understand that sin is something to fight against and remove from God's Church at all costs, not wink at the corruption of financial givers or pander to "good workers" in the congregation.

We need men of understanding in our nation!

We need men who understand that if you have one set of genitalia you're a male, and if you have another you're a female! We need men who understand that if you tell children they are accidents and animals, they

will live like both! We need men who understand that if they don't value the lives of the pre-born, they won't be valued when they themselves are old! We need men who understand the need for men to work, love, and protect like men and for women to care, nurture, and support like women!

We need men who, like Zebulun are of single purpose - men who want to glorify God with their whole being! We need these men who will give their whole life to that purpose and that mission so that on that day when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, the number of the sheep who acknowledge that gladly is so much greater.

God, give us these men!

Let us be these men!

If you are a woman, raise and support these men!

What could be greater than a Church and a nation full of real understanding and purpose!?

April 23

Reading: 2 Samuel 6:12-23; 1 Chronicles 15-16

"And it was told King David, 'Yahweh has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God.' So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing."

(2 Samuel 6:12)

One wonders what Obed-edom thought the day the ark of the covenant came to his house!

Just earlier a fella named Uzzah got zapped by God for touching the ark! Having disrespected God and His instructions, the ark was being carried back from the possession of the Philistines on a new cart rather than being carried by Levites with the appropriate poles, etc. (Exodus 20:26; 25:12-15) (Hey! At least they put it on a new cart, right?) When the oxen stumbled and the ark began to slip off the cart, Uzzah was nice enough to reach out and save it from falling. For this act of disrespect, he lost his life.

David gets mad and has a pity party. "Fine!" And he leaves it with this poor fella Obed-edom. So, I say...

One wonders what Obed-edom thought the day the ark of the covenant came to his house!

But, as days wore on into weeks, and weeks to months, Yahweh blessed Obed-edom for his hospitality. God and Obed-edom must have gotten along alright! He isn't just blessed - he is notably blessed! People can see it; David decides to go get the ark.

Now while the ark definitely was the reason for the blessing, I don't think it was just because O-e took good care of a gold-covered box. I think it was because he loved God and welcomed God's presence in his life and home. He became very mindful of God and Who God was. I mean, can you imagine seeing the ark every day! We kind of take God's presence for granted, but for O-e, it was a very real thing! And - think about what he remembered every day - how the ark got to his house. I'm sure he really got into the habit of living a holy life.

I wonder what would happen if we took such notice of God's presence in our lives?

What if we didn't throw tantrums and welcomed God?

What if we didn't just think of Him and His power and grace on Sunday, but every day?

What if we really began to live differently because of that and not just play at religion?

What if...?

If we did that - I imagine we'd be blessed - "and all [our] household" too!

And... other people might just decide they want God's presence in their lives too!

What if...?

April 24

Reading: 2 Samuel 7-8; 1 Chronicles 17-18; Psalm 60

"When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men,"
(2 Samuel 7:12-14)

You know what one of the Church's main problems is? We want a shortcut. We want an easy way out.

Some of you may say, "Well, not me and not my congregation! We are busy for the Lord! We are doing a lot!"

But God didn't call for "a lot"... he called for everything.

David wanted - with an honest and loving heart, I think - to do "a lot" for Yahweh. He felt bad that he, the king, was living in a palace made with cedar beams, while God (or at least the symbol of His presence - the ark of the covenant) was kept out in a tent!

"Preacher (Nathan), let's build God a house!"

Nathan said, "I like it!"

But God put a big "WHOA!" on that. Why?

God said He hadn't ever wanted, needed, or asked for that. Since the ark was constructed - since they left Egypt - since even the time of Abraham - God never asked for that.

Why not?

Because God doesn't want "a lot" - He wants everything!

When you read these verses, we know that God is talking about a son of David's. (We will see later that it is Solomon.) But you know, does it not - in many ways - also sound like He is talking about Jesus?

The Offspring of David (the one Offspring of Abraham, Galatians 3:16) will have His Kingdom established; He will build a house for My name (The Church!); His throne will be forever!; He will be God's Son but disciplined with the rod and stripes of men.

That's Jesus!

David, bless him, wanted to do "a lot". But God wanted it all! God didn't want wood and bronze and gold, etc, etc - He wanted us as His house - a forever home through Jesus.

Sometimes, even unintentionally, we just take a short-cut. We will preach hard, teach deeply, sing loudly. We will mow the church house lawn, paint the walls, lay cement. We will vacuum carpets, cook meals, visit shut-ins.

And all that is wonderful. All that is needed and necessary. Thank you!

But while that's "a lot" - what God wants is everything.

What He wants is you!

April 25

Reading: 1 Chronicles 6:16-30, 50-53, 31-48; 2 Samuel 9-10; 1 Chronicles 19

"And David said, 'Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathon's sake?'"

(2 Samuel 9:1)

Have you ever been recognized?

In fifth grade, I won the Science Award at Northwood Elementary School. Evidently, the science teacher thought I was his best student that year. I can't really say that I've been all that "recognized" since then.

But it's nice when folks "see" you. Especially when they are a bit of a celebrity.

Here is the newly anointed and recognized King of Israel, David, and he takes time not only to recognize but also to forever welcome his former foe's grandson at his table. David was not perfect, but he is certainly the definition of magnanimous! Who knew the promise he'd made to Jonathon anyhow? (1 Samuel 20) Who would have thought it anything but "normal" for him to kill Mephibosheth to make sure none of Saul's descendants would try and lay claim to the throne? Besides all that, who would bother with someone at all who was as lame and poverty stricken as Mephibosheth?

But David didn't "get above his raisin". Just because he was now king didn't mean he forgot his promises or the people who helped him on his way. So, David does two things that we ought strive to do in our lives:

One, he looks for someone to bless.

David didn't wait for a relative of Saul to come looking for a hand-out, hand-up, or the fulfillment of a promise that maybe his daddy, Jonathon, had mentioned. He asks around. I don't think it's enough that we "stand ready" to help people; we need to be looking for people to help! Remember the parable of the good Samaritan? The lawyer wanted to know, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus taught him the question was wrong; he had better ask, "To whom can I be a neighbor?"!

Two, he keeps his promises. Even when no one else knew what he'd promised Jonathon - even when no one would blame him for breaking that promise if they did know - David had integrity. With great generosity he did all he could to honor his word.

Let us also strive to be such fine people.

April 26

Reading: 1 Chronicles 20:1; 2 Samuel 11:1-12:14; Psalm 51; 2 Samuel 12:15-25; 2 Samuel 5:14-16; 1 Chronicles 14:3-7; 1 Chronicles 3:5-9

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a [steadfast] spirit within me. Cast me not away from Your presence, and take not Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit."
(Psalm 51:10-12)

I had to write from Psalm 51 today because I can hardly bear to read 2 Samuel 11-12 once, let alone ponder it long enough to write about it. This story hurts my heart.

Up to now, save a couple of kinda cocky moments and a little immature pouting, David has been a hero. Yes, he struts a bit; he whines a little, but he is like the driven competitor on the field of competition. His faults come from his deep and passionate feelings that God is important. He believes everything about God is important - His people, His name, His calling... everything. Being God's King is serious business, and so is worship. David does everything with his whole heart with lots of feeling... to a fault.

But this...

Oh, it's hard to watch. The second glance at a woman other than his wife... The thoughts... The idea hatches... How did the whole scene play out?... How did his integrity unravel to adultery?

Then the news: she's pregnant.

His mind begins to race. What will people say? The wife of one of his very own "Mighty Men"... And all he can think to do is somehow cover up his sin. The plot to make it look like Uriah's child... A second attempt... And finally, he has to conceive the death plot. If it's not just outright first degree murder, it's the closest thing to it.

It's hard to see men of such renown fall this way... the way I do... the way I have.

Oh, I'm not guilty of those particular sins, but that doesn't mean I'm any better.

I too am a person who lives and strives to serve God with my whole self. Like Peter, James, John... I can let my zeal and my passion lead me into saying and doing dumb things. And then, like David, let my whole life seemingly fall apart in a big, stupid way.

What in the world happened!?

I think David's Psalm of confession and repentance (Psalm 51) tells all. I don't think today's verses were written because of his sin with Bathsheba, I think maybe his sin with Bathsheba happened because he hadn't come to terms with his soul in this way beforehand!

Somewhere between that incredibly magnanimous guy who sought out Mephibosheth and the ugly scene of adultery and murder, David goes awry. This whole terrible chapter (or two) happens because he hasn't had a clean heart! He hasn't had a steadfast spirit! He has not been in God's presence, and he was looking for joy... somewhere... elsewhere from God's hand and salvation. When those conditions permeate our lives, we are bound for a big, big fall.

What about us, friend? Is your spirit steadfast? Is your joy in the Lord?

Or are you tossed about like a ship on the waves? Are you chasing after the joy you will have when you: get that new house... pay off that truck... find the right person... get your degree... achieve a promotion... retire...

Ask God today to give you a steadfast heart and the joy of His salvation. Ask Him to let that be enough. For truly, nothing else will ever be - enough. And when we do that, perhaps we can avoid some of the really big, messy, sin-disasters that are so hard to even read.

April 27

Reading: 2 Samuel 12:26-31; 1 Chronicles 20:2-3; 2 Samuel 13-14

"We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. But God will not take away life, and He devises means so that the banished one will not remain an outcast."
(2 Samuel 14:14)

Poor David! It seems he never "gets" that all these parables that get told to him are about him! And yet, he always recognizes the sin of "the other guy" in the parable and knows exactly what should happen to set things right.

Does that sound like anyone else?

It sounds like two people I know!

The former sounds like me. (And you?) I (we?) can see the sin and trouble in someone else's life quickly. It is easily diagnosed and treated when I (we?) see it in others. Yet, I'm (you're?) pretty blind many times to my (your) own sin. It has always been such a common problem that Jesus warned against it. (Matthew 7:3-5)

Yet the latter part of that sounds a lot like Jesus. While Jesus doesn't have any sin of His own He is overlooking, He does always see our problems accurately, and He is able to quickly give the cure - even though

sin leads to the seemingly irreversible spiritual death of our souls. We are definitely like water spilled on the ground; you can't gather it back up!

But Jesus can.

He devises the means so that the banished one will not remain an outcast - even if it costs Him His very life on the cross. Praise God for a redeemer! We, like David, must work to emulate Jesus and work at the business of redemption. Sometimes, like David, it's righting our own wrongs or giving grace to those who have harmed us - making things right ourselves. Other times, it just has to be us pointing to the One who can gather up what is spilt.

April 28

Reading: 2 Samuel 15:1-17:14

"So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof. And Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel. Now in those days the counsel that Ahithophel gave was as if one consulted the word of God; so was all the counsel of Ahithophel esteemed, both by David and by Absalom."

(2 Samuel 16:22-23)

Oh my! The family intrigue gets worse. But this guy Ahithophel takes the cake! What an evil man he is. David's counselor turned on him to encourage Absalom in even more evil. It is not enough that Absalom has sex with his father's concubines to disgrace him and widen the wedge between them - but he violates them all atop the palace in public.

Unbelievable! Why!? How!? Because they (both Absalom and David) listened to this fella Ahithophel like he was God!

And it happens today!

"I don't care what the Bible says, ' _____ ' (name of a televangelist, my preacher, my grandma, etc) said..."

When we believe what any man says like he or she is God, it is over, friend! The devil will use that to destroy you! Even the best of men, the most righteous of men - if left unchecked and listened to like God, will begin to believe they are God. Their power and influence will cause them to run amuck.

You want to know what to do? Ask a godly person, fine. But you better make sure what they say squares with what God says!

Maybe we'd ought ask Him in the first place!

April 29

Reading: 2 Samuel 17:15-29; Psalm 3; Psalm 63; 2 Samuel 18:1-19:30

"But David said, 'What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah, that you should this day be as an adversary to me? Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day? For do I not know that I am this day king over Israel?' And the king said to Shimei, 'You shall not die.' And the king gave him his oath."
(2 Samuel 19:22-23)

You know, there are some events in life that just give you a different perspective.

I think David had a lot of those.

People all around him - even his most trusted comrades - don't understand him and can't see his perspective. That shows you that just because you "know" what someone is going through/has gone through - you don't "know" what someone is going through/has gone through! They know the facts, but they can't imagine the pain. Neither can they see the lesson and experience the growth.

David just lost his son. Yes, his son was out to kill him. Yes, his son had done evil things. But David also knows that he wasn't the best father to Absalom. David knows that he too has done evil things. And here in the wash of the week's events, as part of the most un-jubilant victory parade ever - David looks at his enemies with a different perspective. "Civil" war has cost him dearly, and he will let someone's life be taken on this day - especially one who has only thrown words at him. Whether Shimei is real in his repentance or not, David doesn't have the stomach for anymore loss.

"Can't we be done with this for a day!?"

It seems that David even lacks the will to decide between Ziba and Mephibosheth. Did Mephibosheth really side with Absalom? Was he right to have given Ziba all Mephibosheth had because that's what Ziba said? Or had Ziba lied? David will have none of the argument. "Just split it" (vv.25-30)

"Can't we be done with this for a day!?"

I gather from years of ministry that all of us could say that. I believe we've all been through things that few others could ever understand from the simple facts they may know - as close to us as they may be. We come through things with a different perspective, a different set of priorities. Sometimes that's a good change - sometimes not. Sometimes it's a lasting change - sometimes not. But we all say...

"Can't we be done with this for a day!?"

Yes.

And no.

Yes, we can lay aside pain, regret, fear, frustration... for a while... today... and at least attempt to pursue other things or to seek God or to ponder a different path. But ultimately, no. In this life, we will "deal with" our storied struggles until the end - of our life or the world.

But, as David's son Solomon will someday write: "For everything there is a season..." (Ecclesiastes 3:1a) And just as there was a season to move beyond the civil war, there would also be a day of reckoning for it. (Patience... we will read about it later.)

And, one day, there will be a day, a time, a place - in eternity - when we will have a reckoning for all that we have done and experienced. Let us be sure that we are prepared for that day. Not only awaiting for Jesus to free us of our pains and disappointments, but to also be our Advocate for the times we fought against the King.

April 30

Reading: 2 Samuel 19:31-20:26; Psalm 7; 2 Samuel 21; 1 Chronicles 20:4-8

"And the king said to Barzillai, 'Come over with me, and I will provide for you with me in Jerusalem.' But Barzillai said to the king, 'How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? Please let your servant return, that I may die in my own city near the grave of my father and my mother. But here is your servant Chimham. Let him go over with my lord the king, and do for him whatever seems good to you.'"

(2 Samuel 19:33-34, 37)

I remember when I was about thirteen. At our church, new elders had just been selected, and the ordination service had taken place that morning. I took my place in line to go, speak to, and congratulate the men on their ordination. Jokingly, I said to one of the men who'd been made an elder, "Well, now you're an elder! Does that mean you're going to become old and crochety now?" He laughed and said, "Well, if I do, you just tell me, and I'll change!"

As I grew up, I wasn't a part of that congregation anymore, but from what I hear... He did. Other people told him. But he didn't change.

As I look back now, that man was, at that time, probably younger than I am now! Yet, somehow, he seemed so old. ('Cause when you're thirteen, everyone over thirty is old!) And, honestly, it sounded like I already had the opinion that a lot of young people have about "old" people (people my age to today's thirteen year olds!). I thought most old people were grouchy and hard to get along with.

Well, I don't know if most is a good word... and please remember, I am now classifying myself in this age group!... but I'd have to say that for many of the "old" folks I've ministered to and with in the Church, that's been true. Many... probably not most. While there have been many, many "old" people who have been wonderful, gracious, encouraging, helpful, faithful, and wise - there have also been many of those crochety, grouchy, hard-to-get-along-with people (some "old" preachers included!).

But in today's reading is the "old" man I want to be. Barzillai was eighty years old. Yet, he was unafraid to stick his neck out for the king in David's most desperate hours. (2 Samuel 17:27-29) And now, when the king is back in a position of power and looks to reward him, Barzillai looks at the whole situation with a great wisdom of years. He has a "what-else-would-I-do" attitude. He just wants to be the best citizen of the kingdom he can. He just wants to lift up the king. And - he desires to make sure someone else who is able to enjoy it received the reward he had earned.

Perfect "old" guy attitude for me to emulate!

Serve the KING!... wherever you find yourself. Serve the King!... not just for your own blessing, but so others can be blessed.

I want to be - I hope I am - that kind of "old" guy!

What about you?

May 1

Reading: 2 Samuel 22; Psalm 18

"Yahweh dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands He rewarded me. For I have kept the ways of Yahweh and have not wickedly departed from my God."
(2 Samuel 22:21-22)

In a favorite western movie, Doc Holliday - speaking of Wyatt Earp's chasing down of "The Cowboys" responsible for his brother's death - drawls out in his Georgia accent:

"...make no mistake - it's not revenge he's after; it's a reckoning."

Revenge, while it may be deserved, is often misused. It can be overdone. It sometimes implies not only anger, but also bitterness and a desire to hurt someone. But a reckoning is a justification. It is reconciliation. Not in the sense of the healing of a relationship, but in mathematical accounting terms. It's "balancing the checkbook" of life. It's an "even-ing". It sets things right.

So it is here with David and will be for all those who are faithful followers of Yahweh. When you stick with God, He will stick with you.

"Now, wait, Preacher! David talks about his righteousness and cleanness of hands... that's not me. I've made many mistakes. I'm far from having always been faithful."

Well, technically - that's David too! We've seen many deep flaws in both his character and his actions. But guess what? In Jesus, we are clean! The question is only: Will we remain faithful!?

Again, if you'll stick with God, He will stick with you. And, one day, there will be a reckoning. Things will be set right. The books will be balanced. Don't give up, Church!

May 2

2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21-22

"So the king said to Joab, the commander of the army, who was with him, 'Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people.' But Joab said to the king, 'May Yahweh your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are, while the eyes of my lord the king still see it, but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?'"
(2 Samuel 24:2-3)

If you are at least my age, you know this line sang by Kenny Rogers:

"You never count your money when you're sittin' at the table; there'll be time enough for countin' when the dealin's done."

It's the same as the old English proverb:

"There's many a slip twixt the cup and the lip."

Or, perhaps my chicken-raising granddaughter would prefer:

"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched."

How ever you say it, that's what David was doing. There's more to the "Why" this idea was brought to his mind and how God used Satan to do it (2 Samuel 24:1; 1 Chronicles 21:1), but David was sure one to take the bait. Was it a moment of pride? Was a moment of insecurity? Regardless, David wanted to glory in and/or trust in who he was and what he had rather than Who God was and what God could provide.

His trusted general Joab, tasked with the job of taking the census of all the fighting men of Israel and Judah, even tells him it's a bad idea. "I love the idea of a growing country, Chief! But don't do this! God won't like it! Why do you want to do this?"

Why did he indeed?

Why do we!?

It's not a bad thing to have money; it is a bad thing to trust in it. It's not a bad thing to have insurance; it is a bad thing to trust in it. It's not a bad thing to pursue education; it is a bad thing to trust in it. It's not a bad thing to have family and/or friends; it is a bad thing to trust in them.

Jesus said you cannot serve God and money! (Matthew 6:24) He didn't say it was difficult to... He said you can't! You will love one, and hate the other.

So, that being said, in the words of Bo Diddley...

"Who do you love?"

May 3

Reading: 1 Chronicles 23-25

"The sons of Amram: Aaron and Moses. Aaron was set apart to dedicate the most holy things, that he and his sons forever should make offerings before Yahweh and minister to Him and pronounce blessings in His name forever. But the sons of Moses the man of God were named among the tribe of Levi."

Now stick with me here... Father to son...

Abraham... Isaac... Jacob... Levi... Kohath... Amram... Aaron & Moses. Got it?

When King David hands the keys to the kingdom over to his son Solomon, he bequeathes to him: plans for the temple, workers, materials, and a complete counting of the Levites. (Joab, in David's pride? had not counted Levites as they were not fighting men. David counts them here, not in pride or insecurity, but to organize for temple service. That's an "OK" thing.) Besides that, the different families of Levites are counted and given general assignments as priests.

But note something interesting here among the two most famous Levites of all!

The descendants of perhaps the most famous Levite, Moses, are named and assigned not as "sons of Moses" but simply "named among the tribe of Levites. They are not listed and assigned as sons of Kohath (which they are) - as opposed to sons of Gershon or Merari. They are numbered just among great-grandad's children. They are... just Levites.

Moses! The guy who was "like God to Pharaoh"... Who talked to God at the burning bush... Who met with God in the tabernacle and came out glowing... Who by raising a staff, parted the Red Sea... Who received the Ten Commandments... Who received from God and penned the Torah - the first five books of the Bible - gave us the creation account, how sin entered the world - things never explained to anyone else... Just to mention a few of the things on his resume...

Just a Levite.

No particular standing... No fantastical duties... No forever office...

Aaron, simply the "prophet" to Pharaoh's "god" Moses - his descendants are "forever" the high priests. To them belong the most glorious work in the temple until the time of Jesus.

Just kinda makes you go... "Huh!"

But I think there are a few important things illustrated for us here:

1) There is the self-denying attitude and lifestyle of Moses. Moses didn't seek a position as the emancipator of God's people. In fact, many was the time he tried to wrangle out of it. Yet, in the end, he always humbly walks before God (except for that one time...). He doesn't try to lay claim to the fame, fortune, and a name he could surely have clung to for his family. He just does what God asks him to do.

2) Aaron does the same - but in a different way. He, even though the older brother, doesn't lay claim "back in the day" to ruling over his baby brother Moses. He humbly accepts his job as the subordinate. Eventually, God lifts him up to greatness with his name forever associated with the high priesthood.

3) David illustrates the same. He sees the work to be done, divides it proportionally, and instructs people to responsibly do what they are called to do.

All of it illustrates how the Church of today is to function. As Spirit-filled disciples of Jesus, we are all gifted to serve God in a way the Body of Christ needs - both for its edification and the evangelizing of the lost. Can we all just humbly submit ourselves to whatever it is that God has called us to do and to be?

To sum up the attitudes of Aaron and Moses, James will put it this way:

"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you." (James 4:10)

May 4

Reading: 1 Chronicles 26-28

"Be strong and courageous and do it. Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed for Yahweh God, even my God, is with you. He will not leave you or forsake you, until all the work for the service of the house of Yahweh is finished."

(1 Chronicles 28:20)

Have you ever been to a home site - a place where a new home was being built? When you look at just the concrete slab or the foundation, laying there flat on the ground, the house looks very small. It looks like it is not nearly big enough. Even as studs are raised for walls and rafters go on top, it's hard to imagine what it will be. You're looking at the unfinished product.

Do you ever feel alone? Have you ever felt like giving up? Does life ever seem really small? Is it hard to imagine that things could ever "get better"? Have you ever felt that no matter how hard you tried to do the right thing... the godly thing even... that things just didn't go right? Always remember this: you're looking at the unfinished product.

It's hard to imagine the project that was before Solomon - the intricate details of the furnishings that God demanded and all the materials and craftsmanship it would involve. Tasked with building the temple, it had to be - at times - very overwhelming. But David reminds the young king what Joshua told the people long ago: "Be strong and courageous". He told him God would be with him until the end - until the "house" was finished.

Again, as we've seen throughout our journey in scripture, it's hard not to see Jesus here! He said much the same. When He told His disciples to get to building His real house (making disciples!), He told them, "And behold, I AM with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20b)

Don't be discouraged as you look around at life. You don't have to wonder, "What's going on!?" God's Temple, YOU, are just "under construction". It's a work in progress. You're looking at the unfinished product. Set-backs are inevitable. But God will be faithful to finish what He started (Philippians 1:6) and will be with you to the end!

May 5

Reading: 1 Chronicles 29:1-22; 1 Kings 1

"Then the people rejoiced because they had given willingly, for with a whole heart they had offered freely to Yahweh. David the king also rejoiced greatly."

(1 Chronicles 29:9, italics mine)

Have you ever noticed that generous people are happy people?

Have you ever noticed that stingy people are not happy people?

One would think that if money is what makes the stingy person happy, that in being stingy, they would be hilariously happy. But the proof is in their countenance. Money doesn't make you happy - so the more stingy you are (relying on money) the less happy you are.

Conversely, generous givers are so generous because they don't trust in money. They are trusting in God. Their faith both allows them to be generous and be happy. They are happy before they give and even happier after they give! They believe they can trust God, and then they put themselves in a position to have it proven to them another time!

What about you, friend? Are you happy? Do you want to be happy?

Trust in God and prove it by being generous. The next time your down in the dumps, try it! See if you are not happier after give generously! Be like David. Find a need you can fill and do all you possibly can to help.

It's no wonder that God loves a cheerful giver, (2 Corinthians 9:7) so does everyone else, right?

May 6

Reading: 1 Kings 2:1-9; 2 Samuel 23:1-7; 1 Kings 2:10-12; 1 Chronicles 29:26-30; Psalms 4-6, 8-9, 11

"I will give thanks to Yahweh with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High."

(Psalm 9:1)

Would you say that today you are in a state of supreme well-being and good spirits?

Would you like to be?

That is the definition of the word "gladness". And elusive as gladness may be sometimes, David gives the path to gladness - all summed up - right here in one verse.

The first step toward being glad is to give thanks. Now, as they say, many times, the first step is the hardest. This may surely be true if you are starting from a place of "un"-gladness! When we are not in good spirits, it is hard to be thankful. In fact, we may not even want to be thankful. But if we will but let our will override our feelings, we can do it.

For David says to give thanks to Yahweh! If I'm expected to look around and be thankful for all my circumstances, well... sometimes... you just cannot! That's why Paul told the Thessalonians to be thankful in all circumstances! (1 Thessalonians 5:18a) Wherever we find ourselves today, we can be thankful to Yahweh for His love, compassion, mercy, grace... always! If you will just think - you will be able to thank!

Once we get thankful, David says he will "recount" all Yahweh's wonderful deeds. That goes beyond just "counting your blessings"; it goes beyond pondering God's deeds. We've already done that; thinking how we got thankful! But this speaks to testimony! I've inwardly considered God and become thankful - the next step toward being glad is to tell someone! Our mouths - as consecrated tools of the Royal Priesthood - are to tell of our Lord.

At this point is the only place we will find true gladness. Thinking, thanking, and testifying will make you glad! Don't believe me? Give it a try!

May 7

Reading: Psalms 12-17, 19-21

"O Yahweh, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? ...He who does these things shall never be moved."

(Psalm 15:1, 5b)

Ever been part of a "Q&A Session"? Well, here we are. Question: Who gets to dwell with God? Note the quick answer in vv.2-5a.

"He who walks blamelessly..." Keep an eye on your ACTIONS.

"...and speaks truth..." Keep an eye on your WORDS.

"...does no evil to his neighbor," Act KINDLY.

"in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear Yahweh" They keep the right PERSPECTIVE on the world. They walk circumspectly and realize that God is not weak, He is just waiting for people to repent. One day, He will dispense justice rightly and bring a reckoning to the world.

"who does not put out his money at interest and does not take a bribe..." GENEROSITY is all hallmark of the person who dwells with God. He is not greedy, does not trust in - nor is he controlled by - money.

We are not saved by our works, this is true. None of us fit this bill perfectly. But look it over. It's a diagnostic. How you doin'? That's my question! What's your answer?

May 8

Reading: Psalms 22-26

A few years ago I was reading Ken Davis' book "Fully Alive". He made the suggestion that I read the 23rd Psalm daily. I took up the challenge. I wrote it out in my journal and followed some other suggestions concerning it. The gist of what Davis wanted me to see was that Psalm 23 gives me the CONFIDENCE to live "Fully Alive". After a few weeks of reading it daily, I was meditating on it while brushing my teeth and knew I needed to gather my thoughts on the song. Interestingly enough, I had been reading and meditating on this psalm for 23 days. I CHALLENGE YOU to read the 23rd Psalm for 23 days and then share YOUR thoughts. See if it does not give you the CONFIDENCE to live "FULLY Alive". Below are my thoughts:

The LORD -

Yahweh

Jehovah

the I Am

the Alpha, the Omega - the Beginning and the End

the First and the Last

the Living One

He Who Was, Is, and Is to Come

the Prime Mover

the Uncaused Cause

the One Who's Effect is Himself
the Omnipotent, Omnipresent, and Omniscient
it is HE who

is my shepherd

MY shepherd

He KNOWS ME

He knows my name

He knows the numbers of the hairs of my head

If for no one else, He'd have sent the Redeemer

Oh, I'm no more important than anyone else in all history

- before, contemporary, or after me

- but no less either

I am His and He is mine

He hears my call as loudly as any other of His sheep for

He is MY shepherd

MY shepherd

His chief concern is HIS glory

- but His chief opportunity for it is ME

- FULLY Alive

He desires to see me reach my full potential for HIS glory's sake

This shepherd works ALL things together for my good.

I shall not want

Oh, I may DESIRE.

- I may foolishly pine after the cheap and easy and momentary -

- I may have difficulty abandoning self

But I will NEVER want for my NEEDS

Even if I want for the very basics of life

- for food, for air, or for my life's blood

- my most basic need will then become the peace and courage to die...

- And He will give it when I seek first the Shepherd's Kingdom.

He makes me lie down in green pastures

Oh, how I love the green pastures

Oh, how I love lying down

He always gets me there

Many times through LONG stretches of rocky dirt or sand

- sometimes made longer by my own wandering or stubbornness

- sometimes made longer by the preciousness of the pasture to which He is leading

- sometimes made longer by the need to strengthen me for the longer droughts to

- even more glorious pastures -

But He is leading me there

He is leading

He leads me beside still waters

Large POOLS of water

There in the quiet

- away from

- the babbling of brooks
- the roars of rapids
- or the deafening foaming of falls
 - He speaks to me
 - He calms me

He lets me drink deeply

No fear here

No possibility of being swept away

No distractions

Just He and I

He restores

He

He restores

Nothing else will do

Nothing I seek can restore, replace, refit, realign, remove -

Just HE

my soul

He may not restore my health, my wealth, or my friends

He may not restore my reputation, my strength, or my fire

He may not restore my desire, my heart, or my mind

But

He will restore my one, only lasting, eternal possession

- if I will but allow Him to hold it

- my SOUL

He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake

What a blessing to do good!

What joy to make a difference

- a lasting eternal difference

- or to just brighten someone's day

To not just be "not bad"

- to not just be "good"

- but to do RIGHTEOUS things

But never

- for the accolades

- for the joy

- for the fulfillment

But only for the sake of HIS name.

To bring glory to the One who provided

- the talents, the time, and the treasure

- that it might be a TESTIMONY

- to HIS glory

When they are put to God's good use

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil

Even when death seems near I don't fear evil

Because fear is only a tactic and not a weapon

Fear can only distract me from the Shepherd's voice
Shadowy, threatening evil cannot touch me
At the moment I may be most overcome by it
I will be translated from the confines of my earthly tent and moved
- to the unfettered realm of the heavenly
The shadow of death only proves the light of the One who is the LIFE!

Your rod and Your staff - they comfort me
Oh, they are not always comfortable
The rod pushes me in directions I do not want to go
The staff pulls me back from the desires of my flesh
Yet, it also protects me from the wolves
I know that while my Shepherd holds His staff, nothing can devour me
- not even myself

You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies
Right in the midst of attack and trouble
You keep blessing me
You keep providing
- and my enemies can see it
They are allowed to marvel
- and gnash their teeth
At the goodness of the God they have rejected
And Who overrides all the harm they attempt to inflict upon me
They stand bitterly on the OUTSIDE of the restaurant as

You anoint my head with oil
You treat me like an honored guest
You lavish upon me the grace, love, and respect that I have so often failed to show You
- my Shepherd

My cup overflows

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me ALL the days of my life
Why, after bringing me through all You have so far
Could I ever expect that You would allow my foot to fall?
Surely I hope in
- I eagerly expect
That same faithfulness each and every day of my life

And I will dwell in the House of the Lord
Not JUST these days of my life
But

FOREVER.

May 9

Reading: Psalms 27-32

"Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to You at a time when You may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him."

(Psalm 32:6)

"Hurry! Don't delay! This is a limited time offer!"

We are used to hearing these kinds of things on commercials. When we hunt through "that drawer" for the coupon we clipped a few days ago (or has it been a few months ago?), we need to look for that expiration date.

"Is this still good?"

Well, friends, the offer of God's forgiveness and protection is still good! But I must warn you - time is running out! The Bible declares that God is not slow in keeping His promise to:

- 1) Bring a reckoning that will set right all the wrongs in the world;
- 2) Redeem His creation;
- 3) See the return of His Son, the end of history, and the destruction of the world and everything in it -

but He is patient toward us! Not wishing that any would perish, but that everyone - every last person - would turn around from their sinful choices and seek Him, follow Him, and serve Him. (2 Peter 3:9)

But there will be a Day when God's patience runs out! There will be a day when those who have waited too long will receive the wages of their sin. (Romans 6:23) And you don't - and you won't - know when that is (regardless of what the televangelists say). (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3)

David urges us to seek God while He may be found. Paul echoes that when he says:

"Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Corinthians 6:2b, italics mine)

Please, friend - don't delay to come before the Lord today in confession and repentance! If you've not yet received Jesus as your Lord and Savior in water immersion so that your sins are forgiven and the Holy Spirit comes into your life - don't wait! If you have, remember Jesus' words that we need die to ourselves every day!

Today is the day! Get things right with God right now!

May 10

Reading: Psalms 35-38

"Roll on Jehovah thy way, And trust upon Him, and He worketh, and hath brought out as light thy righteousness, And thy judgment as noon-day. Be silent for Jehovah, and stay thyself for Him, Do not fret because of him Who is making prosperous his way, Because of a man doing wicked devices."

(Psalm 37:5-7, Young's Literal Translation)

When your way seems dark,
When you've lost all heart,
Roll on Jehovah, roll on Jehovah thy way.
When no one sees,
Your pain or victories,
Roll on Jehovah, roll on Jehovah thy way.

Give Him all your cares
Give Him all your fears
Trust in Him, and He will hear
When you need a friend, He is there.
If you will just be still...

When you've done what's right,
He'll bring it all to light,
If you roll on Jehovah, roll on Jehovah thy way.
He's the One Who Knows,
Surpassing peace will grow,
If you roll on Jehovah, roll on Jehovah thy way.

Give Him all your cares
Give Him all your fears
Just trust in Him, and He will hear
When you need a friend, He is there.
If you will just be still...

If you will just be still...

If you will...

Just.

Be.

Still.

May 11

Reading: Psalms 39-41, 53, 55, 58

"O Yahweh, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days, let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before You. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Selah Surely a man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!
(Psalm 39:4-6)

When you encounter tragic, unexpected, and/or traumatic grief, one of the consequences is the "desired" outcome of these verses. For better or worse, one recognizes that life is quite frighteningly short and fragile.

There is an increased understanding that virtually anything may happen at any moment. At any time, any life may come to an end - yours or anyone else's... friend, foe, or unknown.

Anyone and everyone.

What do you do with that?

Verse 7: "And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in You."

It is time to adjust priorities. It is time to invest in the eternal. It is not time to panic, but to pause.

All the things of this world? They will not go with you, and - regardless of your "last will and testament" - neither can you insure it to your willed heirs. We truly do "not know who will gather"!

So put your hope - your expectations - in the Lord only! Don't worry about tomorrow, for each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:24) Live in the moment. Enjoy the now. Feel the pain; it's proof you're alive; it's proof you're growing; it's proof you are being fitted for heaven.

...or not.

The choice is ours when it comes to how we handle our humanity. Where is your hope?

May 12

Reading: Psalms 61-62, 64-67

"Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer; from the end of the earth I call to You when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I,... Let me dwell in your tent forever! Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings! Selah ...appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him!"

(Psalm 61:1-2, 4, 7b)

When you come to the real heart of life... when you get down to the nitty gritty... when everything is washed away, and you at least begin to understand the transitory nature of the things and people around you... You quit looking for the things that we usually search for. The power, the money, the prestige, the flattering relationships - those all take a backseat (if there is any seat for them left at all!). You begin looking for the things only God can provide. David seeks three attributes of God in Psalm 61 that really "fill the bill"!

David looks for something HIGHER! (v.2)

There must be something (someONE) beyond - better than - higher than this temporal plane. There must be another dimension of life that is greater. There has to be "more than" this. Everything in the world is a cardboard cut-out compared to God. He stands tall and high in realism and power. There is nothing like Him! Thank God for something - someONE (Himself) HIGHER.

Along with higher is that temporal issue again. Is what we will find in God something that will last? David looks for something ETERNAL! (v.4a) As David asks God for a forever dwelling place in Him, he points out that he seeks it because of his past experience with God. "You...have heard my vows" and "given me the heritage" of

God-fearing people. God blesses us with His eternality. Once we find Him, we need never seek again!
Because...

David finds the third attribute he's looking for in God as well. God is FAITHFUL! Not only IS He higher... not only IS He eternal... but God is FAITHFUL. He will always be what He has always been. Read that again, please.

God will always be what He has always been.

Higher. Eternal. Faithful.

Praise God!

May 13

Reading: Psalms 68-70, 86, 101

"When the humble see it they will be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive."
(Psalm 69:32)

Psalm 69 Quick Notes!

Want revival ...in your life? ...in your congregation? ...in your marriage? ...in your family? ...at your work?

It comes (v.32) with:

Recognition & Repentance (vv.1-9)

David characterizes his life with at least seven words here: drowning (v.1), sinking (v.2), thirsting (v.3), waiting (v.3), hated (v.4), attacked (v.4)... (Any of those sound familiar in your life? Are you experiencing - or have you ever felt that/those?)

POOR DAVID!

Oops! Seventh word that he would say characterizes him: sinful (v.5).

Yes, David is in a fix, but he is not innocent. Recognition! Both of circumstances and sin.

Yet his life is also characterized by faithfulness amidst his failings and continues to be repentant. In fact, his faithfulness inspires words used to speak of Jesus in the gospel of John. (2:17) The Psalm becomes a Messianic prophecy. Though Jesus was never in need of repentance, He identified with sinful man in his baptism, and here David shows that faithfulness is always enveloped in recognizing our part in our problems and staying repentant (continuing to turn back to God).

Furthermore, revival comes when, after a recognition of our situation and repentance of our sins, we:

Petition and Praise (vv.13-18, 30-33)

David has at least six things that he petitions God for here. (We will leave a discussion on imprecatory Psalms [prayers for the general judgment and destruction of the wicked - vv.22-28] for another day!) He asks God to: Deliver (v.14), Answer (v.16), Hide not [His] face (v.17), Draw near, Redeem, Ransom (v.18).

David asks specifically for what he needs and doesn't hold back! But regardless of how or when God answers any of his prayers, he commits to praise.

"I will praise the name of God... I will magnify Him..." (v.30)

And this is what God desires - not a rote, "have-to", "heart-not-in-it" "worship" - but praise that is: willed from our hearts, regardless of our circumstances, because we know God deserves it!

This seeking of God will let our hearts be revived! (v.32)

May 14

Reading: Psalms 103, 108-110, 122, 124

"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of Yahweh!' Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!"

(Psalm 122:1-2)

Psalm 122 lands us in the midst of the Psalms of Ascent. The Psalms of Ascent were songs that were sung on the way "up" (ascending) to the temple in Jerusalem. They may have been sung "on the way" as in on the way "up" to the city of Jerusalem (as it is always mentioned in scripture, being a higher elevation, than say Galilee...) - or they may have been songs that were sung on the way "up" the steps into the temple itself - or... both!? Regardless the point of the songs is to prepare people on the way to the temple for worship! I've heard Psalm 122:1 used for a "call to worship" many times at the beginning of a church service - or even at its close. Well and good! Yet, if we are talking about temple worship, as Christians, this psalm says so much more!

Today, God's temple is not a building in Jerusalem. It's not even a building in your town where you attend the gathering of Christians to which you belong on the Lord's Day (You are doing that, right?...); those who have been immersed into the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection - they themselves are the temple of God's Holy Spirit!

Yet, we like David, can be so close - yet so far away!

He says, "Here we are! We've been standing inside the very gates of God's city," (that's close!) "but I was glad when they said let's go in to the temple!"

Brothers and sisters, it's not enough to get close. And when we "go to church" - when we enter into a building - we are close... but just close. We only have the opportunity to be in God's presence, not the assurance of it.

Let me say something that may surprise most of you...

You are no closer to God "at Church" than you are anywhere else!

Because that's not the purpose of the gathering!

The purpose of the gathering is... to be together in worship (Hebrews 10:25) - to be together and receive encouragement. And that is reason enough to obey God's command to be there!

But we have the very same amount of opportunity to worship God "in Spirit and in Truth" (John 4) each and every day, each and every moment, at each and every place we find ourselves! Praise God! Let's do that!

"Let us go to the house of Yahweh!"

May 15

Reading: Psalms 131, 133, 138-141, 143

"O Yahweh, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways."
(Psalm 139:1-3)

Does it ever amaze you that God knows you - you, of all people - so well? There are almost eight billion - eight billion - people on the planet right now! If we all laid end-to-end, we could go to the moon and back over 17 times! Whoever it is that estimates such things, estimates that there have been over 117 billion people in the history of earth! If you took just one minute to consider each of 117 billion people it would take almost 223 thousand years!

That's a time-span of 20-30 world histories!

(And, contrary to the evolutionists, the earth has only been around 6-10 thousand years.)
Yet, God knows you.

He didn't just know you a minute way back when... He isn't just planning on getting around to you some time soon... He knows you now and has known you every single millisecond of every single day of your life.

How does He have the time? Why isn't His schedule quite backlogged!? I mean, frankly, some of us are taking up more than our share of God's time!

Because God is outside of time. He is eternal.

How can He spend the effort? Because it is effortless. He is omnipotent.

How can He care so much? Because He is love.

Doesn't it blow your mind?

That's why David said, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it."

Amen, David. Amen.

May 16

Reading: Psalms 144-145, 88-89

"One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts."
(Psalm 145:4)

Shall we, really? We must! But have you? Are you?

Every child will ultimately, at some point, make their own decision about Jesus and how to live their life. But a large part of the problem in today's Church - and our nation - is directly connected to generations of adult Christians who did not pass down their faith to a younger generation. We tend to believe that "everybody knows" the things we know. We believe that just because we tell kids something once, that's enough. We think that since Bibles are so readily available in our culture that people actually read them.

They don't. They don't. And they don't.

Who are the young people in your life with whom you can share your faith in God? Before you say there aren't any... they surround you.

If you don't have children, do you have grandchildren? Nieces? Nephews? What about those annoying kids at church that run around unsupervised because they come by themselves from across the street or on the church bus? Why not take responsibility for them rather than just be aggravated at them?

What about the young couple that lives next door? They are newly married, just moved to the area, and don't really have any friends. Do they know about the mighty acts of Yahweh?

What about the young people on your crew at work? The kids in your class at school? The young person that checked you out at the store?

My point? If we are not talking to younger generations about God, it's not because we don't have opportunities. It's not because we "can't". It's because we won't because we don't want to.

May 17

Reading: Psalms 50, 73-74

"But to the wicked God says: 'What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you. If you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you keep company with adulterer. You give your mouth free reign for evil, and your tongue frames deceit.'" (Psalm 50:16-19)

Would you like proof that God's Word is as relevant today as it was over three thousand years ago? Look no further than Psalm 50!

Someone once said, "All truth is God's truth." That is, if it's true, it's of God. God knows it; God understands it; and when we are talking about scientific truth in nature, etc - God created it!

It is the same with morality. It is the same with right and wrong - good and evil. There is none of that without God. When governments write laws against murder - that's God's law! Without God, there is no right or wrong. Yet, while our government (And please understand this: when I criticize our government, I do so as a patriotic American. While the United States government has its flaws and downright sinfulness in areas, there is no greater country or form of government in today's world.) promotes such right and wrong in some areas - reciting God's statutes as verse 16 puts it - is largely hypocritical.

They call homicide wrong while they allow millions of the unborn to be murdered.

They promote marriage with tax breaks, and then destroy the American family by codifying homosexual weddings.

They give freedom to all people, but enslave segments of the population with promises of "free stuff" and leisure.

I would imagine that God sees it just like He calls it here in Psalm 50 three thousand years ago. What right have they to use God's truth when they disregard it where they want otherwise?

We certainly see them pleased with thieves and adulterers, and the media is their free-reign mouth of deception. (v.19) It is interesting that the current administration has established their "Ministry of Truth" against disinformation - when they themselves are the largest purveyors of disinformation campaigns.

On the other hand... guess what?

In the United States of America, when we criticize the government, we are criticizing ourselves. It is a government of the people, by the people, for the people. And if it is not anymore, we are to blame for that too!

And if our countrymen are too immoral to select or be the right kind of government, guess who bears some of the responsibility for that? God's Church! We really haven't cared to be Jesus, glorify Jesus, or make disciples of all nations as we were told by Jesus to do! If we had, wouldn't things be a lot different?

What about it Church? What about God's Truth in our lives? What right have we to espouse a truth - God's truth - that we live so little by?

It's time to repent!

May 18

Reading: Psalms 75-78

"In spite of all this, they still sinned; despite His wonders, they did not believe,...
When He killed them, they sought Him; they repented and sought God earnestly. But they flattered Him with their mouths; they lied to Him with their tongues. Their heart was not steadfast toward Him; they were not faithful to His covenant. Yet He, being compassionate, atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them;..."
(Psalm 78: 32, 34, 36-38a)

Ever been caught up in a cycle? Humans have a tendency, for some reason it seems, to prefer the familiar even when it's proven not to work! We continue to do the same thing over and over and expect a different result. Someone once said that is the height of insanity.

The Israelites were definitely in a cycle. As characterized in these verses, even after God had blessed them so greatly - even after He performed mighty miracles - they would not believe. So, they suffered. Then they would repent. But seldom was their repentance long-lasting. Soon they slipped back into their half-hearted worship and empty words.

But He, being Himself, remained faithful.

I'm glad I can't count the number of times I've been the same. All the times I said, "This time, I'm going to..." - and then didn't. Oh, I meant it - for a while. I tried - for a while. But as the wise Yoda said, "Do. Or do not. There is no try."

Faithfulness means doing - not trying. It means trusting - not wishing. It means going - not planning. It means acting - not talking.

Ask God today to show you what your cycle is. Ask Him to show you what attitude is keeping you in the cycle. Ask Him to show you where you need to be more obedient.

Let's ~~try to~~ be as faithful to God as He is to us. After all, what if His faithfulness to us was like ours toward Him!?

May 19

Reading: Psalms 79-82

"How long, O Yahweh?"
(Psalm 79:5a)

How do you most measure time?

If I'm saving a portion of my pay to buy something, I measure by weeks. I compare the time remaining until I get paid to that same amount of time that's passed. "Two weeks until I get paid? Hm. Two weeks ago I was in... doing.... That doesn't seem so long!" (Is that weird?)

When I'm on a trip, time might be measured by the number of Love's truck stops we will get coffee from before we get "there". (It's measured in Buc-ee's stops if we are lucky enough to be traveling I-10 Texas.)

If you are answering your granddaughter who asks from the backseat (for the 20th time), "How long 'til we get there, Papaw?" You can measure it by the length of a Disney movie or an episode of SpongeBob Squarepants.

These are the kinds of time measurements we understand. They are definite; they are relatable; we know we can span them.

But do you ever ask, as Asaph did, "How long, O Yahweh?"

When it comes to spiritual matters, we can really struggle to deal with time. How long will it be until we "get over" this physical suffering? Will life ever be "normal" in the face of this overwhelming grief? How long will I have to endure the scorn of family and/or friends who don't share my faith? How long will it be, Father, until You send Jesus to come and get us?

How long, O Yahweh?

I don't have an answer for that question on this "level". Here in "time and space", I cannot tell you how many years (or decades?) what you or I are suffering through will last. I don't know the day or hour of Jesus' return.

But I do know, on God's side of history's tapestry - where He stands outside of time and space - it is going to be soon! Heaven will make the very worst of our suffering a "light affliction" and eternity will make it only "momentary". (2 Corinthians 4:17)

How long, O Yahweh?

Soon my child. Soon!

May 20

Reading: Psalm 83; 1 Chronicles 29:23-25; 2 Chronicles 1:1-13; 1 Kings 2:13-3:15

"And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was a valiant man of Kabzeel, a doer of great deeds."
(2 Samuel 23:20a)

[We now close the chapter on the life of David, finishing the Psalms written by Asaph. Asaph was a grandson of the last judge of all Israel and prophet, Samuel. He and his brother Heman were appointed by David over music in the temple. We will return to more Psalms later, written by Solomon and others.]

Trigger warning! "Toxic masculinity" ahead!

Among other godly things the devil has tried to rid the world of is manly men! Our society would prefer that there be no difference between men and women. And as wonderful as women are - and they are fantastic - it is men that society would like to exterminate. It is the man that the devil wants to take (has modern man already taken?) a back seat and stay in the backseat.

When I read about men like Benaiah... it gets my juices flowing!

Man of Valor.

Doer of Great Deeds.

Don't we need some of those kind of men today? A LOT of those kind of men? At least one of those kind of men in every family?

Solomon certainly begins to show his wisdom in today's passage from 1 Kings 2. As he begins setting the Kingdom aright and finishing his father's business, he knows that Benaiah is the man for the job. Over and over he goes to the trusted Benaiah to be the hand of the throne and makes him captain of his army.

Today, it's not only every family that needs a man of valor and doer of good deeds - but every congregation of God needs them! God's Kingdom needs men! - men unafraid to stand up for Jesus, men who lead with the strong, but loving hand of Jesus on the tiller of the ship of God.

Parents, could you make an effort to raise your boys fearlessly? Could you allow them to get dirty, play hard, be rough-and-tumble, independent? We don't need any more snowflakes!

Could you teach them honesty, bravery, leadership, and loyalty? Could you take those attributes and mate them to a faith in Jesus that advances God's Kingdom in the hearts of men?

Men, could you step up? PLEASE! Be men! Not harsh, not unloving, kind, tenderhearted, forgiving - but strong, holding to truth - men of valor and doers of good deeds? Your family and your Church need that! - now more than ever!

Honor, raise-up, and be: Men of Valor; Doers of Good Deeds.

May 21

Reading: 1 Kings 3:16-28; 1 Kings 5-6; 2 Chronicles 2-3

"So Solomon built the house and finished it. He lined the walls of the house on the inside with boards of cedar. From the floor of the house up the walls of the ceiling, he covered them on the inside with wood, and he covered the floor of the house with boards of cypress. The cedar within the house was carved in the form of gourds and open flowers. All was cedar; no stone was seen."

(1 Kings 6:14-15, 18)

Smells play a huge part in our life don't they.

Who can forget what it smelled like to walk into Grandma's house after church and smell Sunday dinner cooking on the stove? There are also other smells that I associate with grandma's house. I even know what my grandma's purse smelled like! Spearmint gum! (She always had a package of Wrigley's spearmint gum in her purse!)

My wife loves candles. It's not unusual, when we are home, that there is a fragrant candle burning in two or three different rooms of the house. It's very welcoming and soothing.

Smells can transfer. You know around whom you and others have been. If you're around a smoker, even if you've become "nose-blind" to it, others can tell. If your dogs have been in the car, you can tell. Smell not only plays a big part in memory and "therapy", it also has a large part in taste. If you had Covid-19, perhaps you experienced the symptom that I and many others did - you couldn't smell anything... and because of that - you couldn't taste anything. (It was the most frustrating symptom for me!)

If you've ever opened an old cedar chest, you know the smell. Just a box that's maybe five or six cubic feet in size holds that pleasing aroma for decades!

Can you imagine the beautiful aroma of God's temple - four stories of walls lined in cedar!?

People would know and remember the experience of going to the temple simply by the aroma! I can imagine little kids who had been to the temple - every time they smelled cedar anywhere saying, "Mama, this smells like God's house!" and remembering the experience.

Guess what?

God still desires that His temple have a certain aroma.

2 Corinthians 2:14-16a says this:

"But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are

being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life...."

Christians are to ~~have~~ *be* an "aroma". If we "smell like Jesus", others who follow Jesus - or at least would like to - are attracted; it smells like life! If they are on a path of rebellion, it smells like the stench of death. (No wonder some people don't like Christians hanging about!)

Are you producing an aroma from the work of Christ in you? Is the sweet smell of fellowship being transferred around your congregation each and every Lord's Day as you obey His command to meet together?

Or do you have a case of spiritual B.O.!??

May 22

Reading: 1 Kings 7; 2 Chronicles 4

"Solomon was building his own house thirteen years, and he finished his entire house."
(1 Kings 7:1)

Solomon was thirteen years building this place! That is certainly a while to build a house - although if you read through today's entire reading, you see why it would take that long. If you do a little research, you'll find Solomon built his house right next to the temple. It is good to desire closeness with God. How much better is it that we have the opportunity - not just to be close to God - but to have the Holy Spirit dwelling in the temple of our bodies!

But that might beg this question: "How long have we spent on our 'house'?"

I'm not talking about your physical dwelling place at your street/zip code, but that dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. There are many who never give their house another thought after they come up out of the baptistry. They have a great spiritual foundation! But the wise man who built his house on the rock is not just the one with that foundation - but the one who hears and does God's Word/work! (Matthew 7:24ff)

A strong foundation is certainly essential! But a foundation is not adequate housing. A foundation doesn't give warmth in the winter. A foundation alone cannot protect from the heat or the rain. A foundation alone is not a peaceful dwelling place and retreat from the world. The building must continue, day-by-day.

And it will probably take longer than thirteen years! It will probably continue until the day your body is changed in an instant at the return of Jesus! (1 Corinthians 15:52) Until then, really, we are but a tabernacle of the Holy Spirit. (2 Corinthians 5:2) His "temple" or dwelling place for sure - but we are to be "working on a building" for the rest of our lives.

Pick up the hammer and nails. Grab a plumb-bob and a square. Saws and all other manner of tools are required. Build, build, build, Christian!

May 23

Reading: 1 Kings 8:1-53; 2 Chronicles 5-6

"If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence or blight or mildew or locust or caterpillar, if their enemy besieges them in the land at their gates, whatever plague, whatever sickness there is, whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all your people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart and stretching out his hands toward this house, then hear in heaven Your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart You know, according to his ways (for You, You only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind), that they may fear You all the days that they live in the land that You gave to our fathers."

(1 Kings 8:37-40)

The preacher says: "Repeat after me... I believe... that Jesus is the Christ... the Son of the Living God... (AMEN!) And I take Him as my 'Personal Savior'..."

Wait... what!?

That's not in the Bible!

That phrase "personal savior" has only been around since the 1930's, used and popularized (along with the sinner's prayer) by Charles Fuller in his "Old Fashioned Revival Hour" radio program. (Frank Viola article - January, 2021) Among other things, it has given rise to the idea of a "personal" relationship with Jesus that is very "individualized".

"My relationship with Jesus is personal. I'll keep it to myself, thank you. And please don't bother me about any problems you perceive with my life."

Not. Biblical.

The Church walks together. We are a body.

Yet...

You want a "Personal Savior"? How 'bout we get personal then?

A Personal Savior deals with you, your problems, and your sins - personally. I don't mean that in a "Church-body doesn't help" kind of way... I mean that unless God deals with your individual sin - being in the Church body isn't going to help!

As Solomon brings the ark of God into the finally finished temple, he kneels down on this large bronze platform he has built (2 Chronicles 6:13) and prays - hands toward heaven. He prays that people would remember Yahweh's presence and pray to Him whenever they find themselves... and then he gives at least seven different "for instances" of when we need to be "in the temple" (so to speak) talking with God.

The fourth instance - in the specific reading above - is the one that stands out to me. It is here that Solomon points to the specificity of the individual - not just the "body"/nation.

"whatever prayer...is made by any man (as opposed to "all Your people")...each knowing the affliction of his own heart... stretching out his hands...then hear...and forgive and act...to each whose heart You know..." (vv.38-39)

Nations, congregations, groups of people, etc... may all experience the same trials. We share common problems, griefs, sinfulness, etc. But God will deal with us personally. He knows how each problem has been an affliction to my heart. The "problem" may be common - but the solution needs individual attention. God is willing and able to provide - if we let Him deal with us personally.

Ever wonder, "Why is it that I am having so much trouble with (the pandemic, the economy, worldly worries, my family, etc), but 'he/she/they' seem to be just fine?"

Perhaps they have prayed and God is sustaining them in the midst of everything else. (Although... I would strictly caution you about the "comparison game" ...)

This also speaks to the idea that when we pray, the outside threat may not change, but the way we are able to deal with it and the effects that it has on us very well may!

It also is not just God dealing with our hurts and needs personally, but how we contribute to the problem(s) personally! Note that while the "problems" mentioned in this section of the prayer don't seem to be sinful - it is assumed that forgiveness is needed. (v.39)

You want a "Personal Savior"? Very well. How does Jesus need to deal with you - your problems - and your sin - personally - today?

May 24

Reading: 1 Kings 8:54-9:14; 2 Chronicles 7

"Let these words of mine, with which I have pleaded before Yahweh, be near to Yahweh our God day and night, and may He maintain the cause of His servant and the cause of His people Israel, as each day requires, that all the peoples of the earth may know that Yahweh is God; there is no other."
(1 Kings 8:59-60)

What if we changed some of the hymns in the hymnal or some of the songs that appear on our screen?

Rather than "How Great Thou Art", what if we sang "How Great I Am". Let's not sing "Lord, I Lift Your Name on High", but rather "Lord, I Lift My Name on High". Be done with singing, "I'm coming back to the heart of worship, and it's all about You." Get it right, "I'm coming back to the heart of worship, and it's all about me." I'm almost fearing the lightning from heaven as I type! We would never (I don't think) actually voice those sentiments. Yet, many times, we live as if those words are more of our heart than the original lyrics.

Somehow we think that the Master's job is to make the servant comfortable. We believe the Potter is there to serve His created vessel. We'd rather the Carpenter, if He has to use a tool, never allow it to be beaten on with a hammer - regardless of what the Carpenter is doing.

We believe that God is there for our benefit.

And while it's true that a good master cares for his servants, the potter is cares for his creations, and the carpenter properly uses and maintains his tools - we exist to benefit and glorify God. Did you notice that here at the end of Solomon's prayer? Did you see the reason he prayed this and expected God to answer the prayer?

"...that all the peoples of the earth may know that Yahweh is God..."

God will see us through. He is loving and faithful. But ultimately, we are His servants, His vessels, and His tools - bought, created, and used - for His glory, not our comfort.

Have you genuinely and happily accepted your place as God's beloved creation? Or are you still trying to replace the Creator?

May 25

Reading: 2 Chronicles 8:1-9:28; 2 Chronicles 1:14-17; 1 Kings 9:15-10:29

"For the king had a fleet of ships of Tarshish at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years the fleet of ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks. Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom."

(1 Kings 10:22-23, italics mine)

Really? Seriously? Solomon had ships bringing apes to Israel? Not one ape... apes! Not one time... every three years he got more apes!? What in the world was his thing with apes!? What did he do with them? Where were they put? Who fed the apes? Enquiring minds want to know!

I suppose we will have to wait 'til heaven and ask him.

But this is the point the Chronicler (Ezra we suppose) is making here: Solomon's kingdom was very opulent. (Understatement) When the Queen of Sheba came to see and hear what she'd been told of, scripture says it took her breath away. She, as she put it, hadn't even heard the half of it! (1 Kings 10:5,7)

(Wait 'til you see the apes, Queenie!)

Remember that by the time of the writing of 1 Kings (written by Jeremiah?) - even though written concerning the period of the Kingdom we are looking at, Solomon and beyond - the greatness of Israel had long since passed generations before Jeremiah's time. Even so Ezra - as he writes the Chronicles after the Babylonian captivity - is even further from Solomon's day. The Israelites would be as amazed as we. There hadn't been anything like it before and probably little if anything like it since.

Yet, as fantastic as it was... it passed.

But, remember... in many ways pictured throughout the short narrative of Solomon and throughout his many writings (which we will begin looking at tomorrow), Solomon is a type of Christ. That is, what Solomon did in "small" ways for short periods of time, points to Who and what Jesus will do and be for eternity in much larger and grander ways! As incredible as Solomon's wisdom, riches, and royalty sound - they passed away. But the Kingdom of Christ is greater - and shall not pass!

Let us strive today to put our lives in the hands of the Eternal King and lay up our treasure in a place - in a Kingdom - where nothing can steal or destroy it! What a mighty God we serve!

May 26

Reading: 1 Kings 4; Psalms 72, 127

"May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth! In his days may the righteous flourish, and peace abound, till the moon be no more!"

(Psalm 72:6-7)

So you want a great nation?

Would that our nation would pray for and follow after what Solomon, the wisest man of all-time, asks God for in Psalm 72. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a leader that is a blessing like rain in its proper time? What if we had a leader who brought prosperity to good people and abounding peace?

When Solomon asks God to bless him (vv.8-11), he knows it will be because ("For..." v.12) he has done the job that government is to do. Solomon describes that in his prayer as three-pronged:

One, may the nation's leader judge with righteousness and justice. (v.2) Righteousness must make use of - at the very least - God's natural law (something some of our Supreme Court justices deny even exists). Justice means what it says. What is just. We hear a lot about "social justice" today, but seldom is the motivation, the means, or the end really justice.

Two, the godly nation must defend the cause of poor people. (v.4a) This doesn't mean "handouts" - those seldom help their cause, but it means making sure that the poor are not taken advantage of in order to suppress them perpetually. Along with this is delivering the children of the needy. (v.4b) Isn't it interesting that so many people and large portions of our government today support a corporation that is the largest purveyor of infanticide that was founded by a woman who wanted specifically to engage in eugenics? The stain of abortion on our country directly contradicts "delivering" the children of the needy!

Three, the leader of such a nation must see that the oppressor is crushed. (v.4c) Oppressors come in all shapes and sizes, and from all directions and methods. Whether from within or without the nation, the government is to protect its people.

Wouldn't that be a wonderful place to live?

You have a part in this!

"May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all the day!" (v.15b)

I grossly neglect praying for our president. Sometimes it is, ashamedly, because it is someone that I have a difficult time "liking"... sometimes it is because I am just too busy with my "own" stuff and agenda.

But Christian, praying for our leader(s) is our own stuff! No one else is going to do that. No one else can do that. Let's get busy at it!

May 27

Reading: Proverbs 1-4

"Trust in Yahweh with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths."
(Proverbs 3:5-6)

We can be so tempted to think, "I know what I'm doing!"

We believe what we've always done is what to do. Or we think that, "Common sense demands..." But our own understanding is not always the best path.

Consider, for instance, four quick commands later in Proverbs 3:

"Do not say to your neighbor, "...tomorrow I will give it" when you have it with you. (v.28)

Have we ever said, "I can't be bothered right now." Or just put someone off hoping they would find what they need elsewhere or forget? (Man, I hope I'm not the only one raising his hand here!) Solomon says the "straight path" is to just be generous.

"Do not plan evil against your neighbor...." (v.29)

I can honestly say that I don't think I've ever done that... but I'm sure I've been tempted. Solomon says the "straight path" is to just be good.

"Do not contend with a man for no reason,..." (v.30)

Oh man. Am I the only one here who is OK with arguing? Over basically nothing? Why bother doing that? Even if I am right (and surely I am... right?... why not do as my wife used to tell our children when they argued, "Just let him be wrong!" There's no need to argue; Solomon says the "straight path" is to just be peaceful.

"Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways,..." (v.31)

It can be easy to look at even violent or otherwise "bad" people and envy them. They don't seem to suffer; they seem to have what they want... But we don't see the price they do (or someday will, at least) pay. Solomon says the "straight path" is to just be content.

Our human "default mode" will most always be sinful. That's why we must take up our cross, deny ourselves daily, and follow Him. (Luke 9:23) Because unless we do, we will lean on our own understanding, and we will be sure to miss the straight path!

May 28

Reading: Proverbs 5-7

"There are six things that Yahweh hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers."

(Proverbs 6:16-19)

Hate.

We are told that we are not to hate people - maybe not even particular places or things! Hate is a word that is banned for the use of many children in Christian homes. "Don't say 'hate'!"

Yet isn't it interesting that: 1) Those who most strenuously tell us not to "hate" 2) Hate the Church when it hates 3) Works that the Bible says our very own Creator hates!

Yes, God hates.

Surprised?

Look, if a word can mean anything, it means absolutely nothing. The word "hate" is so overused and misunderstood today, that most people don't even know what they are saying. We also somehow believe that if we hate actions - or yes, even people (!!) - that we cannot also love them, care for them, and want (or even strive for!) their best.

Untrue.

God hates.

God loves.

The two are not incongruent.

Hate simply means something (or someone! !!) that is "separated from", detested, or that we are "ill toward". In that strict sense, God hates some people! Sin separates from God - does it not? When we are in our sin, we are detestable to God. When we receive punishment for our sins - or lack of blessedness - is that not "ill toward" us?

"...'Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated....'" (Malachi 1:2-3)

Now I have gone the long way around, and perhaps even over-stated these things to make my point today. Solomon lists for us here six things, "yea seven" (When the poetic writers do this, it is not because something was almost forgotten. It is a literary device used to point to and emphasize the last of the list - in this case the seventh - above all.) things that God hates. I don't know that this is an exhaustive list - but they're good to know. However, let me just give a couple of quick thoughts on just that last one today.

"...one who sows discord among brothers."

Friends, we ought be real careful about our relationships in Church. When we gossip about, lie on, connive against, and backbite, we are purposely introducing a viral disease into the Body of Christ. We are releasing a pathogen to wreck the health of Jesus' blood-bought bride. Do you think He will really NOT find us detestable and believe He will be glad to bless us?

Repent! For the Kingdom of God is at hand!

May 29

Reading: Proverbs 8-10

"Does not wisdom call? Does not understanding raise her voice? The woman of folly is loud; she is seductive and knows nothing."

(Proverbs 8:1; 9:13)

There are two main on-ramps on the way to hell.

On-ramp number one is ignoring what's around you. Solomon says that Wisdom calls - Wisdom raises her voice. (Note here that though Wisdom is personified as a woman here - in contrast to the seductiveness of the prostitute - the whole of Proverbs 8 sounds a whole lot like Jesus!) One would have to stick his fingers in his ears not to understand Who God is, what He has done, and what He is calling a man to do or be. In fact, Paul and Peter both make that extremely clear:

"...men...suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them." (Romans 1:18b-19)

"...they deliberately overlook this fact..." (2 Peter 3:5a)

You would think that without divine revelation, a man or two might accidentally stumble upon the right path somehow. But no, one who will not hear will find the way he is looking for. Because there, as we said - in contrast to the voice of wisdom, is the voice of the seductress.

That seductress is on-ramp number 2. Even if you happen to see, hear, and understand the direction of Jesus - there is still ample opportunity for another voice that plays just as loud over creation's speakers.

Just as surely as creation tells us of an incredible and loving God Who is all-powerful; it also speaks of a sinister force that wrecks both the beauty and purpose of God's handiwork. The Apostle John speaks about it in his second epistle:

"...many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh..." (2 John 7)

Some, unwilling to see God's voice will blindly fall for the counterfeit. Some, will simply choose the pleasures of sin for a season - preferring the "here and now" rather than living out the rigorous disciplines of salvation unto eternal life.

Don't make the mistake of choosing the wrong path friend. You know the Way. It is clear. Your conscience knows. Listen and obey!

May 30

Reading: Proverbs 11-13

"A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly."
(Proverbs 12:23)

"Listen... ooo ahh ooo... Do you want to know a secret? ooo ahh ooo... Do you promise not to tell? Closer, let me whisper in your ear..."

While that old Beatles song gets around to telling the girl "the words [she longs] to hear", that first line could be the theme song for many people inside and outside God's Church. No matter what the information, there are people who are longing to share it. They are just waiting for someone to come along to share it with. They are people who don't repeat gossip... so listen close the first time!

Now, if these people were so excited to tell others about Jesus!... wouldn't that be marvelous!? That's the knowledge to never be concealed!

But this verse says that just because you know something - even when you know that something to be absolutely true - there are times when that knowledge - be it even good news - is to be concealed! Just because you know it - doesn't mean you should tell it!

Here is yet another word we are not supposed to say, but I'm not saying it - God is... the person who tells everything they know is a fool! The word fool is cautioned against by Jesus in the gospels because it doesn't just speak to the intellectual capacity of a person, the word "fool" actually speaks more to a person's very heart and character.

When Solomon says:

"Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent." (Proverbs 17:28)

He isn't just talking about showing a lack of intelligence by his words, but what we say reveals our character; the depth, the detail, the intended desire behind what is told - all communicate about the heart of the speaker.

What did your words say about you yesterday? What will they say today? Knowledge is great; knowledge shared prudently is wisdom!

May 31

Reading: Proverbs 14-16

"Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox."
(Proverbs 14:4)

The job I hate most in life? Mowing the yard. But I sure do love sitting on my patio and watching the birds pick through it for worms. I like walking across it in my bare feet and feeling the cool grass on a hot day.

My wife might say that she hates the never-ending pile of laundry we seem to produce - but we sure do enjoy wearing clothes - and clean ones at that!

I dislike spending money on gas, car washes, oil changes, tires, and the like. But I do like not walking hundreds of miles to work!

Good things come with a price. There is labor in blessing. It was this way from the beginning - it is intended. Granted, the work was not toilsome as it may be now, but even before the fall of man, Adam and Eve were put in a garden to be stewards of it and tend it. Solomon writes in today's reading as well that:

"In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty" (14:23)

That truth and the truth of today's selected verse can be seen just as easily, and nowhere is it more true, than in ministry.

It'd be nice, I suppose, as a farmer to not clean stalls. That's something base. It's the thing you can send a kid out to do. There's no particular skill involved in shoveling... well... you know. But it has to be done. And the fact is if the manger (stall) is clean that only means one thing - there is no ox. And if there's no ox - there's no crop.

Having been a preacher in five congregations over twenty-six years, traveling among congregations across the US and Canada another seven plus years, having two sons who are preachers, and many friends in ministry - I can say this: You will have to shovel a lot of... well... you know... in the Church. There is always "cleaning" to be done. If there isn't - then there are no oxen. And when there is no oxen - there are no crops.

The messiest, most maintenance-intensive mangers are those where people are being won to Christ. They are the Churches where people are growing, being challenged, and fruit is being produced.

New believers carry in old sins we must help them to start untangling. New body members present a challenge for old ones who must "make room" in the manger. Old members make messes when good preaching challenges them to surrender the last of their old sins that are lurking in that darkest, dustiest closet of their heart, never opened to the work of the Spirit.

This "manger maintenance" brings the profit of fruit in the harvest if we do not give up!

So... are you a stall cleaner? Keep toiling. Enjoy the fruit of your labor.

Are you a stall "messenger"? Repent!

Or - is your congregation just so dead that everyone is "happy, happy, happy" in a nice clean manger?

June 1

Reading: Proverbs 17-19

"Let a man meet a she-bear robbed of her cubs rather than a fool in his folly."
(Proverbs 17:12)

A wonderful friend of mine, who has since gone to be with the Lord, grew up in Brooklyn. I couldn't help but love his sometimes brash but always plain-spoken conversation. One day, in talking about someone who had a misfortunate situation, he called them a "poor schlimazel".

"Wait... he's a what?"

A "schlimazel", as he explained it, is a guy that always seems to have bad luck. Most always he encounters misfortune because of a "schlemiel". Both are Yiddish (a European Jewish dialect spoken by many New Yorkers) terms and are described in a Yiddish saying this way:

"A schlemiel is someone who often spills his soup, and a schlimazel is the person it lands on."

However, a schlemiel is different than a "schmuck". Being a schmuck is an improvable state. A schlemiel is a good word for the word "fool" Solomon uses here. As noted in May 30th's devotion, being termed a "fool" speaks to the very inner-being and character of a person - not merely his intellect or education.

What Solomon is saying here is, "Don't be a schlimazel! Watch out for schlemiels!"

As in many cases, beware of the company you keep. While Jesus would have us be kind to everyone and love them as He would lead us to, bear in mind that there are people - "fools" God calls them here (again - I'm not using the word, God is!) - that will constantly bring trouble into your life if you choose to consistently be around them.

Don't complain if you choose to keep the company of fools!

Solomon says he'd rather be between a she-bear and her cubs! I've been to mountain ranges where there are bears-a-plenty... that is always something hikers are cautioned about. Don't disturb the bears - especially if they have cubs!

Being a schlimazel for a schlemiel is worse!

June 2

Reading: Proverbs 20:1-22:16

"The sluggard says, 'There is a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!'"
(Proverbs 22:13)

There used to be kind of a strange old lady that was a member of a congregation I ministered to. Every Monday about 10 a.m., she would show up at my study in the church building. We'd say good morning, and then she'd say, "Here's my tithe," and hand me an envelope with some money in it. We might chit-chat a minute, but before she'd leave, she'd always tell me, "Well, I had to bring that by since I wasn't at Church. I just can't get out."

I wonder if she ever noticed that incredulous look on my face... every week... when she'd say that... every week.

I wanted to yell, "Lady! You're out!"

I know of some other people who have not been to church even one time in over two years. "We can't come to Church because of 'the Covid'." But if you look at their Facebook page, there are pictures of them just about anywhere else - all over the country!

A dear preacher friend of mine, upon hearing a lady's excuse for why she hadn't been to Church in a while said, "Why didn't you just tell me you were out of peanut butter?"

The lady looked at him quizzically.

He replied, "One excuse is as good as another!"

Whether it's lions, feigned invalidity, Covid-19, or a lack of peanut butter - if you are too lazy to serve God - if you don't care enough to do what needs to be done - if you don't give a rip about the Lord's Table or your brothers and sisters in Christ - one excuse is as good as another; and you'll find one.

June 3

Reading: Proverbs 22:17-24:34

"Do not toil to acquire wealth; be discerning enough to desist. When your eyes light on it, it is gone, for suddenly it sprouts wings, flying like an eagle toward heaven."
(Proverbs 23:4)

There is a place for work. Don't get me wrong. Hard work, long hours, and toil are needed in season.

In season.

Did you notice God made seasons? Before there were electric lights, work had to stop at dark. Some parts of the year, when the earth is "working", the light is long; other parts of the year the earth is resting and the days are short.

I believe this was a cue to us as the thinking, reasoning part of creation. There are seven days in a week - one of those seven is not for work. There are four seasons in a year; one season has high opportunity to meet high demand - another has low opportunity and low demand.

There is a time for toil; there is a time for rest.

Now there is a great segment of today's world that needs to hear, "Get busy working! Get off your duff and make a contribution!" But there are many... maybe you?... that need to hear what Solomon says here:

"Take a breather."

We do need to work to live, but we don't need to live to work.

Whether you are toiling for the dollar, the house, the car... or perhaps, preacher, you toil for the accolades, the "church growth", or even have a wonderful (and I mean this honestly) heart - that justifies workaholism for the "sake of the Kingdom"...

What you toil for in this manner - what it is that you set your mind on achieving, Sol says, "sprouts its wings". The fortune, the accolades - those will fade. The congregation "you" build - will someday be led by others more or less talented than you. And, if you stare too long at work, you will find when you turn around that your family is gone. At best your kids grew up and moved out before you got around to all those things you were going to do with them "someday". At worst, they are gone to the wind - lost in sin or relationships damaged (or never built) beyond all repair while you put your work (even if it was "Church", preacher!) first. (Preacher, your personal relationship with God is FIRST... but His Church comes after your family!)

So, today, if your reading this in the morning... or tomorrow, if you're reading this at night... be careful about your workload. Prioritize God; optimize work; emphasize relationships.

June 4

Reading: Song of Songs

"Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised."

(Song of Songs 8:7)

I. Will. Not. Do It.

Read almost any commentary on Song of Songs... it will attempt in some way - great or small, all or in part - to spiritualize the song of love. A certain false prophet and preacher in Kansas City, MO, pairs this whole book with Revelation constantly to promote his strange eschatological ramblings.

Not me.

Oh, I suppose, if you must, you can compare the groom here to Jesus... certainly the love of Jesus is as great - yea greater - than the love of any groom for his bride. Certainly that is true of Jesus and His bride the Church.

But I... Will. Not. Do it.

This writing in its historical usage and obvious intent is not about any of that. For Pete's sake, if I tried to go in very much depth as to the details of the poetry... I'd have to give a parental advisory! (In fact, when I did preach through this book from the pulpit of the local Church, I did give parents a few weeks warning about what was coming!)

This book uniquely underscores the love between a man and his wife... a woman and her husband. That relationship - even on the sexual level - is so important that God included it as inspired writing. The whole book extols the beauty of the physical relationship a man and woman have in the bonds of matrimony.

If God did this:

That physical relationship is to be enjoyed. In fact, Paul said never to disregard it - except that we might devote ourselves to deeper times of prayer. Even then, we must quickly restore that part of our relationship. (1 Corinthians 7:5)

It underscores how we should elevate the marriage bed. The Hebrew writer said the same!

"Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." (Hebrews 13:4)

So, let us stand up for God's view of marriage and the sexual relationship. In practice and preaching, let there be: ONE MAN and ONE WOMAN - made ONE FLESH in the covenantal, spiritual, and physical union - FOR LIFE.

Amen and amen.

June 5

Reading: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

"What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has been already in the ages before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after."

(Ecclesiastes 1:9-11)

This writing of Solomon we begin today is looked at oppositely by two of my kids. It's a favorite of one and considered depressing by another. Since those are merely their opinions, they can both be right. (No fighting, y'all!) But you can consider flashes of both here.

I think Solomon was depressed - at least at the beginning of this writing. As he will go on to tell us, he "has it all" - even his own zoo of sorts complete with apes! Remember? But as he looks at all his accomplishments, all his wealth, all the accolades... there's nothing new.

When you have sought so strongly after stuff, eventually you want something new. The chase to attain can be exciting. If you have everything, the fun is gone.

Yet, Solomon, consider the upside of all these things you say!

Yes, the sun rises and falls, the winds blow, the rivers run (vv. 5-7)... isn't that great!? God is continually guarding and empowering His creation until "the Day"!

What about all that stuff we complain about? You know, the evil acts of men, the crazy philosophies of those who reject Yahweh... been done. We over-emphasize the evil of our day quite a lot because we are the ones who are having to live through it. But even a cursory reading of scripture shows that many of today's "newest" ideas (confused cultures of effeminate men and burly women - even that)... old hat.

All the wonders of Solomon... we don't know them all. Even in his own day the Queen of Sheeba said she "hadn't heard the half of it"! Forgotten.

Even all the works of Jesus - we don't know them all the Apostle John said. (John 21:25) They've been forgotten.

We mourn some of the lessons of history that we must repeat. We shake our heads at history's revision by those with evil agendas and its acceptance by the weak-minded and uneducated. There are many great deeds - torn down and forgotten.

But guess what? That also means that all the foolishness of man that you see today... It will also pass from the conscience and memory of the future generations. What seems insurmountable and indestructible today will be blown away and scattered as dust in a western wind.

Yet - one thing remains. God's Kingdom continues to stand. Forever and always. And that is certainly one thing that, while eternal, never grows old!

June 6

Reading: Ecclesiastes 1:12-6:12

"There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from Him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases Him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner He has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to the one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind." (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26)

Have two people ever read the very same book, but had two different endings to the story?

Quite possibly.

I remember when I was in grade school there was a series of books that were very popular. I don't recall the name of the series, but the book actually allowed the reader to have some choice in the story. You would come to the end of several pages and then it would read something like, "If you want Bob to go ahead into the forest, turn to page 63. If you choose for Bob to return toward home, turn to page 67." And, based on your choice, there were various, multiple possibilities for the ending.

Solomon seems to arrive at the fact that all humans experience pretty much the same things in life. Everyone has good times and bad times. There are victories and defeats. There is triumph, and there is tragedy. This is true for everyone.

If it's all the same, what's the point?

The difference is in how we see our "toil", and how we see our "toil" is determined by how we see God (or don't see God at all!). If we choose to find joy in our eating, drinking, and toil (the basic ordinary day) - if we choose to live life according to the Spirit, pleasing God - the outcome is "A". You can do the very same eating, drinking, and "toiling" - but if you choose not to enjoy it in the Spirit, it will be just that - just the "business of gathering and collecting" only to give it to someone else; the outcome is "B".

Same book - different ending.

All-in-all, when speaking of the day-to-day, as someone once said, "Life is what you make it." So make of today what God intended for it. Enjoy it. For even if you encounter tragedy in it, the joy will be in the fact that God will make it for your good if you love Him and are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28) If you choose not to enjoy it, guess what? You won't.

That. Is. Vanity. And that is a terrible waste of today.

June 7

Reading: Ecclesiastes 7-12

"In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him."
(Ecclesiastes 7:14, italics mine)

One thing that I've noticed about deep grief we encounter in life, particularly a tragically unexpected grief, is this: You develop a certain amount of paranoia.

You may have well have been enjoying a fantastically beautiful day when sudden and grave adversity fell upon you. It causes you to consider and understand what so much of Solomon's writings here say. You realize that regardless of how you live and what you are doing, we live in a weird, upside-down, and unpredictable world. Anything can happen at any time. Life is short, and no one gets out alive.

When this becomes reality and not just philosophy, it becomes hard to fully enjoy life. Not just because of what you may have lost already, but the realization that no matter how great today is - it can quickly turn. We wait, almost gripped in fear, for "the other shoe to drop" and plunge us back to the bottom.

However, it doesn't seem to work conversely. When we are having a bad day, when we can't see the sun, we don't believe life will ever be good again. And we sink into gloom.

Truth about life is truth - but neither response is appropriate.

Solomon says God shuffles the deck. There are mountain top days; there are rock bottom dark days; there are all manner of days in between. The high highs are few, and, really, relatively, so are the deep days of death. Yes, sometimes they somehow get strung together - like a deck of cards... but there are only so many of either and a whole lot of just "days". "...man may not find out anything that will be after him."

Conclusion?

Again, enjoy the day. If it's great - give it its full due and don't worry about tomorrow. If it's awful, enjoy the grace God will give that is sufficient for every grievance. (2 Corinthians 12:9) If it's "just a day" enjoy the reprieve from the adrenaline rushes of triumph or tragedy and live at peace.

Peace.

June 8

Reading: 1 Kings 11-12; 2 Chronicles 9:29-11:17

"And the priests and the Levites who were in all Israel presented themselves to [Rehoboam] from all places they lived. ...because Jeroboam and his sons cast them out from serving as priests of Yahweh,... They strengthened the kingdom of Judah, and for three years they made Rehoboam the son of Solomon secure, for they walked for three years in the way of David and Solomon."
(2 Chronicles 11:13, 14b, 17)

For all his wisdom, Solomon thought he could make God out to be a liar.

Yahweh had told Solomon that taking foreign wives - anyone taking foreign wives - would bring his kingdom to ruin. Yet, somehow, Solomon believed he could be the exception.

He couldn't.

And because of the terrible idolatry with which this great hero of God's people ended his life, a very sad chapter begins in the history of God's people - the Divided Kingdom. When Solomon's son Rehoboam takes the throne, his poor judgment concerning from whom to take counsel leads to the execution of the prophet Ahijah's words. Jeroboam takes the 10 Northern tribes, and Rehoboam - grandson of the great King David - is left with only Judah (and Benjamin, who by this time has become part of Judah).

But even while God makes great promises to Jeroboam if he will but remain faithful, he - like his southern counterpart - also takes bad advice. Out of jealousy and fear, he kicks out the Levites in the northern tribes and puts them all out of work - sent them packing.

What happens next is our take-away today!

When God's priests show up in Judah, ready to do their job... When God's priests are allowed to do their job... a nation is strengthened!

Rehoboam was not nearly a faithful follower of Yahweh - but he was smart enough to let God's Kingdom flourish (for three years anyway). And things went well for him. Oh that our nation - and the others where Christians are - would hear, understand, and apply this lesson today! (We will see tomorrow what happens when he took that for granted!)

Do we have a nation that will allow God's priests to do their job? Well... so far. Though our rights and abilities seem to be attacked and weakened daily, as of now, the priests of God still have the government protected right here in the United States of America to proudly and loudly proclaim - on street corners or in pulpits - the whole counsel of God! We still have the protected right and opportunity to call people to repentance, holiness, and a life of Christlikeness!

But... do we have the priests showing up for work?

Have you, as these from Israel did, "presented yourself" for work in the Kingdom? Are you ready, willing, able, and actively calling your friends, family, and countrymen to the cross? That's what Christians the new priests in the Kingdom of God do!

June 9

Reading: 1 Kings 13-15; 2 Chronicles 11:18-15:19

"Nevertheless, for David's sake Yahweh his God gave him a lamp in Jerusalem, setting up his son after him, and establishing Jerusalem, because David did what was right in the eyes of Yahweh and did not turn aside from anything that He commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite."
(1 Kings 15:4-5)

I took time to pray with a man last night after services.

Part of the message dealt with being the "kind of family" that God could use to make His mark on our community. This man though a teacher of the Word told me the story about how one of his children had strayed far from God into falsehood. We prayed about that, and I hope he felt peace and encouragement from Jesus.

This passage from today's reading I think should be a comfort too. Perhaps like that man, though you raised your child(ren) in the Truth and maybe they'd even been baptized into Christ as this man's child had been - one or more of them have gone astray. Abijam, scripture says, was no better than his father Rehoboam. Perhaps in some ways he was even worse. Yet, these verses say that God was good to him - not for his father's sake... or even his grandfather's... but because of David his great grandfather!

When I read that, though thus far my children all hold to The Faith, I am encouraged as a Father. If I have been and remain faithful, like David was (though imperfect...), perhaps even my great grandchildren will somehow receive blessing by it. They may not receive all they could have for their own faithfulness, but maybe I can at least give them something... some kind of blessing or favor they might not have known were it not for my own attempt at godly living.

Be encouraged! Just because you don't see the fruit you'd like to see doesn't mean that you've not had a great and godly impact on your family for generations.

June 10

Reading: 1 Kings 16:1-17:7; 2 Chronicles 16-17

"And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook."

(1 Kings 17:6)

Last Summer my wife put out a small fountain on our patio. To decorate, she filled the bottom of the fountain with colorful bits of sea glass. One morning we noticed something strange. A lot of the sea glass was missing, but in its place were some other drab colored stones. We couldn't imagine what might have taken place.

Somehow I got to reading and figured it out. About that same time, grackles were passing through our part of the country. They are larger than average birds, closely related to ravens. Like ravens they like colorful and shiny things. They will pick up things to use for... whatever. But, if they happen to see something they like better, they will drop what they have and take what they like. Evidently, when stopping for a drink, they thought they'd "trade-up".

This year at a national park, I broke the rules a little and fed some ravens that were skulking around nearby looking for food. I shared some crackers and hotdogs from my lunch while the very large, sociable birds didn't mind getting fairly close to me.

All that to say - ravens are remarkable birds. Even more remarkable is our God, isn't He? When His servant Elijah needed to be alone in the wilderness, another human wasn't even needed. The King of Creation utilized another part of creation to minister to the man of God.

Has it ever seemed that God may be out of options to help you? Do you ever feel that you are beyond the saving touch of God? If you will but remain faithful to God's call in your life, He will always provide for your needs - even if it is necessary to befriend the birds of the air twice a day for meals.

God is truly incredible.

June 11

Reading: 1 Kings 17:8-20:22

"...you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of Yahweh, and the God who answers by fire, He is God. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'Yahweh, He is God; Yahweh, He is God!'"

(1 Kings 18:24, 39)

One of my best friends in high school was Troy. We shared a love of the same kind of music, and we enjoyed running around together. However, when I'd call up at his house, I'd have to say, "Can I speak to YOUNG Troy?" I had asked for "Troy" a few times. I would usually get his dad on the phone - his name was Troy also. After that happened a few times, I learned how to save time; I was specific.

Elijah was specific. This was no time for confusion.

I've discussed, in short, a long time ago in this devotional that when "the LORD" appears in the English Standard Version I use - "the LORD" is not in the original language. This is the replacement for God's revealed name, YHWH. Somewhere along the way - for some odd reason - the Jews decided to substitute "LORD" for God's name. They thought it too holy to even pronounce. (Thus in all honesty, we really don't even know that "Yahweh" [or "Jehovah" the Greek version] is the correct pronunciation of the "Tetragrammaton" ["the four letters"] YHWH.)

But again, Elijah called him by name! In fact, all the Bible writers call Him by His revealed name - YHWH. Why? Because it matters!

In this passage, Elijah says, "You call on the name of your 'gods'. I'll call on the name of Yahweh! And the God Who answers by fire - He is God!"

I'm not really even sure the last part of that challenge was "the deal". I am inclined to believe it was a statement! For Yahweh IS THE ONLY GOD who ANSWERS - by fire or any other way!

The time has come for Christians to be specific!

We live in a world that constantly re-writes definitions. Just about any word can mean just about anything. The same goes for names, and "God" as a name can mean just about anything. This is no time for confusion now either. We need to speak the name of our Lord and Savior JESUS the Christ!

I always listen at ballgames, graduations, and the like - public venues when someone offers an opening prayer. Will they say the name of Jesus? Will they pray to "Our Father" and "in Jesus name"? I know that saying "in Jesus name, Amen" is not a magic incantation that makes our prayers "work". (I think some think it is!) But I'm

also smart enough to know what's happening when someone prays to "God" and ends with "in 'his?' name, Amen".

In WHOSE name!!??

People would like us to just fill in the proper name of whatever deity you'd like to serve. Let's not offend anyone. Let's not take a stand and cause a fuss. No one minds if you pray - as long as you don't place Jesus as the name above all names!

When the people on Mt. Carmel saw what happened, they did not say, "The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!" In the presence of 850 false prophets of Baal and Asherah, "Lord" could have meant Baal, Asherah, or anyone else! NO! They were specific! They (and it says all the people - the 850 false prophets as well!?) said,

"YAHWEH, HE IS GOD!

YAHWEH, HE IS GOD!"

Everyone knew that day who "The God Who Answers By Fire" was... and it wasn't Baal or Asherah!

What about you, Christian? Your life... your words... your exclamations... what do they say? Do you "Thank heaven!" or do you "Praise Jesus!"?

Allah is not god. Vishnu is not god. Nirvana is not the heaven we want to achieve, and we didn't originate from Kolob. Don't be afraid to stand for Jesus! Yahweh is the God who answers!

June 12

Reading: 1 Kings 20:23-22:9; 2 Chronicles 18:1-8

"And a man of God came near and said to the king of Israel, 'Thus says Yahweh, "Because the Syrians have said, 'Yahweh is a god of the hills but He is not a god of the valleys,' therefore I will give all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am Yahweh.'""

(1 Kings 20:28)

Things that reign in America's South: Cotton, Elvis, sweet tea, grits, Coca-Cola, banana pudding, BBQ, manners, Yahweh.

Things that reign in the Canadian Maritimes: Fishing, lobster, muscles, scallops, cod, Gordon Lightfoot, Anne Murray, blueberries, boiled dinners, Yahweh.

Things that reign in California: Redwoods, Hollywood, surfing, sunshine, the Beach Boys, Eagles, VanHalen, Yahweh.

Things that reign in Washington D.C.: Chaos, corruption, pride, traffic, violence, The Smithsonian, The National Mall, Yahweh.

Anywhere and everywhere I've been... anywhere and everywhere I've hung my hat - every region of every nation around the world has things they are known for and are driven by. Some things that are part of a region

are good; some are bad; some are a source of pride; some are a source of shame; some just are. But they are local.

Yet there is one "Thing" - or actually one Person - that is not only found everywhere, but He has the same level of power - the same potential influence - and the same desire for every region's inhabitants. He IS. He is Yahweh. He is the only true "Super Power". In fact, He not only inhabits every region - every corner and crevice of the world - but He keeps the very world in existence moment-by-moment.

Throughout scripture, whether Balaam or Jonah or Ben-Hadad, people thought they could out-run or hide from Yahweh. But He is no "hometown favorite". While some people in certain places may know Him better than others, just stepping outside your door gives you enough acquaintance with Him to hold you accountable for the natural law and order of things that you know in your heart is there.

Don't bother thinking you can hide from Yahweh. Don't insult Him by trying. Give in. Give up. Surrender. You'll be glad you did!

June 13

Reading: 1 Kings 22:10-53; 2 Chronicles 18:9-20:30

"And the messenger who went to summon Micaiah said to him, 'Behold, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king. Let your word be like the word of one of them and speak favorably.' But Micaiah said, 'As Yahweh lives, what Yahweh says to me, that I will speak.'"

(1 Kings 22:13-14)

Three kinds of people are depicted in these verses. You are one of them.

Perhaps you are like the prophets of King Ahab. Every one of them, to the last man (save Micaiah) seems to be a "yes man". They are the kind of people who say whatever is popular. Whether or not it is true, whether or not they even believe it is true - they attempt to curry favor with those of power or their peers by going along. They are outrightly evil. They know what is right; they know what is wrong. But they don't care as long as they are on what they believe will be the winning side.

We have people in our world who know that abortion is wrong, and others who really believe it's OK - but they stand together because they have the same agenda. There are those who are so deceived as to - unbelievably - believe that there are more than two genders, and there are others who know there are only two - and understand you are born unchangeably that gender - but share an agenda with the believers. There are those who know homosexuality is a perversion, and those who believe it's OK - those who know smoking dope is dangerous, and those who believe it's fine - those who think gambling is just plain fun, and those who know it's a way to deceive people out of their money. But the politics of sin knows no bounds when it comes to putting them together as bedfellows. The devil's agenda is popular for both the ignorant and enlightened.

Others are like the King's servant sent to find Micaiah. They fancy themselves peace-makers.

"Look, I know they're wrong. I don't like it any better than you. BUT... let's not make waves, shall we? Just smile and 'wear the ribbon', keep our mouths shut, and it'll all be OK. We can figure it out later. "

They are not peace-makers at all, they are simply spineless compromisers and collaborators. They don't have an evil intent, but their lack of intestinal fortitude leads them and others to the same place to which the evil go.

Others, hopefully you, are like Micaiah. Micaiah didn't care what the majority thought. He didn't care about what people wanted to hear - even the king! In his mind nothing trumped truth! Regardless of how things may look on the outset, it is Truth that frees! Lies and deception are of the devil and bring death and destruction.

Ahab sent Micaiah to jail and said, "I'll deal with you when I come back."

Micaiah said, "If you come back... then I'm not a prophet. I was wrong."

Ahab didn't come back.

You choose.

Evil, spineless, or truthful.

You can only be one.

But only those who will boldly proclaim truth can be assured of their safe end.

June 14

Reading: 2 Kings 1:1-18; 3:1-27; 8:16-22; 2 Chronicles 20:31-21:4-7

"And he said, 'Thus says Yahweh, "I will make this dry streambed full of pools." 'For thus says Yahweh, "You shall not see wind or rain, but that streambed shall be filled with water, so that you shall drink, you, your livestock, and your animals." 'This is a light thing in the sight of Yahweh. He will also give the Moabites into your hand,'"

(2 Kings 3:16-18)

I've told this story a lot before. You might have heard me tell it, but I'm not sure I've ever written it. If I have, let it just be a reminder.

One morning before Sunday school, I was walking through the church building and found my oldest son, just about three years old at the time, crying. I asked him what was wrong. Through his sobbing, he told me that he had put \$.50 into the cold-drink machine that was there and - Alas! - no can appeared.

I dried his tears and told him not to worry. I escorted him to my office where I sat down behind my desk. Opening my desk drawer, I produced the key to the machine. We walked back over, I opened the machine, gave him his drink - and his money.

Crisis averted.

So it is when everything in life seems unfixable.

Our Father is the one who holds the key. You may encounter deep loss, unspeakable tragedy, or just a daily frustration. But it is "a light thing in the sight of Yahweh." Not your broken heart, not your despair, for it is those things that move His great compassion toward you - but the problem you have is no more than four bits in a cold-drink machine to Him.

He created the streambed. He can fill it. Instantly. He doesn't even need rain.

How do you suppose Jehoshaphat and his men felt as they marched toward Edom and the allied kings now?

Live life today with confidence. Know that you can do all the things God has put in your path to do today. Whatever you need... when you need it... He can provide it. Do His will today with reckless abandon!

June 15

Reading: 2 Kings 2; 2 Kings 4

"And Elisha saw it and he cried, 'My father, my father! The Chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' And he saw him no more."

(2 Kings 2:12a)

What we need today in our homes, our schools, our nation and even in God's Church is a healthier respect - not only for the Word of God - but those that proclaim It! The preacher was once a respected member of society. It was a calling to which parents would be proud for their sons to aspire. Even those who did not attend church - perhaps not even believe in God - stood up straighter, removed their hat, cleaned up their language, and spoke respectfully to a man who symbolized, and spoke for, God.

Today?

Today, preachers are looked upon as lazy people who only "work one day a week". They are looked upon as weak men because they are assumed to teach only fairytales to women and children.

I suppose that some preachers have earned this reputation, and many televangelists have been known for their hypocrisy and greed. On the other hand, there are many preachers who have become cynical, having dealt with board members on power trips who couldn't throw their weight around anywhere else. There are many who are disillusioned by the hypocrisy of church members who claim to follow Jesus but follow only with their lips, and cringe at the thought of their children becoming preachers or missionaries.

But what did Elisha say?

"My Father, my Father! The Chariots of Israel and its horsemen!"

Elisha was proclaiming who his mentor Elijah was. Elisha recognized that this man, who had become his spiritual father, was the true defender of the nation. He, as God's prophet... God's spokesman... God's preacher... was the backbone of a nation. He was the horses and Chariots of Israel. Proverbs 29 puts the need for preaching this way:

"Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint." (v. 18a)

That certainly sums up where we are doesn't it? Between the lack of respect for God's Word and the lack of real preaching of repentance from the pulpit...

"...in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie." (Ecclesiastes 11:3b)

The King James version puts it as rightly this way:

"Where there is no vision, the people perish;"

Our families, communities, nation, and its congregations are certainly perishing today for lack of respect for the Word of God and Its messenger.

Elisha not only recognized and respected Elijah - obeying his master, following him to the very end, and proclaiming his standing - but also lived a life that demanded the same respect as well. When asked what he would have his master Elijah do for him, Elisha said, "I want to be able to have the power and guts you have had, Elijah! Twice over!" (v. 9) When some boys from town mocked him on his way home - calling him names and telling him to leave in the same manner as his mentor did - Elisha didn't take their guff! What seemed like more or less innocent playground childishness was not tolerated when it was pointed at the man of God. Cursed by the name of Yahweh, forty-two young men were descended upon by bears and mauled! (vv. 23-24)

(As an aside... I wonder what kind of respect we teach our children when we shave the preacher's head or decorate him like a s'more or such for reaching at VBS offering goal? It may seem like innocent fun, but maybe we should teaching giving and generosity for the sake of God - rather than have the opportunity to demean God's man.)

What of you preacher? Are you doing a respectable job? Can you truly say that you are recognizing and praying to remain God's spokesman?

What of you Church member - or even just community member... Does your life reflect a respect for the Word and Its proclaimer? Don't the effects we've seen in our lives without it demand some reflection?

June 16

Reading: 2 Kings 5:1-8:15

"Then they said to one another, 'We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news. If we are silent and wait until morning light, punishment will overtake us. Now therefore come; let us go and tell the king's household.'
(2 Kings 7:9)

When we are pushed aside... when we are outcast... when it seems no one values who we are or what we can do, it is human nature to feel a certain amount of animosity. It is easy for us to not only look for a way to prove them wrong but also to settle in for a view of their prideful fall.

Here in today's passage are two guys who have been just that. They are stuck outside the city because they are lepers. They can't go in, and they can't stay out. One way they'll be killed as unclean people in a city already decimated by a siege, the other way they'll starve outside without any food at all. Their only option between quick and slow death was to put themselves in the hands of the ungodly.

But this time they find themselves in a most fortunate place. They will be the first to witness the saving hand of God. Leaving certain death behind, they strike out and strike it rich! God has caused the besieging army to hear the non-existent weapons of war approaching and abandon the siege. And there, left behind in their hurried retreat, are all the spoils of the Syrian war machine. Food, drink, gold, silver, clothes - all a man could wish for - is here for the taking! And it all belongs to two men.

Can't you imagine the utter incredulity and extreme joy of these two guys!? They go from worst to first - from the bottom of the barrel to the top of the heap. They react like any of us would. They grab up all the loot they can and take it to a hiding place. Then? They make another trip - perhaps a third! When they've worn themselves out, it's then time to rest and feast. They tear into a banquet the likes of which they'd never dreamed. It's all there - for just the two of them - it's the largest most indulgent buffet they'd ever seen. Their growling bellies can't help but remind them of all the dirty looks they'd suffered over the years from those "religious people" inside yonder wall. "If they could only see us now...!"

But as their stomachs distend with their smorgasbord of kings and the alcohol begins to mellow their minds, somehow their consciences slice through.

"This is a day of good news."

They begin to think of people inside that wall. There are starving children in there. There are some people who are nice. Maybe they even begin to wonder, "Had the shoe been on the other foot..."

"This is a day of good news."

Friends, we live in a day of good news! While the world, even the Church, is under siege - starving for the Bread of Life, there is good news. There is bread available! There is a Savior! We, like the lepers, might still be plagued with some physical sufferings, but Yahweh has once again delivered His people - even mankind! Will we sit and enjoy the blessings of God and salvation all by ourselves and gloat over the destruction of the rest of man?

True enough, there was also the realization that one day, most likely the next morning, the truth of the matter would come to be known - just as on that Day all will know the Truth of the gospel - and when that Truth was known - had they not spoken up - they would be killed. Yes, that was also a motivation. And it should be for us as well!

But more than that, it was the thought...

"This is a day of good news!"

Couldn't your family, your co-worker, your schoolmate, your neighbor... couldn't anyone... couldn't everyone... use some good news?

June 17

Reading: 2 Chronicles 21:8-22:9; 2 Kings 8:23-10:31

"And he said, 'Come with me, and see my zeal for Yahweh.' So he had him ride in his chariot."
(2 Kings 10:16)

Have you ever been "lovesick"?

Have you ever felt so much longing and desire for a person (or I suppose it could be a thing...) that you physically felt symptoms? Sometimes it's characterized as a positive emotion - sometimes we feel it more in heartbreak, but most of us have had some level of that feeling. In its most negative light, we might say that someone was "green with envy". Supposed origins of that idiom come from our emotions being so stirred with the bile of our inner parts that our skin turns green or yellow.

Literally, it just means to be "sick" with love.

Jehu, longtime commander of the army of Israel under Ahab and his sons, became the instrument through which God would execute the prophecies of Elijah concerning the death of Jezebel and the end of Ahab's dynasty over Israel. Jehu was extremely effective to this end. He definitely polished-off the house of Ahab. He furiously drove his chariot all around the kingdom striking them down wherever he met them. He gathered up not only the prophets of Baal, but also all the people who worshipped Baal and killed every last one of them.

It is this kind of "zeal" or emotionally upheaving desire for Yahweh that he speaks of as he picks up Jehonadab in his chariot and invites him to see his lovesickness for God with his own eyes. Jehonadab even claimed to Jehu that his heart was as Jehu's.

Zeal for God is a wonderful thing.

When our desire for Him stirs our emotions in such a powerful way... when others are stirred in that same way... when God can lay hold of us for his purposes... what a powerful combination that becomes!

However...

While God was pleased with His obedience, evidently there was more in Jehu's heart than just "zeal" for Yahweh.

There was prideful ambition as well.

While God said, because of the good things he'd done, his sons would sit on Jehu's throne to the fourth generation, we also see this from the prophet Hosea much later:

"...in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel,"

(where the killing of Joram and Jezebel took place)

"and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel."

(Hosea 1:4b)

It is always right to love God! It is always right to obey God! It is fine to love God in such a way that it moves us deeply and emotionally. But we must keep a constant watch on our motives, on our attitudes, and our pride. It is easy to begin a work, or even to answer a calling of God, with all the right intentions. It can also be easy to lose our original aim.

Stand for right. Tell the truth. Preach the Word. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

But die every day.

Make sure the person who does it to be right instead of righteous... the person who does it to destroy not build-up... the person who does it to sever, not restore... is never allowed to live within your heart.

June 18

Reading: 2 Kings 11:1-12:16; 2 Chronicles 22:10-24:22; 2 Kings 10:32-36

"Then the Spirit of God clothed Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, and he stood above the people, and said to them, 'Thus says God, "Why do you break the commandments of Yahweh, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken Yahweh, He has forsaken you.'"

(2 Chronicles 24:20, italics mine)

Would you bet \$100 against my \$1M that you could smash a boulder with one hit from your hand? OK - \$10M. Let's adjust for inflation. Would you put up \$100 for a chance to win a billion dollars? All you have to do is smash a boulder by striking it once with your bare hand.

You wouldn't spend \$100 on that? Why not? Because it's impossible right? You'd just as well hand me \$100 or flush it down the toilet. There is absolutely no chance that you're winning even bragging rights at that.

The people of Judah had been prospering under the strong leadership of the priest Jehoiada. He kept the boy king Joash safe until he was seven years old. He practically raised the king and taught him how to lead, how to follow God, how to be a good king. But when Jehoiada died, the "important people" of Judah rejected his son as a spiritual leader, killed him, and led King Joash and his people off into idolatry, misery, and pain.

They knew the prosperity of godliness. They knew the blessings of holiness. But they couldn't resist the bet they could not win.

How is it that we still believe that we can break the laws of God and prosper! God says here in this passage that it cannot be done. Not by people who know better anyway, and eventually even those who seem to be prospering will be destroyed if they do not repent.

It's just that the promised payoff is so huge, right? But the devil can't pay. He doesn't own a thing. It's impossible odds.

June 19

Reading: 2 Kings 13:1-11; 2 Kings 12:17-21; 2 Chronicles 24:23-27; 2 Kings 13:14-25

"And he said, 'Take the arrows,' and he took them. And he said to the king of Israel, 'Strike the ground with them.' And he struck three times and stopped. Then the man of God was angry with him and said, 'You should have struck five or six times; then you would have struck down Syria until you had made an end of it, but now you will strike down Syria only three times.' ...Three times Joash defeated [Ben-hadad] and recovered the cities of Israel."

(2 Kings 13:18-19, 25b)

Are you planning to retire?

In Neil Pasricha's April 13, 2016, Harvard Business Review article, "Why Retirement Is a Flawed Concept", he says:

"Back in 1889, German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck invented the idea of retirement, establishing the concept for the rest of us. 'Those who are disabled from work by age and invalidity have a well-grounded claim to care from the state,' he said at the time."

He goes on to describe one of the healthiest Japanese communities with a long life-span. They have no concept or word for "retirement". They have a different word in their vocabulary, however, that seems to be very important: "ikigai". "Icky guy" roughly translates to: "the reason you wake up in the morning".

You see, it's not so much that we want to quit working... we just want to work at what we love. Now we could go on and discuss "finding a job you love and never working a day in your life", but here is where I think the idea touches our scripture and our spiritual lives.

As Elisha lay on his deathbed, King Joash of Israel goes in for one last blessing. He hasn't been the best of kings, but he likes to "cover the bases". Weeping and crying, Joash uses the same phrase that Elisha had used of his master Elijah - in recognition of who the real leader of Israel was - as he calls Elisha "My Father...the Chariots and Horses of Israel".

But as prophets are apt to do, Elisha doesn't do (or say) the kind of things maybe Joash is looking or listening for. First, he has him shoot an arrow out the window. (Really!? Poor hunter safety, Elisha!) And then Elisha pronounces a blessing. (That's more what we're after!)

Then tells him, strangely, to beat the ground with some arrows. Joash does this, but after hitting the ground three times, stops. Then Elisha scolds him.

Why? Elisha didn't specify that he should do it more than that... We can only speculate and take our own "arrow shot" at application for our lives.

Was it a matter of sincerity? How sincere was Joash? Did he just kind of half-heartedly tap the floor? Did he roll his eyes at yet another thing? ("Again with the arrows? Just get on with why I'm here!")

Did he know what Elisha was driving at and just decide for himself... "I've got this. He's already said I'm going to 'end' the Syrians."

Maybe what he should have done was to thrash those things like he meant it and keep doing it until the man of God said, "STOP!"

And that's our lesson for today.

When God tells you to do something, keep doing it until He says you can stop! You don't retire from God's work. When we love the Lord, His commands are *ikigai* (Icky Guy). Serving Him is why we wake up in the morning. Paul put it this way:

"And whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." (Colossians 3:17)

And,

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters," (Colossians 3:23)

If you want what you can get out of life, go ahead, do it your way. But if you want what God intended for your life: keep listening; don't give up; and thrash some arrows!

June 20

Reading: 2 Kings 14:1-4; 2 Chronicles 25:1-24; 2 Kings 13:12-13; 2 Kings 14:15-16, 23-27; 2 Chronicles 25:25-28; 2 Kings 14:17-22; 2 Kings 15:1-5; 2 Chronicles 26; Jonah

"So the captain came and said to him, 'What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise! Call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.'" (Jonah 1:6)

Franciscan priest, ascetic, and writer Brennan Manning said this:

"The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians: who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable."

Jonah was sometimes that kind of prophet.

When Yahweh sent him with good news to King Jeroboam II, he was able to do that. (2 Kings 14:25) But when it came time for him to go to Nineveh and proclaim his enemies' destruction... he wasn't so sure.

It wasn't that Jonah had a problem with the news per se; it was that Jonah knew this: when you preach God's Word, things happen! He was sure the people of Nineveh would repent, and God - being the good God He is - would relent and forgive.

Jonah had rather see'm burn.

When finally he did obey God, it was all as Jonah suspected. But he did not rejoice; instead he sat on a hill to see what would happen. God had already told him/them what would happen. I suspect he sat there though to see if their repentance was for real - and perhaps to tell God on them if they went back to their old ways. Are we like Jonah?

Our nation is a sinking ship in a terrible storm caused by our own sin - the church's sin and the sin of the ungodly. Yet, too many are like Jonah. They are "lip-service-believers". They talk a big game of love, forgiveness, and Jesus. They proclaim they know Him. But when it comes to the real work of being disciples by making disciples - they run the other way and sleep in salvation's comfort while the rest of the world struggles against the storm in ignorance.

In the 2020 "pandemic", the Church was relegated to "non-essential" status by many governments. Guess why? Because a lot of the Church is non-essential.

To what else but atheism would the world's governments of men be driven when those who say they believe in Jesus and make bold claims aren't really contributing anything to society. The world may not believe in our God, but if we are going to claim to be Christians, they'd rather us at least pray for them than to be in the ship's hull fast asleep.

June 21

Reading: Amos 1-6

"'And I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and some of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?' declares Yahweh. 'But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, "You shall not prophesy."'"
(Amos 2:11-12)

In 2009, an unemployed forty-seven year old lady surprised the world. She was what the internet would refer to as both ugly and fat. One headline said, "Forty-Seven Years Old and Never Been Kissed". When she stepped out on to the stage and said her dream was to be a professional singer, audience members rolled their eyes and laughed. Judges gave one another doubtful looks. But when Susan Boyle opened her mouth and began to sing to the judges on Britain's Got Talent, people began to cheer. She moved everyone to tears as they rose to their feet cheering and applauding the sound of her heavenly, angelic voice.

Sometimes incredible things come from unlikely places.

One day, Amos was a shepherd in the Judean village of Tekoa. The next, he was a prophet of Yahweh speaking to Jeroboam II, the King of Israel. (1:1)

Hadn't Israel any of their own prophets? Yes. That was precisely the problem.

Yahweh had sent them many prophets, even men who were so "given" to God that they were Nazirites - men of a whole separate class of sanctification. Yet what did the Israelites do?

They told them to "Shut up and drink a beer."

Today the world cries out for great political minds who can solve the crises and upheaval of the world. Nations clamor for scientists who can cure the various scourges of infectious diseases. Society longs for leaders who will inspire unity and a social conscious. Perhaps God has given all those things, but they were murdered in the over thirty-million abortions that have happened in the US alone since Roe V. Wade.

Today the Church cries out much the same. The Kingdom's lack of gospel preachers... the drought of men who can and always will stand firmly on the Word of God and preach the gospel... has left the Church floundering in a chase for "relevance", struggling in a state of non-essentiality, and teetering on the precipice of extinction in the Western world.

Why?

Perhaps because we have "aborted" our prophets.

Not just in the literal, "medical murder" sense, but primarily in the same way the Israelites did. Many Church members (You know there's a difference between a "Church Member" and a Christian, right?) have said to our would-be preachers:

"Shut up and drink a beer."

In our nation, and in an increasing way among Church people - as already stated, we are losing a respect and desire for such men and what they bring to us. Additionally, when such men are called to be God's spokesmen, they are belittled and discouraged. Just as Jeroboam II, we prefer to look the other way from God in our trials and tribulations and believe that there must be some other way besides listening to God's call. But God will go to the pastures and grab "any old shepherd" if that's who will listen to His call.

Upon hearing of his nephew who was surrendering to God's call to be a preacher, one man said, "I hate to hear that. He's so smart. I don't want him to throw his life away." A father said to another young man who wanted to preach, "No one will hear you come and talk."

Those two men are the two evangelists of Rock Solid Ministries.

While we may not have changed the world, we would like to think we have at least been faithful to God's calling to "come out from among them" to call others out too.

I mourn the fact that many other prophets have been "aborted". And that some preachers of the Word have become only story tellers. Whether you are someone who is looking to hear God's Word... or perhaps one who has been called to speak it... will you please... for the sake of the Kingdom... look beyond self and look to God?

God is still calling men today, and we need to hear them - regardless of from where they may come.

June 22

Reading: Amos 7-9; 2 Kings 14:28-29; 15:8-9, 6-7; 2 Chronicles 26:22-23; Isaiah 6

"Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?' And He said, 'Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and Yahweh removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.'"

(Isaiah 6:11-12)

If you are still employed, what is it you are working for? If you are retired, are you trying to accomplish anything with your days? I think all of us are working for or toward some level of success! Even if we don't necessarily have "ikigai" (see June 19) in our life, I don't know of anyone that is working toward complete and utter disaster!

Yet, that is what Yahweh said the end of Isaiah's ministry would be.

"How long am I going to work for you, Lord? Until everyone repents? Are we going to try and - if they won't listen - go ahead and move on to something else?"

Nope. Isaiah's mission would end when there was the complete downfall of a nation and the almost total captivity of its people. The nation of Israel would be just a stump of a former mighty oak when all was said and done. (v.13)

Who'd sign up for that? Not even Isaiah knew that's what he was getting into when he raised his hand and said, "I'll go! Send me!"

But he was obedient. He saw the Lord on His throne. And did you notice in v.1 that just "the train of [the Lord's] robe filled the temple"? If God's "clothes" take up all the space in His temple - how much space does He take in us?

The Hebrew writer declared that He is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:29) A fire that consumes... well... it consumes! It fills. It takes. It eats up - not part, but all - of that which it touches.

When God calls us, and He has called us... me, you... every man and woman... when He calls us, it is permanent. It is until the end. It is not just part of us - not just part of our life - but all. It is not for our purpose or our desired ends - but His.

Are you OK with that?

You can't follow Jesus unless you "deny [yourself], take up your cross daily, and follow [Jesus]". (Luke 9:23) People crucified unto death don't have anymore life of their own... they don't have their own plans, schemes, motives, wishes, or purpose. It has been denied and crucified.

God may give us great success in our work! We pray He will! But is it OK... will you continue to follow Him... even if you are working toward utter failure?

June 23

Reading: 2 Kings 15:32-38; 2 Chronicles 27:1-9; Micah 1; 2 Kings 16:1-9; 2 Chronicles 28:1-15; Isaiah 7

"For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. And within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people. And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you are not firm in your faith, you will not be firm at all."
(Isaiah 7:8-9)

OK. Here is a confession - a confession of a guilty pleasure. One, I like TV. Two, of TV, I could spend the whole day watching "reality TV" courtroom shows. Yes. Any of them. Take your pick. I also like fictional (Wait... am I being redundant talking about "reality TV" and fictional shows?) courtroom dramas. In short, to paraphrase an old commercial (that I used to see a lot on TV!) "I'm not a judge or a lawyer, but I see a lot of them on TV."

However, if you had a legal problem, you probably would not come to me. But hey! I know about condonation and the Doctrine of Clean Hands and probably a lot of other stuff I can't think of right now.

Still not impressed?

Why not? Because you know that if I practiced law I'd still be sorely lacking. I don't have the knowledge, the actual experience, the authority... in short, I'd be a fake.

As Israel and Syria gang up on Judah and King Ahaz, Isaiah is sent with this message from God, "Rezin (King of Syria) and "the Son of Remeliah" (Doesn't even call Pekah by name! Ouch!) are fakers. They're nothing like Yahweh. God is going to take care of this. BUT... you must have FAITH to stand! If you don't have faith... well..."

Isaiah even offers Ahaz a sign. Even more, he says, "Pick a sign! Any sign! Ahaz, you need a faith boost? OK then. Let me help you!" (v.11)

But Ahaz is a fake too. "Nope. Don't need one. I'll not put Yahweh to the test."(v.12)

Seriously?

You don't think your perverse kingdom has already "tested Yahweh"? You don't think that when you went down to the Valley of Hinnom (what would become the city dump later) and offered your son on the fiery bronze alter of Molech that you tested God!? (2 Kings 16:2) God has passed every test by not already destroying you!

Stop it with your fake piety!

Instead, Ahaz went to the King of Assyria Tiglath-pileser (initials T.P.!) to solve his problem. T. P. was just as much of a faker as Rezin and "the son of Remeliah" (Wouldn't even say his name!). He was not God. In the end, T. P. would fall and so would Rezin ...and Ahaz ...and "the son of Remeliah". (Wouldn't even write his name down!)

What of you and me?

Do we fear the "son of ___ (fill in the blank) a man" - rather than the Son of Man? Are we leaning on T. P. for help?

Maybe we ought remember that when you trust in TP you're not fixing the problem. There will still be a whole lot more... uh... mess... in to clean up in the future!

Don't be a faker.

Remember this day: "If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all." For, "...without faith it is impossible to please God...". (Hebrews 11:6)

June 24

Reading: Isaiah 8-11

"Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But Yahweh of hosts, Him you shall honor as holy. Let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread. And He will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem."
(Isaiah 8:12-14)

If you're looking for how the words of the Bible - a collection of sixty-six books written 2000-4000 years ago - are relevant for today's life... look no further. With all the political unrest and intrigue happening in the nations of Syria, Assyria, Israel, and Judah - like today - real conspiracies and conspiracy theories were sure to abound. People lived in fear of what might happen next. The economy was shattering and the nation's enemies were knocking on the door.

What would they do? How would they respond?

Again... sound like today's world?

God sends Isaiah to speak to the people about the situation. He shows them two ways of looking at what was happening based on one of two ways people would look at God.

One way to respond - even as we see people respond today: distrust of your neighbor, fear, and dread.

"Whose side are you on!? Are you for or against us?"

That kind of paranoia is driven by fear. Someone once said that a good definition for fear is: F.alse E.vidence A.ppearing R.eal. The devil will attempt to conjure up all kinds of thoughts of what could be and false interpretations and understandings of what is. That even leads to - and comes out of (a vicious circle) - negative thoughts about God.

"Don't believe what the prophet says! Don't even believe what God says! He doesn't care for us."

In fear and mistrust, people stumble over God. They don't believe His Word. And they are trapped in their own ignorance.

But God says for us to respond differently. It is as if He is snapping His fingers - getting our attention, "Hey! Over here! Don't look at that! Don't listen to that! Keep your eyes on me. Keep your mind on my Word. Keep moving in the direction I'm leading."

That kind of response gives us a sanctuary! In Him we have a place to rest - even in the chaos of a world that is failing and falling apart.

In short, turn off the news, and open your Bible. Relieve yourself of worry and rest in the sanctuary of God's peace!

June 25

Reading: Isaiah 12, 17; 2 Chronicles 28:16-21; 2 Kings 16:10-18; 2 Chronicles 28:22-25; 2 Kings 18:1-8; 2 Chronicles 29:1-2; 2 Kings 15:30-31; 2 Kings 17:1-4; Hosea 1:1-2:13

"And she did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, and who lavished on her silver and gold, which they used for Baal. Therefore, I will take back my grain in its time, and my season, and I will take away my wool and my flax, which were to cover her nakedness."

(Hosea 1:8-9)

Who would purposely marry a known prostitute? - a man of God determined to do what God told him to do - regardless of how crazy it seemed.

Hosea/Hoshea being very closely related to the name Jeshua - the Hebrew version of "Jesus" also means "savior". This - a savior - Hosea attempted to be for the wayward woman - a woman he entered into a relationship with even while she was a sinner.

Throughout his marriage it was one heartache after another. Gomer, daughter of Diblaim ("two cakes" - Commentator Matthew Henry notes that sin is often born out of plenty!) bore Hosea at least three children ...at least he assumed they were his children. Each were named sad names by instruction of the Lord to complete His message in this in-real-time, live-action play before God's people.

The sermon Hosea delivers reveals in these verses that when Gomer would leave home and take these other lovers, Hosea would go to them and give them what Gomer would need. He knew to these other men she was only a plaything. They didn't care for his wife; they only took what they wanted - living a lifestyle of immorality and idolatry. Such was surely seen when Hosea quit paying for her care. The "lewdness" and immorality of all parties was on display when they tossed her aside without Hosea's money.

Can the message be more clear?

We are a people bought with a price even while we were yet sinners. (Romans 5:8) And since then, God continues to lavish upon us blessing after blessing. (James 1:17)

But how do we use them?

We take the things meant for our good (Romans 8:28) - everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3) - and waste much of it on our own pursuits. We even attend church services and get all involved in our own "feasts, new moons, sabbaths, etc" ... our own. (Did you notice there in 2:11 that Hosea says he will put an end to all her feasts, new moons, Sabbaths...). But when we make "church" about us, we are no longer worshipping God.

What would happen should God start to remove His hand of blessing because of our whoredoms and wastefulness?

Is that what we are seeing?

June 26

Reading: Hosea 2:14-8:14

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt."
(Hosea 2:14-15)

Therefore.

Somewhere along the way, a teacher told me, "When you see the word 'therefore', always stop and consider what it's 'there for'."

(It couldn't have been an English teacher because that ends in a preposition. They would have said, "consider the reason for which it is there" - which really doesn't work at all.)

What is this "therefore" "there for"?

Because what we see as utter disaster, (1:1-2:13) God only sees as an opportunity - a reason for - help and mercy in the face of punishment. Yes, punishment for an unrepentant heart is sure, but God offers an alternative! That alternative is described with three different geographic locations.

The Wilderness. The wilderness is rough. Sometimes it's described as the "desert". It's away from conveniences, away from the comfort we usually place foremost in our plans. But it's also away from distraction. Many times through the Bible, God speaks to the people He will use in big ways out in the wilderness.

Moses. A man on the run from the punishment of a murder he'd committed. (OK, justifiable homicide? Eh... only God can say, I suppose.) God finds him out in the wilderness and speaks to him from a bush.

John the Baptist. He was preaching a revival in the wilderness.

Jesus. He begins His ministry by going out to the wilderness to fast and pray for forty days and nights.

The Apostle Paul. Then known as Saul, out in the wilderness, he was accosted by a bright light and called to be Jesus' Apostle to the gentiles. He is then whisked off to Arabia for three years. (Galatians 1:17-18)

The wilderness isn't fun, but when you're ready - God's ready to meet you there.

The Valley of Achor. Remember that one? You have to remember all the way back to March 24th's reading. There we learned that it was in the Valley of Achor (meaning the Valley of Trouble) Achan, his whole family,

and all that he had were stoned, burned, and stoned again! (Joshua 7:26) But a whole valley of the worst kind of trouble can be a door of hope. It can be a door of expectation - for the one who will turn back to God.

Egypt. God says, "Remember that trouble in Egypt - when you were slaves, when you got your workload doubled, when you had it doubled without any straw for your brickwork? I called you out of that; I'll bring you out of this if you'll trust me."

Which place are you in?

Are you in a place where God is ready to use you if you'll spend some time with Him a while? A wilderness?

Are you in a whole valley of trouble by your own doing? A Valley of Achor?

Are you in Egypt - enslaved by your culture, your government, your workplace, your... fill in the blank?

Hosea... Hoshea... Joshua... Jesus... SAVIOR... whichever language or variation you want to use... stands at the ready today. He's calling you. He's alluring you.

Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling.

June 27

Reading: Hosea 9-14

"The inhabitants of Samaria tremble for the calf of Beth-aven. Its people mourn for it, and so do its idolatrous priests - those who rejoiced over it and over its glory - for it has departed from them. Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek Yahweh, that He may come and rain righteousness upon you. You have plowed iniquity; you have eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your own way, and in the multitude of your warriors,"
(Hosea 10:5, 12-13)

We live in a world that makes me shake my head.

In our worship of all things material, we mourn the passing of our idols. I remember the outpouring of grief in our nation over the death of a great acting talent several years ago. Yet, relatively, few of those people knew that person. The people loved what was given them on the silver screen, but they had no interactions with that person. They had no relationship they lost. They simply missed a perception and what entertainment they might be provided them in the future.

Fast-forward to June 24, 2022. The Supreme Court of the United States of America honors the State of Mississippi's law that severely restricted infanticide in the form of abortion. The liberal media and the "women's rights" groups - even homosexual organizations - mourn the fact that not any and every child can be murdered in the mother's womb.

The gods of our world cause us mourn the passing of idols that may or may not have given anything real or tangible to the world - and rejoice in the ending of innocent life.
Let that sink in.

You have to shake your head.

Hosea said Israel was much the same. As the Assyrians would haul off the inhabitants of the Northern kingdom along with all their idols, they mourned. Isn't that strange? They mourned the falling of their god that did not - and never could - save them!

Maybe the message they received is the one we need to receive!

It is time to seek Yahweh!

There is a stark dichotomy presented here: Sow righteousness and reap steadfast love; or plow iniquity and eat lies.

Choose wisely! We will reap what we sow. (Galatians 6:7)

June 28

Reading: Isaiah 28; 2 Kings 17:5; 2 Kings 18:9-12; 2 Kings 17:6-41; Isaiah 1:1-20

"Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations - I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly."
(Isaiah 1:13)

Consider this closely Church. Read these words of Isaiah. These are the words of God to the house of Judah. Judah was the lineage of Jesus. God blessed them and pleaded with them and strove with them for centuries. Yet, they were carried away. Why? In part, or in whole, because of their hypocrisy.

While they carried on their festivals and meetings and "worship" - their hearts were far from God. They lived lives full of iniquity. We are not talking about the daily struggle each believer has with temptations in this spiritually frail structure of our worldly body - I'm talking about: knowing what's right, continually deciding to do wrong, and everyone being "OK" with it.

This is what they did.

God says, "I can't deal with that."

Yet in many congregations today, there are members whose lives are soaked in iniquity. And they really don't care! Add to that, the Church - its members, its evangelist, its leaders... they all know it. But - either the other members are afraid of their own sin being found out, the preacher is afraid of losing his job, or the elders: don't have the guts to stand up for Jesus, are afraid of their wives and the gossip circle, or just, frankly, don't care about the sheep as long as the attendance stays up so that the offerings are good.

I am not talking about congregational discipline for the sake of power trips, meanness, or self-righteousness. But what do you think Jesus thinks of a body of people who "religiously" gather "in His name" but congratulate themselves on their piety while the witness of the Lord's Church is that of a gathering of worldly hypocrites?

Jesus has commanded that we tighten up and bring to restorative health the body of Christ! (Matthew 18:15ff) But if that won't happen, the cancerous part of the body is to be cut out so that the rest may survive in health! (1 Corinthians 5:11-13)

Recently, I was told that maybe with some age I'd learn some "humility". A person said this simply because I stood up and said what God said about things. Look, don't call the person courageous enough to love Jesus' people "arrogant" or "mean". Have the guts yourself to love others in a way that encourages repentance! And have the guts to admit when you're wrong and repent.

God "cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly".

June 29

Reading: Isaiah 1:21-5:30

"Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?" (Isaiah 5:1-4)

My wife and I enjoy mornings at home. Even in the Mississippi summertime, just after rising, you will most likely find us with a cup of coffee and our Bibles at our patio table. We listen to God and watch the birds (and vice versa!) We have a couple of different seed feeders as well as some hummingbird feeders.

The sparrows fit themselves right down into the seed trays. They pick through and find what they want and throw some out on the ground. But, no worries, the cardinals - a little too big to rest on the feeder - pick around down underneath and get what the sparrows throw over. As well, we have a woodpecker that floats down once every morning to get one kernel of corn and go back to his tree.

The other day though, I noticed a tall shoot growing up underneath one of the feeders. There, with roots exposed, was a corn stalk. The cardinals and woodpecker had missed it and it was growing - already about six inches tall. My wife had an empty pot of soil near by, so I picked it up and replanted it.

My garden!

But within two days, it had shriveled up. There would be no corn this year.

Now, I didn't expect much corn. In fact, I hadn't expected any at all! I was as surprised as Jonah about what came up. So, when it expired, I didn't care much about it.

My neighbor, however, is a real gardener. We each share ownership of half the lot between our homes. His half, and a little bit of mine, is covered with his garden. There are beans, squash, watermelon, corn - you name it - and lots of it. From the time the frost ends until it comes again, he spends hours a day, preparing, planting, weeding, tending, harvesting, and preparing for the next year.

But last year he was pretty disappointed. With all that he'd done, and he is an expert gardener, there was little to show for his labor. We had far too wet of a year and nothing survived. It was pretty discouraging.

I know that sometimes it feels like we are kinda just walking through life on our own. That "life is what you make it", as they say. Many feel that they got the "short end of the stick". They look at the lives of others and call them "privileged" or lucky.

Want to know the truth?

We are all privileged.

No, we may not all have the same material things. Throughout the world, we may not have the same socio-economic opportunities as others. But in the things that matter, God has taken notice of all of us. And not just taken notice, but: diligently watched over us, laboriously called to us, and meticulously planted in us.

"For God so loved the world..." (John 3:16)

"your Father...makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust."
(Matthew 5:45)

"By His divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life..."
(2 Peter 1:3)

So God says:

"And now...judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?"

Do you look at your life and judge God? Do you say that He has not given you what you need? Do you look at the worldly and not at the spiritual He has labored to plant in you?

Then why do we have these wild grapes?

June 30

Reading: 2 Kings 16:19-20; 2 Chronicles 28:26-27; Isaiah 13-16

"Those who see you will stare at you and ponder over you: 'Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who did not let his prisoners go home?'"
(Isaiah 14:16-17)

Have you ever thought God was "out to get you"? "He is just waiting for me to slip up!" I certainly have.

No one knows and realizes the depth of your soul. No one else knows the dark places and thoughts you are capable of - perhaps the things you are capable of doing - except you. ...and God. Yes, we know all about the grace of God; yes, we know all about the love of God; we've heard all these things before. But sometimes it seems unbelievable that it could really extend to me! There's no way that God couldn't be ready to exterminate me!

Actually, that's not true.

Conversely, God is actually trying - constantly - to help you, to encourage you, to cheer you on. The Bible says that "...God is for us..." (Romans 8:31) When we are trusting faithfully in him - even through our sinful failures - He is there pushing us onward, upward, and through.

So much so that He does things like Isaiah 14. Before Judah is ever taken captive, Isaiah brings the good news that Nebuchadnezzar will not be forever. In fact, he won't even be the master of Judah a third of the captivity! This man who proclaimed himself a god and wanted to be worshipped like one - a certainly looked like one to the known world by the power he wielded - is only a man. In the end, Isaiah prophecies that people will look at him and say:

"Is this what we were afraid of!?"

In our world today where fears abound, isn't this a message that we need to hear?

Understand that on the other side of today's trials... beyond what you see today that seems so daunting... past what you think you cannot endure... is - if you will but stick with Jesus - the day when you look back and say, "Why was I afraid!?"

July 1

Reading: 2 Chronicles 29:3-31:21

"Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah, and he did what was good and right and faithful before Yahweh his God. And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in accordance with the law and the commandments, seeking his God, he did with all his heart, and prospered.
(2 Chronicles 31:20-21, italics mine)

For several years now I have been strictly a revival preacher. I no longer stand in the pulpit of the same congregation every week, but go from town-to-town, state-to-state, sometimes country-to-country and preach where I've been invited to do so. When I first began this way of life, I called a lot of preachers I knew - and some I didn't - and let them know about our ministry. Being as there is absolutely no financial cost to any congregation for me to come, I thought most - if not all - preachers would jump at the opportunity to hold a meeting in their church.

I was surprised at many, if not most, of the responses I got.

"Revivals don't work anymore."

"Our people won't come out for that."

"We've tried that before."

"Do churches still hold revivals?"

I have a lot to say about each of those responses, but can I share what I think the truth is? (I'm going to regardless because this is my forum!)

I think there are a lot of congregations - and preachers even - who don't want revival! Oh, they'd never say that... but real revival - not just having some meetings - will cost you a lot.

And I'm not talking about money.

What happens in today's reading is a real revival. By the time Hezekiah becomes King of Judah, at best, God's people have for decades sat on the fence in pseudo-worship of Yahweh, and they have served other "gods" at their worst. Additionally, they had been constantly under siege from outside forces... things were not good. Today's reading mentions that they'd not even met for once-a-year meetings like Passover regularly!

But Hezekiah brings revival! He served God and directed the people "with all his heart" and what he did prospered.

But it came at a price that few church folks are willing to pay today.

1) He repaired, cleaned, and consecrated the temple to get back to its full function for God. (29:3-5) Now there is a whole lot to say about this on a spiritual level... revival demands that we Christians as the Temple of the Holy Spirit - if we would have revival: repair our relationship with God, rid our lives of the filth of sin, and set ourselves apart for the service of God. THAT is the best and strongest application of this for us.

Yet, one outward symptom of neglected spiritual lives I see as I travel about is the state of many church buildings. They are in a state of disrepair we would never allow our own homes to be in. They have bulletin boards with items on them from years ago ("Nothing much new going on here!"). It may not even be consecrated space anymore! There are congregations and campgrounds of our churches who rent out their facilities to share with other churches that teach false doctrine! How is that right?

2) Revival demands a commitment. (29:10-11) Yes, there is the commitment to the calendar, etc, for a revival "meeting", but beyond that - real revival means we get cleaned up then we start doing things rightly! On an individual level or congregationally, it is a commitment to not fall back! We will have to make a commitment to stop being half-hearted, stop being worldly-minded, and preach against sin and remove it from the Church. Just as God had chosen Hezekiah and those servants, priests, and ministers of his day, God has made us Jesus Christ a royal priesthood! (1 Peter 2:9) Let's get back to the work, Brothers and Sisters!

3) Revival demands real worship. Worship includes both these other things already mentioned, but it also demands giving of our time, talent, testimony, and treasure. This all happened when the people finally gathered and brought their offerings. And they all sang and played the whole time the burnt offering was offered. (29:28)

4) Revival demands that we go out and invite the back-slidden to "slide on back" to the fold! This Hezekiah commanded the people. There were some who laughed at the messengers, but there were also some - even some from the already fallen Israel - who came back to God. (30:10-11)

5) Revival demands the work of prosperity. Wait, what? Yes, in all these things Hezekiah prospered. But you see, prosperity - even in the Church - brings its own work. Prosperity means continued spiritual growing pains in the lives of once content-on-the-sidelines believers. It means more people will be coming to church - people with problems, messy lives - and demand our time and attention. It means that even when we have the joy of baptisms, we will then have to feed and care for new babes in Christ.

No, if you like a nice, quiet, easy congregation - don't have a revival meeting. In fact, do what so many have done and try to get as much Bible out of what is already happening at church weekly. Any Bible at all may

cause problems. Certainly, even just having four more services than regular in a week (like a revival meeting) will cause a bigger problem!

July 2

Reading: Proverbs 25-29

"Bloodthirsty men hate one who is blameless and seek the life of the upright. An unjust man is an abomination to the righteous, but one whose way is straight is an abomination to the wicked."

(Proverbs 29:10, 27)

I made a mistake the other day. I looked at Facebook.

I only have six "friends" on Facebook - my wife, my three children, and my two daughters-in-law. That's the way I like it. I used to have close to two thousand "friends", but I ran into the same problem when I made my mistake the other day.

I don't even know how I found it, it was not on one of my six "friends'" pages. But someone made a comment I just couldn't resist commenting on. And we were off to the races.

This person absolutely could not be reasoned with and while demanding tolerance for the falsehood they touted as truth, would absolutely not tolerate the real truth from me or anyone else! (Such are the "tolerant" people.) Hate spewed from their mouths concerning the righteous viewpoint I shared. But as Solomon said, "...one whose way is straight is an abomination to the wicked."

Wicked people hate the truth because they know the truth. Everyone knows right from wrong. You can eventually sear your conscience with enough denial of it, but God has written natural law on the hearts of men. When righteousness is preached, and especially when righteousness is lived before the wicked, they hate it. Piety only proves that a person can know what's right and can do what's right. It really puts a kink in the wicked person's ability to justify their agnosticism and/or wrongdoing.

It is difficult to speak for Jesus. Solomon shows the quandary in Proverbs 25:4-5:

"Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes."

To put it more plainly, "It's foolish to try to convince a fool of anything, but if you don't try they'll never learn."

It seems you just can't win!

But don't give up. Keep seeking the Truth, telling the Truth, and living the Truth - "for you will heap burning coals on his head, and Yahweh will reward you." (25:22)

July 3

Reading: Proverbs 30-31

"The man declares, I am weary, O God; I am weary, O God, and worn out. Surely I am too stupid to be a man. I have not the understanding of a man."

(Proverbs 30:1-2)

Ever feel that way?

I don't know who Agur was, but praise God! He let Agur put his feelings down in The Book! Many if not all of us, a lot if not most of the time, can definitely relate. But verse 4-6 seem to be God's response to Agur's (and our) feelings.

"Who has been on both heaven and earth? You? Who can control the weather? Do you know about that? Who created all this?"

That is, why would you think you should know so much!? You don't know how things work. But you do know Who does - and you know His Son's name! (Is this the first biblical reference to God having a Son? Seems like it!) God simply says, "I know you don't know anything... but that's OK! Just trust my Word and take refuge in it."

I think verse 6 says that when we try and pretend we know it all... knowing we don't... we are - in a sense - adding to His Word. Relax a little! Let God give the Truth! You just live the truth!

July 4

Reading: Psalms 42-46

"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God."

(Psalm 42:5-6a)

Things can certainly look like they will never be the same again.

And they won't.

At least not all our relationships will be the same - people die, move on, become disinterested. Our jobs or job responsibilities will change. The governments' leaders will change. The weather will produce storms, blizzards, and heat waves. Disease and age change our very selves.

And so we pant for God. (v.1) Our very soul is looking to God like an animal needing a drink in the heat of the day. Oh, we may not recognize that... As things change about us we run after new technologies, new escapes, more money, and a new hope. But what we are really panting after is God.

Though while mourning loss and change everything, seemingly everyone, and sometimes self says, "Where is God?" (v.3) Our faith can, if we will cling to it, remind us of the one thing (or Person) that never changes. As the psalmists say here, "[We] shall again praise Him."

Yes, most things change - people are born, people move in, friendships develop. Our jobs will take exciting new turns. The governments' leaders will change. The weather will produce just-right temperatures, cool

breezes, refreshing rains, and gentle snowflakes. Healing will come - now or "then". Wisdom and perspective will make age sweet. For our God, He who never changes, makes all things new. (Revelation 21:5)

We praised Him then; we will praise Him now; for past, present, future, and forever - He will be worthy of our praise.

July 5

Reading: Psalms 47-49; 84-85, 87

"Clap you hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!"
(Psalm 47:1)

Arrowhead Stadium, home of the National Football League's Kansas City Chiefs, boasts the title as the NFL's loudest stadium. At 137.5 decibels, the crowd at Arrowhead reached a sound level 7.5 decibels louder than a military jet takeoff with an afterburner. This level, prolonged, is listed as "painful". As a Chiefs fan who has visited the stadium several times, I can tell you that when the crowd rises even close to that level, you cannot actually hear yourself yelling.

I have also seen Christians, octogenarians even, at a high school basketball game get pretty loud. Whether yelling at the referees or cheering on the team, they get really excited.

Yet, when it comes to the Lord's Day gathering, some maintain that we must be quite restrained, quiet even - certainly nothing close to loud!

Why is this?

God's Word actually says to clap and be loud! Yet, sometimes when I try to encourage people to clap in worship, they look at me like I'd asked them to stab the person next to them in the pew!

"Well, that's Old Testament, preacher. They used 'loud clanging cymbals' back then too."

They certainly did. (So why are you complaining about it?) And the Old Testament is the scripture that Paul said was useful for "all things Church"! (2 Timothy 3:16-17) The Old Testament was Jesus' "Bible".

I am not advocating for something to be painfully loud. I'm not advocating that there shouldn't be silence at times. I'm not advocating that we be loud for loudness sake - I don't even think that's the point the Sons of Korah were making here in Psalm 47. What I'm saying - and what I think they were saying - is simply this: We need to be at least as excited about Jesus as Chiefs fans are about their sports team!

Let's not consider "what will people think" - but let us be concerned with what God thinks about our enthusiasm, love, and devotion toward Him.

July 6

Reading: Psalms 1-2, 10, 33, 71, 91

"Be to me a rock of refuge, to which I may continually come; You have given the command to save me, for You are my rock and my fortress."

(Psalm 71:3)

At a Church camp, one of our local friends came to the camp and cooked. He loves to share his gift of cooking and is generous with the food he catches and grows. It is all oh so good! As we say in the South, his cookin' will "make you wanna get up and slap yo' mama!"

One night he came and fixed a low country shrimp boil. There were jumbo gulf shrimp, sausages, potatoes, rutabagas, corn, onions... We all stood around the table as it was dumped out and began to eat. As we stood and ate, no one really noticed how full we were until we were really full! I swore I was so full I would never be able to eat again!

...or at least until the next night.

The next night he came and fried catfish, alligator, french fries, hushpuppies... And guess what? I ate again.

It just seems that no matter if we tried, we can't sit down and get enough food eaten to last the rest of our lives. We must come back continually.

In the same way, we need need Jesus daily! Sometimes we think we don't need Him, but you can't live on yesterday's faith. Jesus called us to bow before Him daily. (Luke 9:23) Other times, it seems that he must be tired of us running to Him for every little thing as we ask Him "continually" to "be to [us] a rock of refuge".

But God has offered that to us. He has "given the command" and looks for us - yea, expects, looks for, and even pleads with us - to come to the fortress... to be in Jesus... to remain in the vine. This very day Jesus wants to be your rock and fortress!

July 7

Reading: Psalms 92-97

"It is good to give thanks to Yahweh, to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; to declare Your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night,"

(Psalm 92:1-2)

How does your day begin?

I remember one preacher describing two approaches to the day. One person says, "Good morning, Lord!" While one says, "Ugh. It's morning."

As I have grown older, I have become more of a "morning person"; I just can't sleep as long or late as I used to. But as a formerly avowed night owl, the morning struggle can be real.

But over the years, as I have labored to discipline myself to morning worship, I have grown to honestly look forward to meeting Jesus every morning. My morning is not complete - and my day is "off" - unless I sit down with coffee and Jesus. It is truly good to declare His steadfast love in the morning.

Conversely, while I'm still working on prioritizing some time with God in the evening beyond my bedtime prayers, I have grown to love Sunday night and Wednesday night church. It was a bother to me as a young preacher. Sunday night sermons were the red-headed step-child of my week's study, and the small crowd was discouraging. But there is something about closing out the day with believers. Coming back together, tired from the day, to plop down and remember Jesus once again at twilight.

Because we do need that daily bread, I hope that you will endeavor to try waking up and falling to sleep with the Lord. And if that's already your habit... GOOD MORNING!

July 8

Reading: Psalms 98-100, 102, 104

"Make a joyful noise to Yahweh, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises! Sing praises to Yahweh with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody! With the trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, Yahweh!"
(Psalm 98:4-6)

I'm a musician and a bit of a singer. So, naturally, you might correctly guess that I like music. I'm also a known TV addict, so you might also guess that I like movies. That's also true. So, if you put those two things together you might guess that I like musicals.

I hate musicals.

Now, that's a bit of an exaggeration. There are a couple that I happen to like - but trust me, they are few and far between.

The main problem I have with musicals is their far-fetched, unrealistic nature. No one breaks into song for real – riding on a trolley while the bell's dingin' and their heart strings are zingin'! People don't go around singing in strangers faces while the strangers just smile, and orchestras of music don't just come from nowhere!
"Unrealistic!" I cry. Something like Star Wars - that's the movie for me!

Yet, Psalm 98 kinda seems like maybe we ought try it out. I mean "break forth into joyous song and sing praises" seems much more spontaneous than Sunday morning at 10:30 during the "same ol', same ol'".

Across several Psalms, today's included, we not only get this command - and it is a command! - to worship in song, but the song writers quickly give reasons for such an unlikely behavior:

"For great is Yahweh, and greatly to be praised;" (Psalm 96:4a)

"for He has done marvelous things!" (Psalm 98:1b)

"for He comes to judge the earth." (Psalm 98:9b)

"for Yahweh our God is holy!" (Psalm 99:9b)

"For Yahweh is good; His steadfast love endures forever, and His faithfulness to all generations." (Psalm 100:5)

So while generally, if ever, we don't need a reason for a command beyond the "Because I told you so!" - we certainly get many throughout the Psalms.

Well... why not try it today? Maybe you can start when you're someplace by yourself. Or - break forth into song at the local Walmart if you dare! I won't tell you where or when - the text leaves that up to us. But in general, there's no time like the present to obey God!

July 9

Reading: Psalms 105-106

"When He summoned a famine on the land and broke all supply of bread, He had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave."
(Psalm 105:16-17)

How do you make sure everything is ready and prepared for someone's (maybe your!) arrival? Nowadays, we call, text, email, message... some type of electronic communication can insure at least modest preparation will at least be requested in a timely fashion. While this is usually our method, it was not available to God's people throughout most of history - nor do I think it is as effective as God's method was (is?). (Surprise, surprise, right!?)

Throughout the Bible, God is always "sending a man ahead". This man would prepare the way for God's people (like Joseph here), for God's message (John the Immerser), God's work (the disciples sent to prepare the upper room for instance)... a large number of instances and reasons.
Does God do that today? I believe He most certainly does!

While we don't often take the time to notice or reflect upon it, God sent someone ahead of us! - ahead of you! Someone was already laboring in the "gospel field" - tilling the ground, sowing the seed - just waiting for your arrival. I believe God has a plan for each man; He has certain works prepared in advance for every man (and woman) to do! (Ephesians 2:10) Your opportunity to hear, believe, obey, and live out the gospel was planned far ahead of your arrival at the field of faith!

Have you kept your appointment?

God can and does do this, because He Himself is outside of time and space. He sees what has been, what is, and what will be here in time - all together. He has the power and ability to set everything out ahead of time - to give you and I opportunities. He is not controlling our moves, but He sets the chess board up for our advantage if we will but take a moment to notice and walk in the path He has prepared.

What has He prepared ahead for you today? Is there work to be done? Or, perhaps, have you been sent ahead on someone else's behalf? It's all worth considering!

July 10

Reading: Psalms 107, 111-114

"Oh give thanks to Yahweh, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of Yahweh say so, whom He has redeemed from trouble"
(Psalm 107:1-2)

This reminds me of a song. (Well, it is a song - but one based on these verses that we used to sing a lot.)
Ready!? Sing along with me! (Remember the July 9th devotion! Go ahead and "break forth" right here, OK!?)

"Let the redeemed of the Lord say so!
Let the redeemed of the Lord say so!
Let the redeemed of the Lord say so!
I'm redeemed! I'm redeemed!
Praise the Lord!"

Thank you! ("Thank you very much..." ...for the Elvis fans.)

Funny (not funny), it seems to me that much of the Church has the punctuation incorrectly memorized in this verse. They don't read, "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so!" They read, "Let the redeemed of the Lord say, 'so?...'"

If you are redeemed... if you have accepted the payment of Jesus Christ on the cross for your sins... we are to say so! That is, say that it *is* so. We are to tell people of our good fortune, the grace poured over our sins, and about the steadfast love of Yahweh that endures forever. If that's you - get out there and say so!

But too many Christians today live their life just saying, "So?" Their faith and their God is just another part - another compartmentalized piece of their humdrum "workin' for the weekend" lifestyle. For some reason, it just doesn't seem to mean very much to them.
Live your faith, Church.

Let your faith in Jesus and what He did for you inform every decision.

Let your faith in Jesus and His steadfast love form your every opinion.

Let your faith in Jesus and your freedom from sin season every word with a heavenly saltiness.

Be proud to be a Christian - loving like Jesus, speaking the Truth in love. If you're redeemed - say so!

July 11

Reading: Psalms 115-118

"Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them."
(Psalm 115:8, italics mine)

Ever wonder why some people just can't see the Truth? Why can't they understand?... Why can't they follow logic?... Why can they not see what's staring them in the face!?

As a friend of mine says, "Sin makes you stupid."

That is literally true. (And I don't mean the new dictionary definition of literal which is literally stupid itself that says you can say "literally" and it not be literal. These are the times we live in!)

"Sin makes you stupid." Literally, that is true.

Paul put it this way to the Roman Christians:

"For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools," (Romans 1:21-22)

There is literally a darkening that happens to the mind of the one who rejects Jesus - whether they only know Him by natural evidences (Romans 1:20) or they have even "tasted of the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, (Hebrews 6:4b). That is why Peter says that "...if after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first." (2 Peter 2:20) The purposeful rejection of Jesus darkens the mind in such a way they many will not be able to think their way back to an acknowledgment of Jesus that leads to repentance.

The Psalmist says here that people become like the god they worship.

Psalm 115:5-7 says their idols had "mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see; They have ears but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk;"

Paul would say, "You crazy [people]! Did someone put a spell on you? Have you taken leave of your senses?" (Galatians 3:1a). In my neighborhood, we'd say, "Y'all ain't got no sense!"

The Psalmist would say that literally! (In the new dictionary definition way.) Idolatry, defined by trusting in anything but Yahweh Himself, makes us like our idols which - as the Psalmist put it - are devoid of any sense.

The only way for us to come to our senses? Glad you asked! Paul told the Romans it was to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind". Dying to ourselves daily (Luke 9:23) is the only way for the lightbulb to come on and fight our darkened minds.

July 12

Reading: Psalm 119

"How long must your servant endure? When will You judge those who persecute me?"
(Psalm 119:84)

If you are an orderly type person, you will love today's Psalm. Well, at least if you would if you could read Hebrew!

You may notice in your English Bibles that every eight verses there is another heading... "Aleph", "Beth", "Gimel", "Daleth", etc. These are letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse of the eight within those twenty-two stanzas (the twenty-two divisions based on the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet) begins with that Hebrew letter. Again, we can't see that in the English Bible (unfortunately).

Furthermore, every one of those acrostic verses contains a Hebrew synonym for God's law. (Well, except for four verses. I guess the Psalmist could only make his thoughts work in his creative acrostic just so far.) They come across as many different English words. In the English Standard Version, some examples are: law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, rules, word, etc. I would encourage you today to read the whole Psalm and underline each synonym used - and find the four verses where there is none. (I'll tell you the answer to that at the end of this devotion.)

However, I will give you a couple of verses where the synonyms for God's law are a bit tricky. They are verses vv. 84 and 91.

"Judge" in the English of v. 84 is a verb. It doesn't look like a synonym for law. The Hebrew word is more like "judgment", a noun and, in context, a synonym for God's law. The English translation uses a verb so the translation flows more easily. Same thought and idea - just needed to say it a bit differently for us. (The other is "appointment" in v.91 - if you're reading the ESV. Your Bible may say "ordinances" - which is much more easily seen.)

But the idea of God's Word as judgment is what I want to explore for just a second.

(Yes, we finally get to the "devotion". Sorry for all the "Bible nerd" stuff, but now you know, as Paul Harvey said, "the rest of the story". Look it up if you were born after 1970 and listen to him a lot if you can find any recordings - especially if you're a preacher!)

God's word is the judge, the judgment, and does the judging. Jesus said that He wasn't sent to judge the world (John 3:17); He didn't have to. The world was already under judgment because the Word of God had enlightened mankind to their sin. (Romans 7:7-8)

When we say something is wrong, it is because God's Word says it is wrong. We do not judge; we simply proclaim the Truth (our job) of God's judgment. Two things, however, must be remembered:

1) We should only be proclaiming what is right and wrong on the basis of that Word! The Church movement to which I belong has had a tradition of this phrase: "Where the Bible speaks; we speak. Where the Bible is silent; we are silent." A lot of Christians have trouble with that concept! We also like to say: "In essentials unity, in opinions liberty, in all things love." Equally hard for some. (I'm raising my hand because I'm usually RIGHT! I am being facetious.)

2) It's not only our job to proclaim the Truth of right and wrong - but to also proclaim the remedy! We are not the world's policemen; we are the world's bail-bondsmen! We are to not only proclaim the truth of our condition, but also to help set the captives free by participating in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus! For those who are "dead" cannot be punished by the law. (Romans 6-7)

Celebrate today, the wonderful law like the Psalmist did. It both convicts and frees!

(VERSES WITHOUT A SYNONYM FOR GOD'S LAW: 3, 37, 90, 122)

July 13

Reading: Psalms 120-121, 123, 125-126

"Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar! Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace. I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war!
(Psalm 120:5-7)

I've lived in a lot of places, and seldom have those places been very large. The smallest place I've ever lived was Gaston, Mississippi. Most anyone from outside Prentiss County would ask, "Where is that?" A lot of times people might ask, "What's that close to?" The Psalmist describes for us living his life in a place, not by what it's close to, but by how far from a place it is.

He says he's been living (sojourning, ie., he's been staying there, but doesn't belong there) in Meshech and Kedar. Those two places are about as far from Jerusalem as anyone knows or imagines. Meshech was way up North in what is now southern Europe, and Kedar was way down South in what is now Saudi Arabia.

The point?: Though he doesn't belong there, he's been just about as far from living with God as he can be. And now, he is coming back. He's speaking figuratively about where he's been (as these two places are so far apart), but he is literally "coming home".

Psalm 120 begins, in our Bibles, a section of the Psalms called "The Psalms of Ascent". (Check out the inspired introductions to the songs.) It's believed that these Psalms were used as worship to prepare the minds of people on their way to the temple in Jerusalem. As Jerusalem was on Mt. Moriah, they were literally "going up", ascending in altitude - hence the name. Additionally, they may have been sung as people were ascending up the long, wide stairs that led from the base of the temple to its courts. Psalm 120 is the introduction to the part of the Hebrew hymnal that prepares people for temple worship.

There is a lot to be learned in these Psalms about preparing ourselves for "temple worship". Just because our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, doesn't mean we just come before the throne of God "willy-nilly" and find the time fruitful! Maybe though you belong to God, you've been "sojourning" quite a ways from Him. These Psalms might help us as well. Specifically in Psalm 120, the obvious is that we must "Leave & Love". We have to leave the places we've been sojourning and really show we love peace. We say we love peace - that we desire peace, but then we hang out with those who hate peace! We've got to leave.

Do you sojourn in the public arena? Do you hang out where politics is discussed? Do you look to men to bring the peace and help that only God can? You are sojourning far from Him - far from peace - where people hate peace.

Do you sojourn in the public school? Unfortunately, the public schools of the United States of America are much less places to be educated and are basically "indoctrination centers" where children are taught they are animals and accidents. It is there they learn diabolical social engineering strategies and are encouraged to be either gender, no gender, or make up their own gender. They are not taught scientific or historical truth, but invited to help rewrite it - with minds that aren't even finished developing! The public school hates peace.

Do you sojourn over on that other social media platform still? Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc - are also filled with hate, derision, and filth that somehow denies God exists on the one hand - yet also blasphemes He

in whom they say they don't believe. It has done nothing but fuel the fires of self-absorption, depression, and repression.

Do you sojourn in Hollywood? Do you get your direction from TV and movies? Do you clamor to have what the celebrity elite do? Do you understand the world from the far-removed, strange, out-of-touch perspective of those on the screen? Hollywood hates peace. It drives us away from our God who beckons us to Him.

If you truly, really and truly, want peace of mind... you are going to have to leave Meshech and Kedar and love the Prince of Peace - Jesus. Come home from far away today, and let us worship...in peace.

July 14

Reading: Psalms 128-130, 132, 134-135

"I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for Yahweh, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob."

(Psalm 132:4-5)

Do you have things that must be done every day? If you have livestock or even just pets, one of the sayings around the farm is: "Animals eat first."

There is your "morning routine" which consists of: whatever bathroom routine you have, coffee, dressing, coffee, gathering up things for work, coffee... Every. Day.

There is the "before bed routine": floss, brush, contacts out. Ladies may enjoy a hot bath every evening, un-apply make-up, and apply the Oil of Olay.

The Psalmist is concerned about finding room for God! Our days already have these "every day routines". And the challenge is not just "adding in some God". Sometimes our Bible reading, our prayer time?, our "going to church"... those things can become routine but not real. Beyond "adding God" is making room for God.

"...[finding] a place for Yahweh, a dwelling place for [Him]..." is more. It goes beyond the "consultation" of the Word (which might be a daily routine); it goes beyond the "habit" of dutiful prayer. Finding a place for Yahweh means that we don't "give sleep to [our] eyes" until God is first place in our attitudes, actions, and our words.

Don't give up; don't shut your eyes to sleep before God is changing your life!

July 15

Reading: Psalms 136, 146-150

"Praise Yahweh! Sing to Yahweh a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly!"

(Psalm 149:1)

I'm not a great song writer. I've written several songs, and I'm never really satisfied with them. There are a lot of reasons why I feel that way that I won't go into here. But one of the most difficult kinds of songs I find to write are "praise songs" - or even new "hymns" - simple songs of praise or truth that can be easily sung by the

congregation of the Lord. I mean, what can I say that hasn't already been said!? (I did write a song about that problem!)

But here in Psalm 149 we are instructed (commanded?) to sing to Yahweh a new song. A few things about that...

1) Church, I love old songs. There are some great ones. I've sung "The Old Rugged Cross" and "In the Garden" both since I was old enough to sing anything! I love them - and others. But God deserves songs that are new to Him. It's great that we enjoy those old songs - but those songs are not just for our enjoyment and encouragement - they are to be a blessing to God, and He commands we also sing new songs.

2) That means we have to learn some new songs. You can write the song, or you can sing a song that's new to you. See, while praise is for God ultimately, it's a whole lot like prayer. Prayer doesn't change God's mind, it changes ours. Prayer's job, ultimately, is to align our minds with God's plan and/or invite God to work in our lives by the resignation of our wills. A new song of praise to God, while pleasing to Him, may do the same thing! Maybe we need to see a different perspective by singing a different perspective!

3) That takes effort. It takes effort to either write or learn a new song. No one knows that more than I! But look, the Bible says:

"The steadfast love of Yahweh never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness."

(Lamentations 3:23)

If God cares enough to give us new mercies every day, should we not be willing to give Him new praises every day?

Take a moment to "Count Your Blessings"... remember "The Old Rugged Cross"... and then express to God in a new way - right now - praise for Him!

July 16

Reading: Isaiah 18-23

"And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open. And I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his father's house. And they will hang on him the whole honor of his father's house, the offspring and issue, every small vessel, from the cups to all the flagons. In that day, declares Yahweh of hosts, the peg that was fastened in a secure place will give way, and it will be cut down and fall, and the load that was on it will be cut off, for Yahweh has spoken."

(Isaiah 22:22-25)

What is it you are hoping for today?

Are you hoping for lower gas prices? Are you hoping for less expensive groceries?

What is it you are enjoying today?

Are you going for "all the gusto you can get"? (Sorry if you're not from the '70's.) Are you "working for the weekend"? ('80's reference) Do you "want it all" and "want it now"? (From the '90's) Get where I'm going here?

Every generation has what they are hoping for and that which they are seeking to enjoy while they can.

And generally... it's always the same loser stuff.

It was no different in the days of King Hezekiah just before the Babylonian captivity. While he was in many ways leading a revival (2 Chronicles 29-31, See July 1), the people, for the most part, were still doing their own thing. They and their leaders, from decades of decadence and rebellion against God, still sought money, comfort, and security in themselves.

While prophets like Isaiah preached the way out, he calls Jerusalem a "Valley of Vision" - a very sarcastic name being as a valley is no place to have much "vision". While Babylon continued to rattle their sabers, Jerusalem went on in revelry (22:2a), while most of its leaders had already mentally resigned. (22:2b-3) They'd made their preparations, and they were hoping for a good outcome. (22:8b-11)

God finally would provide an object lesson for them in a faithful servant named Eliakim. While the 2nd in command of the nation, Shebna, was concerned about his grand final resting place and ornate chariots (vv.16, 18), he would be thrown away by God and replaced by the faithful Eliakim. God secured him as a "peg" in a wall. All Judah would rely on Eliakim. Really, Eliakim becomes a type, or a picture, of the coming Christ. One man to take upon himself the weight of a nation.

Yet, even the man God put in place could not hold the lot of them. The peg would shear, and the nation would fall. Eliakim was a picture of the Savior - but definitely not Him.

What God illustrated was that it does us no good to hope for things. We must hope in One Person. The One Person who was selected and set as a peg with a cross to bear the weight of a nation. A whole nation of those who had faithfully come before - and the convergence of Jew and Gentile to form a new nation under a new covenant. This One Person could, did, and still does bear the weight from Calvary. He is the One Who now "holds the keys" (v.22, Revelation 3:7) and bears the whole honor of His Father's house (the Church). It is this hope in Him that has brought together the three-fold congregation of the Saints - represented by Israel, Egypt, and Assyria in Chapter 19:24-25, the work described in Ephesians 2:11-14.

Don't hope for something... desires and wishes have no security. And don't attempt to enjoy creation without the Creator. Hope in Jesus! Put your delight in Him!

July 17

Reading: Isaiah 24-27, 29

"And the Lord said: 'Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.'" (Isaiah 29:13-14)

Can you think back to a time when someone was merciful to you? Was there a time when you were expecting someone to lash out in anger or at the least be very disappointed, but then they said, basically, "OK. Let's start back at the beginning."

That's what God does here. Isaiah has just finished pronouncing judgment on all the kingdoms of the world and even the "Valley of Vision" - Jerusalem. When Isaiah begins preaching about how their worship is only lip-service, and they only fear God because they were "told to", I'm expecting God to really "let them have it"! He begins the next sentence, "Therefore..."

Here it comes! He's gonna roast'em!

"I will again do wonderful things with this people."

What!?

God says, "OK. I'll start over. I will RE-convince them."

Isn't God's mercy and grace truly amazing!? He pursues us relentlessly. Let's reconsider who we are, Who He is... and let Him "catch" us once more, shall we?

July 18

Reading: Isaiah 30-33

"Therefore Yahweh waits to be gracious to you, and therefore He exalts Himself to show mercy to you. For Yahweh is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for Him."
(Isaiah 30:18)

All thru the Bible people are always, somehow, wondering about God.

From the time of the first people, Satan was able to say to Eve, "Did God really say..." - and SOMEHOW she actually wondered! She wondered and doubted her Creator with whom she had walked in the very garden of paradise!

People wondered if Yahweh – whom they had seen bring plagues upon their Egyptian task-masters, whom they'd seen part the Red Sea, whom they had seen destroy Pharaoh's army IN that very sea – they wondered, "Has Yahweh just brought us out here in this desert to die!?"

They wouldn't believe God would feed them – he gave bread from heaven. They wanted more - He gave them meat out their nostrils. They thought they'd die of thirst – He provided water from a rock. Yet they still WONDERED – even completely disbelieved – God could lead them to their Promised Land.

When Jesus came – fulfilling all the prophecies they'd studied for millennia – they wondered. Jesus said, "I'm gonna give you ONE last sign." And He cryptically spoke of His coming resurrection.

But here's my point: Yahweh has provided the proof of Who He Is. He has shown what He can do; He has promised what He will do. And asking for more – and even getting more - wouldn't and won't make us any more sure because "without faith it is impossible to please Him". (He 11:6)

You will trust those you love – Isaiah says,

“So Yahweh must wait for you to come to him so he can show you his love and compassion. For the Lord is a faithful God. Blessed are those who wait for his help.”

(Is 30:18)

God is not going to chase you down. He is not giving us more “signs”.

He beckons us! In pulpit after pulpit, page after page, and even in the world around us.

“...what can be known about God is plain to [us], because God has shown it to [us]. ...His invisible qualities...His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived...in the things that have been made...”

(from Romans 1:19-20)

“So Yahweh must wait for you to come to him so he can...

"show you his love and compassion." (NLT)

And, after all, couldn't you use some of that today?

July 19

Reading: Isaiah 34-35; Micah 2-5

"Writhe and groan, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in labor, for now you shall go out from the city and dwell in the open country; you shall go to Babylon. There you shall be rescued; there Yahweh will redeem you from the hand of your enemies."

(Micah 4:10)

Recently I saw a movie about struggle. It was about a family struggling with their understanding of life and God because of a great grief many years earlier. In the end, the main character's take on the adversities of life was that those things make us "closer to Christ".

Hmm. They certainly can. But I still was chasing a question that I asked in my own life the other day. Why do we suffer?

I mean, I know all the "answers", OK?

1) The perfect world God created has been wrecked by the sinful choice of Eve, in which Adam - and all the rest of us - have followed in our gift of free-will by a God Who wants us to choose to love Him.

Got it.

2) It does no good to say, "Why do I have to suffer God? I am a good person!" As already stated, I might do alright on the bellcurve with all the other people in history - but Jesus blows the curve for everyone! We have all sinned (Romans 3:23), and Jesus says, "There is no one good, but God!" (Mark 10:18)

Understood.

But still unsatisfied.

On the other hand, God does miraculously intervene at times. I know it. I've experienced it. I have been and have seen others physically healed. I believe God is involved in every day life, setting certain things in motion, putting people in various places (eg., Acts 17:26), moving the pieces... still leaving the ultimate choices up to us, but setting everything up, leaving little to chance, for His ultimate purposes in His plan to be fulfilled.

God hears and answers prayer. He is constantly working in the world.

Why is it then that still, when there are people - I won't even put myself in this group, although I think I could make a case (at least in my own prideful heart) - who have literally "given all" (OK, now I definitely fall out of that group... willing to give all?) to follow Him and do His will - why isn't it that they are at least a little more immune to suffering? Can't those who are really trying get a special dispensation? (OK, as I write, I must say like Paul, "I am talking like a madman". (2 Corinthians 11:23) But isn't this how ~~we~~ I feel!?)

Then I come here to the meat of Micah's preaching in today's reading.

"...you shall go to Babylon. There you shall be rescued; there Yahweh will redeem you..."

What looked like the ultimate destruction of everything the Judaeans knew, loved, and held dear - was really their rescue. It was their rescue from themselves.

I'm still not so sure I'm satisfied with that, but it sure looks true. Babylon rescued Judah back then. It was through the trials and tribulations of the "New Babylon", the Roman Empire, that we saw how the Church was purified and redeemed - saved from its own apathy, false doctrines, pride, etc. (See the letters to the seven congregations in Revelation 2-3.) And, at the risk of over-spiritualizing, it is the Babylon we live in - be it an immoral, ungodly nation or the sufferings of our own humanity - that rescue us from ourselves. We are rescued from the human pride that says, "I can do life on my own." Remember it is the wicked and evil who go and "do what they can" without any seeking for or direction from God. (Micah 2:1)

What suffering do you face today that just may be your rescue?

July 20

Reading: Micah 6-7; 2 Chronicles 32:1-8; 2 Kings 18:13-37; Isaiah 36

"But as for me, I will look to Yahweh; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me. Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, Yahweh will be a light to me. I will bear the indignation of Yahweh because I have sinned against Him, until He pleads my cause and executes judgment for me. He will bring me out to the light; I shall look upon His vindication. Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, 'Where is Yahweh your God?' My eyes will look upon her; now she will be trampled down like the mire of the streets."

(Micah 7:7-10)

Sometimes we get a little "high and mighty".

"Oh, woe is me! Why do I suffer!? Why must I go through this!? Why are so many people against me!? God, why won't you help me!?"

The answer is easy - if we are honest. Many times we are out of money at the middle of the month because we spent frivolously. People may be "against us" because we weren't very nice to them. Sometimes we are suffering the consequences of sin. There are many, many reasons why we suffer - and many times we won't know why. But honestly...

Sometimes we do.

It can be in those times that the words of the enemy are tempting. In today's reading from Isaiah (and 2 Kings 18), Sennacherib's spokesman comes to Eliakim and Shebna (July 16) and tries to bargain a way out of having to fight Hezekiah for Jerusalem and Judah. His argument? "Look, Yahweh's mad at you anyway. You are courting Egypt for help - you've been tearing down alters left and right (Actually, Hezekiah tore down the alters to the false gods. But when the enemies of God accuse, they usually don't know what they're talking about, they just throw-up a bunch of words to discourage you.), He's not going to be interested in saving you!"

When we think about our sinfulness... when we are honest in our hearts... that sounds right.

It's easy to say, "I've messed this up too much now. God *could* get me out of this - but He *won't*. He doesn't care about me anymore."

Have we forgotten what Paul said to the Galatians?

"Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you know being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:2b-3)

While we strive to live a holy lifestyle that matches the sanctified position we've already been granted, we will never achieve such perfection that will allow us to stand before God on our own. We will always... I repeat... *always*... need a Savior.

And so, Micah reminds them in today's selected verses:

"I will bear the indignation of Yahweh because I have sinned against Him, until He pleads my cause and executes judgment for me."

Christian, God is still with you and fighting for you! On the Day of the Lord, Jesus will plead your case. If your name is in the Lamb's Book of Life, Jesus will stand for you, and the "judgment" will fall in your favor. You shall then "look upon [God's] vindication". He will show that those who are faithful to Him: regardless of their fall, they shall rise - regardless of the darkness they're in, God will give light - and they shall always... I repeat... *always* be on the right side of things in the end.

July 21

Reading: 2 Kings 19; Isaiah 37; 2 Chronicles 32:9-23

[It may be of interest to note that today's reading contains the only two word-for-word identical chapters of the Bible: 2 Kings 19 and Isaiah 37!]

"And [King Hezekiah] sent Eliakim...and Shebna...to the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz. They said to him, '...It may be that Yahweh your God heard all the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has

sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that Yahweh your God has heard; therefore lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left."

(2 Kings 19:2a, 2c, 3a, 4)

If you have children, have you ever said to your spouse: "Well, you'll never guess what your (son or daughter) did now!"

In that moment, you were not actually disavowing your child (though you may have wanted to!), but we sort of jokingly throw blame toward the other parent. "He/she didn't get this from me! It must be you!" Or we are saying, "This is your problem to fix because I just can't deal with this person!"

That's what I think of when I read the message that King Hezekiah sent to Isaiah. Twice, Hezekiah says to Isaiah, "Yahweh your God". Maybe the king was simply saying, "He's your God as well as mine; talk to Him!"

Or, maybe though he had led in a revival across Judah, he was feeling a strained relationship with God right then. What Hezekiah found out is this: when you trust God enough to start ridding God's Kingdom (the Church in our age) of worldliness and idolatry - it does not take long at all for the Devil to come knocking! Satan wants that kind of thing stopped! Ever since Hezekiah did the right thing - everything's gone wrong! Sennacherib showed up; in a panic, Hezekiah literally strips the gold off the walls of the temple and the palace and gave it to him; but no sacrifice made to a Satanic agent is ever enough.

You never... I repeat... never... negotiate with terrorists, Church!

So, yeah, maybe at this point Hezekiah is feeling a little dejected, a little rejected, and maybe he suspected that God wasn't going to listen to him (if God was even there?).

But at least the king has the wits about him to do something we need to do when we are at that point in our lives. He goes to a godly person. "Pray for me. Maybe your God will hear you."

Isaiah does that. He prays. God speaks. And Isaiah sends word back to Hezekiah. The Word of God then falls upon the ears of the king. OK. Good.

But then...

Since Hezekiah's resolve is refreshed and propped-up by what Isaiah told him, the Rabshakeh goes and reports back to Sennacherib, "He ain't budgin'!" So Sennacherib sends the Rabshakeh back with another letter, one the reading from 2 Chronicles tells us wasn't just taken to Hezekiah - but was read aloud, shouted to all the people manning the walls of Jerusalem, "The gods of other nations didn't help them! Your God isn't going to help you either! Give up now while you can!"

But the Word of God didn't just "prop-up" Hezekiah. The New Testament tells us that the Word of God imparts faith to the one who seeks it and will hear it! (Romans 10:17) And because of the faith that is restored in Hezekiah - King Hezekiah goes back to praying himself! He takes the actual letter, the physical note, to the temple and unrolls it before God there. "Look at this God! Help!"

And, of course, God did.

But my point?

When your faith in God is at its weakest, it is not the time to run from God - but to run to God! It is the time to be in the Assembly of the Saints. It is not enough, Church, to read your Bible by yourself at home! It is the time to hear the Word of God... to let the preaching of God's spokesman reverberate through the airwaves, fall upon your eardrum, be translated by your brain into words, and received as faith by your soul!

Make sure that Yahweh is not just your preacher's God... but that He's your God too!

July 22

Reading: Isaiah 38-39; 2 Kings 20:1-19; 2 Chronicles 32:24-31

"He said, 'What have they seen in your house?' Hezekiah answered, 'They have seen all that is in my house. There is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them.' Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of Yahweh of hosts: Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house,...shall be carried to Babylon.' Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, 'The word of Yahweh that you have spoken is good.' For he thought, 'There will be peace and security in my days.'"

(Isaiah 39:4-6a, 6c, 8)

I'm no poker player by any means. But had I the chance to play just one hand with Hezekiah, I think I'd take it. He's not one to play much "close to the vest".

For the price of a gift and a get-well-soon card, Hezekiah let's his pride take over and shows the envoys from the new-power-on-the-block Babylon all his stuff. The silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, the armory... it was all revealed to Judah's future nemesis. It's hard to imagine a national leader with a worse foreign policy! (Although I might think of one.)

Proverbs 16:18 says:

"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

Isaiah confirms the truth when he prophesies Babylon will eventually haul all this away. Even some of his own sons will be made into eunuchs to serve the king of Babylon.

Hezekiah's response? "There will be peace and security in my days." (v.8, italics mine)

There are a lot of ways in which I admire Hezekiah. He was a leader of godly revival throughout his nation. While he struggled sometimes in faith, he overcame and was a man to whom God responded with answered prayers. But God forbid that I should be like him in this. Hezekiah just wanted to be comfortable. Hezekiah wanted what Hezekiah wanted.

Hezekiah's pride is the very problem we have in God's Church today. Today much of the Church wants to flaunt its material riches. It wants to sit in comfortable pews and be entertained - while it has no concern for the spiritual heritage and truth it leaves to the next generation.

I wish that when I was in located ministry, I had put more effort into the discipleship and mentoring of young people. I wish I had been teaching more young men how to preach and asking every young man to listen for God's call on their life to preach - or to do whatever God wanted him to do.

I wish I had spent less time listening to fifty-year olds who wanted cool stage lights and contemporary music and coffee bars. I wish I had spent less time listening to eighty-year olds who wanted pews and hymnbooks and steeples.

I wish I had spent less time satisfying myself and more time satisfying God.

What about it, Church? Is life about you? Is "church" about you? Or is it about God? Is it about Jesus? Is it about proclaiming the Truth, making disciples of every nation? Is it about an everlasting Kingdom? Or is it about your kingdom?

July 23

Reading: Isaiah 40:1-44:5

"To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with Him? An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move."
(Isaiah 40:18-20)

Often times we may think about the commitment that Jesus asks for to be His disciple. At least I hope we consider it. He said that if we would come after Him, we will have to deny ourselves (give up our desires, our ambitions), take up our cross (denial to the extent that though we walk the earth, we are no longer "alive" to our own selves), and follow Him. It is quite a thing to commit our way to the Lord - to be His disciple. (Luke 9:23) It is the tower we must consider the cost of building. (Luke 14:28)

Perhaps we even consider that cost too high at times. That 3 point qualification Jesus says must happen "daily". And sometimes, well... some days we consider the cost too high. We give ourselves to something else that day.

But consider today's verses, the comparison to God is... an idol. Because, as Isaiah says, people who choose idols also sell themselves away - all of themselves.

The devil won't take any less from you than Jesus - he's just not honest about it.

Isaiah says they will give all they have to have an idol fashioned of gold and silver, and if they can't financially afford that, they will have one of wood that will last (take) their whole life. Haven't you seen that to be true?

A man may not choose to give his life to God - but he will give his life to the god of money. A woman may not choose deny herself for Jesus - but she will trade all of her self and soul to win the affection of a man. And if a person just doesn't have the wherewithal to enjoy the pleasures of the lucrative or sexy idols - that junky will just turn down Jesus' cross for a needle, bottle, or pill.

And all of them will cost the worshipper everything.

Bob Dylan sang it this way, "It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody."

Will you serve the Master that shows the Way, tells the Truth, and gives the Light? Or will you serve the master who charades as those things so he can murder you?

July 24

Reading: Isaiah 44:6-48:11

"Because I know that you are obstinate, and your neck is an iron sinew and your forehead brass."
(Isaiah 48:4)

Back a few weeks ago, we got a new headboard for our bed. Our old one was, well... old. It was a really cheap one from Walmart bought decades ago. It was showing it's age and didn't match our other furniture bought since, so we got a new one. I like the new one. At least I like the way it looks. But honestly, it gives me a sore neck. I can't adjust my pillow up against it "just right" like the old one, and that makes my neck not "just right", and that means that when I wake up my neck is stiff, and it hurts all day!

All that to say that I've been reminded of something I already knew: Having a stiff neck hurts!

Isaiah clarifies to Israel that they have been hurting because they also have a neck problem. As a matter of fact, Isaiah likens the muscles of their necks to iron! They would not bend to God's leading. Their faces were set where they wanted to go and would not be turned for anything. And it was killing them as a nation.

On top of that, he said they had brass foreheads! (I guess you'd need an iron neck to hold up a brass head!) And I would suppose that would have to be one of - if not the - most spiritually lethal combinations known to man: Iron Necks & Brass Skulls! (Don't steal my sermon title, preachers!) They couldn't be turned and couldn't be taught.

Listen, don't let your stubborn spirit only be outdone by your ignorance! We only hurt ourselves when we will not listen to God. What happens is what He said would - not what we accomplished. And what we know is what He told us - not what we figured out! (vv.5, 7)

July 25

Reading: Isaiah 48:12-52:12

"He says, 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'
(Isaiah 49:6)

Doesn't everyone want to feel important? Who among us would say, "I want my life to be wasted and to have counted for nothing."? Especially as people begin to see the brevity of life, they begin to think about their heritage and their legacy. What mark will we have made? What will we have left behind that we might be remembered? Yet, too often, our own ambition and worldly sense of values can warp our attitudes and actions.

God tells Isaiah, "Have I got a job for you! It's an important one! It's a huge one! I want you to be a light to the nations!" And that is precisely the job God has given the Church!

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9)

Friends, don't be short-sighted! Even in the service of God, sometimes we only see the small picture. Our job is big! Our job is important! And it is a job - the only job - that carries with it an eternal impact and legacy.

Consider today how you might proclaim God's "excellencies" - then do it!

July 26

Reading: Isaiah 52:13-57:21

"Thus says Yahweh; Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast,"
(Isaiah 56:1-2a)

I wouldn't say I am a quitter, but I have quit before.

I quit little league baseball the second season I played. I quit football in the seventh grade. Few of us are doing that very same job we started with as a teen; we mature out of certain roles. I have "quit" the job at a few congregations and moved on to others.

While I wouldn't call myself a quitter, and while the things I quit weren't necessarily a bad choice (definitely not morally wrong), I can say this - without exception for each thing I've quit: There was some - sometimes small, sometimes large - part of me that regretted it. Whether I quit in disgust or happily parted for a new project... Whether I looked back with broken pride or broken dreams... each time there was regret.

What if I'd only stuck it out? What if I'd tried a little harder? What if I'd leaned on my friends a little more? What if I almost won!?

Every single day the world beckons. Every single day the pleasures of sin call us to take them up for a season. Every single day "the temptress" beckons from the streets, "You will find rest if you just quit trying!"

How true that is.

We will find rest if we quit trying. If we will quit trying to produce rest... If we will quit trying to work out our own path... If we will quit trying to bless ourselves... it will be found. But not in the arms of the world. Only in Jesus.

Once we knock, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7) God doesn't always provide the salvation we want in the way or time we want, but it will always be the way and time we need. The greatest regret, in this world or certainly the next, will be of those who once knew Jesus - but gave up on Him. They quit.

Don't give up. Don't give in. We are closer today to our promised salvation than we have ever been!

An unknown author gave us this jewel:

When things go wrong, as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high,
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,

When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest, if you must, but don't you quit.

Life is queer with its twists and turns,
As every one of us sometimes learns,
And many a failure turns about,
When he might have won had he stuck it out;
Don't give up though the pace seems slow-
You may succeed with another blow.

Often the goal is nearer than,
It seems to a faint and faltering man,
Often the struggler has given up,
When he might have captured the victor's cup,
And he learned too late when the night slipped down,
How close he was to the golden crown.

Success is failure turned inside out-
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,
And you never can tell how close you are,
It may be near when it seems so far,
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit-
It's when things seem worst that you must not quit.

July 27

Reading: Isaiah 58:1-63:14

"You shall no more be termed Forsaken (Azubah), and your land shall no more be termed Desolate (Shemamah), but you shall be called My Delight Is In Her (Hephzibah) and your land Married (Beulah); for Yahweh delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." (Isaiah 62:4-5, parentheticals are the literal Hebrew words)

I'm going to say something that might make some of you disappointed in me. I don't really like Southern gospel music. There. I said it.

It's not really the style I don't like (Well, sort of it is.), I don't really even mind singing it. It's just that a lot of the Southern gospel singers are so cheesy. There's just this whole Southern gospel culture that I don't get.

But that's not my point.

A Southern gospel song I've heard a lot here and there is called "Sweet Beulah Land". And I will admit, even I think it's a beautiful song. It expresses a sentiment that's beautiful. The harmonies are beautiful. It just evokes longing. But it's just not biblical. Sorry.

Well, I'm overstating. But let me make my point here, OK?

First, let's understand betrothal in New Testament times. (Yes, I know. We're reading Isaiah; that's in the Old Testament. But let me make my point here, OK?) Betrothal was pretty much marriage - except for a few key concepts: the celebration, the "move-in", and the consummation. That is, in betrothal, the marriage was already a binding contract. The dowry was agreed upon; prices were paid; the legalities were legalized. They were married - just not married married.

I'll come back to this in a minute, OK?

The song "Sweet Beulah Land" talks of a city that the singer is longing for. A city to which he (or she) has never been, etc, etc. The context of "Beulah Land" in that particular song is that "Beulah Land" is heaven. I'm longing for heaven too! But I'm not convinced that the Beulah of the Bible is heaven.

In John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, he speaks of Beulah. He describes it as *this side* of the River of Death, not yet to the "New Jerusalem" (his name for heaven in his allegory). It was close enough to see the city to which he was going in the distance; he was ever so close. Doubt and fear all behind, his step was lighter and excitement moved him onward like never before.

In an old hymn I sang as a boy, "Dwelling in Beulah Land", the lyrics were in agreement with Bunyan:

"Far away the noise of strife upon my ear is falling;
Then I know the sins of earth beset on every hand;
Doubt and fear and things of earth in vain to me are calling;
None of these shall move me from Beulah Land.
I'm living on the mountain, underneath a cloudless sky,
I'm drinking at the fountain that never shall run dry;
Oh, yes! I'm feasting on the manna from a bountiful supply,
For I am dwelling in Beulah Land."

Now neither Bunyan nor C. Austin Miles (writer of "Dwelling in Beulah Land") are inspired writers in the biblical sense (and neither the author of "Sweet Beulah Land"), but I think Bunyan and Miles are closer to what Isaiah means here in Isaiah 62.

Yes, for Isaiah, the "land" of God's people called "Beulah" is off into the future. But I believe it is *our present!* Beulah (and this is the only place in the Bible the word is mentioned) means "married". Isaiah says that a time is coming (the Church age, I believe) when God's people will not be called "Forsaken" and the land will not be called "Desolate", but the land - that "place" - that "nation" - will be called "Married".

Isaiah goes on to use a lot of imagery we are familiar with from the New Testament. Jesus is the bridegroom; the Church is His bride. But here is my point... Here is why I'm saying (over-stating?) that "Sweet Beulah Land" is not biblical while Bunyan and Miles are: Though we have not yet come to the wedding feast in that heavenly Kingdom - we are every bit as united with Christ now as we will be then! And don't we praise God for that!?

We are His right now! We have already begun to reign with Him eternally! We who are in Christ shall never taste real death! It has been conquered.

Look, I believe with all my heart that we should long for heaven. And I do. And I hope you do too. But, friend, live with joy, peace, and victory in the Kingdom now! We have a bridegroom! We are not forsaken! We are not desolate! We are - right now - married! We are chosen! We belong! The bridegroom's price has been paid, and

we belong to Him! As another song says, though we are not there yet, "Canaan land is just in sight!" (Did I just quote another Southern gospel song!?)

So:

"Let the stormy breezes blow, their cry cannot alarm me;
I am safely sheltered here, protected by God's hand;
Here the sun is always shining, nothing there can harm me;
I am safe forever in Beulah Land."

July 28

Reading: Isaiah 63:15-66:24; 2 Kings 20:20-21; 2 Chronicles 32:32-33

"For thus says Yahweh: 'Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip, and bounced upon her knees.'" (Isaiah 66:12)

Over the last decade or so I have heard a term come into usage that is quite telling: "Adulthood". While it seems that many generations have been in a hurry to grow up, many of the current generation are not. While there are also a good many responsible young adults today, "Adulthood" is the not so tongue-in-cheek mourning of a generation that they "have to" do "adult" things. Learning that you have to pay to repair your own car, make the rent on time, and eat peanut butter and crackers for supper sometimes are the kind of things that many label as "adulthood".

Yet, how many of us - regardless of age - can still relate?

"Adulthood" can be difficult. And while many of us might have looked excitedly and were eager to jump into the challenges of being an adult and living our own life... who among us can't relate to the feeling that - in many ways - it might be nice to be a kid again?

God appeals to this longing in every heart in our selected reading today. Yes, life is hard - but a time is coming - a time of peace. When we will be taken care of like children again! We will once again be "fed", "carried", and even "bounced on [God's] knee"! What a delightful metaphor of the peace Jesus brings now and even the heavenly home to which we travel.

But take note: Our difficult travel to that point is the "norm".

"Before she was in labor she gave birth"? "Who has heard such a thing?" (v. 7a, 8a)

"Shall a land be born in a day? Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment?" (v. 8b)

The Kingdom of God, here on earth and eternally in heaven, is a product of both pain and patience. It doesn't come without hard work and sacrifice, and it doesn't come quickly.

Yet God promises: "Shall I bring to the point of birth and not cause to bring forth? Shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb? Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice in her joy..." (vv. 9-10a)

What comes with pain and patience - also comes in hope and hallelujahs! We don't always understand the reasons why the Kingdom must come at such a price or pain, but God promises that there will be fulfillment on the down-payment made. (Ephesians 1:13-14) The injection of the Holy Spirit into the lives of Kingdom citizens will bring their work to pass. And the rejoicing at the end is worth the effort.

Stay strong! Endure the pain and patience for the hope and hallelujahs!

July 29

Reading: 2 Kings 21:1-22:2; 2 Chronicles 33:1-34:7; Jeremiah 1:1-2:22

"for My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water."

(Jeremiah 2:13)

I really don't know much about cisterns. I really even know very little about well water. For the most of my life I have just walked over to the tap and had water pour out from some tower in town.

But I've heard about cisterns.

A cistern is basically a catch-can. It could be either in ground or above ground, but it just catches rain water or run-off. A "hewn" cistern was probably carved into the ground in a place where there was an exposed rocky surface. It was a man-made, large bowl in the ground.

A cistern is also kind of the last choice for a water source. I was talking to an old man about this passage once, and he recalled when his grandmother had a cistern on her farm. It was good for catching water... and a lot of other "stuff". Anything that happened to be on the ground could run into a cistern in a heavy rain. Any animal that might scurry along the path might accidentally fall in and meet its demise. A fresh mountain stream? Wonderful! A well of deep spring water? Great! A barrel of some kind above ground? OK. But an in ground cistern? Hm. No thanks.

Yet daily we settle for cistern water. We are willing, yea, not just willing but desirous to drink stagnant, putrid - even toxic - worldly run-off. Jesus offers us living water - a fountain, as Jeremiah puts it.

But we go and carve out cisterns.

And guess what else? Our cisterns don't even hold water! Some cisterns might hold water. Maybe you could strain out the occasional drowned rat. Maybe you'd be willing to boil the water. But the cisterns of the world's run-off don't even keep water! They're leaky. We think we will have enough to satisfy, but we never do. We will always be left sick and wanting.

The gospel of John tells us that Jesus offers continual refreshment. The Holy Spirit is the "living water" that slakes the thirst of the one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. (John 7:37-39)

Don't be left wanting today! Quit looking to the world to satisfy! Abandon the cistern and drink from the inner flow of Living Water!

July 30

Reading: Jeremiah 2:23-5:19

"If you return, O Israel, declares Yahweh, to Me you should return. If you remove your detestable things from my presence, and do not waver, and if you swear, "As Yahweh lives," in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, then nations shall bless themselves in Him, and in Him shall they glory."

(Jeremiah 4:1-2, italics mine)

I hear from preachers (and mostly money-grubbing "Church consultants" occasionally) sometimes, "Revivals don't work."

That's an odd statement. A "revival" says that it did work! If you had a "revival" people were "revived". If people weren't "revived", you didn't have "revival" - you just had a church meeting. The problem is not the "revival meeting" (what they are really referring to) the problem lies with the hearts of a congregation of lukewarm Christians whose heart was cold and hard - revival meeting or no!

Revival in God's Church begins when God's people return to Him - not to religion. Will a revival meeting help? Yes, God's Word always "works"! (Isaiah 55:11) When God's Word is preached, faith can be imparted to those willing to receive it. (Romans 10:14-17) But if we are not doing what God called His people to do through Jeremiah, nothing is going to happen in a "revival meeting" (or in the REGULAR SUNDAY MORNING WORSHIP TIME EITHER!).

God says coming "back to Me" requires that we:

One, "break up your fallow ground". (4:3b) Fallow ground is that which could be of great use. All the opportunity in the world is there - but nothing is being done. Some people are fallow by choice (some of the Church), and some are fallow by ignorance (the lost). Either way, just knowing what is right and true, does not mean it will be accepted. (5:4-5) The unused ground - the heart (mind, will, emotion) must be re-tilled and sown with truth.

Two, "sow not among thorns". (4:3c) The Church (or individual member of Christ's body) must not believe that he will simply begin again his faithfulness in earnest, while he also continues in worldliness! The worldly weeds will simply, at some point in the future - sooner or later, again overtake and kill the produce of the Spirit.

Have a revival meeting? YES! Every congregation should set aside regular time in their calendar for the extended times of prayer, praise, and preaching a "revival meeting" offers! But more than that - begin the "revival" (in your family, community, and congregation) with a real revival... a revival of your own faith... beginning again in faithfulness to the scriptures, prayer, praise, and obedience - sown as far from the worldly influences on your heart as your field will let you get.

[Shameless plug portion: I invite any congregation to contact us at Rock Solid Ministries to schedule your revival meeting. Everything we offer is completely free of any financial obligation. We cover our own expenses and don't even take up an offering. Yes, IT'S FREE! See our website at: rocksolidministries.org]

July 31

Reading: Jeremiah 5:20-6:30; 2 Kings 22:3-20; 2 Chronicles 34:8-28

"To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen; behold, the word of Yahweh is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it."
(Jeremiah 6:10)

In all the nights I've spent in hotels, there have been a few times that the fire alarm has gone off. These alarms in hotels, if you've never experienced them, are no nine volt "oven timers" for Betty Crocker drop-outs. These things are loud! They have absolutely the most annoying, brain-piercing sound known to man.

You know how many times out of the - let's say five times, shall we? - five times I've been interrupted from sleep, getting dressed, watching TV, or what-have-you that I've actually heeded the warning?

Once. Kinda.

It was in the morning. My wife was still getting ready for the day - hair, make-up, clothes. I happened to be ready to go down to get my morning coffee anyway, so I said, "I'll go down and have a look and text you if it's "for real". It wasn't. (Hopefully you'll not one day read about the evangelist and his wife who died in a hotel fire!) I could have, had I not needed coffee, just done what I usually do - plugged my ears and waited a little bit.

Most all my life I've lived in the part of the United States affectionately known as "Tornado Alley". I would guess that I've probably lived through - let's say one hundred fifty, shall we? - one hundred fifty tornado "warnings". That is, the radar shows a likely tornado - or a person actually has eyes on a tornado in your county. Know how many times I've taken shelter? A small handful.

That's because out of all those times in a hotel there's never actually been a fire. In fifty-three years of my life, through all those tornado warnings, a tornado has never actually been in my town.

When something has never happened, you having trouble believing it will.

Jeremiah had a hard time finding people to warn about the impending destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. All these times the prophets had warned them... and it had never happened yet. Oh yeah, it happened to "those people" in the North - but that's them; we're us!

God describes them as having "uncircumcised ears". Their ears were "out of covenant" with God. Their um... "private parts" might have shown one thing, but their uncaring nature toward God and His Word was as plain as the big ears on their heads! In the larger reading for today, they only "discovered" the Book of the Law (their "Bible", so to speak) in the temple when they went to search for something else. The guy comes back to the King and just says, "Uh, hey, they say they found... 'a book'." "A book," they said!

Preachers have a hard time warning people today for the same reasons. "All this stuff you're talking about, Preacher, it's never happened. Everything is just like it's always been."

Yeah, the Bible actually predicted you'd say that! (2 Peter 3:4)

There are those who can't hear because their ears aren't able (spiritually speaking). They know what the Word says. They have no valid reason to disobey it or disbelieve it. They just say, as the people Jeremiah preached to, "We will not walk in it. We will not pay attention." (Jeremiah 6:16-17)

At least they're honest.

Those are the people in the Church today who claim to want to go to heaven, but do not really desire God Himself, let alone desire to follow Him. They certainly, as Jeremiah said, "take no pleasure in [His Word]", they just want to attend Church gatherings once in a while and live atheist-styled lives. In reality, they want to go to hell. For, if you don't want God here and now, you won't get Him in eternity.

What about you? Will you ~~hear~~ heed the warning? Or do the ears on your head tell a different story from your mouth and lips?

August 1

Reading: 2 Kings 23:1-28; 2 Chronicles 34:29-35:19; Nahum

"Yahweh is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; He knows those who take refuge in Him. But with an overwhelming flood He will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue His enemies into darkness. Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace! Keep your feasts, O Judah; fulfill your vows, for never again shall the worthless pass through you; he is utterly cut off."

(Nahum 1:7-8, 15)

Once again, a prophet speaks to Nineveh. Somewhere around one hundred years earlier, Jonah had reluctantly preached to the Ninevites. At that time they had listened and, much to Jonah's chagrin, repented in sackcloth and ashes - young, old, male, female, and even the animals! (Jonah 3:6-8) But, like so many of the times Israel had repented, here they were again - unfaithful.

Nineveh was the last great capital of the Assyrians. It was the Assyrians who had defeated the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and led them off into captivity - dispersing them throughout their kingdom. The Assyrians were not only "the" world power, but they were known for their terribly violent and intimidating tactics, not just crucifying their victims as the Romans would, but impaling them alongside the roads. They were an evil lot. That's why Jonah wanted to see them destroyed, not saved.

Now Nahum has come to tell them, "Time's up! How you once responded to Yahweh doesn't count today!" There had been a "worthless counselor" (1:11) after the time of Jonah that had arisen and turned them back against Yahweh and his people. And now, after all the damage they'd done God's people, their opportunities were over. "Yahweh [was] restoring the majesty of Jacob as the majesty of Israel," (2:2).

The message for us?

Just because you repented long ago "way back when" doesn't mean that we don't need to consider our walk today! Are we still following Jesus? God "is good", and He is definitely that "stronghold in the day of trouble", but note that God only knows those "who take refuge in Him"! The rest? He makes "a complete end" of them.

So, be faithful! "Fulfill your vows"! Be on the right side of the good news! God is good! He will bring justice for His people.

August 2

Reading: Habakkuk

"Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith. Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail, and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in Yahweh; I will take joy in the God of my salvation."

(Habakkuk 2:4; 3:17-18)

Is faith blind, or is it based on evidence?

If by evidence you mean that you have to see something to believe it... that is definitely not faith. Yet, God doesn't ask us to trust in something (be it He Himself or His promises) without good reason. Faith doesn't mean we leave our minds at the door. God always makes the first move. The Bible says that "We love Him because He first loved us." (1 John 4:19) The evidence for trusting God has been built into everything He has done.

Faith begins with the evidence that there is a Creator. You don't see the Creator, but there is evidence of the unseeable things about Him simply in what's created. (Romans 1:19-20) True enough, there are those that say, "That's not enough! I think the world came into being a different way without a 'creator'!" OK. But do you realize that you are still living your life by faith? You still did not see the earth and everything in it "come into being". So you have to look at whatever evidence exists in nature and trust (put faith in) that evidence for your conclusion. Paul tells the Romans that the evidence really only points one way!

Faith continues to blossom from the spoken Word as it falls on our ears. (Romans 10:17) God makes promises. Some are conditional; He says "if this, then this". Some are "this is absolutely going to happen" or "this absolutely will not happen". How do we know what He says is true? We trust in it through faith. Because we can go back and see His explanations concerning the world and the promises that are already fulfilled, we have evidence that He is trustworthy. With no one greater to swear by, He says, "So help Me, Me!" (Hebrews 6:13) Then the Hebrew writer's definition of faith brings it together:

"Now faith (a belief that causes us to trust and obey God) is the assurance (being confident) of things hoped for (things we are expecting from God's promises), the conviction (being absolutely, immovably convinced) of things not seen." (Parentheticals mine)

That does not make it any less hard sometimes.

But Habakkuk's statement is one to emulate! He is going to live through a day described as having (at least without God) no hope. If there is no fruit on the trees or vines... if there is nothing in the field... if the sheep are astray in the field and you don't have any cows... what have you left!?

Jesus.

As corny and cliché as it sounds, I found what someone once said to be true: "When Jesus is all you have, you'll find out He is all you need." Personal testimony: I know it by experience.

So exercise faith today. The more you exercise your faith, the stronger it will be. And if you think it takes faith to live today... wait until you see what the rest of life holds in store!

You will live life by faith! Faith in you or faith in God - it's your choice.

August 3

Reading: Zephaniah; 2 Chronicles 35:-20-27; 2 Kings 23:25-30; Jeremiah 47-48

"At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, 'Yahweh will not do good, nor will He do ill.' The great day of Yahweh is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of Yahweh is bitter; the mighty man cries aloud there."
(Zephaniah 1:12, 14)

A common gag in many different old, comedic TV shows and movies I've seen is the "fence sitter". Two people in the scene are quit animated about their opposing points of view. A third character, usually one who is portrayed as weak-minded, stands listening. When one makes a point, he says, to the other, "Yeah, that's right!" When the other makes a rebuttal, "Well, that's true you have to admit!" The other character retorts and the fence-sitter says, "Well, yeah, what about that?" Usually, both sides get frustrated with the person who doesn't pick a side and tell him to "get lost".

It's the same in real life; no one likes a fence-sitter - including God.

Here in the words of Zephaniah, God is coming after the fence-sitter. God is pictured carrying a lamp. Is he using the lamp to look into every nook and cranny - every hole and crevice? He is searching the whole of the Holy City to find those who can't decide - those who say, "God's not going to do anything - good or bad. Why worry?"

Perhaps God needs the lamp because He is coming "like a thief in the night"! A lot of Zephaniah speaks of the Day of Yahweh - mentioned in a few places as The Day of the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 5) When the Babylonians came, the Judeans would need to decide which side they were on. They could stand by the short-term winners (Babylon) or they could stand with God's and win in the end, but there was no room for fence-sitters that didn't have an opinion about Yahweh.

Still today, our great Day of the Lord is, as Zephaniah said, hastening fast. We don't know when it will be, but Jesus will return like a thief in the night. You too can choose: either the pleasures of sin for a season or a life of faithful obedience to God. But choose you must. There is still no room for those who want to sit on the fence.

What do you say of Jesus?

August 4

Reading: 2 Chronicles 36:1-5; 2 Kings 23:31-24:4; Jeremiah 22:1-23; 26; 25:1-14

"Therefore thus says Yahweh of hosts: 'Because you have not obeyed My words, behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares Yahweh, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation.'" (Jeremiah 25:8-9)

You ever heard the saying, "Po' folks got po' ways"? It's just a colloquial way of saying "You do what you can." Sometimes you're poor financially, sometimes educationally - but whatever it is your lacking, you just go ahead and get by with what you got.

That's me a lot of times. I'm not really a handy guy around the house. Mainly because I really have never invested in a lot of tools. I abide by the rule, "If it moves and it's not supposed to - use duct tape. If it doesn't move, and it is supposed to - use WD40."

Po' folks got po' ways.

But God's not poor. He is never lacking. In any and every situation, He has the answer, and He always has the proper tool. Many times, people are His tools. Some people are tools that He can use in many ways; some people are special tools that only come out of the chest for a very special and specific job. But God can and will use anyone! Don't believe me? Read today's verses again.

God declares that Nebuchadnezzar is going to be the servant of Yahweh. Now that doesn't mean that Nebuchadnezzar was going to worship Yahweh, but Nebuchadnezzar would serve God! God loves to use willing, worshipful people as tools to do His will in the world. He loves it when He finds someone like Isaiah who says, "Here am I! Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8b) Willing participants in God's plan not only have the honor of serving God, but they are more quickly fit for their eternal destiny and purpose.

However, as I said, God doesn't just use worshippers. He uses whomever He will to do what He needs to have done - however His promises need to be fulfilled. God can use the most evil of people as His servant if need be. Paul wrote to the Philippians about people who would use his time in prison to promote themselves - to make themselves a preacher that people looked to and leaned on because they envied Paul's position. Paul said, "Fine. Just so Jesus gets glorified!" (Philippians 1:15-18) God uses anyone He chooses as His tool, but it is up to us whether we get anything out of it or not.

Is your life laid bare before Jesus today to be used as a willing servant? That is the only way blessing for this life and preparation for the next happens.

August 5

Reading: Jeremiah 25:15-38; 36; 45-46

"The word that Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch the son of Neriah, when he wrote these words in a book at the dictation of Jeremiah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah: 'Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch: "You said, 'Woe is me! For Yahweh has added sorrow to my pain.

I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.' Thus shall you say to him, "Thus says Yahweh: 'Behold, what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up - that is, the whole land. And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not, for behold, I am bringing disaster upon all flesh, declares Yahweh. But I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go.'""
(Jeremiah 45)

Ever feel "caught in the middle"?

Poor Baruch, working as Jeremiah's "assistant prophet", is in a spot. Jeremiah 36 tells how, once again, to make sure that Judah has been more than adequately warned, to give them and King Jehoiakim yet another chance, God says, "Jeremiah, write down all the things I've told you - going all the way back to his grandfather Josiah - and give the scroll to Jehoiakim." So Jeremiah - having said a lot - enlists the trusty Baruch to write while Jeremiah dictates. Jeremiah has been banned from going to the temple, so Baruch also "gets to" deliver the scroll. Jehoiakim and company eventually cut the scroll up, piece by piece, and burn it. Jehoiakim then commands that Baruch and Jeremiah be arrested. However, as Jeremiah tells it, God hid them, and he and Baruch went back to writing yet another scroll!

Ugh! The life of a scribe!

And in the midst of it all, Baruch laments. "Woe is me! Sorrow and pain! I have no rest!"

God's answer?

"Why do you expect any, Baruch?"

God tells Jeremiah to explain to Baruch that the kingdom of Judah is wasting away. They whole thing would soon be gone. How could he expect to find rest in a nation that is soon to pass?

The same question could be asked us.

The New Testament tells us that all creation is groaning. (Romans 8:22) The effects of sin are taking their toll on the world every day. Each generation is more diseased. Morality continues to degenerate. Common sense becomes less common - let alone biblical literacy. How is it that we complain to God for rest? How can we have rest in a world that is passing away? How could we find it comfortable and "homey"?

Our only promise is the one that Baruch got.

God said, "Baruch, you're not going to have the 'rest' you want here - but, for your faithfulness, you will escape with your life."

That's our promise too, friends. We will never achieve the worldly filling of our desires; we will never have the rest we crave... here. But God has promised us our lives. Not necessarily physical life in this world that is passing away, but an eternal life that begins now and only becomes more real with the passing of our physical bodies.

What rest are you longing for today? You'll never find it here. If you need to know how to find spiritual life in Jesus, just ask me!

August 6

Reading: Jeremiah 19-20; Daniel 1

"Oh Yahweh, You have deceived me, and I was deceived; You are stronger than I, and You have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, 'Violence and destruction!' For the Word of Yahweh has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, 'I will not mention Him or speak any more in His name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."
(Jeremiah 20:7-9)

A young preacher said one time, "I just love preaching!" To which an older, wiser preacher said, "You don't love preaching. You love hearing yourself talk."

I suppose that's true of many preachers. Maybe even most preachers at the beginning.

I remember when I was a young man of nineteen years. I was off to my first weekend ministry in my second year of Bible college. (You know why the 2nd year of schooling is called the "sophomore" year, right? "Sopho" comes from the Greek "sophos" which means, roughly, clever or wise. "More" comes from "moros" meaning fool - like a moron. Such were many of us as sophomores - fools "full of a little bit" of wisdom!) I was convinced that by all these things I had learned and was, truthfully, very excited about - things that these people in these churches probably had never heard - I would go and "rescue the perishing" and build the next mega-church - in that town of 150 people. I had every right motivation, just not very much reality.

For those who only love to "hear themselves talk", the shine of preaching wears off fairly quickly. The reality is that a lot, if not most, of the Church has heard a lot of what you have to say, and they don't want to hear it!

Good preaching - preaching of Truth, preaching for repentance, prayerful preaching by the Holy Spirit's guidance through the passages of scripture - leads to a lot of conflict. Jesus said, "I did not come to bring peace but a sword." (Matthew 10:34) A preacher will either quit preaching all the truth (like many in pulpits today), or he will often feel like Jeremiah.

"God, it seems like every time I open my mouth I only have 'hard' things to say. Why can't I just say nice comfortable things like that guy on TV who smiles a lot and just holds up his Bible?" The paraphrased words of an old preaching mentor are true, "It's OK to preach on hell a lot, just always leave them with a little bit of heaven." But a ~~good~~ faithful preacher will be one who has a "fire in his bones" to tell all the truth - regardless of how it makes the chips fall.

This is what removes so many men from the ministry today. They tire of the flack they receive from people in the pew who want only to be comforted with flowery words and funny stories. While there is definitely a place for comforting preaching, words of comfort - as in Jeremiah's preaching - hardly ever come without words of judgment upon those on the other side of the fence who will not seek Jesus. This can make most every sermon a faithful preacher preaches distasteful to some Church members.

Of course the application is simple: We are either the one who should be telling the truth or receiving the Truth - probably both. Will we do each with a zeal and fervor that comes from a heart that loves God? If we don't really love God, we will do neither.

August 7

Reading: Daniel 2-3; Jeremiah 7:1-8:3

"Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh.' Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!' - only to go on doing all these abominations?"

(Jeremiah 7:4, 8-10)

I'm not a huge Star Wars saga nut, but I am a fan. I remember seeing the original Star Wars movie at the drive-in picture show in 1977 when I was just eight years old, so it's just kinda part of my "experience". But one of my favorite things about the Jedis is when they use the "Jedi Mind Trick". They can simply wave their hand in front of you, say the words they want you to believe, and the victim will utter them back in full belief. When Obi-wan tells the stormtrooper, "These are not the droids you're looking for." The stormtrooper says, "These are not the droids we're looking for," and leaves. Nice! (I have actually attempted the Jedi Mind Trick a few times in desperation, and, well, let's just say this - The Force is strong with me.)

In reality though, just saying something does not make it so.

Daniel and his three friends have already been taken off to Babylon. Daniel is interpreting dreams for Nebuchadnezzar, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are miraculously surviving the fiery furnace. But meanwhile, back at the ranch, Jeremiah is still preaching to the majority of the Judeans in the promised land. Again, God offers people the opportunity to repent. Surely they will listen when they've already seen many of their best and smartest youths hauled off to Babylon.

Nope.

People are still believing, not in Yahweh, but a building. "This is the temple of Yahweh! The temple of Yahweh! The temple of Yahweh!" It is as though they believe if they say it enough that Nebuchadnezzar's siege troops will repeat back, "This is the temple of Yahweh," and leave.

Jeremiah says that it is deception to believe that saying particular words or phrases - regardless of their truth - will have any effect on your salvation.

People "go to church" and they proclaim, "This is God's Church! God's Church! God's Church!" and then proceed to run it themselves by their own hollow "wisdom". They allow the sinner's prayer and other heresies to be taught from the pulpit, allow women to preach, condone sexual immorality by word or neglect, turn a blind eye to other sinful things, and then have the gall to invoke the Spirit's blessing and sing praises to a God they don't worship with anything else but words.

Of course, the church building is not the temple, but even still, people proclaim they are the temple of the Holy Spirit. They say, "I'm a Christian! I was baptized when I was twelve years old and have hardly missed a Sunday at church, and I believe in Jesus." They say this like they can play a Jedi Mind Trick on Jesus, and at the judgment He will just repeat their "words of safety".

Make no mistake; you're no Jedi, and God is no weak-minded employee of the dark side. He is the Light and Life that "reveals deep and hidden things". (Daniel 2:22) He is still a God of grace, but neither will He be mocked. Let us strive to make sure our actions match the things that our mouths proclaim so vehemently. It's not your belief that saves (let alone your words) - it's your faith, and those are two very different things!

August 8

Reading: Jeremiah 8:4-11:23

"They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace.' Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among the fallen; when I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says Yahweh. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?"

(Jeremiah 8:11-12, 22)

Just today, I read a newspaper article about a denominational congregation in my region of the country. This particular congregation was having a vote upon whether or not to remain in their denomination. At the core of the dissension was the issue of homosexuality. The article featured mostly people who did not approve of leaving the denomination. (This is, "they approved of the denomination's approval" of practicing homosexuality among its members.) However, the congregation, rightly, by a 2/3 margin, voted to leave the denomination.

But many of the people interviewed bemoaned "losing their church". They saw the disapproval of homosexuality as eroding the "faith" that their great-grandparents, who had belonged to the same congregation decades ago, held. Forget the fact that their great-grandparents would have been appalled at such behavior - let alone the fact that it doesn't square with the Word of God. One might wonder if they don't love God but only their "church".

Others interviewed were "members" of the congregation who "don't attend often anymore, but support the church financially". They couldn't be bothered to come make an attempt at worship or hear God's Word (however little of that there may have been), but you could count on them to be sure to come out and vote for sin!

Is the Church wounded as God's people were in Jeremiah's day? Yes, it is. Is there sin among God's people as there was in Jeremiah's day? Yes, there is. But much of greater Christendom seems to believe in the same old "healing" methods of the leaders to which Jeremiah preached! Friends, the division and healing in God's Church does not come with the "light healing" of saying "Peace! Peace!", singing Kumbaya, and accepting what God has called an abomination! Such "light healing" is putting a BandAid on a potentially fatal wound!

And before we begin to ride our high-horse, it is not just the sin of homosexuality that the Church needs to address. While other sins differ because they are not promoted and even encouraged in our society like homosexuality and transvestitism, they are every bit as dangerous and deadly. Note 1 Corinthians 6:10! After saying that the Kingdom of Heaven will not be inherited by homosexuals, it also gives this list:

"nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers..."

If our preaching and teaching does not also call out these behaviors and, really, all other sin - we are every bit as guilty of "light healing". Is there not a balm in Gilead? Is there not a way to heal God's Church? We know the answer.

"You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:15)

Why then has the health...of my people not been restored?

August 9

Reading: Jeremiah 12-15

"Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Yahweh, God of hosts."

(Jeremiah 15:16)

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit Muscle Shoals, Alabama. If you are a music nut like me, you know something about Muscle Shoals. Even if you don't know anything about Muscle Shoals, Alabama, I can almost certainly guarantee you've heard a lot of the popular music of the '60's and '70's that came mainly from two famous studios there. Though I live nearby I'd never gone and toured those studios. When I did, I must say that I came out with a greater appreciation and enthusiasm about that music. I have rediscovered a lot of artists and taken a greater appreciation in their songwriting. As we might sometimes say, I really "ate that up"!

If you stop and think about that phrase, it makes a lot of sense. When you eat something, you consume it. When you eat something really, really good - it can begin to consume you! You might begin craving it. You might start serving it up at home yourself. If it's something really good for you, it might make you healthier. But even if it's something that you can't control and it makes you fat - well, one thing is certain... it changes you.

That's what Jeremiah said about God's Word. When he discovered God's word, he says he really "ate it up"! And even that those words were "a joy and the delight of [his] heart". Jeremiah took so much pleasure in God's Word that he was willing to share it with others; he tried to get them to appreciate it like he did - even though it meant some persecution from other folks who weren't so thrilled about the message. But Jeremiah couldn't help it. It became to him like a fire in his bones (Jeremiah 20:9). Though this "weeping prophet" often complained to God about the results, this "food" he consumed most definitely consumed and shaped him.

Jesus often said the same about God's Word. In fact, after feeding the 5,000, Jesus explained to His disciples that He is the "bread of life". (John has already told us in chapter one that Jesus is "The Word" - the representation of, message from, and God Himself all in one!) Jesus even says that if you want to be a part of Him you must "feed on [His] flesh and [drink His] blood". No, He didn't mean that literalistically (as in cannibalism). And no, sorry, how many times you've heard it quoted at the communion table on Sunday morning notwithstanding, He wasn't talking about taking the Lord's Supper. Jesus was saying in the words He used that we must "chew up"... we must consume... God's Word. God's Word must be that which is the real sustainer of our lives. (Mathew 4:4) We must consume Him in the form of His Word in such a way that it begins to consume and shape us!

Well, what about it? When you get here to the passage we study in "Today's Bible" - or any other passage of scripture at any other time - do you "just eat it up"? Does it excite you? Fill you? Consume you? Shape you?

Are you excited to tell others what you've found today? Or are you more like those that Jeremiah just complained about who have God "near their mouth and far from their heart" (12:2b)?

August 10

Reading: Jeremiah 16-18; 35

"Therefore I will hurl you out of this land into a land that neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favor."
(Jeremiah 16:13)

I can remember a few times when, from the pulpit, I have asked a crowd, "Who here enjoys sinning?" No one would raise their hand. "Really? No one here enjoys sinning? I do! If you're not enjoying it, why are you doing it?"

The truth of the matter is this: We do enjoy sinning! - at least for a while. If there was not some kind of payoff, we wouldn't do it! People don't bother lying if they wouldn't get in trouble for telling the truth. People steal because they want the joy or benefit of that thing they take. A person lusts because it satisfies the craving of their mind. The "benefit" may be long-lasting or really, quite short. Sometimes the the intended result never even manifests itself. But the motivation is always sure: We believe that sin will be fun, satisfying, or otherwise fulfilling. That's why the people of Judah served other "gods". In some form or fashion, for short or long-term, they "benefitted" from their unfaithfulness.

But there always comes a time to "pay the piper"!

When Jeremiah was sent to pronounce God's judgment, the people responded incredulously: "Why has Yahweh pronounced all this great evil against us? What is our iniquity? What is the sin that we have committed against Yahweh our God?" (16:10)

Can you imagine that?

Yeah, I can.

All around us in our nation are people saying, "What's so bad about what I'm doing!? I'm not hurting anyone! Why is it your business - or even God's for that matter?"

The thing is that when we pick idols, (And that's what sin ultimately is. We look to an activity, person, or object to fulfill our needs rather than God.) God let's us choose! God never forces Himself, but allows us our choice. So He says, "Off you go to serve your gods." (v.13b)

"Wait! Can't we just go on serving them here?"

No, it's gone on too long. See, it's not so much even that God was punishing them, in my opinion, as much as the natural course of things taking place. Again, they dismissed God. So, when God quit protecting them ("...for I will show you no favor."), naturally, someone would come and take them away.

It is the same with us. You see:

While at first our idols serve us - we will eventually serve them.

The price of our sin will eventually be paid, and if we will not cling to Jesus - our merciful, loving God - for His payment, then we will pay the price for our sinful pleasure by being shackled to a "god" that is our taskmaster.

The intoxication of alcohol and "high" of drugs eventually leads to an addiction that costs the addicted every penny and human relationship he has. Sexual relationships that are not godly actually become enslaving after they are no longer pleasant because the chemical brain reactions that draw a man and wife close together in a godly marriage will still bond a person to terror outside those commitments. Materialism ends in debts that can't be paid regardless of how hard one works. On and on the list of our self-serving sins go.

Let Jesus break you free from your gods now while there is still time to get away.

August 11

Reading: Jeremiah 49:1-33; 2 Kings 24:5-9; 2 Chronicles 36:6-9; Jeremiah 22:24-23:32

"Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has My word speak My word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares Yahweh. Is not My word like fire, declares Yahweh, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?"
(Jeremiah 23:28-29)

Wouldn't it be strange if I listened to a Chinese podcast? I mean, not just a podcast originating from China, but a podcast that was only spoken in Chinese. Since I don't speak or understand Chinese... since there is no picture or video to help with context... since even inflections of voice are completely different from Chinese to English... there is absolutely zero chance that I would ever understand anything! It wouldn't make any difference how many times I listened, though I might be able to mimic a few words, I wouldn't know what I was saying.

So it is with many who read their Bibles - and even many that "preach" from them! We don't have picture or video, most of us don't know the original languages in which the words of the Bible were written, and the narrative is 2,000-6,000 years removed from us.

Thankfully, it's not as though the languages are intelligible. We have many, many people who do know Hebrew, Aramaic, and ancient Greek and can, and have, translated it into almost all the languages of the world. Yet, admittedly, the Bible can still be difficult to understand at times. The Ethiopian eunuch, when asked by Philip if he understood what he was reading (even in a language in which he was literate, evidently) replied, "How can I unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:31) While there are many passages, maybe even most?, from the Bible that are quite easily understood, just "reading your Bible" isn't likely to give you much understanding without employing a few helpful things.

Prayer! Never come at the scripture without asking God, by His Holy Spirit, to speak to you. Ask for clear understanding and the insight to see how this specific truth applies to your life.

Context! One reason I decided to write Today's Bible chronologically is that so much is lost - particularly in the major and minor prophets (Bible books Isaiah - Malachi) when they are separated from their historical context (Bible books 1 Kings - Esther). Even the common-sense words of Jesus or Paul may not make sense if you pick one verse out of its proper context. False teachers and unbelievers make a habit of doing such things!

Study! Study broadly and study deeply. Don't just know a few passages of scripture - work to know all of it. The Bible, oft times, is its own best interpreter. So many passages refer to others written by God through different men even separated by thousands of years. If you're not sure about the meaning of a word or passage, consult trusted books, men, scholars, or even the internet. WARNING: Any of these can also be dangerous, but used with wisdom and prayer, you may also learn a lot. One of the best arenas to study the Bible is in a Bible-believing, New Testament congregation - regularly hearing Bible preaching and teaching.

The point? If we are going to do what Jesus commanded and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20), it is imperative that we understand the words that we share. This is what God, through Jeremiah, was pointing out to the other prophets of his day. Preach! Yes! But speak God's word faithfully! Paul urged Timothy to "rightly divide the word of God. (2 Timothy 2:15) The Word of God is - as this passage states - a fire, a hammer. Elsewhere it is referred to as a sword. (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12) Let's be careful to know it and speak it accurately!

[Note: This is by no means to be a justification for keeping your mouth shut about the Bible! None of us "know it all"; all of us are still students. Share what you do know!]

August 12

Reading: Jeremiah 23:33-24:10; 29:1-31:14

"When one of this people, or a prophet or a priest asks you, 'What is the burden of Yahweh?' you shall say to them, 'You are the burden, and I will cast you off, declares Yahweh.'
(Jeremiah 23:33)

When I was a younger and more foolish man, I made a common mistake that I suppose every new husband makes.

I worked for a while as a short-order cook at a restaurant one of our church members owned. I worked all different times of the day - often early in the morning during the breakfast hours. I was particularly instructed on how the pancakes were to be made. I followed instructions closely and had it down. I knew how to make pancakes!

One night my wife happened to be making pancakes for supper. Well, you can see where this is leading. As I passed by, I noticed that she wasn't doing it "right". I stopped, watched a minute, and considered my options. Then I chose poorly.

Never - I repeat never - criticize the cooking of the one who has taken that job on as their life-long role for your benefit! (She has since forgiven me, and I've gotten a lot smarter!)

But if you've ever watched somebody doing "wrongly" what you knew how to do "rightly" - you know the feeling. It may be something as trivial as pancakes (Wait! I'm not sure pancakes are ever trivial...), or something that is a matter of life and death - but it "burdens" you. You feel the need to speak out. It is as Jeremiah put it, it is "a fire in my bones". (Jeremiah 20:9)

That is why the prophets (though Jeremiah excluded himself of this in his writings) referred to their prophecies and preaching as "the burden of Yahweh". The message was a burden placed on their hearts by God to tell His

truth to His people. They spoke of this "burden" and, as referenced here early in today's passage, might be asked, "What is the burden of Yahweh?" That is: "Tell us, Preacher, what does God have to say to us?"

Well, prophesying, I suppose, was certainly a burden. Especially when you were a prophet of bad news like Jeremiah often was. And preaching today is, in some respect, a burden. But many of the prophets of Jeremiah's day - and even the people who might hear them - used the phrase in a less than sincere way. It seemed the prophets might use the phrase to provoke a kind of pity for them from the people as they "had-to" carry this "burden of Yahweh". In addition, while they garnered sympathy for their difficult "job", to make matters worse, they were not actually carrying the burden of Yahweh! Jeremiah says their "burden" had become "every man's own word" and that they perverted the words God did give them! (23:36)

"So, Prophets! You better quit saying that!"

In addition, the people weren't supposed to ask that either. They were not to look for nor encourage more of this outrage. What's more, why would they ask? They never did what God told them to do anyway!

In response to their foolishness, God says that Jeremiah is to tell them, "You are the burden of Yahweh!" The burden of Yahweh was no longer what He put on the hearts of the prophets, but what they had placed on God Himself. And - God says - "I'm getting ready to throw you off!"

What about us, Church?

Preachers, are you truly carrying "the burden of Yahweh"? Are you speaking the Truth of God's Word? Do you proclaim the whole plan of salvation and invite people to respond to God's Word every Sunday (let alone every day)? Are you burdened enough with the Truth and the brokenness of people's lives that you will preach on the hard topics of divorce, sexual immorality, gossip, and the like? If you aren't willing to do that, maybe you ought set it down - if it's just a "job" and not what God has called you to.

Church members, do you come to the assembly to truly hear what God has said, or do you simply come to look for comforting words? Do you look down your nose on your neighbor in the pew - thinking they are the ones who need to hear the hard words?

What is the burden of Yahweh? Hopefully it is not us!

August 13

Reading: Jeremiah 31:15-40; 49:34-51:14

"Thus says Yahweh: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.' Thus says Yahweh: 'Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares Yahweh, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares Yahweh.'" (Jeremiah 31:15-17a)

As pointed out here on August 11, a broad study of the scriptures is helpful! Often, the Bible is its own best commentary and interpreter. Matthew tells us that the events he conveys in chapter two of his gospel are the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy here.

What was going on there?

King Herod, having ascertained from the magi the approximate time of Jesus' birth, declared that all male children two years old and under - in Bethlehem and all the surrounding region - be put to death. (Matthew 2:16-18)

I can't imagine the horror of that.

The streets must have been filled with chaos... shouts, cries, and weeping family members for... who knows how long?

Lamentation. Bitterness. Refusal of comfort.

Perhaps you can relate to that. I can. But I can't relate to it on that scale.

I just can't.

You know what's strange about it? The prophecy Jeremiah gives is smack in the middle of the prophecies rejoicing over the restoration of Judah and Israel. Jeremiah is promising that God will not forget about them in their Babylonian captivity. Today's passage goes on to tell how, even though God used the Babylonians, God did not excuse their part in the destruction of His people or His city. Jeremiah assures everyone that the Medes are coming (51:11) and Babylon will get what's coming to them!

The prophecy also paints a metaphorical picture of how God is not forgetting anyone! While he will restore Israel "under new management" later - He is sending a King that will make a "new covenant". People will know Him "one-on-one" and His law will be written on their hearts. (31:31ff) The Kingdom of Our God and Christ was coming in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

However, Satan would use Herod to throw a huge "temper fit". The devil would strike out with incredible, unheard-of evil in an attempt to short-circuit God's plan. Oh, the horror! But God foresaw it all the way back there - around 600-some years earlier - in Jeremiah's day and says with comfort: "...there is a reward for your work...there is hope for your future".

When you face the worst life can offer, remember this: I believe Satan still pitches his biggest fits before God does His greatest works!

I have experienced that in my own life. Sometimes it's in small-scale - sometimes larger - but it's not uncommon. That's not to say that everything bad is directly of the devil. But I do believe this as well:

Still today, there is a reward for your work and hope for your future!

When we do what God wants us to do, the way God wants it done, when God wants us to do it - we may encounter stiff opposition. (Jeremiah will see this himself.) But over and over Jesus promises to redeem our sacrifices for the Kingdom.

Weep if you must - but keep on workin'!

August 14

Reading: Jeremiah 51:15-58; 2 Kings 24:10-20; 2 Chronicles 36:10-14; 1 Chronicles 3:10-16; Jeremiah 52:1-3; 37:1-10

"Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh his God. He did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of Yahweh. He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God. He stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to Yahweh, the god of Israel."
(2 Chronicles 36:11-13)

"God helps those who help themselves." (Said... somebody)

Well, no, not really.

While we should always be "involved" in our own lives, so to speak, and take responsibility for ourselves (Galatians 6:5), the direction and ultimate "help" should come from God! Our responsibility and "help" to ourselves is to seek God and His will and then obey it directly.

This is not what Zedekiah did, and therefore, what he did do landed him in trouble.

Zedekiah had sworn by God to Nebuchadnezzar. (36:13) That is, when Nebuchadnezzar hauled off Zedekiah's nephew, Jehoiachin to Babylon, he made Zedekiah "swear by God" to just be a good boy and do what he was told, and he could be the new "King" of Judah. While we might think that Zedekiah's rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar would be a good thing, it ran afoul of God's plan.

One, God takes vows seriously - especially when people use His name! Jesus says, in fact, "Just don't make vows at all. Live the kind of life where people "just know" that your own word means something. If you say, 'Yes,' they know it's yes; if you say, 'No,' they know it's no." (Matthew 5:37) So even though Zedekiah is rebelling against Judah's enemy, it's not a good "look" for God's leader - no matter how much a figurehead.

Two, God's tool during this time is not Zedekiah, but Nebuchadnezzar. As we've already seen, God is using Babylon to take all His temple stuff and the best of minds of Judah and "store" them in Babylon until the time of His redemption. In rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar, Zedekiah is rebelling against God. But most of all, with another tip of the hat to a broad reading of the Bible and letting the Bible speak for itself, Ezekiel gives insight! In Ezekiel 17 (which we will read in a few days), Ezekiel explains in a parabolic vision that when Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, he wasn't being "pro-God", he was being "pro-Egypt"! Zedekiah was "helping himself" by making plans and seeking salvation outside of God's plan and power - seeking the help of Pharaoh.

What are your problems today? What is it that you are struggling with most? Perhaps we might benefit from examining whether or not we are trying to help ourselves - or if we are truly seeking and following Jesus, while we pray and wait for His plan to play out.

August 15

Reading: Jeremiah 37:11-38:28; Ezekiel 1:1-3:15

"Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, 'Put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes.' Jeremiah did so. Then they drew Jeremiah up with ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard."

(Jeremiah 38:12-13)

I'd be the first to tell you that, though it seemed all too normal to me at the time, I grew up very blessed. My parents did not separate until my dad died at seventy-five years of age. My dad always had a job, and we never lacked for food, clothing, or shelter. I was born into a home that believed in God, went to Church regularly, and followed Jesus. I was "abnormally normal". So it might not be too terribly surprising that I have lived my life much the same way. While I'd never say that has made life "easy", I don't really have a story about "overcoming".

Without downplaying my story or anyone else who has a similar one - let me admire once again the "over-comers" - people who somehow, against what would seem bad odds, did something great or became someone "good". In our reading today is one such obscure man. He is a fellow that lived in King Zedekiah's house and would probably never have even gotten a mention in history except for his exceptional show of compassion for God's prophet.

When the prophet and preacher Jeremiah gets lied about again, the king's henchmen grab him up and throw him in an empty cistern. With bread already a hot commodity in the besieged city, they weren't throwing any down to him! Jeremiah is left sinking into the mud of the abandoned cistern to die. (v. 6) A fella named Ebed-melech goes to King Zedekiah and pleads Jeremiah's case.

Who is he?

He is a eunuch and a foreigner. (v.7) He was probably a male slave that had been castrated in order to guard the King's wife/wives without any temptation to "improper relations". In short, he was a man who had been dealt a pretty cruel hand in life. Probably few people had acted very compassionately toward this guy. If anyone had a right to be angry and uncaring...

But not only does Ebed-melech plead for Jeremiah's life, when the king grants his request to save Jeremiah, he goes a step further. Knowing Jeremiah's situation - how he has sunk deep into the mud... stopping to consider how that would feel to have thirty men fighting the mud for your body... He takes the time to hunt up some rags.

"Here, Jeremiah, put these under your arms."

Little stuff that will get you a mention in the Bible.

I think it says that God puts a lot of stock in the kind of people who overcome their own difficulties to see and care for the smallest of pains in others' lives. I wonder if I, who have had many blessings and opportunities, see others' needs so easily? You?

August 16

Reading: Ezekiel 3:16-4:17; Jeremiah 27-28; 51:59-64

"Son of Man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, "You shall surely die," and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand."

(Ezekiel 3:17-18)

Did anyone ever say to you, "I'm telling you for the last time...?"

If anyone ever wanted to say that... my goodness, I'm sure it was the prophets of God during the time of the kings. From King Saul and the prophet Samuel - all the way to King Zedekiah and the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel - over and over and over the prophets preached with dedication the warnings of God. And they didn't just warn God's people. Jonah went to Ninevah - however unwillingly. Jeremiah and others prophesied to the Ammonites, the Edomites, the Chaldeans, the Egyptians... there was a lot to say.

And seldom was it ever heeded.

In fact, when Zedekiah asked Jeremiah to tell him what Yahweh had said, Jeremiah said, "Why!? If I tell you the truth you'll kill me! And if you don't kill me, you're not going to listen anyway!" (Jeremiah 38:15)

None of that absolves the prophet, priest, or preacher from his work.

None of it.

True enough, even if the wicked don't hear a call to repentance - if it was never spoken - they are still guilty of sin and worthy of punishment. But their rejection of God's word time and again was no excuse not to do his job.

Church, we are not prophets revealing any new foretelling of future events and works of God. But we are commissioned priests with the responsibility of being salt and light to our decaying and dark world. Much of the degradation of our communities today is because our congregation, long ago, ceased to inject any godly influence or teaching in our schools, courthouses, or homes. We are accountable, Church, for our attempt to lovingly - *lovingly* - warn the lost and to *harshly*, if necessary, rebuke the found! If they will not listen - that's their choice, but if we will not go, we bear the guilt as well.

August 17

Reading: Ezekiel 5-9

"Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one on whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary.' So they began with the elders who were before the house."

(Ezekiel 9:6)

Were you ever told, "You're old enough to know better!"?

Ezekiel is sometimes a perplexing study. There is a lot here that we may not fully understand away from the historical context of his prophesies. However, regardless of being able to identify and interpret "every last insect living in the under-bark of a particular subspecies of tree" - we can, as in Revelation, "see the forrest" and probably get a better understanding by looking at the whole anyway.

What's very clear thus far in Ezekiel:

God is not a "limited, regional, patron deity". Regardless of our understanding of Ezekiel's vision in chapter one of the four-faced creature and the wheels, etc. (which he also sees in 3:23 and 8:4, so far), God proves that the general consensus of folks is not correct. (Surprise, right!?) God shows his glory (the point of the vision, says 1:28) in a visit with Ezekiel and shows that He is with them - even in Chaldea - and sees all. Even all the chariots and forces of man and nature from the North are still only His tools and under His control. In doing so, God continues to point out that He has rescued many from Jerusalem and that Jerusalem will be destroyed - as many of Ezekiel's visions point out.

Application #1: Don't believe you can run from God!

The sin of those who know God is worse than the sin of those who don't. (5:6-7) Their wickedness was "more than the nations". How so? Because the nations had never walked in God's ways! They had never known such blessings of God. Therefore the rebellion of God's people was so much worse. This is what the New Testament explains. When we know the blessings of salvation, and then reject it, we are worse off at the end than the beginning! At the start we had a hope to go to; if we reject Jesus, there is no hope left! (Hebrews 6:4; 2 Peter 2:20)

Application #2: Continue to work out your faith in fear and trembling! (Philippians 2:12)

The sin in the life of a nation runs deeper than what is seen on the surface. God reminds Ezekiel of the plain, out-front sin with a vision of the temple. Idols are set up right in plain sight, then God says, "But there's more". He points Ezekiel to a hole in the wall. Ezekiel peers through to see a secret door where, inside some unseen room of the temple, worship of all kinds of unclean beasts is taking place. Leading them is even one of the reformers from Josiah's day, Jaazaniah. Also seen are women worshipping foreign gods.

Application #3: Sin runs deeper than you think - whether in the lives of others, and perhaps even in yourself. Look hard and weed it out!

But then we come to today's specific verses. The destruction of Jerusalem and the punishment of its inhabitants would begin with "the elders who were before the house". They were truly "old enough to know better". While they should have been leaders of righteousness among God's people, note their disgusting behavior in 8:16-17. They turn their backs on the temple of Yahweh while they bow in worship to the sun. God's leaders - worshipping the created, rather than the Creator!

While the end of 8:17 is somewhat of an enigma ("Behold, they put the branch to their nose."), many understand this to be - in the context - an idiom for an obscene gesture toward God. It certainly does seem so as they raise their "backside" to God while they honor their idol!

Whatever the case, Church, we are "old enough to know better"! The New Testament proclaims that judgment will again "begin at the household of God". (1 Peter 4:17)

Have we turned out "backsides" to God to chase after other things with the honor due Him? God forbid!

August 18

Reading: Ezekiel 10-13

"And he said to me, 'Son of man, these are the men who devise iniquity and who give wicked counsel in this city; who say, "The time is not near to build houses. This city is the cauldron, and we are the meat." Therefore prophesy against them, prophesy, O son of man.'" (Ezekiel 11:2-4)

While I do have a sweet-tooth I try my best to deny, I am really what you would call a "meat and potatoes" man. I could never be a vegetarian - at least not by choice. I love good, home-grown, garden vegetables; but a meal without meat... well, for me, it just isn't a meal.

However, in many times and cultures - even today - meat is not necessarily a "staple". Be it because of preference, tradition, or lack, many throughout history have not eaten a lot of meat. So it was in Jerusalem - at least in Ezekiel's day. As they are undergoing sieges and times of war, all food was lacking, but particularly meat! So, when God shows Ezekiel the people back in Jerusalem saying, "This city is the cauldron, and we are the meat!" It is another statement of arrogance.

Their meaning is that the "inedible" or "undesirable" parts of the meal have already been thrown out (Ezekiel and the other deportees). Again, the false prophets are teaching - and these "twenty-five counselors" are telling the "prince" of Judah (Ezekiel is careful never to actually call Zedekiah the king!), "We are the remnant God will bless! We are the favored ones! We are the choice ingredients in God's Kingdom" In another statement of arrogance, they say, "The time is not near to build houses." i.e., we will be here a long time... we can get around to that later.

Their evaluation of the situation could not be further from the truth!

In chapter thirteen, Ezekiel says these counselors have been "prophets" alright - false prophets! They've never spoken by the Holy Spirit, they've never been privy to the inner thoughts of God, they lived only to scavenge off people, they've never cared for the people's needs, and all the visions they surely did have came from witchcraft! All the while they used Yahweh's name vainly as the stamp of approval for their lies. (13:1-7)

Let us be careful about what and to whom we listen, Church. If it's in God's Word - the Bible - we've already got it, and we'll follow it! If it's not in there - reject it! Paul told Timothy that at some point people would gather about them preachers and others that would tell them what their itching ears want to hear. (2 Timothy 4:3) We are there now! And we have probably been there for a long, long time.

Just like judgment was sure upon Jerusalem, regardless of the false prophets' words, the return of Jesus Christ to raise the righteous to eternal life, and the evil dead to eternal destruction, is imminent! Our time is not long! And soon the "meat" will be removed just as they had been from Jerusalem, and the "undesirable" will be left to suffer destruction - just like Jerusalem did.

[Note: Your version may say, "Will it not soon be time to build houses?" or "Is it not time to build houses?" The actual Hebrew could be taken either way - "it is time" - or "it is not time". The building of a "house" could also mean a few different things: It could be a dwelling place, but the scripture also "building a house" as an idiom for having children. It might also mean to build a political dynasty - that also might be a "house". Regardless of how we might choose to interpret "is" or "is not" or take "build houses" - the point is the same. "We will be here a long time!" So, either "It's time to build! We can safely start over because God has blessed us!" or "We've got plenty of time later on for such things" - both speak to an arrogance that was unjustified.]

August 19

Reading: Ezekiel 14-16

"But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his."

(Ezekiel 16:15)

Are there certain words you don't like to hear - even if they are appropriate? I'm not even talking about curse words or other things considered "bad language"... just words that may have a bad connotation to you?

The English Standard Version here really trips all over itself. It does use the word "whore" and "whorings". (God uses those words no less than seventeen times in chapter 16!) But the translation almost seems to use them in apology and protest. There are the following footnotes at the bottom of the page the first two times: "Or unfaithful" "Or unfaithfulness; also verses 20, 22, 25, 26, 29, 33, 34, 36" In verse twenty-five, the translation just finds it too distasteful to be completely literal and says, "...offering yourself to any passerby..." and then only gives us the literal translation at the bottom of the page, "Hebrew spreading your legs".

God wants to make a bold point, but sometimes the truth hurts. When sin is revealed for what it really is - we want to look away.

At the beginning of the chapter, God describes the nation of Israel as a child no one wanted. Without even having the blood wiped off her after birth, He finds her in the field abandoned and helpless. But God speaks life into this people:

"And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' I said to you in your blood, 'Live!'"

(v.6)

He then describes how He rescued her, brought her into a covenant relationship, adorned her with all the finest things - clothes, jewelry, crowns, food - royalty even! (vv.7-14)

But then, trusting in herself, she takes all that God has given her and gives it away - even her very self - to strangers. She does it anywhere she can find them. What's more, though they "played the whore" (v.17) in such a way that even the Philistines were ashamed (My goodness! v.27), they were worse than a prostitute! God said, "Prostitutes get paid! You paid them to be your lover!" (v.34)

Oh my.

That's hard to read isn't it.

Is it even harder to read when we can see some of ourselves there?

Sure, the nation may have had some of her own beauty. All of us as creations of the Living God have value! We are born with natural abilities, gifts, talents, and strengths. But without Jesus' redemptive mercy, love, and grace we are as helpless as an infant. People may or may not want us, but regardless, we will never reach our full potential without Him.

So, when He does redeem us, He lavishes us with gifts. He takes our natural abilities and all our unique passions and personalities and enables physical people to do spiritual things. We are empowered to not only function with purpose and efficiency in the natural world, but to become supernatural by being able to edify the body of Jesus (the Church) and to do the incredibly miraculous work of helping others become a new creation in Christ.

Yet, what have we often done? We often take what we become and give away the blessings of God... and for what? Our idols do nothing for us! Our unfaithfulness only profits the world.

Oh my.

That's hard to read isn't it.

Let us not take for granted our redemption, Church! Let us be who God saved us to be today! We have been saved by grace, through faith for good works! (Ephesians 2:8-10)

August 20

Reading: Ezekiel 17-19

"The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself."

(Ezekiel 18:20)

I know a person who grew up under terrible circumstances. The home was filled with drugs and abuse from birth to adulthood. Yet, that soul is a great servant of God today. That person's whole family loves and serves God, and they are a great witness of God's holiness.

I know another person who grew up in a loving home. It was a home that taught and lived the Word of God every day. That soul went to a Christian school, entered into ministry - and then denied Jesus.

Question: Will God look at the first person and say, "It doesn't matter how much you do. You will never live up to My expectations," and punish that person for how he grew up? Will God look at the second person and say, "You're not so great, but you come from a good family. In fact, I made a promise to your father, so any child of his is a child of Mine!"?

I don't know of anyone - when plainly read that way - would think God fair in doing that.

Yet, that is exactly what the Israelites believed - and they complained that it was unfair that God didn't agree with them!

They wanted "credit" for being sons of Abraham and for having the Mosaic law. And, they figured, if you're parents were bad, most likely you were too, and anything you suffered was probably because of that.

How ridiculous!

Except that we often act that way.

Many people are "Christians" by birth - in their book. They grew up "Christian". They "went to Church" (at least on Christmas, Mothers' Day, and Easter). They went to a "Christian Academy"... "I'm good! I know all that stuff." And they live an atheist-style life.

Other people are looked down on - by some "Church Members", mind you - because of who their parents are. Those kind of "Church Members" probably aren't Christians themselves. Most likely, they are probably part of the other group!

The point is this: Every man will decide about Jesus for himself. And every man will receive the "just due" for his decision. That might be good news or bad news. Which is it for you?

August 21

Reading: Ezekiel 20:1-22:16

"Then I said, 'Ah, Lord Yahweh! They are saying of me, "Is he not a maker of parables?" The word of Yahweh came to me: 'Son of man, set your face toward Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuaries. Prophecy against the land of Israel and say to the land of Israel, Thus says Yahweh: Behold, I am against you and will draw my sword from its sheath and will cut off from you both righteous and wicked.'
(Ezekiel 20:49-21:4)

Back in the more innocent days of TV, "Gomer Pyle USMC" was a popular TV show. Gomer, being an honest, yet naive, citizen of Mayberry RFD was constantly under the skin of Sergeant Carter. When Gomer might mumble something in his North Carolina drawl, Sergeant Carter would yell in his face, "I can't heeeaaarr youuuuuuuuu!"

Ezekiel complains to God that, maybe more like little children taunting one another on a playground, the Israelites say to him, "I can't hear you!" The way Ezekiel puts it, "They just call me a story-teller. They are not 'getting it!'"

God responds.

"OK! They don't like 'stories' told toward 'the south'? Then preach! Set your face toward Jerusalem [specifically, not just 'the south'] and preach! And here's your sermon..."

The introduction to his sermon is particularly interesting and attention-getting. Ezekiel is told to go around moaning and groaning. When people ask, "What's wrong with you?!" "That's when you start preaching, Ezekiel!"

Ezekiel then tells them it's because of the message that's coming from God - one so terrible that their hearts will melt, they just may faint, and - if you believe the New International Version's interpretation (I think they are probably the only ones who put it this way) - they'll probably wet their pants! (21:6-7)

The sermon then continues about a sword that is coming from Babylon to bring judgment - first on God's people in Jerusalem and then to Ammonites in Rabbah. They will complain that the divination the Babylonians consulted "got it wrong" (21:23), but no matter - Yahweh's judgment is nigh.

Just as then, the time has come for "plain talk". Although, in the New Testament, we are given a little bit of a different "day-to-day" approach. While there are many "Christians" who seem to go 'round with a sour look - moaning and groaning like Ezekiel - it is for no godly reason. They are usually people who have lost the heavenly perspective and are living in the woes and worries of the world. The world doesn't ask them, "What's wrong?" because the world knows what's wrong!

The New Testament asks us to live in such a manner that people will ask us, "What's right? What's so right in your world that you live the way you do? Why do you seem to go about your life in hope [not a wish for something good to happen - but an expectation that everything will turn out for your good]?"

Peter says that's when we go to preachin'! And tell them the reason for the expectation of God's promises fulfilled that we live by. (1 Peter 3:15) But I have to wonder if we are living holy and hopeful enough lives for anyone to ask... So far, I'm afraid all I can hear the world saying is, "I can't heeaaaarr youuuuuuuuu!"

August 22

Reading: Ezekiel 22:17-23:49; 2 Kings 24:21-25:2; Jeremiah 39:1; 52:4-5; Ezekiel 24:1-14

"And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them. I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath. I have returned their way upon their heads, declares the Lord Yahweh."

(Ezekiel 22:30-31)

I recently stood before a congregation and delivered a sermon wherein I challenged people to commit themselves to spending just fifteen minutes during the next week telling someone the truth of the gospel of Jesus. The congregation had "Amen'd" a lot throughout the sermon. Surely, they'd been sufficiently moved to action! Several times before, when I'd made this challenge at the invitation time, five people, ten people, and a few times - even the whole congregation - came forward to re-receive the commission to make disciples, be prayed over, and sent out. But this time, as they all sang, "I Surrender All", not a one would even surrender fifteen minutes for Jesus.

Not. A. One.

As God saw the nation of Judah slipping further and further from His heart, He looked. Was there anyone - just any one - who would "stand in the gap" for Him? Was there just one person that would be a go-between, a real priest, between God and man?

Not. A. One.

It would be easy to look at this on the national level as God spoke it through Ezekiel. It would be easy to apply it to the United States (or any other nation) and say, "Oh, if only someone would save our country! If only one someone...!"

Yet, that is far too easy.

Judah was a geographical, political nation for sure. But it was also a "Kingdom of Priests". (Exodus 19:6) It wasn't just the job of the Levites to do something. It wasn't just the job of the prophets to set things right. It wouldn't just be the king who was responsible for the direction of a nation. It was all of them!

And today, God's Kingdom of Priests has not changed! While it is no longer a geographical, political nation, it is still Israel - and that Israel is the Church! And, yes, while it would be wonderful for the Church to step in and be the light to our nation and others that our country (and others) need - we need first a citizen of the Kingdom to stand between God and His Church!

Anyone!

We need young men who will get in the pulpit and be the preacher and evangelist that God has called them to be. Men who will patiently preach and suffer through the heartless and calloused hearts of leaders who prefer to sweep the sins of the Church under the rug and maintain the status quo, while the evangelist goes on trying valiantly to attack the devil's worldly wall of doubt in the community - bringing the lost to Jesus.

We need older men who will be the pastors that God has called the elders of His Kingdom to be! Men unafraid of the wolves among the sheep who terrorize them with division, poison them with sin, and hinder the saving of the lost. We need men unafraid of losing "givers" and "long-time Church-'members'" (NOT long-time members of Jesus' actual body!) who will trust God when He says to expel those kind from the Church.

We need deacons who will do more than hear and give reports. We need servants who serve, men who work - work at more than just holding a title.

We need women who teach younger women modesty, who teach children godliness, and who live holy lives. We need men who raise boys to be godly men, to be kingdom servants, and godly fathers - while they support their families and the Church financially.

Were God to go looking today, would He find one?

Even one?

And... He is looking!

August 23

Reading: Ezekiel 24:15-25:17; Jeremiah 34:1-22; 21:1-14; Ezekiel 29:1-16; 30:20-31:18

"Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down. Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning over the dead. Bind on your turban, and put your shoes on your feet; do not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of men.' So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died. And on the next morning I did as I was commanded." (Ezekiel 24:16-18)

There is a lot to unpack in these verses, but let me try and pull a few things out for "show and tell".

One: Just because we are serving God doesn't mean that we are immune to some of life's most difficult struggles. All of us - whether in the pulpit or pew, or even without a relationship to Jesus - live in a world that is no longer perfect. Not news, right? But all of us are touched by death. In God's mercy, He disallowed us to eat from the tree of life in this world so that we would not have to live in this state of brokenness and imperfection eternally. In the curse of death, is also a blessing when we seek the redemption found in Jesus. However, that does not mean the end of life for those we love is easy. It's hard, and we all must endure it.

Two: When those who are God's servants go through these times, we are not excused from our service to Him. Ezekiel must publicly put on a face that denies his feelings and his grief (It had to be unexpected from his normal personality or at least culture for people to ask him about it. [24:19]) and continue teaching people about God. Few of us will be called to such an extreme part in a "play" before others, but that doesn't mean that we can't be a witness in our time of grief. God probably won't call us to "put on an act" of denial, but He does encourage us to grieve trials and struggles of the world - even death - differently from those who do not know Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

Those are just observations. But the point of what God is having Ezekiel do is in this:

Three, the "play" that Ezekiel puts on before the public is meant to show how Judah (and usually we too) value the wrong things. It wasn't necessarily the physical death that Ezekiel would mourn. Though we fight, literally, to stay physically alive, we do know that death is inevitable. We simply know that the physical death ends the relationship we have - in this world. While the Israelites saw the temple and Jerusalem as their pride, delight, and yearning of their souls (v.21) that they were fighting with everything to hang on to - their actions and lifestyle didn't really value God. In the end, they wouldn't even mourn those things, they would mourn what they had really lost - the intimate relationship they should have had with God - and cry over their sin and iniquity when they were taken from and/or ran from the city of God.

What do you most value today? What do you value about your friends? What do you most value about your spouse? Most importantly, what do you value about God? Are you into appearances and the physicalities of people? Or do you value who they are? Do you value the church building, its furnishings (you know... that "sacred" painting behind the baptistery, the old pews, the stage lights, or styles, etc, etc) - or do you value the power and awe of the God you worship there (and hopefully everywhere else as well)?

The things you mourn over says a lot about what - or Who - you rejoice over!

August 24

Reading: Jeremiah 32-33; Ezekiel 26

"Ah, Lord Yahweh! It is You who have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for You. You show steadfast love to thousands, but You repay the guilt of fathers to their children after them, O great and mighty God, whose name is Yahweh of hosts, great in counsel and mighty in deed, Whose eyes are open to all the ways of the children of man, rewarding each one according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds."

(Jeremiah 32:17-19)

Songs can stick with you a long time. I think there is a reason that the longest book in the library we call The Bible is the Hebrew songbook, The Psalms. Songs stick the truths of God with the great gift of God called music to make something so powerful that we remember the truth for years and even recall many things about when and where we heard it first.

While our selected verses today were not originally written as a song, God has used other musicians throughout the years to keep God's truths ever before us. In 1976, Kay Chance put these verses to music in a way that I can remember today.

When I was a Freshman in Bible college, I remember chapel services where the song leader with great enthusiasm waved his arms and led us in this rousing song. I share it with you today. OK, it's a bit dated... the instrumentation is pretty cheesy... but I hope it will be an "earworm" that will stick in your mind today - and every day - to remind you of this: If Yahweh created the heavens and the earth, there is nothing that is too hard for Him!

And that includes any of your problems and trials!

"Call to me and I will answer you,..." (Jeremiah 33:3a)

August 25

Reading: Ezekiel 27-28; 2 Kings 25:3-7; Jeremiah 52:6-11; 39:2-10

"You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked."

(Ezekiel 28:14, italics mine)

Have you ever heard someone say, or said yourself, "Why doesn't God do something about...?"

He probably has.

While other nations are only given several verses of one chapter in Ezekiel's prophecies concerning their coming fall to Nebuchadnezzar, the great city of Tyre has three chapters!

It was an important city to all the known world. The Phoenician ports and sailing vessels were known from Tarshish (an unknown location but believed to be in either northern Africa, Italy, or even as far as southern Spain) to Arabia. The known world loved, traded with, and increased their wealth and quality of life by their dealings with Tyre. (Ezekiel 27:10-25) Through Ezekiel, God reveals that this was by His hand. "I placed you," God told the king of Tyre. (This is in accordance with the New Testament on the earth's rulers. [Romans 13:1-2]) Yet, the king's pride was exposed in his laughter over the plight of Judah. Just as Ammon eventually fell to Nebuchadnezzar though he chose Judah to conquer first, so would he also come to Tyre. (Ezekiel 21:18ff)

But the prophecy concerning Tyre would not be complete until Alexander the Great approached Tyre in 332 BC. Having been turned away from coming to make sacrifices to Hercules on the island, Alexander swore to raze the island to the ground as Nebuchadnezzar had done to the mainland population. In an engineering marvel, Alexander set tens of thousands of men to work and built a causeway of over a half mile long and sixty-five yards wide across the Mediterranean Sea to besiege the island city. When he was done, Ezekiel's prophecy was accurate; Tyre was a bare rock only good for spreading out your fishing nets. (Ezekiel 26:14)

What kind of leaders... what kind of nations... what kind of blessings has God provided this world... not just to His Church, but to provide for the whole of creation... in modern times - that we have ruined? It's pretty easy to see the prosperity of our own nation - and others like it - that for some time has not only blessed its own people, but been an advocate and a benevolent (in many cases) people to those around the world. However, even today, pride and haughtiness continue to destroy our society - even while people say, "Why doesn't God do something about..."

Today, let us not ask what could would or could do, but let's focus on taking what He has provided and putting it to godly use!

August 26

Reading: Jeremiah 39:11-18; 40:1-6; 52:12-27; 2 Kings 25:8-21; 2 Chronicles 36:15-21; Lamentations 1

"How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave."

Is not Jeremiah's lamentation over the city of Jerusalem following Nebuchadnezzar's siege and burning of it an accurate picture of the Church today?

As we look out across auditorium's of mostly empty pews, we can imagine days when they were full. We remember the days when people stood, hymnal in hand, and sang heartily as the room was filled with praise. We recall a fervor with which people came on Wednesday nights and paired up to go and call on the backslidden - or even door-to-door. Somewhere along the way, somebody told us "none of that 'works' anymore"... so... we just stopped.

Guess what works now?... not the things "they" told us would!

Here we are now - decades removed from going out and telling people about Jesus... decades removed from encouraging young men to "give your life to full-time Christian service"... decades removed from diligent, studied teaching in Sunday School classrooms... and the buildings are only fractionally full and the pulpits are even emptier.

"Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me..." (v.12)

The Church chases its tail after its "lovers" (v.19) who told them what would "work", but we find that we were deceived by the "Church Consultants", tricky denominationally-sized "planter organizations", and purveyors of "gospel-tainment". We sought after what we were told to by the false priests and elders would revive our strength, but we lack for a comforter. (v.16)

There is no grief like the grief of knowing you were wrong. That dashing of pride is a hard sell.

"Yahweh is in the right, for I have rebelled against His Word; but hear, all you peoples, and see my suffering;..." (v.18)

Unlike Judea, God's Church has time yet to repent! We have opportunity to see a comforter - THE Comforter. He is the only One Who can yet revive our spirits!

Will we be willing to turn back to Bible preaching, honest praise, the discipling of young and old with a biblical literacy absent from today's "what-does-this-mean-to-you-phony-boloney-plastic banana-good time rock'n'roller-'bible' studies"?

"...I am in distress; my stomach churns; my heart is wrung within me..." (v.20)

Is that Jeremiah speaking? God? Me? You?

I hope the answer is: YES.

August 27

Reading: Lamentations 2-4

"The steadfast love of Yahweh never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. 'Yahweh is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in Him.' Yahweh is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of Yahweh."

(Lamentations 3:22-26)

People, normal, every-day, "compassionate", good people... were reduced to boiling their own children for food. (4:10)

Let that sink in.

How hopeless, hungry, and howling mad did people have had to become through the siege of Nebuchadnezzar to resort to this? If you thought the story of the Donner Party was gruesome...

Yet even within this level of society's degradation, Jeremiah offers hope and truth. God still loves us; His mercies (even while He is punishing us) are never-ending. He comes up with new ways to refill our cup of every morning. We must only "wait for" Him.

Twice Jeremiah talks about how we wait.

One: There is a prayer of declaration. "Yahweh is my portion...I will hope in Him." Two: Twice Jeremiah talks about being quiet. Both in our selected passage today, and then in v.28, he says to "sit alone in silence".

There is a time to pour out our hearts - to let our mouths overflow with every emotion we have. There is a time to speak to God about all the ways we are disappointed in or even angry with Him. He can take that. But there also comes a time to simply pray, "God, You are what I want (my portion)!"

Many times our disappointments are because we have been chasing after a different "portion". We often get our priorities all wrong. It's useful to sit back and say, "Lord, I'm going to quit chasing these things that I want... I just want You." And then we let our hope (our expectation) become Him being nearer us every morning.

I know I need to do that more... what about you?

August 28

Reading: Lamentations 5; Obadiah; Jeremiah 40:7-41:18; 2 Kings 25:22-26

"For the day of Yahweh is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head."

(Obadiah 15)

In today's reading we read about the benevolent governor of Judah, Gedaliah. Appointed by Nebuchadnezzar to govern the old and poor left behind in Judea, he goes about encouraging the people. He welcomes Jeremiah to his base of operations at Mizpah, and even when a trusted friend brings him word of a coup, he is too nice to believe such a thing of a "brother".

He shoulda been more versed in the scriptures!

From Genesis chapter 4, the jealousy of one brother toward another has been a fact of the fallen world. That jealousy rears its ugly head when a relative of the fallen King Zedekiah wants his family's throne back and kills Gedaliah.

It's no different in Obadiah's prophecy. His short vision concerns the "brother" of Jacob (aka Israel or Judah), the Edomites. Edom was the nation descended of Jacob's brother Esau. And, when Chaldeans came for Judah, Edom, like many of Judah's neighbors, felt nothing but a satisfied jealousy. Obadiah says they "stood aloof on the day that strangers carried off [his brother's] wealth". (v.11) In response, God says the actions of the Edomites toward their brothers will be upon their own heads.

"Hey, Edom! What goes around comes around!"

Throughout His word, from Cain and Abel to Jesus' words concerning how people would know His real disciples, God has expected that we would care for - that we would love - our brethren. That means our earthly flesh and blood family, our spiritual flesh and blood of Jesus' family, and our brothers in creation. God has commanded that we love them all. True, it will be shown in each of these groups in different ways. But if my deeds were to return on my own head, I'd sure want them to be good deeds!

What can we do today to show love for our brothers?

August 29

Reading: Jeremiah 42:1-44:30; Ezekiel 33:21-33

"... 'Come and hear what the word is that comes from Yahweh.' And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it."

(Ezekiel 33:30b-32)

After most all of Judah and Jerusalem is hauled away by the Babylonians, people come back to Jeremiah asking him to go and pray to Yahweh for us and find out what we should do. He does, but even as he tells

them the truth, he lets them know they won't obey. And sure enough, they actually tell him he's a liar, and they will do what they want to do.

Yahweh explains to Ezekiel that this same thing is going to happen with the captives already in Babylon that he ministers to.

Preachers, expect no less. Many will come to the meeting and say, "Fine sermon, preacher!" "Boy, you really stepped on my toes!" "Great message today, brother!" ... but they will not act on it. You are just an entertainer for some.

I like the way the New Living Translation puts it:

"You are very entertaining to them, like someone who sings love songs with a beautiful voice or plays fine music on an instrument."

And true enough, in many congregations today, not only have the people quit listening to the preaching, they have actually brought in the entertainment to satisfy them and the crowds they do want. Filled with fluffy, feel-good sermons and entertaining concert-style pseudo-worship they go home to their worldly lifestyles.

Church member, is that you? Will you hear the Word of God today and act on it!? Or are you just going for your own entertainment?

August 30

Reading: Ezekiel 34-36

"And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David. And He shall feed them: He shall feed them and be their shepherd."

(Ezekiel 34:23)

Our God, Yahweh, never changes - but thankfully, the way He teaches us DOES!

Under the old covenant (the Mosaic covenant - from the time of the Exodus to the birth of the Church), God had priests. Priests were men responsible for being the intermediary between God and mankind.

Thankfully, as with the law of Moses, God replaces this system when it becomes apparent - to the PEOPLE not to HIM (He ALWAYS knew His plan and purpose) - that a sinful man could not adequately mediate for other sinful men. So Jesus was sent to be the High Priest (among other things); He was able to go into the Holy of Holies in a temple not made by human hands, and not by the blood of bulls and goats, but by His own Holy blood.

It was also apparent in Ezekiel's day that the priests could not shepherd God's people. Their hard hearts, often turned by greed and corruption, left others to flounder. So He says there will be One Shepherd! Jesus!

While we still have the overseers of the Church that are to be our Pastors/Shepherds - they are only following the lead of the One Shepherd. While we are all in God's Church called to be priests - helping mankind find God - we serve under the one High Priest that is our only hope as well!

Have men let you down? Do you feel lost and alone? Do you feel like a sheep without a shepherd - broken without a doctor? Jesus longs to be your shepherd. He longs to love you and bring you before the very throne of grace - not just now, but for eternity.

August 31

Reading: Ezekiel 37-39; 32

"...He brought me out in the Spirit of Yahweh and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. There were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And He said to me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' And I answered, 'O Lord Yahweh, you know.'

"Then He said to me, 'Prophecy over these bones...'

"So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army."

(Ezekiel 37:1b, 2b-3, 4a, 10)

Is all the 'life' gone from, well... your life? Is it dry? Are you more dead than alive? The people of Judah, now living in Babylon had endured more atrocities and heartache than most can imagine - or want to imagine! Life seemed to hold little value. They were literally, as a society at least, dead.

Yet, God takes the most hopeless situation - death - and proves He can conquer it. He can conquer it figuratively in the "state" of life we find ourselves in. He can take life from just existence to exuberance! And, as the New Testament gospels show time and again, He can literally conquer death through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

How does He do it? BY THE POWER OF THE WORD! The WORD of God, SPOKEN to the PEOPLE of God MAKES THINGS HAPPEN! It brings life to the lifeless.

Christian, faith comes by HEARING - that is - through your ears! It's NOT enough to sit and READ your Bible - great as that is. It is IMPERATIVE that you ATTEND CHURCH (Hebrews 10:25) and hear the Word SPOKEN to your ears! Believe it and live!

Preacher, do you sincerely believe - really and truly - that what you are doing in the pulpit is accomplishing anything? If you don't - you won't. If you do - you will (or rather HE will!).

September 1

Reading: Ezekiel 32:17-33:20; Jeremiah 52:28-30; Psalm 137; 1 Chronicles 4:24-5:17

"Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die."
(Ezekiel 33:13)

In the words of the Janet Jackson song... "What have you done for me LATELY!?" Not that God should be compared to a spoiled girl in a pop song, but the thought might be asked of us who claim to follow Jesus.

From even before the days of Ezekiel, people have had a tendency to be content with the sacrifices made to God in days past. Today even, it is common to hear people in congregations across the country talk about the large crowds they USED to have... the revivals they USED to hold... the many baptisms of the past. Their foyers or fellowship halls have literal trophies from softball leagues of the '70's or Christmas parades in the '80's when people were more involved with the body of Christ than their own personal lives. The Hebrew writer states God is a CONSUMING FIRE. Evidently, some folks had quenched the Spirit before He had quite consumed all of them.

What about today? Do you live in the great works of faith in your past? Or is God still consuming you and causing you to live closer to Him and do more in and through Him than ever?

September 2

Reading: 1 Chronicles 5:18-26; 6:3b, 49, 4-15; 7:1-8:28

"The Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh had valiant men who carried shield and sword, and drew the bow, expert in war, 44,760, able to go to war. They waged war against the Hagrites.... And when they prevailed over them, the Hagrites and all who were with them were given into their hands, for they cried out to God in the battle, and he granted their urgent plea because they trusted in him. For many fell, because the war was of God."

(1 Chronicles 5:18-19a, 20, 22a)

Over forty-thousand skilled and equipped warriors made quite a mighty army. Yet, God's people still realized the need to seek God's help in accomplishing that which He'd set out to do. And, as usual, when God's people seek to do what He has commanded in the way He asked - God comes through. God did not only give them the strength and courage of heart to accomplish the task, but He actually miraculously intervened in some way to "[fight] against them" Himself. Yet, as time dragged on, these fighting men of great reputation (5:24) were eventually unfaithful to the God they had sought, obeyed, and been blessed by.

It is good, from time to time, to recount to ourselves, and our family and friends, the ways that God has blessed us. Otherwise we can get to thinking that we've gotten where we are on our own. The blessing that the good times make us forget the bad has a double-edged blade. It can make us forget Who made the times good again!

Take some time to recount to yourself - and others if the opportunity arises - the ways God has brought you through life's battles. Never forget!

September 3

Reading: 1 Chronicles. 8:29-9:1; Daniel 4; Ezekiel 40:1-37

"Therefore, Your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."

"All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. Twelve months later..."

- Daniel 4:27-29a

King Nebuchadnezzar was eager to have a dream interpreted. He realized that only Daniel - a follower of "the Most High God" - could interpret it. He called for Daniel and asked for his honesty. He heard the less-than-encouraging meaning. He heard Daniel's plea for repentance. But he did nothing.

Perhaps for a time he considered it. Perhaps he even lived in dread. Perhaps he actually made strides toward repentance. But "Twelve months later" came, and as Nebuchadnezzar proudly spoke, God fulfilled His promised punishment (4:30-32).

One thing you can say about our God - He is not rash. He is not quick to act. As they say, "He is seldom early...". But the other half of that phrase is just as true - "but He is never late!" God will, in His time, keep His Word. Whether we are waiting on vindication and reward - or thinking we have evaded His punitive promise - God will be true to His Word.

Live by the promises of God today - in joy or repentance. For the promise of God today is the reality of life tomorrow.

September 4

Reading: Ezekiel 40:38-43:27

"And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. As the glory of the Lord entered the temple by the gate facing east,"
(Ezekiel 43:2, 4)

Just outside my hometown a large cross has been erected. At over 120 ft. tall, the "Building the Cross Over Prentiss County" project has been amazing. I don't really know all that much about it, but I do know that it united believers across denominations to do something that honors Jesus.

But at a cost of over \$200,000, my first thought was, "What could have been done with that money to more effectively tell the lost about Jesus!?"

Well, I don't know about that, but when I read the Bible I see this: there is no "waste" in honoring God. When sacrifice is made to honor Jesus, regardless of how "wasteful" it may seem to some - it is WORTH IT.

Mary opens a bottle of expensive perfume and pours it all over Jesus' feet. The disciples complain the financial value of it could've done so much more (of course one of the detractors simply wanted to help himself to the money!). But Jesus blesses her for honoring Him.

In today's text (and yesterday's and tomorrow's), an angel(?) has been showing Ezekiel in a vision how God wants His temple built. Could/can God be worshipped in a tent - He was for forty years! Could He just be worshipped "out in nature" without any accoutrements at all? Sure. But God included in His temple items made of pure gold and things decorated with palm trees, etc. And that tent where His glory dwelt for forty years was no army surplus! God cared about the esthetics of His dedicated place of sacrifice as much as He cared to create a beautiful world for OUR habitation!

The culmination of God re-entering the Temple in the vision made me think about 3 truths that come to mind for me when I imagine what Ezekiel saw:

1) There was simply what Ezekiel was being shown and what he was to explain to God's people in Babylon about how to build the Temple of God on their return and His promise to inhabit it as they put away other "gods" and relics.

2) Then there is the first step of application for myself. When I repent of my sin and am washed in water baptism, I am cleansed and created to be God's Temple (Acts 2:38). And, as long as I will keep this Temple "clean" - as I guard against idols and decline to honor other things - He promises to dwell with me. Here. IN ME. Therefore, NO SACRIFICE on my part is too great, no matter the protestations of self or the opinions of the world, to prepare a place for the life-giving, sustaining, creative Spirit of the Living God.

3) I am also reminded of His return. It's hard for me to read about God's return to Jerusalem without thinking about Jesus' return to this world. The imagery used concerning the loud sound and bright light (1 Thessalonians 4:16) is too much for me to not consider it. And NO SACRIFICE is too great for me to be ready - or to help OTHERS be ready - for that day when He comes, not for US to receive HIM, but for HIM to receive US into heaven.

Have you sacrificed yourself, died to yourself, in the watery grave of Christian immersion? Have you made the sacrifice of all you hold dear that you might honor your Maker? NO GIFT to God - even of our whole selves - is ever wasted.

September 5

Reading: Ezekiel 44-46

"But the Levites who went far from me, going astray from me after their idols when Israel went astray, shall bear their punishment. But the Levitical priests, the sons of Zadok, who kept the charge of my sanctuary when the people of Israel went astray from me, shall come near to me to minister to me. And they shall stand before me to offer me the fat and the blood, declares the Lord God. They shall teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean. (Ezekiel 44:10, 15, 23)

The men of Zadok's family stand as an example to those who would be faithful priests before God. When ALL OTHER priestly families hesitated, gave up, compromised, and even introduced idolatry, Zadok's family of priests were FAITHFUL!

In our day where many of God's priests (all Christ-followers, 1 Peter 2:9) are following the world and compromising the Church of God - causing it to NOT be a holy nation - we need men and women who are Zadok-like priests.

Stand up, Church! Stand up, and say, "NO! We will NOT behave like the world! We will not talk like the world, accept the world's standards, or even remain silent on the world's choices!" There are people all around us every day dying and going to hell! Are you OK with that? The UN-Zadok-like priest IS.

Be HOLY and be FAITHFUL!

September 6

Reading: Ezekiel 47-48; 29:17-30:19; 2 Kings 25:27-30; Jeremiah 52:31-34

"Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Going on eastward with a measuring line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water, and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was knee-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was waist-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen. It was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through.

(Ezekiel 47:1, 3-5)

I'll have to admit, I'm off in the weeds through a lot of Ezekiel. However, in looking at various commentaries, it seems I'm in good company! The last several chapters of Ezekiel (and many of the early ones) have been said to be among the most difficult passages in the Bible to interpret. But, I'm going to give this a shot, and I think you'll find - if you've walked with Jesus much - at least my application sound.

Obviously, this prophecy has to mean something to the folks who heard it from Ezekiel directly. The message is this: "Just because you don't have a LAND doesn't mean you're not a PEOPLE!" Through the most difficult of times - even if you've experienced death, destruction, and displacement - God still SEES, CARES, CALLS, and PREPARES. He still saw them, and He still sees you. And even if your mess is of your own making - He still loves you and calls you home. AND He is preparing a place for you to come home to! (Yes, I know that ended with a preposition. Sue me.)

Now I could stop there and be alright - but permit me to be "Junior Professor" and get off in the weeds a minute.

The Hebrew says that the "man" (angel?) took Ezekiel down this river in segments of 1000 cubits each. In the Bible, 1000 is always a number of completeness. Could it show how God's life and grace flowed/flows from His throne age after age in increasing fashion?

From the beginning of God's presence in man's life through the Adamic covenant, God showed grace and mercy (Genesis 3), but it was vague and afar off in its culmination. In God's covenant with Abram, just another "1000 cubits down", we begin to see more of God's plan (Genesis 15). By the time we get to Moses, just another 1000 cubits down, we are waist deep in the grace of God as time after time He draws them back in repentance and the hope of a Messiah. Finally, with the birth of the Church, the body by which all the earth begins to be watered for "1000 cubits" (Revelation 20:6), we are swimming in the grace of God - able now to have our consciences cleansed (Hebrews 9:14). Until, when the stream reaches its destination and the sea of death is extinguished for life-everlasting.

I could be way off.

But here's the point. No matter where you are - God's grace is available to you. Today. It flows directly from His throne. And the further you go with Him "downstream" the deeper in it you get.

September 7

Reading: Daniel 7-8, 5

"And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings... And behold, another beast, a second one like a bear... After this, I looked, and behold, another like a leopard... After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful, and exceedingly strong...it had 10 horns."

(Daniel 7:3, 4a, 5a, 6a, 7a, 7c)

It doesn't take very much thought to see this is a reiteration of Daniel's earlier vision given during the time of King Nebuchadnezzar. Different characteristics are brought out, but the message is the same. Certainly, Daniel's emotional response to what he sees is understandable. It's a little concerning and intriguing when we READ it - but SEEING it in a dream or vision, with all of the clarity God would have for him, brings terror. And when the Gabriel the angel shows up in chapter 8 - well... he faints!

But whether it's Daniel, Paul, Peter, or John in Revelation (all of them hit on the subject, John in Revelation particularly uses some of the exact same imagery) - God's people are to be *encouraged* and know this...

GOD WINS! Stay faithful! Stay strong! Keep praying, and DON'T quit doing what God has called you to do!

No matter who stands against God's people, they all have crumbled and have now become subject to the everlasting Kingdom of Our God and Christ! (Daniel 7:13-14, 26-27)

The war was won on Calvary. Don't let the enemy deceive you just because you weren't there at the surrender!

September 8

Daniel 6, 9; 2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1; 1 Chronicles 3:17-19

"When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously."

(Daniel 6:10)

Over the past couple of years, the government has been increasingly telling congregations when and how they can or should meet. Even with no laws signed, punishments of fines and other threats have been handed out. One may debate the motivation of the government. One may debate the way the government has acted and reacted to current political upheaval. One may debate the efficacy of what the government demands. One may debate whether someone should because of their own private health concerns attend church meetings, etc. But what one may not debate is God's command.

Hebrews 10:25 says, "And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near." (NLT)

God has commanded that we meet together. Will we now disobey God simply because the government says to? Will the able-bodied, self-proclaimed Christ-follower obey men rather than God?

Faced with the threat of DEATH (as millions in other countries still are today, by the way!) Daniel chose to worship Yahweh. Not only did he - he did it just as he always did! And not only that - it seems like he did it immediately in response to what he'd been told *not* to do!

Today's Western Christians would've had many easy solutions for Daniel.

"Daniel, how 'bout...

--- "just close the windows! You don't have to face Jerusalem to pray." (the simple solution)

--- "just pray at night!"

--- "just wait til this all blows over."

--- "just pray to God 'in your heart'. He will still hear."

--- "just worship online with a VPN, and they'll think you're in England somewhere." (OK, maybe not an option for Daniel)

Look, here's the point: if you are physically vulnerable enough that you can't get out - even to Walmart or your favorite restaurant - that's one thing. But, able-bodied Christian, if you don't attend or worse yet close the whole congregation because you fear the government or worse yet because you simply don't care all that much about going anymore and this is a great excuse... SHAME. ON. YOU.

Millions risk beheading weekly, even daily, to publicly worship God as they always have and their conscience dictates. Will we not risk our money? Will we not risk jail time?

If you will not stand now, you will definitely not stand when the persecution of God's Church soon begins in earnest, even in these United States. You will fail the test.

THROW OPEN THE WINDOW, CHURCH!

September 9

Reading: Ezra 2:1-4:5; 1 Chronicles 3:20-24

"They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening."

(Ezra 3:3)

It must have been quite interesting for these folks to go "home". Many of them going "home" to a place they'd never actually lived. On top of that, their "homes" and cities are occupied by the exiles of other countries that the Assyrians had dropped off there! Sure, they'd come back with the order from Cyrus to rebuild Yahweh's temple, rebuild their city, etc, etc... but they have pagan neighbors to deal with. What would they think? What would they do?

It didn't take long for the conflict to begin.

As the refugees return, they are approached by those living there... "Hey, we'll help! We've been worshipping your God. After all, He's the God of this place. We've started worshipping Him when we got here."

Recognizing that the worship of those around them was not really in accordance with the worship of Yahweh, they respond, "Nah. Thanks anyhow. We got this."

From then it was "game on". There wasn't going to be much "getting along" with these folks. But they continue their work - regardless of even fearing what their neighbors might say or do. They remain faithful.

What about you Christian?

The world proclaims that all these "gods" - if "they" exist - are really just one god. Call Him by whatever name - god is god is god. And if that's true, they will further proclaim, that our worship of "god" - whatever we call him/her/it - is just as valid as what the Church does.

Unfortunately, Much of God's Church has bought into this religious synchronism. But friends, Allah is not Yahweh! Jesus was not just a rabbi. And Jesus is not Satan's brother from the planet Kolob! (Yeah, look that one up!) There is One God. His name is Yahweh. Everyone is welcome to - even encouraged to - make peace with the Father through His Son Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit of God as prescribed in the New Testament. But God's Church must never validate any religion of a "little 'g' god".

Yahweh stands alone!

The culture will not like it, but Jesus says, "In this world you will have trouble...". Over and over the New Testament says that if we actually follow Jesus, you will be persecuted! No one says you can't be afraid, but you MUST remain faithful.

Church, you just do as Zerubbabel and Jeshua did - keep doing what God has called you to do in the way He's called you to do it.

September 10

Reading: Daniel 10-12; Ezra 4:24-5:1; Haggai 1

"You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes."

(Haggai 1:6)

Does life ever feel this way for you? Does it sometimes seem like no matter what you do you cannot "get ahead"? It can actually go beyond "feeling or seeming" - life can indeed become unproductive, unsatisfying, and cold. What do you do?

God diagnoses the Israelites' problem this way... "Your priorities are messed up!"

There are fifteen(ish) years between yesterday's reading in Ezra (the history book of this time period) and this beginning message God sends through the prophet Haggai (the preaching/message from God for these people). Over those fifteen years, the discouragement, bribery, and general negativity of their neighbors - they initially stood against - got the better of them and work on God's Temple had stopped.

But it was pretty easy for the folks to find other things to do - things of which their neighbors were more approving. Getting a more permanent home built, for instance. "Why live in a lean-to or even a tent? God's given our land back to us; let's build a proper home!" And so, God points out to them that His house lies in ruins whilst they live in their "paneled houses" (that is, all "finished-up").

Priorities.

Maybe it's a good lesson for us. When life becomes unproductive, unsatisfying, cold... when it seems no matter how disciplined we are in working, budgeting, saving - everything falls apart at once... maybe it's time to prioritize!

Remember the words of Jesus?

"Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Are you more concerned about the "things" you have or don't in the world? Or the advancement of God's Kingdom and righteous living?

Priorities.

September 11

Reading: Ezra 5:2; Haggai 2:1-9; Zechariah 1:1-6; Haggai 2:10-23; Zechariah 1:7-5:11

"Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of Yahweh, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And Yahweh said to Satan, 'Yahweh rebuke you, O Satan! Yahweh who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?'

"And to [Joshua] [the angel] said, '...Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you...'

"Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you...are a sign: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch. ...and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day."
(Zechariah 3:1-2, 4b, 8a, 9b)

Do you ever feel like everyone's against you? Well, not everyone is. But definitely someone is ...all the time!

Revelation 12:10 says that there is "one who accuses [our brothers and sisters] before our God day and night."

Satan may have some of his minions making life miserable, but his miserable self is standing before God tattling on us for everything we do wrong. "These people cannot be your priests! Look at their sin! They've denied You and followed me!"

That is exactly what Satan had to say about Joshua, the High Priest of the Israelites, as they enter back into Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. As God is reestablishing the Temple, the priesthood, and such, an angel shows Zechariah what is going on behind the scenes. Right next to Joshua is the ol' devil himself spewing forth accusations.

Yet, God says, "I'm not hearing it!" He has plans for Joshua and all His people. He yanks him "out of the fire", cleans him up, and sets him to work. "And by the way, if you don't like it, I'm sending 'the Branch' soon, and I'm gonna clear this all up in ONE DAY."

Jeshua represents two people here:

1) He represents us - people made priests by God (1 Peter 2:9). And yes, though we are full of our own sin, God has snatched us from the fire of our own making and has a job for us. He has cleansed us by the what "the Branch" would do/did in "one day" on calvary. When we accept that sacrifice and are given new clothes (clothed with Christ Himself) in Christian baptism (Galatians 3:27), we are made ready and able for our new job. And God can do this! Not because he bends the rules, but He can then - and continually - faithfully and justly "forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9) because of what "the Branch" did on the "one day".

2) But Joshua also represents Jesus Himself. Joshua (or Jeshua) is the Hebrew form of the name Jesus! Joshua is a type of Jesus. That is, what he is doing just a little and in part foreshadows what Jesus is going to do (did) a lot of to completion! Regardless of the sins of the rank and file priests (those under Joshua and us under Jesus), we too, as they did, have a HIGH PRIEST - Jesus - who carried our sins before Yahweh for us on our behalf. Yet, He stood and still now stands clean before the Father and interceding for His people.

Yes, someone is against you. Yes, he is against you all the time. But praise be to God! In Jesus Christ, those accusations - true as they may be - are not heard!

September 12

Reading: Zechariah 6; Ezra 5:3-6:14a; Zechariah 7-8

"And as you have been a byword of cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so will I save you, and you shall be a blessing. Fear not, but let your hands be strong.

"...In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'" (Zechariah 8:13, 23b)

Often, when I preach about evangelism (telling other people the good news about Jesus and offering to help them find Him), I hear that they've "done that".

"I've invited people to Church 'til I'm blue in the face."

Number one, that's not what I encouraged people to do. While there is certainly nothing wrong with inviting people to Church on Sunday, that is not evangelism. Evangelism is inviting people to Jesus! When people meet Jesus, they'll come to Church. However, even coming to Church is not our goal! Our goal is what we are commanded to do -

MAKE. DISCIPLES.

PERIOD.

(But I digress.)

What if rather than apologetically annoying people with a church sales pitch, we lived such awesomely different lives before those in our community that they were "grabbing us by the sleeve", as Zechariah says, just to follow us around and learn how to know and follow Jesus (the true meaning and way to make a disciple!)? Wouldn't that be something?

How could that happen? We must do what God's people back then were told to do. Fearlessly and with great strength build the Temple!

How do we "build the Temple"? We build our very selves - our whole lives - into such a receptacle and outlet of God's attributes through His Holy Spirit that people have to ask questions. We must live in such a way that the glory of God so shines from us that people want what we have. The New Testament assumes this will be the case when we live as Christians!

"but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you...". (1 Peter 3:15a)

And - this goes beyond you trying to "be a good example". While our walk does need to be holy and pure, defending the hope you have means talking about why we have expectations that God keeps His promises. And - them knowing you have those expectations means you've stated them already in conversations - probably many times.

As the old saying goes - "Walk the walk and talk the talk."

Church, get building!

September 13

Reading: Zechariah 9-14

"Then I will encamp at my house as a guard, so that none shall march to and fro; no oppressor shall again march over them, for now I see with my own eyes. Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
(Zechariah 9:8-9)

As God speaks through the prophet Zechariah to tell His people how the nations about them will be punished, He promises that "foreign oppressors" will no more overrun them. Did God miss this one? A few times since the return of the exiles from Babylon, Israel was overrun until the complete destruction of even the temple in A.D. 70. (See chapter 14!)

But as we keep reading we see another prophecy that makes the first more clear. It is a Messianic prophecy! It could not be more clear that this triumphant time speaks of the coming of the Kingdom of God! King Jesus - both rightful heir to the throne of Israel by physical birth (Matthew 1:6-16) and heavenly proclamation (Revelation 17:4) - did literally fulfill this prophecy on the day we refer to as Palm Sunday (Luke 19:35-40).

But His Kingdom was not and is not one which may be overrun by anyone. For the Kingdom of our God and Christ - while very much conquering the world, soul by soul - is set in those souls of men. God is always expanding upon His influence, power, and sovereignty. For, as the Bible says, "...our God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:29) In the same way the ministry of Jesus expanded by the coming of the Holy Spirit at Jesus' resurrection and ascension (ie., Jesus could now be everywhere through the ministry of His "body" - the Church - to whom Jesus promised would do "greater works than these"), His Kingdom and power - oh so very real in the spiritual and eternal realm - was now as unconquerable as the faith-trust of every disciple.

Christ-follower, YOU ARE "MORE THAN CONQUERORS THROUGH HIM WHO LOVED US." (Romans 8:37) There is absolutely no thing nor is there any person who can come against us! (Romans 8:38-39)

"...neither death nor life..." God's Kingdom doesn't even rise or fall with your physical existence!

"...nor angels nor rulers..." There is no one - not a demon or a president or a dictator - no living being of any type stronger than one who is IN CHRIST!

"...nor things present nor things to come..." A VIRUS cannot stop the Kingdom - old or new!

"...nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Church! Live this day in POWER and VICTORY! Don't cower in corners. Don't submit to fear. Don't be told to "shut up and sit down"! Proclaim the Kingdom and invite others to join us!

September 14

Reading: Ezra 6:14b-22; 4:6; Esther 1-4

"Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods."
(Esther 3:13)

Ever wonder why during the great shut-downs of 2020's "pandemic" liquor stores and casinos were deemed "essential" and Churches were not? The Church of God used to be considered essential.

While certainly many Christians and preachers did go and fight in wars, in days past Bible college students and preachers were exempt from selective service drafts because the government recognized a need for preachers here at home. Blue Laws basically closed whole towns for business on Sunday because we recognized the Lord's Day and encouraged people to attend Church. You would never find school programs, practices, or ballgames scheduled even on a Wednesday night, let alone a Sunday.

But today?...

Today, only a few short decades after that way of thinking, the Church - or at least some of it - is the last vestige of a great nation's conscience. Where the gospel is faithfully preached, saints and sinners alike will look into the mirror of God's Word and recognize themselves for what they are. God's faithful Church points to man's humanity, fragility, and lostness without a Savior to which they must bow!

The world, like Haman, wants the Church to bow to it. The world proclaims, "You must not only tolerate our sinful behavior among yourselves, but you must say it's OK. And you must not only say it's OK, you must prefer it! You will not even be allowed to sit silently; you will be removed from society."

Cancel Culture.

Mordecai, because of his refusal to bow to the evil Haman, had his very life cancelled - and not only his, but the lives of all his countrymen. There was even a very literal "drop dead date"! And the people of his society were being encouraged to be a part of it.

Can you imagine a city where people are told, "If you kill your neighbor on March 7, you can have all their stuff"! Talk about a society in chaos! While some might have enough of a conscience left not to participate, many would probably fight over the chance to kill as many as possible for their personal gain. No wonder it says "the city of Susa fell into confusion". (Esther 3:15b)

Cancel Culture against your neighbor for your own personal gain. We. Are. Here.

And if you don't think it's going to get worse... if you don't think that one day the Church will be "cancelled" by threat of death to its adherents, you are fooling yourself. It has been happening in increasing and quickening fashion all around the globe. It will come here.

If you have a pulpit, if you have a paper, if you have a computer, if you have a voice - whatever it is that you've been given, will you stand and still proclaim Truth? Will you be the voice of Jesus in a country that is ever-descending into evil greed and immorality? God might be ready to use you and whatever is in your hand to deliver his people!

"If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for [God's people] will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made...for just such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

September 15

Reading: Esther 5-10

"...for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked." (Esther 8:8b)

I remember a buddy (who is an engineer) and I working on some sort of building project together. He did some quick figures in his head pertaining to some measurements and gave a sum of his calculations - which I questioned (I shouldn't have).

Referring to the calculations and formula he'd used, he said, "It's the Law of the Medes and Persians."

"What?"

"You know!"

"No, what are you talking about?"

What he was referring to, and using metaphorically in reference to his laws of physics and geometry, was the historical fact that once a Mede/Persian King made a decree, it could not be revoked. (One wonders what kinds of consequences such a rule had in that empire - and maybe how it might effect our politicians today if they knew what they decided could never be changed! Probably wouldn't matter at all.)

In today's reading, Ahasuerus also refers to the rule. March 7 has already been given for the literal "drop dead date" upon which anyone could murder the Jews with impunity and take their property. He couldn't change the rule and be a just ruler - even for Queen Esther. To change the rule was to break another. This, a just and righteous Kings cannot do.

But Esther, in her God-given wisdom, devises a plan. The Jews will now be able to lawfully assemble on March 7 and not only defend themselves but also seek out and annihilate those who would do God's people harm at any other time. The plan works marvelously. After seeing the end of Haman on his own 75 ft. tall tree of death, no one would even attempt to do what could legally be done to them. The communities of the kingdom went from seeing the Jews as an object of derision and wrath to a respected and feared part of their community.

While Esther is one of only two books of the Bible that do not mention God by name (know the other one?), God is so very present here. He is obviously present in this story in the wisdom of Mordecai and Esther, but we see the very story of redemption played out.

The rules were set in place all the way back on Day No. 1.

"And Yahweh God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'" (Genesis 2:16-17)

And just as the Law of the Medes and Persians cannot be revoked, neither is the law of God. Covenants (like the Mosaic law) may broken by a party (us - never God), or end upon death (the death of Jesus), but this is a LAW OF CREATION. You sin - you die.

"For the wages of sin is death,..." (Romans 6:23a)

From our first sin we break the law and come under its punishment. And that punishment cannot be revoked. More than the Law of the Medes and Persians - it is the law of God. And the righteous, holy, and just God Yahweh will always do what He says!

But just as He shows Esther, He takes one law and overlays it with another. Yes, death is the penalty for sin, but there is One who - like Esther - will stand for the whole people of God - the people who choose to enter into covenant with Him. The law still stands - but the price is paid by the blood of Another.

"...but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23b)

This is why John can write that "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

God is always true. God is always righteous. Thank Him... He is also always merciful!

(Song of Songs, btw! ;))

September 16

Reading: Ezra 4:7-23; 7-8

"Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, 'The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.' So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty."

(Ezra 8:21-23)

Can you imagine walking through a bad neighborhood or deserted road with 24 tons of silver, 7500 pounds of silver articles, 3 3/4 tons of gold, and assorted other treasures? Can you imagine walking from New York City to Detroit, Michigan with all that and making it there alive - let alone still having the treasure!? This is about the distance he will travel through a wilderness filled with bushwhackers and badmen. It was quite an accomplishment for Ezra and his entourage, yet he credits God for his safe passage - even before leaving! That's something he wouldn't have been able to do if he had followed what had probably been our first instinct.

Artaxerxes seems to be quite amicable to the needs of Ezra and his folks now to worship at their newly built temple. Surely he would have been quite open to sending some help along the way. But Ezra knew it was time to put his money where his mouth was (almost literally!). He'd been talking a big game about how his God works and cares for those who worship Him...did he really believe it?

What about us? When it comes to truly living our faith, do we? Or do we bring shame upon ourselves, the Church, and our God because we say with our mouths we trust God - while our time, testimony, talent, and treasure say something else.

"God provides"... does the offering plate show it when it passes by you?

"I believe the Bible"... do you actually take time to read it, or are you too busy?

"God, if you'll just get me through this"... but you forget to praise Him when it's time to testify to others of His goodness.

"Jesus is Lord!"... but does His Lordship even cause you to set aside an hour a week to consider Him?

If the movie of our lives were to be played for all to see... if our thoughts and fears were revealed to the world... would we be ashamed?

Let's do what Ezra did. PRAY AND GO!

September 17

Reading: Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 1-2

"I prayed, 'O my God, I am utterly ashamed; I blush to lift up my face to You. For our sins are piled higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached to the heavens.'

"Your servants the prophets warned us when they said, 'The land you are entering to possess is totally defiled by the detestable practices of the people living there. From one end to the other, the land is filled with corruption. Don't let your daughters marry their sons! Don't take their daughters as wives for your sons. Don't ever promote the peace and prosperity of those nations...'"

"These are the priests who had married pagan wives: from the family of... from the family of.... These are the Levites who were guilty:... This is the singer who was guilty... These are the gatekeepers who were guilty:... These are the other people of Israel who were guilty:..."
(Ezra 9:6, 11-12a; 10:18-44, NLT)

How serious is your sin?

How serious is the crucifixion of Jesus?

God takes sin seriously!

Here is Ezra. He's all excited - just finally back "home" from bringing all this treasure from Babylon. Now he will have a turn in the restoration of Jerusalem. But what does he find? The returned exiles participating in the very sin that had destroyed the city and its people just over seventy years before! Had they learned absolutely nothing?

He takes to prayer (as per his usual thing), calls a meeting, plans the work, and works the plan. But then he does something shocking. He writes down the name of every (presumably) person and family that has participated in this sinful activity! No less than one hundred eleven names are listed. Not just for folks to know about back then, not erased and forgotten after things "got right" - one hundred eleven men's names written in God's Holy scripture for all following believers in Yahweh to clearly read. Not only would their unfaithfulness be known to countless generations, but quite possibly all manner of brokenness and earthly consequence would be traced back and pinned to these guys.

What if that happened today?

What if when people sinned it was written in the Church bulletin? After they'd come forward and repented and done their best to fix things? I'm not advocating for that, but I will say this:

God's Church does blessed little to call out sinners!

We are afraid to hurt feelings. We are afraid they'll go somewhere else. And listen, most probably they will go somewhere else! Why? Because we have so fragmented the Lord's Church that when people get angry there is no unity that binds them - no love that motivates people to work things out and heal. They just go to another congregation - sometimes where the leaders even know the sin - that's all too eager to receive the pouty member's tithe and record their attendance on the Church scoreboard!

I am not calling for a Barney Fife policing mentality. I'm calling for a love for God and His people that understands sin is serious. I'm calling for LEADERS to live Holy lives so that they are ABLE to hold people to this standard -

for the sake of the people and for the Lord's glory!

September 18

Reading: Nehemiah 3:1-7:3

"Then Eliashib the high priest and the other priests started to rebuild at the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set up its doors, building the wall as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and the Tower of Hananel.

"The Fish Gate was built by... The Old City Gate was repaired by... The Fountain gate was repaired by... Next to him repairs were made by... Next to them... Above the Horse Gate..."

- Nehemiah 3, NLT

I heard a story one time...

At the end of a church service, a preacher said to the soloist of the day, "Thank you for that message in song. You did a beautiful job!"

"It was all the Lord," replied the singer.

"Well, I think, had it been the Lord, He'd done even better than that!"

Somehow we have come to think that when Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father Who is in heaven," that means that we should deflect all thanks or praise for what we do, and nor should we ever thank those who are a blessing to us and/or God's Church.

Nothing could be further from the truth!

While we saw Ezra listing those who gravely sinned in God's Word yesterday, Nehemiah gives credit where it is due - listing all the people who did this and/or that as the work on the wall around Jerusalem was completed. He could have just said, "God's people came together and...", but they are memorialized as great workers.

(I bet Nehemiah was a lot more popular than Ezra!)

Note Jesus words about motive... "...in order to be seen by them...". It's the motivation behind what we do that the warning is about.

Now, granted, sometimes our motives are not clear even to us; so, this can be difficult to discern. That's why every time we are knowingly performing service to the Lord, we should do so prayerfully and carefully. If our service can be done in secret, maybe that's best. But obviously there are things that will must go about doing for the Lord in public. We can't preach or teach privately. We can't sing encouragements to God's people privately. We can't mow the churchyard in secret. It'd be difficult to roof or paint someone's house without them knowing. So - be careful.

But there are ways to check our motives.

Are you upset if no one does thank you? Are you saying in your heart whilest you do it, "Well, here I am again. Doing this. Why can't anyone else do this? Why do I always have to do this? I'm the only one..." Check your motives.

But all that to say, GRACIOUSNESS toward one another is to humbly accept thanks. AND KINDNESS toward others is to express our thankfulness for what they have done.

Does anyone in your life... your congregation... your family... your workplace... the store you shop at... need to be thanked today?

September 19

Reading: Nehemiah 7:4-8:12

"So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law."

(Nehemiah 8:2-3)

Has your mind ever wandered during Sunday services? (My hand's raised.) Have you ever felt things seemed to be going a little too long? (well...maybe) Have you ever thought the preaching just a little dry? (Plead the fifth.)

The first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, the books of Moses are what we consider the books of the Law. I don't know if Ezra read all of every book. It doesn't say he did, but he definitely got all the Law stuff. Ezra read for probably close to six hours; he read the Law - the whole Law - and nothing but the Law. You know - he definitely read a lot of stuff we just kinda skip over... those long lists of names, the passages in Deuteronomy that were just repeats of what he'd read a few hours earlier in Exodus, and definitely all those meticulous rules for "this that and th'other" and "first one thing the'nother". All that.

Actually, verses 7 and 8 tell us there was even more than that. Several of the Levites helped Ezra read the Law AND they gave them meaning and helped people understand it. (And somehow I doubt there were any interesting powerpoint slides to follow along with or good stories from when Ezra was in college.) And the people ALL STOOD (v.5) and/or bowed with their faces to the ground while they listened (v.6).

What reverence they showed for God and His Word!

Do we care about what God has to say that much? Do we stand or bow when the Word is read? Would we be annoyed by that kind of preaching and teaching? When our preacher does his best to read and explain God's Word to us, do we complain that it was boring? Do we want funnier stories? Would we like to have shorter services (or none at all) so we could get to the ballgame, the lake, the buffet, the family?

Do something at Church this week to show your reverence for God's Word.

September 20

Reading: Nehemiah 8:13-10:39

"... 'We will not neglect the house of our God.'"
(Nehemiah 10:39b)

My brother sent me a quote the other day that said, "My temple is a mega-Church!" I thought that was pretty funny. (If you don't get it, think about it more after you read the whole thing.)

Do we neglect the Temple of our God?

During this great REVIVAL of re-recognizing God, His Word, His commands, etc... the people do NOT want to get back to the place in which they found themselves lately. They get everything and everyone back in order, make vows, and hit the restart button. and PROMISE TOGETHER not to neglect the Temple. Though the Temple was "just" a building, it was GOD'S building.

The Temple represented God in the community - and the world! When it was in disrepair, it made a bad impression. If people don't care about the building dedicated to the worship of their God, did they in fact care at all about their God? Unbelievers, for sure - who took great pains to maintain their "little g gods'" temples might not think so. Children of believers begin to think that the "stuff of God" doesn't really matter. When there is a choice to be made between God's Temple and the work there and... work, play, family, etc, etc... do "what needs to be done" and THEN get back to God later...maybe.

What about our Church building. Sure. It's JUST a building. But when I travel about the country, I see some in great disrepair - while the people who attend there live in fine houses. Priorities? Some Church buildings are not even in disrepair, but they are just - as my Mom would've said - "a pigsty". There are six months of old bulletins on a back table. They have baptistries that are not only devoid of water, but full of the next season's plastic flowers or discarded junk. There is the worn-out sofa from someone's living room deemed "good enough" for the youth room and the microwave that takes thirty minutes to heat a bowl of water that you didn't want in the kitchen because it's "good enough for the Church".

But I can hear some of you, "Greg, the Church is not the Temple!"

I know.

But it is ONE public representation of God and a thermometer of what we think about godly things - as well as the REAL Temple of our God - our bodies.

Yes, our bodies are "just our bodies". As Christians we know that our bodies are simply the "seed" of something eternal. That we will one day shed them. That we use them only for a fraction of a split second before we enter eternity. Yet... it IS GOD'S body.

Don't get me wrong. The struggle is real. My "Temple IS a mega-Church" in some respects (I could definitely stand to shed more than a few "lbs"). It's an ongoing battle. But ARE we battling at it? I'm just asking, "If it's not weight, what else is hindering your body, Christian, (God's Temple) from being "able-bodied" hands and feet of Jesus?"

I know some are physically disabled. But the question is and remains... "Are we using all we DO HAVE - every physical capability offered to us...is it offered to GOD?" Not all of us are super-models, muscle men, athletes, or even mobile - but are we offering EVERYTHING WE ARE to God?

Let us promise together today not to neglect the Temple of our God!

September 21

Reading: Nehemiah 11:1-12:26; 1 Chronicles 9:1-34

"And they lodged around the house of God, for on them lay the duty of watching, and they had charge of opening it every morning."
(1 Chronicles 9:27)

If the New Testament declares that God's people (disciples of Jesus) are now part of a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9), what are our duties as priests? One of them is to guard the Temple and open the gates.

While we have no physical Temple of God from which we minister or in which we make sacrifices to Yahweh, WE are the Temple of the Holy Spirit of God. We must guard the Temple. We must only allow in the things that are holy and pleasing to God; we must remove all the things that have sneaked their way in (or been invited in?) over days past. If Jesus walked among us as today as He did in the first century, I don't think He'd be as interested in "cleansing" the Church building, but He would definitely be (and is) interested in cleansing His Temple once again, His very own people! What would Jesus overturn or throw out of your life, given the opportunity? Go ahead and remove it now!

What about opening the Temple gates every morning? Again, we can only speak metaphorically. And I would agree that any time is a great time to read your Bible, to pray, to worship...yet, there is a something great about "opening the Temple" in the morning. Before anything else happens - before you pick up the paper (OK, who does that anymore...?), before you LOOK AT FACEBOOK, before you turn on the news, before you even say good morning to your spouse?...why not talk to God? What if we FIRST open the gates of the Temple and allow worship to begin? Why not upon wakening every day put an "open" sign on our lives for the honoring and worship of God? Wouldn't everything following look different if worship was the filter through which we first saw it each day?

Let's determine to FIRST tidy up with God - dying to ourselves DAILY and taking up our cross (Luke 9:23), - "God, what needs to be removed today from my life?" (tough question!) and then, "Will you help me get this outta here?" And then say, "God, I am now ready to do your business!"

Is your temple cleaned and open this morning?

September 22

Reading: Nehemiah 12:27-13:31; Malachi 1:1-2:9

"When I arrived back in Jerusalem, I learned about Eliashib's evil deed in providing Tobiah with a room in the courtyards of the Temple of God. I also discovered that the Levites had not been given their prescribed portions of food, so they and the singers who were to conduct the worship services had all returned to work their fields. ...I saw men of Judah treading out their winepresses on the Sabbath. They were also bringing in

grain, loading it on donkeys, and bringing their wine, grapes, figs, and all sorts of produce to Jerusalem to sell on the Sabbath. About the same time I realized that some of the men of Judah had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. One of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest had married a daughter of Sanballat the Horonite."

(Nehemiah 13:7, 10, 15, 23, 28, NLT)

The old saying goes, "When the cat's away, the mice will play." It certainly seemed true concerning the leaders of Judah!

For twelve years, Nehemiah, cup-bearer to Artaxerxes, served as governor of God's people in Judah. He went back for a brief time thinking all was well. After all, people had made promises. The wall was built. The Temple was completed. They'd had a huge parade around the city atop the newly finished wall with a band and choirs. Everything was great.

Until he left.

The wheels seemed to come off quickly. While the people had spoken praise with their lips, their hearts were far from God. The two men who so vigorously opposed everything God was doing in Jerusalem - Sanballat and Tobiah - had a friend in God's HIGH PRIEST. Tobiah sheltered in the Temple he'd opposed building; Sanballat was now a family member of Eliashib - what treachery! Malachi makes clear in his preaching that the people had quit giving tithes, and what they did bring was unacceptable (Malachi 1:6, 3:8-9).

What about us? Do we have to have someone who makes sure we do what we are supposed to do?

When our children are grown, they make a choice. Will they continue in what they have (hopefully) seen and participated in their parents' home? Or will they disregard the example of faithfulness to God?

While the cat's away...

We ourselves have a choice daily. The preacher isn't following us around watching everything we do - encouraging us by the moment to make the right decisions. God has left that job up to the Holy Spirit! (Maybe PREACHERS need to read that last sentence too!) But, alas, the Still Small Voice that we cannot see with our eyes can become easy to ignore. So much so that we hardly hear Him any more.

Do you need someone to parent you? Or have you matured into a believer who loves God enough to do what you're supposed to do because you want to - not because someone makes you?

September 23

Reading: Malachi 2:10-4:6; Joel

"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

(Joel 2:28-32a)

One thing I was taught in school was "the Bible is its own best commentary". So, I absolutely love it, for example, when you have something in the Old Testament - something you might have to make an educated guess about? - that is completely explained by someone in the New Testament. Such is today's passage.

Peter on the Day of Pentecost, in an explanation to those who are accusing the disciples of being drunk, says that what they are seeing is "...what was uttered through the prophet Joel:". (Acts 2:16) How incredible that they are seeing what was prophesied over 400 years ago right before their eyes.

Did the "sun...be turned into darkness and the moon into blood"? (*See a brief explanation on interpretation below, if you wish.) No, but what Joel prophesied and what Peter explained was happening was cataclysmic! It was "world ending" to certain people and a great revival to others. The old covenant was now in flames, the end of the Roman Empire and the judgment of God upon it was now in sight (Revelation 1:1). And the Church of God was born - the Church, the very Kingdom, the final empire - that would conquer the world.

But what Joel says that is most compelling and what Peter says the Pentecost crowd is witnessing is the revival of godly direction in the world through His people of FAITH once again. (God's people have always been a people of faith, not flesh, though this hadn't really been recognized by the masses.) Imagine the thought for those first hearing it... God's Spirit poured out on all (not all in the sense that everyone "gets it" - but that it's available to all. The Spirit is now available to "everyone who calls upon the name of Yahweh"; He is available to anyone and everyone! Up to that time, the Holy Spirit had only been known to "come upon" people for extra strength, to "come upon" the prophets as they spoke messages from God. But now EVERYONE!?)

"But not the young folks, right"

"Yes, young men and women!"

"But not the old people."

"Them too."

"But only the 'worthy'. Not poor people or 'unlearned' people..."

"Everyone! Anyone!"

And yet, with the opportunity for "all flesh" to be on God's side... To run from the falling, burning kingdoms of the world... many people remain.

Some are waiting until they've sucked every last bit of worldliness from its kingdoms to run to God in the last second. But who knows when the last second will be. Do what Joel says every man now has opportunity to do! Call upon the name of Yahweh! This is the same thing Saul was told by Ananias:

"And now why do you wait? Rise and be [immersed in water] and wash away your sins, calling on His name." (Acts 22:16, ESV)

Some don't know about the Kingdom of our God and Christ! Yet, God commands through Joel in these times, "Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe." (Joel 3:13a; Mark 4:26-29) Will we share the news Christian?

By the way, Christian, what about you? You who share in the Holy Spirit, you who have "tasted of the good things to come" - do you live in the power of the Holy Spirit daily? Are you living as Kingdom people? Do not

be deceived. Those who rush out of the world's dying kingdoms only to return for whatever reason shall not be saved! (Hebrews 6:4-8)

Rejoice! The Kingdom of God is here!

*[*Technical jargon and such you may not care about:*

Peter helps us understand what we see in much of prophetic literature. Not everything (or very little?) is to be taken literally. Literally? Yes. Literalistically, no.

While you can believe very literally the point God makes in His word - you can take the history of the Bible literally, you cannot take figures of speech literally. We understand this every day. We may say,

"That just blew my mind!"

"Well, I really 'stepped in it' that time!"

You very literally mean you are flabbergasted or have learned something that you never dreamed possible. But you are not to be taken literalistically - that your mind is actually now broken.

You may very literally mean you've made an error, but not that you weren't watching your step literalistically.

These are figures of speech in our language and culture, and God's Word has them too. Take the meaning of God's poetry or prophecy "to the bank". But be careful about assigning the imagery as realism.]

HELLO READER!!

Welcome to the New Testament! Isn't it amazing that it has taken us almost 3/4 of the year to get to the part of the Bible that we probably study most! How much we miss when we don't take time to soak up the information and inspiration of the Old Testament. All that we've previously read was Jesus' "Bible". This was the scripture He taught. It was the scripture He quoted! I hope our journey has been a blessing thus far.

But now we embark on the NEW - and technically, we won't even enter into the New Covenant for real until November 7! For while Jesus comes, our Prophet, Priest, AND KING is still living under the Old Covenant until His own death, burial, and resurrection are complete.

Watch now the incredible transition, and prepare yourself to have Jesus make a lot of the things we've read thus far more clear. Open your heart and mind to what all we've talked about thus far and what Jesus reveals and what it means you should do in this present age. Peer into the lifestyle and strategy of this new Kingdom that has now come!

September 24

Reading: Mark 1:1; Luke 1:1-4; John 1:1-18; Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23b-38; Luke 1:5-38

"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."
(Mark 1:1)

What a fantastic sentence! We last heard of God's people 400 years ago. Having just returned a few decades before from Babylon, there was really more of the same. There were great reformers and leaders and prophets - such as Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi, and Joel. But will things really be different? Though we don't have God-breathed information during these 400 years, stuff was happening!

At the close of the Old Testament, trouble brewed in Greece with the Peloponnesian War. Greek city states, led by Athens on one side and Sparta on the other, fought one another. Eventually these wars gave rise to the Greek Emperor Alexander the Great (King of Macedonia, Hegemon of Greece, Pharaoh of Egypt, King of Persia, Lord of Asia. He pretty much ruled the world.)

This is prophesied in the visions of Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel, the "middle and legs of bronze" (Nebuchadnezzar's dream) - the "winged leopard" (Daniel's dream), [see September 7, devotion] as Alexander the Great comes to defeat the Persians. As also prophesied by Daniel in chapters 8 and 11, upon Alexander's death, control of this empire splits.

In other news, the Seleucid kingdom and the Egyptians warred. The most famous ruler, perhaps, of the Ptolemy family was Cleopatra. These two lines of former Alexander the Great's generals fought over the Holy Land until it ultimately fell to the Seleucids, ruled by Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus is famous (or infamous) for his persecution of the Jews during his reign and the desecration of the Temple of God with the sacrifice of pigs. During this time Antiochus made the Temple of Yahweh the temple of Zeus! The Jewish people eventually won their independence from the Seleucids in 164 B.C. until the Romans invaded in 63 B.C..

Bible readers are probably most familiar with this Empire as the Romans are the political figureheads throughout the entire New Testament. It is, however, the relative peace and great roads of these "legs of iron" (Rome also prophesied in those visions of Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel) that prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah and the Good News that will travel to the utmost parts of the world.

Back to our verse...

"This is the GOOD NEWS..."

There had been 400 years of BAD NEWS! The lands of God's Old Testament people under the hands of at least four different rulers. Changing customs, changing economies, times of freedom, times of persecution - it had been hard. And - knowing the rest of the New Testament - it was not necessarily going to be get easy over night. But "THIS IS THE GOOD NEWS about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God."

The Good News will never about what's going on in politics - regardless of what side you're on. The Good News will never be about how much you are making on the job or the promotion you may get. The Good News will never be about how many people came to Church last week, what the weather will be, or even if your disease is cured.

The Good News is "ABOUT JESUS".

The Messiah (the chosen, anointed, appointed) Son of God - He who is the Word, Who has always existed, was with God and was God, Creator of all, Bringer of Light and Life (see John 1:1-4) HAS ENTERED HISTORY!

THAT is the GOOD NEWS worth hearing in a troubled world! Are you living in the peace and joy of knowing Him today? Or are you waiting for the "good news" of earthly circumstances? Remember, Paul said THERE IS NO OTHER GOOD NEWS! (Galatians 1:6-7)

September 25

Reading: Luke 1:39-80; Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 2:1-40

"and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, 'What then will this child be?' For the hand of the Lord was with Him."

(Luke 1:66)

Really, there are few moments, few occasions, in life that cause everyone who hears about it to reflect. But the naming of John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, is. Such strange and grand circumstances make people believe that something powerful is afoot. They believe this child will be something great.

In a sense, with every birth, every child has a great potential to be used by God. Parents should strive to - first of all before raising a "successful" child - raise a godly child. I wonder what would've happened had Zechariah and Elizabeth "dropped the ball"...? What if they'd only half-heartedly sought and served God in their own lives and demanded that the Sunday school teachers, youth ministers, and preachers be responsible for his spiritual knowledge and health (and only then when there wasn't somewhere else deemed more important to take him)? What would have happened then?

What if John, if he'd had a poor upbringing, himself had followed that poor example? What if he thought he'd never rise above alcoholic parents or an abusive home? What if he didn't listen to the call of God in his own life? Thankfully, Zechariah and Elizabeth were godly, but that certainly did not excuse John from seeking what God had for him to do regardless of his parents.

Some folks grow up in solid, godly homes. Some folks grow up far from that. But everyone has an opportunity still to be an amazing tool in the hands of our great God because everyone regardless of physical birth can (and must) undergo a second birth.

In this second birth - born in the waters of baptism by the power and indwelling of the Spirit of God - a new creation has the opportunity to do amazing things. What happens when we lead someone to Jesus is, I believe, that which Jesus spoke of when He said His disciples would do greater works than causing the blind to see, lame to walk, deaf to hear, or even the dead to rise. Someone can be re-born by and with the power of the Holy Spirit to live a new and powerful life!

If you've not been re-born, message me here today! If you have, look in the mirror this morning and say:

"What will this child turn out to be?"

September 26

Reading: Matthew 2; Luke 2:41-52; Mark 1:2-8; Matthew 3:1-12; Luke 3:1-18; Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22

"As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

(Luke 3:4-6)

For a guy who came of age in the eighties, I can't read this verse without thinking of one of my favorite TV shows. Each week when the theme song came on (Remember those?...how the theme song reminded you of the premise of the show each week?) I was told that these two particular "Good Ol' Boys" were "straightenin' the curves, flattenin' the hills". Bo and Luke Duke would race around in that un-politically-correct-named orange '69 Dodge Charger in a way that nobody could. They drove like there were no curves (if you grew up drivin' in the Ozarks, you get it), and they just jumped over the hills!

John was doing the same thing. The original "Good Ol' Boy", he lived outside town, thumbed his nose at the corrupt authorities, and was straightenin' the curves and flattenin' the hills. He wasn't slowed by the extraneous laws of religion nor the misunderstandings of men seeking power. He cut to the chase!

Our lives ought be driven in much the same way. The "Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God" (see September 24th) is not difficult to understand - as amazing as it is! Yet, still today some would clutter it up for the sake of retaining their own power.

I remember in a congregation I served a particular guy who worked the sound booth. He didn't really like helping people understand all the different operations of things in it because it might render him unneeded.

Yet, that is the very thing we as preachers and every day disciple-makers ought be doing! Our job is to work ourselves out of a job! We should so "straighten the curves and flatten the hills" for people to follow Jesus that they, in turn, become disciple-makers themselves. Now, that doesn't mean compromising truth! It simply means preaching and teaching a straight-forward gospel that people understand. It means living a life that removes barriers of hypocrisy or immaturity. It means leveling the field by walking with disciples over rough terrain. It is disciple-making.

John understood this: Jesus more; me less. He literally worked himself out of a job. Mission accomplished!

Let me ask you this... When it comes to your faith and your disciple-making, are you more of a Duke boy or a Boss Hogg? (And if you don't know what that means, turn off the "reality TV and watch a real TV show!")
September 26 - Side-note!

An interesting thing found in Luke 3:4...

In the Greek NT, "...Prepare the way for the Lord's coming!...", the word "Lord" is "Kyrios" meaning "Lord or Master". However, note that Luke is quoting John who was quoting Isaiah in Isaiah 40:3.

In Isaiah 40:3, Isaiah uses God's proper name: "Yahweh (YHWH)".

It is somewhat a difference without distinction. The Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament with which pre-dates Jesus' earthly life, substitutes Kyrios for Yahweh quite often. It is then used in reference to Jesus in the New Testament over 700 times.

What is my point?

While Luke is a little less clear at first blush, Isaiah is not. This One whom John preached of was Yahweh. He WAS God in the flesh!

An interesting, maybe overlooked, verse that touts the deity of Jesus of Nazareth!

September 27

Reading: Mark 1:12-13; Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-15; John 1:19-2:25

"And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time."
(Luke 4:13)

I'm definitely no Greek scholar, but I do find words interesting. Even the etymology of English words can be interesting and sometimes revealing. Take the word in today's text "opportunity".

"Opportunity" comes from the idea of being "opposite port". That is, you are sailing along on the open seas and then you come "opposite port". Ah! A place to stop! Here you can restock supplies, go into town, get a meal...any number of things. I don't sail much, but I drive long distances. When the fuel tank gets low or I get hungry...or any number of things, I look for "port" - maybe a Love's station where I'll have an opp-port-unity to stop. Hold that idea.

In the Greek New Testament, the word used is actually *kairou* or translated into English "season". Each "season" of the year (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter) brings its own "opportunities", as does each "season" of life.

The text says that though Jesus passed this test in these forty days - in at least three temptations that are recorded for us - there would be other times Satan would be "opposite port" from Jesus. There would be other seasons in Jesus' life when the Devil might find Jesus ready to "succumb to reason".

This the devil is doing in the lives of all God's people.

In the "Hall of Faith" chapter, the Hebrew writer tells us that rather than be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter and enjoy all of what the pagan world had to offer, Moses chose to be part of God's people than to "enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Gr., *proskairon*) (Hebrews 11:25, KJV).

You can guarantee that the Devil is looking for a port to tie up to in your life! He is searching for a season when you are self-confident, angry with God, or in deep pain - all "seasons" ripe for temptation to grab a foothold into sin.

But note this about either "being opposite port" or "in season" - both are temporary!

That means two things.

One, it will pass. If you will stay strong and look to Jesus "the Champion who initiates and perfects our faith" (Hebrews 12:2, NLT), the Devil will keep on sailing past - "PORT CLOSED". The season of his opportunity - though it may seem long - will also pass. Your feelings about life and how sweet it might be to "try it just this once" (or once again) will go away!

Two, because it will pass, if you do let the Devil in, you will feel shame and guilt. Once the feelings go away, once the destruction of that "reasonable" sin is assessed, the Devil will be gone, and it will just be you and your mess. And he will be back later.

So, let us today, and every day, give sin a hard "PASS!" Send Satan sailing on!

September 28

Reading: John 3:1-4:45; Luke 3:19-20

"The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.'"

(John 4:11-12)

Good well water is good well water!

There's no denying that. Those of you who have ever only had city tap water or tasteless bottled water have missed it. If you have a good well, you have something great.

But even better - living water. As bottled is a step up from tap, and well is a step up from bottled - by my score - living water - that from a fresh mountain stream - cannot be beat! It's clear; it's cold; it refreshes.

We understand pretty quickly, even if we've not read this before, that Jesus speaks metaphorically in comparison to the well water the woman had come there to draw. It surely was a great well! It had been there for hundreds of years - since the time of Jacob. It was surely fed by great underground streams - ever-re-supplied and unpolluted by the things on the surface. I'd guess it was as good as a well gets.

As good as a well gets.

Jesus offers Himself - living water. That's better. Not just refreshing the body, but a man's very soul. We get it.

But do we? Because whether by our words or just by our actions, we ask the same question as the woman, "Can you give us better than our fathers!?"

"Jesus, can you possibly give us more than this financial inheritance?"

"Jesus, can you possibly give me more than my family provides?"

"Jesus, can you possibly sooth my heart and mind more than this drink or this high?"

"Jesus, can you possibly give me more excitement than my own addictions?"

Did you notice that she said, "...and his animals enjoyed?"

"Jesus, can you possibly give us more than water out of a camel trough!?"

Seriously?

We drink from the dog dish as Jesus invites us to the banquet table. He invites us to feast on Him, the Word, that is the real sustenance of mankind (Matthew 4:4; John 6:56) - while we question His ability to feed us.

One of the songs I've been singing at revival meetings this year says it all.

"Lord, there's nothing better than You...nothing is better than You."

Drink deep from the Living Water today.

September 29

Reading: Mark 1:14-15; Matthew 4:12-17; Luke 3:23a; John 4:46-54; Luke 4:16-30; Luke 5:1-11; Mark 1:16-20; Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:21-28; Luke 4:31-37; Mark 1:29-34; Matthew 8:14-17; Luke 4:38-41; Mark 1:35-39; Luke 4:42-44; Matthew 4:23-25

"And he said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Physician, heal yourself." What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.'

"And he said, 'Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.'"

(Luke 4:23-27)

There seems a fine line to walk between the great familiarity we can have with our "personal savior", Jesus - knowing Him intimately, and a tendency to disregard that or those with which we are very familiar.

For those of us who grew up "going to Church" and just kinda "fell into the baptistry", we can tend to see Christianity as "old hat". It is comforting, familiar - even loved. Yet, we can leave that relationship in tatters and disregard it too. We tend to think we've explored all of it there is to offer. We sometimes believe (if only by our actions) that in just showing up and singing a few songs, bowing our head, and enduring the preaching we have all we need or could get. If God has something for me, if He can do something for me - He must have done it.

Not necessarily so.

God is not necessarily looking for those with rows of Sunday school pins (anyone remember those?) and a great knowledge of the scriptures. God is looking to strengthen, bless, heal, and help those who are humbly seeking and ready to receive Him.

Let us go to Him daily with open hands saying, "Lord, remove from me that which I don't need - that which weighs me down or replaces You, and place in my hands that which I do need, that which spurs me on, and that which honors You."

September 30

Reading: Mark 1:40-45; Matthew 8:1-4; Luke 5:12-16; Mark 2:1-12; Matthew 9:1-8; Luke 5:17-26; Mark 2:13-17; Matthew 9:9-13; Luke 5:27-32; Mark 2:18-22; Matthew 9:14-17; Luke 5:33-39

"I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

(Luke 5:32)

It was hard. It was something I'd only done just a few times of my life. I walked in somewhere and had to say,

"I don't know anything about this."

That's probably hard for any man to say, but it's especially hard for a proud man.

I had dabbled a bit in archery a couple of decades ago, but I knew, going to my local gun/archery/fishing shop to buy a bow, I was going to have to fess up. So, I did. Multiple times.

Every time the guy at the counter said, "Do you want 'x' kind of sight or 'y' kind of sight?" "Do you want a 'this and/or a that'?"

"Again, I don't know anything. Explain it to me like I'm ten. Scratch that! Explain it to me like I'm five."

He was kind and got me out the door with my whole rig ready to go - I guess. (You still "don't know what you don't know".) And I went home and began a little target practice.

I set up my small-ish target - in front of my shed, just in case. No desire to shoot the neighbor's dog if I miss, but I probably won't. I mean, I really don't want to shoot holes in my shed either, but I'll be OK.

I have 3 holes in my shed.

I confess. I'm a beginner. And I'm a "misser".

That's what the word sin means. That what it means to be a "sin-er". You - and I - are "missers".

And what Jesus points out here in this verse is that you can go one of two ways in life. You can acknowledge you are a misser and get help. Or you can go on missing and "enjoy" life the way you are. Jesus will not force Himself upon you. You look into the mirror of His Word - whether you hear it with your ears or read it with your eyes - and you will either say, "Eh, I'm good; I don't care." Or, "OH ME!"

Why does He do that? How can He just leave it to you?

Because you know and I know that no matter how much we strut around and pretend we don't care about how little we know or how bad our life is - the truth is that it eats at our soul every day.

Are you willing today to admit you're a "novice" in spiritual things? Can you come humbly before your Creator and ask for help? We are all missers.

October 1

Reading: John 5; Mark 2:23-28; Matthew 12:1-8; Luke 6:1-5; Mark 3:1-6; Matthew 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11; Matthew 12:15-21

"One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be healed?'"

(John 5:5-6)

What an absurd question! "Of course he would like to get well, Jesus!"

Or would he.

You don't have to look around society very long to see that we live in a world full of victims. People grew up abused; they suffered financial devastation(s); relationships have been rent; accident or disease has disfigured; unfathomable depths of loss have been plumbed into the abysses of grief. They are true victims. Some want to "get well".

But, frankly... some don't.

There are many who have chosen to "be" their scar. Their pain has become their identity. Without their pain, who are they!?

I don't know if that was this guy or not. Perhaps there was more he could have done with at least part of the last thirty-eight years. But regardless of that, at this moment, when Jesus offers, he is ready. Maybe Jesus waited until he was ready. There is so much we don't know. But the point is this:

Jesus stands at the door and knocks. Today. (Revelation 3:20) If you will let Him in, He desires to fellowship with you. It is not necessarily an invitation to be healed of your scars or pain (It might be! James 5:14), but it is an invitation to "be well". In the midst of the hardest parts of life, Jesus offers to change your being. You can quit being a victim of your pain and move to having life even in your pain.

Later in John 5, Jesus talks about the dead hearing His voice. He speaks of it twice.

"And I assure you that the time is coming, indeed it's here now, when the dead will hear my voice - the voice of the Son of God. And those who listen will live." (v.25)

Then in vv.28-29 -

"Don't be surprised! Indeed, the time is coming when all the dead in their graves will hear the voice of God's Son,"

I think the first mention speaks somewhat metaphorically of what Jesus can and will/does do now that the Kingdom is here, proving what He will do literally in the future in the second mention. But life that is lived as a victim to our pain is a life of death.

Don't live dead. LIVE ALIVE!

October 2

Reading: Mark 3:7-19; Luke 6:12-36; Matthew 5

"But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

(Luke 6:35-36)

I have a love/hate relationship with those verses.

If I could re-write the Bible, surely that would be an option for editing, right? Who could blame us for hating our enemies!? Seems like of all things, the whole world would get on board with hating one's enemies and seeing to their destruction. Yes, the whole world would.

And the whole world does.

Regardless of what our "tolerant" society says, just try disagreeing with someone! See with what hate and vitriol you are met - even if you are ultimately trying to save them! It is the way the world lives; and that is why it is the way Jesus' disciples are not to live!

See, as much as I hate those verses for commanding me to do something that is against every grain of my nature, I love those verses because of what they mean to me as someone who is, or has been, an enemy of someone else! No one has been as big an enemy to me as I was to God. No one has done the evil toward me that I did to Him. I am responsible for the public mockery, torture, and execution by hours of crucifixion of the Son of God.

Yet... He had compassion on me. While I was a yet a sinner, Christ died for me ("for" - both "because of" and "on behalf of") (Romans 5:8).

So, you and I have a choice.

We can either be like the rest of the world, or we can be like Jesus.

We can treat others the way they deserve, or we can treat others the way we'd like to be treated (and have been by God).

Hm... seems like that "rule" is somewhere in the Bible too.

October 3

Reading: Matthew 6-7; Luke 6:37-49

"give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."
(Luke 6:38)

I remember a gospel song from the '70's that was based on this concept. It was actually taken from Ecclesiastes 11:1, "Cast your bread upon the waters for you will find it after many days."

The line of the song was straight from scripture: "You keep on castin' your bread upon the water, soon it's gonna come back home on every wave."

As a kid... no appeal.

Who wants soggy bread!? Why would you do that!?

But Jesus doesn't mince words here. I'm not a believer in "karma"; that is a demonic imitation of a godly truth. But the idea is somewhat similar. "You get what you give."

That doesn't mean it will happen today. It may not even happen in this world. Jesus has already told them to store up their treasures in heaven. But you know... you either take Jesus at His Word or you don't.

Don't like what's comin' your way in life? Give more.

Give more self. Give more money. Give more time. Give more talent. Give more testimony of what Jesus has done and what you EXPECT He will do because of His promises in your life.

Again, this is not "cosmic". It's not "karma". It's just more of the Jesus lifestyle.

So, throw some bread out there today. It ain't just feedin' ducks!

October 4

Reading: Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-17; Matthew 11; Luke 7:18-50

"But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."
(Matthew 11:24)

Notice here that Jesus doesn't condemn the folks in Capernaum for their sinfulness. He berates them for their apathy and their pride.

Not long after this, in Luke 7, Jesus teaches Simon the Pharisee a lesson. He explains to him that people who have been forgiven more, love more. They serve more. They receive more.

There are people like those of Capernaum and Simon himself; they are "good people" - so they don't really pay all that much attention to Jesus or Kingdom things. They've already "arrived". Then, there are people like this woman who crashes Simon's dinner party - when they know, they change! Sodom didn't repent, but Jesus says enough would have that they'd survived if they'd had the opportunities of Capernaum.

It makes me wonder what Jesus would say to the Church today? After the prophecies of Revelation were complete and the Roman empire fell with a crash under the Church of God, there was vast freedom to share Jesus and change the world. Yet, kingdom by kingdom, nation by nation, that opportunity was squandered and people lost to sin.

Finally, on the Western frontier, in the 1600's one last opportunity for freedom of religion shone as a beacon in the world. By 1787 a constitution was ratified by its people that promised to uphold religious freedom - a kind of religious freedom really unheard of in any nation before or since.

How have we fared?

Good for a while.

Yet, now in the most technologically advanced society in history... With the most opportunity ever to share the Good News... The Church of God in the United States of America retreats to their homes - afraid of

mandates. Often, they feign fear over a virus as a justification for their indifference to Jesus. As a friend of mine says, "Why don't you just say [you can't serve Jesus 'cause] you're out of peanut butter? One excuse is as good as another!"

What would Jesus say to our country?

What would Jesus say to our congregation?

What would Jesus say to you and me?

October 5

Reading: Luke 8:1-3; Mark 3:2-30; Matthew 12:22-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21; Mark 4:1-20; Matthew 13:1-23; Luke 8:4-18

"When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation."

(Matthew 12:43-45)

A very good friend of mine works near a place where they clean out tanker trailers. Some of these trailers carry weed killer - weed killer that is undiluted. It hasn't made it to its final destination where it is diluted and bottled for public use. When it comes time to clean out these huge trailers, there is always several gallons of weed killer left that has to be emptied out.

Another friend of mine got hold of some of this undiluted spray. He took it, put it in his sprayer, and went to town. The weeds he was eliminating were dead by day's end! It is strong stuff indeed. However, once the that spray was washed away into the ground and time did its thing, the next year the weeds were back with a vengeance! You see, the "killer" - even in its diluted form - is really only very concentrated fertilizer. Once it is watered down even more, without further weeding or replacement with the right thing, your problem is worse.

It is exactly the same with sin. JUST eliminating the "weeds" in your life and expecting to grow righteousness is only putting "fertilizer" (ehem) on the problem!

Many Christians believe that following Jesus is simply "quitting all the fun bad stuff". But following Jesus is not just repentance, it is FOLLOWING Jesus. It is allowing GOD to consume our lives. SOMETHING is going to replace the weeds in that bare ground of your life. If it's not Jesus, worse things than you started with will begin to grow. Sin will return to your life with a vengeance!

Has your life just become a plot where you continually fight sin? Rid yourself of the sin that so easily entangles and "let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us." (Hebrews 12:1)

Remove the bad, yes. But also plant the good!

October 6

Reading: Mark 4:21-41; Matthew 13:24-52; Matthew 8:23-27; Luke 8:22-25

"but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also."
(Matthew 13:25-26)

As Jesus explains later in the passage, the good wheat are those are truly part of the Kingdom and doing God's will. They hear the Word and DO the Word - in service to God, others, and in reference to their own lives. The "weeds" are the counterfeit Christians. Those who will "harvest" are the angels. But they are told not to "weed" right now, but to wait 'til the harvest time - then ALL will be taken and ALL will be sorted.

A few things to think about...

I'd often pictured these "tares" among the wheat as individual counterfeit Christians in our congregations. To that end, we might ask ourselves - "Which am I!?" And, we will have to deal with that for a while. Yet, Paul writes in his epistles how to deal with those tares! INCLUDING how to exclude them from the congregation! Perhaps, Jesus is speaking in a general sense... that this situation will always be. That God Himself is not going to step in with "angelic force" and "fix" it (at least until the end) - but that congregational leaders should address it when possible.

One might also consider that the tares in the Church are counterfeit congregations or whole "denominations" (for lack of a better word) of "Christianity". Certainly, there are "flavors" of Christianity that have absolutely no ties to truth - or really even to Jesus! There are counterfeit, money-grubbing shepherds of large organizations who really care only about fleecing the sheep.

Regardless, the direction of true Kingdom people ought be doing Kingdom work and patiently waiting on God. At the time of harvest, He will gather ALL (note He doesn't gather part of mankind after 3 1/2 years of tribulation or 7 - or what-have-you according to the pre-millennial drivel of our day). The day of the harvest is the day of the SORTING. And God WILL DO IT on the last day! (John 6:40, 44, 54)

Let us patiently work and wait as true Kingdom citizens until the day of Jesus' return!

October 7

Reading: Matthew 8:28-34; 9:18-26; Mark 5; Luke 8:26-56

"And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region."
(Matthew 8:34)

Are you afraid of Jesus?

I remember having an informational booth for our congregation at a large outdoor festival in the downtown of a neighboring city. As people strolled by we'd give them some "goodies and gifts" of various things, invite them to church, strike up a bit of a conversation if we could... One group of people I saw approaching was different. Their goth dress and mannerisms, not to mention the look on their face, was almost fearful. They

stared at us! That area of the country is quite known for Satanism and witchcraft, and I had to wonder if they might not be enemies of Jesus.

I say that because, you see, the enemies of Jesus are frightened of Him. Oh I don't necessarily mean the ignorant high school teacher who teaches evolution, or the abortion doctor who murders babies. But the people who are in touch with demons - the conquered, abyss-bound, once-heavenly beings that torture people's minds and for participants who are willing control their bodies - are very frightened of Jesus. They know the Truth. Not from scripture, but from information gained by these beings.

But it's another group of people in today's verse that kinda puzzle me. People in their right or own mind who are afraid of Jesus. They'd just seen and/or heard the great news of how Jesus was able to send all these demons from this man. Jesus had healed him - body, soul, and mind - yet they were so frightened of Jesus that the townspeople begged Him to go away.

You see some people flock to Jesus because they know He can FIX their life. Some people are afraid of Jesus because they think He will MESS UP their life! They think, "What would a man with such power and understanding cast out of my life!?"

Few but the possessed of our day would actually say they are afraid of Jesus. Jesus is seen as "just a teacher" - a serene, calm, soft man - far from "threatening". Yet, if we really believe and know the power of Jesus...

If Jesus were on His way to your home right now, would there be things you'd rush 'round to remove or attempt to hide? Would you turn off all the lights and hide in a back room to pretend you weren't home? Many Church members, even Church leaders (who as one friend aptly put, quickly go from "overseers to overlookers" on the subject of sin in themselves and the Church), don't want to hear about repentance. They don't even want the blessings of Jesus because they cling so tightly to the sin and familiar existence of their "comfortable", demon-ridden lives.

The truth is that Jesus is already there - seeing their sin, rebellion, and fear. But He won't stay long. He will just move on like He did from these folks if you don't want Him. He never forces His way nor pushes Himself on anyone. Consequently, whether as individuals or congregations, the "lampstand" - the light of the Savior - is removed. The darkness they embrace becomes the darkness of their own tomb.

Today, will you run to Jesus or run Him off?

October 8

Reading: Matthew 9:27-34; 13:53-58; Mark 6:1-6; Matthew 9:35-38; Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6; Matthew 10

"And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, 'Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him."

(Mark 6:2-3)

Embarrassing story moment...

I was visiting a friend's office to drop off a key the other day. I'd never been in there before, so the building was all new to me. I walked in, saw the receptionist's desk across the room, and headed that way. I also saw - and read - a sign that said:

"Watch your step!"

I SAW it and I READ it!

...and then I proceeded to almost fall on my face and did jar my whole self toe to skull as I stepped off into a sunken lower floor where the desk was.

Sometimes when we fall we don't see what makes us trip; sometimes we do - and just disregard it.

If it is not the disruption of our sin that causes us to run Jesus off, perhaps it is our pride that causes a heavenly "power outage" in our lives. The people here in Nazareth actually recognize that Jesus is full of wisdom. They see God's power performing miracles, yet they were ensnared. Their pride was a stumbling block for their whole lives. They saw - yet fell.

It wasn't Jesus' fault; He is not the one who caught them up. He was there to help - give life and give it to the full. No, they themselves were unwilling to accept help from "the kid down the street". If they were going to follow someone, it had better be someone special! Someone they don't know! Someone they had no idea about! Someone they hadn't seen perform miracles!

What sense does that make?

Pride doesn't make sense.

Pride is the unwillingness to accept what we know will actually help us. If we can "try" something we aren't real sure about, in the end, when we quit, we can just blame the solution that "shyster" sold us - and then we can go on about relying on ourselves.

...the only person we believe we can really trust anyway.

Don't stumble today because Jesus seems:

...so common

...so "old school"

...so simple

You will never make it on your own!

October 9

Reading: Luke 9:7-17; Mark 6:14-56; Matthew 14; John 6:1-21

"Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.

"One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?'

"Jesus said, 'Have the people sit down.' Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten."
(John 6:5-6, 8-13)

Preachers, elders, or other Church leaders often feel pressure to provide. In moments of human-ness they ask, "Is this message going to meet the needs of the people? Do I have time to make to get to folks' homes and visit where I'm needed this week? Am I understanding this passage correctly for my Sunday school lesson?"

Parents might ask if they are "enough" for their children. Students wonder if they've done "enough" on a test. Employees hope they've done enough to keep their job. Sometimes we might wonder if we are enough for God!

The short answer is, "No. We are not."

However, when Jesus is around, there is never a lack of what is needed. He provides the needs of those who will seek Him - and in abundance!

We see it all the time if we take time to look. When we take what we have, offer it to God, thank Him for it, and begin to use it, it goes much further and accomplishes much more than we'd ever imagined it could.

And usually - there are even leftovers!

October 10

Reading: John 6:22-71; Mark 7:1-23; Matthew 15:1-20

"When many of His disciples heard it, they said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?'"
(John 6:60)

Let me be honest, super-obvious, and clearly understated... Some things are hard.

Yes?

When you are yet to be a year old, it's hard to eat solid food.

When you're five, it's hard learning to tie your shoes.

When you're seven, it's hard to ride a bike.

When you're twelve, ...UGH! You're TWELVE. LIFE is hard.

When you're sixteen, it's hard to ask a girl for a date.

When you're eighteen, it's hard to leave home.

When you get out of college (or before), it's hard to find the right job.

I won't even keep going with all the things that are really hard about life. When we are at those ages though, those things can seem like the most difficult things in the world. Yet, not only are we encouraged to do them, we are motivated to accomplish the difficult. We see the payoff, and we want it!

But when Jesus says, "Life is all about the real - about the spiritual. Get your eyes off food you eat with your mouth; take your mind off ritual you go through with your body. Consume ME. I AM the Bread of Life."

"Eh, that's hard. No thanks."

Because we can't see the payoff, because the gratification is not immediate, because we really don't believe Jesus - we skip the difficulty of discipleship and settle for religion. That's what Bonhoeffer would call "easy-believism" - having faith in FAITH rather than Jesus. That is why Jesus can say,

"This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the One He has sent." (John 6:29)

When we truly believe in/on Jesus - not religion - we will naturally do the things of God from the mind of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit!

If you want fake religion with fake reward, the rules and ritual is great. If you really want to be fed and sustained, put in the time and effort to follow Jesus and consume the Bread that consumes you!

October 11

Reading: Mark 7:24-8:21; Matthew 15:21-16:12

"And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, 'Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?'"

(Mark 8:17-18)

If it's not sin or pride, perhaps it's distraction that keeps us from following Jesus.

One of the most difficult things about teaching children is this problem. They are easily distracted. Many breaks are needed. There is a limited amount of focus. There is a constant need for review of skills and practice of knowledge.

When it comes to understanding the spiritual realm - especially in the beginning - we are but children. It is all too easy to look around at the "wind and waves" (Matthew 14:28-30); it is all too easy to see our lack (Isn't it interesting we see what's NOT there!?) rather than our resources.

The disciples have taken part in the feeding of over five thousand people with five loaves of bread (v.18); they have seen four thousand fed with seven loaves. After each, there was not only what was needed, but more than! But the disciples are so forgetful that they don't remember the physical needs can be met in a heartbeat - so much so that they are missing the things Jesus really wants them to know.

Would you please take just fifteen seconds - right now - and remember something God's done for you? Think of one thing. What comes to mind first that you recognize as God's hand in your life? Go ahead... I'll wait while you think.

(15 seconds)

Got it? Write it down where you will see it today ...and tomorrow and.... If God can do THAT, can He not handle today? Don't get distracted. God will take care of what you need, when you need it, the way God knows you need it.

Listen for what He is trying to teach you today while you practice the faith learned yesterday.

October 12

Reading: Mark 8:22-9:13; Matthew 16:13-17:13; Luke 9:18-36

"And Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.' For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified."

(Mark 9:5-6)

Many Bible scholars tell us that Mark's gospel is actually the memoirs (inspired by the Holy Spirit of course) of Peter as they are dictated to Mark. If so, perhaps that's why, from time to time, we get a little more insight into Peter than the other three gospels. It is "gospel truth" that Peter utters these infamous lines simply because ..."he didn't really know what else to say..."

And, in doing so...says something dumb.

I like Peter a lot. In the gospels he's often the thick-skulled-slow-to-understand-guy, in Acts & the Pauline epistles he's the faithful Apostle with sometimes hypocritical contradictions, and in his own epistles he's the hard-hitting preacher of holiness. And then in this passage is definitely another great example of why I can relate to him. Some people just HAVE TO SAY SOMETHING! Saying something is often good - even right. Just saying "something" 'cause you don't know what to say... seldom is.

Peter is reprimanded for his comment. His way of thinking (or not thinking) is putting Jesus on the same level as Elijah and Moses (men symbolic of the prophets and the Law - respectively). Jesus is not "just" a prophet. And He is the fulfillment of the Law. He is set apart.

I have a friend that I don't get to spend much time with anymore, but I remember something he used to say. Something would happen that was frustrating, hard, etc, and he would just say, "Well - praise God anyway!"

There are times to say things; there are right things to say. But maybe - if we just don't know what to say - maybe we should just go with:

"Well - praise God anyway!"

October 13

Reading: Matthew 17:14-18:35; Mark 9:14-50; Luke 9:37-50

"Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'"
(Mark 9:24)

Here is yet another character in the Bible I love. I can't relate to the problem in his life - but I definitely understand his own personal struggle.

I'm glad he doesn't have a name. Let's just call him "Greg". Or perhaps by the end of this, you might want to re-read and call him your name! Because I think we have all "been there" where Greg is.

Greg has a devil of a problem (literally). The worst of it is that it's not directly his problem, but his son's. If there is anything that is more difficult than dealing with his own problems, Greg really has a lot of difficulty when the people he loves are deeply hurt.

Greg's son is possessed by a demon, and this demon is always trying to kill him. Why? Wow, that could be another whole devotion/study! But here we are with his son in constant peril from the likes of fire or drowning. Other gospel writers tell us he is also unable to hear or talk. Greg is exhausted from the pain and constant watch-care he and his wife have had to exhibit over their son. I can imagine that many remedies have been tried and failed. Even Jesus' own disciples, the other 9 left there while he was on the mountain with Peter, James, and John, have tried healing this boy to no avail.

But I love Greg for his words. His classic words. His words of simple faith, yet complete contradiction,

"I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!"

In the depths of his soul, he is believing. Jesus has just been explaining about the need for faith; in the gospels we've seen stories where a lack of faith kept Jesus from working among them; the disciples here are chastised for their lack of faith. He is believing, but is it enough faith?

It was.

Jesus tells His disciples after the scene ends what the problem was for them.

They ask Him, "Why couldn't we drive out the demon?"

"You don't have enough faith," Jesus told them. "I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible. (Matthew 17:20)

Really? This guy had more faith than Jesus' own Disciples - "Capital 'D' Disciples"? The future APOSTLES? Again, another rabbit trail we could go down about faith - what kind, how much, in whom...?

But put that statement together with what Jesus says again in Mark's gospel in 9:29:

"This kind can be cast out only by prayer."

When you have faith - but not adequate faith - PRAY FOR MORE! PRAY FOR ENOUGH. GET THE RIGHT KIND!
And that's exactly what Greg does here in this simple admission of his conflicted soul.

"Jesus, I am believing...help my lack of belief."

"Jesus, I do believe...help me believe more."

"Jesus, I do have faith...but my faith is tired; it's almost exhausted; refill/restore/renew/revive/refresh my faith."

I'm thankful for Mark's gospel (Peter's?). He always seems to show us that we can come to Jesus right where we are. Believing he can walk on the water...but not quite.

Jesus welcomes you right where you are. Come with what faith you do have - and ask for the rest you need.

Now... go back and enter YOUR name in this devotion.

October 14

Reading: John 7:1-9; Luke 9:51-56; Matthew 8:18-22; Luke 9:57-62; John 7:10-8:20

"Jesus said to them, 'My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil.'"

(John 7:6-7)

I know I'm only twenty years late to the party, but in searching for something interesting to watch, my wife and I began watching old seasons of Survivor. Part game show and all drama, I have learned a lesson or two.

One thing that I've noticed happen more than once... Someone will decide to vote off a contestant out of revenge. They don't try to remove the biggest threat from the game, but their desire to pay back someone they think wronged them causes them to make a play in the game that always seems to turn out badly.

If it's not sin, pride, or distraction... perhaps anger will blind us to the right path.

Jesus' brothers try to goad Him into going to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. "You're not getting any more disciples way up here in Galilee! They can't see your miracles here!"

And trust me... they weren't being nice. Just in case their sarcasm doesn't drip off the page well for his readers, John tells us they said this because "even His brothers didn't believe in Him". (v.5)

But Jesus doesn't take the bait - at least not the way they desire. (Jesus remained in Galilee, just long enough for Him to go on His terms to be able to do His Father's work, vv.9-10.) Jesus comes back with a pretty barbed comment of His own!

"Now is not the right time for me to go, but you can go anytime. The world can't hate you, but it does hate me because I accuse it of doing evil."

There are many times people in the Church, seemingly "Brothers of the Lord", who try to push preachers, leaders, or even other members of the Church to do things. Devilishly, they appeal to our best intentions.

"If you really want people to ...come to Church, ...be more dedicated, ...give more...
Then, you ought to..."

They are not those who care about the Lord's work, but simply religious power-players who want to keep control of things by setting snares in the way of those who do care. But Jesus is not playing a game of Survivor; He cannot be manipulated. His answer shows the proper thought pattern.

- 1) "Now is not the right time" - Jesus says, "I may need to do that, but on God's schedule." Let's make sure that what we do is not just the right thing - but done at the right time!
- 2) "You can go anytime" - This is where Jesus begins to lay down the truth. They have mockingly brought up God's will, "You wanna talk God's will? Let's talk God's will!" One of the best lines anyone can use is, "Sounds great! You go ahead."
- 3) "The world can't hate you" - Backhanded compliment. "Who could dislike YOU!? You'll do a better job than I!" Wait? Why? "Because you're so worldly and UNgodly...that's why everyone likes you."
- 4) "I accuse [the world] of doing evil." - "I speak truth. You speak popularly. Speak what I speak; be as concerned about God's things as you pretend to be; let's see what happens."

The lesson here?

Keep speaking: what God says, how God says, when God says, and let those who won't hear it do as they will - YOU do as God wills.

October 15

Reading: John 8:21-59; Luke 10:1-11:13

"What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"
(Luke 11:11-13)

How many times can Jesus talk about prayer before we get a handle on it? No one would ever say they pray enough. I'm not sure anyone feels like their prayers are "adequate" some how. So, here's another little tidbit we find from Jesus that might help us in our efforts to do what should be effortless!

This passage seems so SURE! Like such a blanket IOU from God... But think about this: we don't believe that God gives us bad things when we ask for good. That's not our problem, we usually just think God doesn't answer. Yet, let's swap around what Jesus said, shall we?

"...if your children ask for [a snake], do you give them [an fish] instead? Or if they ask for [a scorpion] do you give them [an egg]?"

You see, not only does the Father not deceptively trick and end up harming His children in what He does give, neither will He give what they ask for when what they want will harm them!

I think many times, however, that we go to God asking for snakes and scorpions! We think we know what it is we want and need, but our Father knows it will bring harm to us. So we believe that our prayer has gone unheard.

But what God does promise is that He will answer us if we pray and not give up - if we "keep on knocking...the door will be opened". In the process of persistent prayer, the door that may be opened is the understanding of what we really should be asking for! And once we are asking for that "...He' will 'get up' and give you whatever you need...".

Always remember, prayer is not changing God's mind about something, but inviting God to enter in to our lives and change what He wants changed! ...whether it is our circumstance or just maybe our mind!

October 16

Reading: Luke 11:14-12:34

"and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.'

"But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."
(Luke 12:17-18, 20-21)

Noticed the price of gas lately? Ours here in NE Mississippi is always among the lowest prices in the United States, but even still our fuel has gone up \$.40/gallon this week.

Notice the price of food lately? That Thanksgiving turkey we had to buy early because we will be on the road cost us dearly.

We may rightly blame politicians and policies for all this, but here is the thing that can happen: Christians can get their eyes on the PRICE rather than the PRINCE! The price threatens our peace of mind while the Prince of Peace wants us to look to Him.

Which are you most likely to have your eyes on today?

I have been on a bit of a '70's Christian music kick lately since I went to see "The Jesus Music" (recommend!) at the theatre. One song I rediscovered is a weird but truthful song by Gary S. Paxton. The lyrics say:

"There goes a cigar - smoking a man!
There goes a shiny car - and it's driving that man!
There goes a fool who don't know who he am,
'Cause money is the god of his plan."

What is "driving" you today?

October 17

Reading: Luke 12:35-13:21; John 9

"But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

(Luke 12:39-40)

"If I'd only known..."

Have you ever said that? I sure have.

So many unexpected things come our way in life. They range from minor annoyances to devastating horrors. They are seldom unexpected treats, but often defeating tragedies.

"If I'd only known..."

We believe that "If [we'd] only known..." there would have been a different outcome. We'd have done things differently; we'd have been prepared; we would have... [fill in the blank].

Yet, the truth of the matter is this:

We might not have done anything differently at all!

Want me to prove it?

We've been told for over two thousand years that Jesus' return looms... yet we don't live like it. Folks, Jesus is coming back! He is coming back, and we have been told!

And regardless of what volume of the "Left Behind" series you are reading (that fictional scourge of congregational libraries around the world), there are no "signs of the times". The "signs of the times" and the coming of Christ's Kingdom are complete as prophesied by Joel and as pronounced fulfilled by Peter on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

JESUS IS COMING BACK! AND IT COULD BE ANY TIME!

Are you prepared? Will you live differently?

No one will be able to say... "If I'd only known..."

Well, except maybe that person that doesn't know because... well, I'll save that discussion for another day.

But YOU KNOW!

You. Know.

October 18

Reading: John 10; Luke 13:22-14:24

"And he said to them, 'Go and tell that fox, "Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.'""

(Luke 13:32)

Being a music lover and musician, my musical tastes range widely. Occasionally, as the radio dial spins I'll hit upon an old, old country song by Willie Nelson, sung by Faron Young, called "Three Days". In the song, the singer croons on in heartache about three days he "hates to see arrive" - three days "filled with pain and sorrow" - "yesterday, today, and tomorrow"

Jesus has three days on His mind as well - but yesterday is never one of them. Jesus is looking at "...today and tomorrow; and the third day...".

All of this is allusion. For tomorrow, "tomorrow" becomes "today" and there's a new "tomorrow". Jesus is saying He is committed to His Father's work. As long as He's around, that's what He's going to be doing!

But then there is that "third day". The third day is something beyond tomorrow isn't it? And for those of us who know the old, old story, that "third day" should trigger something in our mind and understanding. If it doesn't - spoiler alert! Three days after Jesus dies on the cross for our sins, He will rise again - and the work of redemption will be done. His death, burial, and resurrection will be complete and on that "third day" He will have "accomplish[ed] [His] purpose".

Let us endeavor to always be like Jesus in this way.

For us, there are also three days. Leaving yesterday behind, there is always "today and tomorrow" - and a third day.

May all of our today's and tomorrows be filled with serving our Father while we wait on our "third day" - the day Jesus' faithful accomplish their work and pass from time to eternity.

October 19

Reading: Luke 14:25-17:10; John 11:1-37

"Jesus wept."

(John 11:35)

You reckon He still does? I do.

People often say, "There will be no more crying in heaven." And that is partly true, but it is not actually what the Bible says. There will be very many tears in heaven. What the Bible says is:

"[Jesus] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying...all these things are gone forever." (Revelation 21:4)

We will arrive in heaven crying about a million things, but Jesus will make it all better and there will be nothing else to cry about for eternity. But that is to come! There is plenty for Jesus to cry about now.

What? What would Jesus cry over now? To know, maybe we should first think about what He was crying over then. John doesn't tell us, but we might surmise.

It certainly was not over Lazarus' condition; Jesus knew what was getting ready to happen.

Perhaps it was the small faith of those around Him - even his disciples - who believed He'd arrived too late.

Perhaps they were tears of anger (see v.33) as Jesus saw some weeping and wailing out of tradition? and a desire for attention? and not the real pain that He and Lazarus' family felt.

Perhaps Jesus shed tears because of His pain over the condition of the world - the world He had created perfectly but had been reduced to a place of pain and heartache through the deception of Satan.

Perhaps He just cried because He loved His friends, and Jesus hurt alongside them in their grief. He cried for their pain.

So, does Jesus still weep? I submit to you that all these conditions - no matter which He wept over that day, one, some, or all - still exist today. For we have yet to enter into that timeless place where there is no death, sorrow, crying, or pain, and Jesus is with us constantly by His Holy Spirit - still experiencing this difficult life with us.

Know today, if you are suffering - hurting, that Jesus suffers with you. He hurts with you. What pains you, pains Jesus. But He is there. He is there not as One who is stuck in the mire of difficulty with you, but He is there as the Rescuer sent into the pit to pull you out.

Reach out to Him and put your trust in Him.

October 20

Reading: John 11:38-57; Luke 17:11-18:8

"Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, 'The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There!" for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'"

(Luke 17:20-21)

I guess it is just human nature to seek after what we don't have rather than to do with/enjoy what it is we already have. I have several guitars, but that doesn't stop me from looking at different ones - ones that have different features or a different sound. Just yesterday I plunked down a little money for a 60-70 year old guitar because it was "different".

When it comes to God, we are usually no different. We spend a lot of time looking for God. We think about how we might best serve God in a new way. We examine our Church services to see how we might make God show up and work in our midst. We read a new Christian "self help" book (how can a book can be "self-help" and be in a "Christian" store...?) to try and figure out how to make our lives better.

Jesus says it's all much simpler than that.

"...For the Kingdom of God is already among you."

Jesus was standing THERE! STOP THE SEARCH ALREADY! And you and I can too!

While that rendering into English makes a lot of sense as Jesus speaks to the Pharisees, the King James rendering of the original into English makes even more sense for those of us who've come to know Jesus as Savior. In the King James Version, it says:

"...the Kingdom of God is within you."

How much more could we hope for, get, or find!?

Christian, quit looking elsewhere and LISTEN to the Holy Spirit already received at your immersion! Let Him illuminate you through THE BIBLE! Stop looking elsewhere.

October 21

Reading: Matthew 19; Mark 10:1-31; Luke 18:9-30

"Then Peter said in reply, 'See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?'"
(Matthew 19:27)

Remember when I said I liked Peter?

Peter is a man of practicalities. He is a working man. "An honest day's work for an honest day's pay" I'm sure could have been his motto. You don't make any kinds of decisions - especially ones that concern your livelihood - without knowing what the return is.

Jesus Himself even seems to honor that way of thinking.

"...Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost?..." (Luke 14:28ff)

But practicalities end where the command of God begins. And God calls a man in this passage to do something quite impractical. Jesus commands that if the man would be "perfect", he must sell all he has (which is a LOT) give the proceeds to the poor, then follow Jesus. Give up your possessions, your means of making a living, and take up a life of itinerate preaching/teaching/learning - never knowing from where your next meal may come.

Completely impractical.

For Jesus.

When you hear Jesus' response, you begin to realize that it is always Jesus who comes out - as we say 'round my parts - "with the short end of the stick"!

"...everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, for my sake, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life."

If your broker offered you an investment on your earthly money that returned 10,000%, was good for eternity, and unable to be touched by the fluctuations of the world's economy... would you buy in?

That's what Jesus offers.

At the expense of His life.

Who is being impractical now?

My guess is that when we begin to "count our blessings", we already see a return that far outweighs what we've invested in the Kingdom of God.

October 22

Reading: Matthew 20; Mark 10:32-52; Luke 18:31-19:27

"But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?'"
(Matthew 20:13-15)

"That's not fair!"

If you have children, you've heard that. If you've been a kid, you've said that! As human beings we have an innate sense of fairness. It is a code of morality that is written on our conscience from the beginning. We know when we are being cheated, and that it is WRONG.

In Jesus' parable, these men were willing to serve. They were ready to do an honest day's work for an honest day's wages. And they did. And they got what they bargained for. That's fair.

But our sense of fairness doesn't like it when the men hired late in the evening get the same money. And really, they didn't mind them getting that money - they just assumed they'd get more. We relate to that. That part doesn't seem fair.

Yet, in the Kingdom, the point is this: it's not how much you get; it's that you "get" at all! No one really deserves anything (except hell)! The "all-day work" is not worth what the Master pays. In relation to eternity, we are all here for a fraction of a millisecond! How much later is one who waits even many years to serve the Master?

What's more, in relation to yesterday's devotion, who's getting cheated in the story of Jesus? Who is it that is always the servant and always the served? Whose riches is it that are paid to us? And Who is it that actually earned them?

Nope. It's not fair!

And you (and I) should be glad!

Let us rejoice in the grace available to all and do all we can to find those willing to serve the Master alongside us - even at this late hour!

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Reading: Matthew 20; Mark 10:32-52; Luke 18:31-19:27

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In addition, in relation to yesterday's devotion as well, who's getting cheated in the story of Jesus? Who is it that is always the servant and always the served? Whose riches is it that are paid to us? And Who is it that actually earned them?

Nope. It's not fair!

And you (and I) should be glad!

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October 23

Reading: Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13; John 12:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Matthew 21:1-11; Luke 19:28-44; John 12:12-36

"And while He was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as He was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over His head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, 'Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this

ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.' And they scolded her."

(Mark 14:3-5)

In this amazing story, an unbelievable thing happens.

Here we are in the home of Simon. A man previously known as "Simon the Leper" - for previously he'd had leprosy.

Previously.

Why previously? We assume it is because while no one would've been willing to be around Simon, much less touch him, the hand of Jesus would and did. Simon was a man literally touched by the grace of Jesus. And now, here is Jesus - fellowshiping, eating, staying - in his home! It is certainly a celebration and testimony of God's power and grace.

And yet...

It is also here where greed, derision, and myopic human judgment rear their ugly heads.

Seemingly, it was Judas Iscariot who started the whole thing. His protest for the welfare of the poor is a ruse for his greed. "The disciples" (plural) join in and with their short-sighted-less-than-worshipful way judge that the money could be better spent than in worship of Jesus.

Oh, Simon. Please, Simon. Please tell me that you were not among the disciples who joined in this scolding of this woman. Please tell me that after you had experienced the healing touch of Jesus' grace... you weren't then part of denying another person grace and an opportunity to worship Jesus. Please Simon...

...don't be like me.

For like many (perhaps all?) who come to Jesus and experience His grace, I too have thought others unworthy. I too have questioned people's extravagant, overboard worship of the Savior of our souls. And many times, when we do, it is out of a conviction that we should have done/given more.

Often we are faced with choices of how much is "too much" - too much to put in the offering plate, too much time spent in the Bible, too much effort to help someone in need... Truly, there may be other factors that come into consideration when we serve. Godly direction may certainly lead our worship and service. But let us never consider the "too much" question. For certainly, nothing is ever too much - too extravagant - for Jesus!

October 24

Reading: John 12:37-50; Mark 11:12-14; Matthew 21:18-22; Mark 11:15-19; Matthew 21:12-17; Luke 19:45-48; Mark 11:20-33; Matthew 21:23-27; Luke 20:1-8

"Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God."

(John 12:42-43)

It is one thing to be afraid.

Fear is a God-given emotion that may protect us from doing foolish things. While "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18), few of us are perfect or "complete" or "mature" in our love. At some point, fear can become a monster that often causes us to do wrong things and often make poor decisions. When fear falls into the hands of the enemy, it is used as a tool to keep God's Kingdom at bay in our lives and the lives of others. We can become a lot like Peter - walking on the water one minute, but drowning in fear of the wind and waves the next. God have mercy on us.

Lovelessness is a different thing.

The folks in today's passage are disobedient in a more subtle way. It's not so much that they fear others' wrath - for they are at the "top of the food chain". It is that they don't want to give up the attention of that spot. They have grown accustomed to receiving the praise due God themselves.

And they love it.

They love it more than God.

The funny thing is, they could still have praise. Had they loved Jesus more than man's praise, they'd had it all! They could've had all Jesus offered and been praised by God!

If GOD offered... (fill in the blank) and a man offered the same - which would you take?

I'd bet the farm that anything God offered would be more lasting, more satisfying - more real.

So today, think! It's not just avoiding what we might fear... the real battle is beginning to love that which really blesses.

Keith Green used to sing this one:

"My Word sits there upon your desk,
but you love your books and magazines the best.
You prefer the light of your TV.
You love the world, and you're avoiding me."

October 25

Reading: Matthew 21:28-22:33; Mark 12:1-27; Luke 20:9-40

"Jesus said to them, 'Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?'"
(Mark 12:24)

The Sadducees came to Jesus trying to embarrass Him. Not believing in any kind of resurrection of the dead, they come with a puzzle based on what they perceive a problem with resurrected people would be. If, for instance, someone was married several times, who are they going to be married to after they're resurrected.

You can almost hear them snickering; you can see them elbowing one another - laughing as they think it's a "gotcha" moment for them against Jesus.

But Jesus tells them the problem is not the resurrection; it is their complete lack of understanding. "Your worldly mindset makes you misunderstand marriage, misunderstand the resurrection, misunderstand eternity, and underestimate God's power!"

Many today come with seemingly "unsolvable problems" to mock and frustrate those who would trust God. Every time it is as the Sadducees. They really don't know what they are talking about when they misquote or misunderstand the Bible. And they sure underestimate the power of God.

Let us endeavor to be different! Let us know the scripture and believe God!

October 26

Reading: Mark 12:28-44; Matthew 22:34-23:39; Luke 20:41-21:4

"'If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?' And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions."
(Matthew 22:45-46)

After a rigorous round of interrogation by the religious lawyers, Jesus turns the tables. He has a question for them. "How can the Messiah be both David's Lord and his son?" In patriarchal society, the forefather would always and forever be greater than his posterity.

Here Jesus actually does have them trapped. Because Jesus does know and understand the scripture far beyond them, and Jesus does know the power of God. (See yesterday's devotion.) The Messiah is both Man (Son of David) and God! He can be David's son and his Lord. Yet, if they acknowledge this, it may open their eyes to Whom Jesus really is!

They find it easier to just disregard the truth.

And so it is today.

If you come to God with a question, be ready for an answer! Or, as Jesus does here, another more pertinent question! We, like the lawyers, question and quiz God over trivial things. We hope to satisfy our earthly understandings or, like them, justify our unbelief and disobedience.

Jesus asks the questions that really matter.

Stop questioning God and trust Him.

Be thankful for Messiah. The One so fully man that He knows all our suffering, experienced all temptations known to us, and was able to die in our place - yet, One so fully God that He conquered death itself by His perfection and power!

October 27

Reading: Matthew 24:1-35; Mark 13:1-31; Luke 21:5-33

"And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!'

"And Jesus said to him, 'Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.'"

(Mark 13:1-2)

We are often impressed with ourselves aren't we?

"Listen to this new guitar lick I learned!"

"Look at my beautiful home!"

"Just taste this incredible meal!"

We take pride in our accomplishments, our possessions, and our talents. People may compliment us on a job well-done. We may swell with pride in our children - in their intelligence, advancement, and talent.

Yet, all these things will pass.

All. Of. Them.

If it hurts your heart to think that vehicle you spent tens of thousands of dollars on is going to burn into oblivion... if it depresses you just a little to think of getting older... if you are hopeless in the death of someone important in your life... (and all of us feel this way at times about all these things - and many more things) you, and I, have our eyes on the wrong thing.

I don't suppose any of us have done anything - been involved in any project - so amazing as the Temple of Yahweh that stood there in Jerusalem before the eyes of the disciples. Yet, Jesus tells them, while it is impressive, it is not so impressive that it will last. It will go back to the pieces of rock from which it started.

Such is our lives.

We will return to dust. Our cars will rust away. Our houses will return to the ground from which the wood once grew and the rock was mined. Our jewelry will be on the hands and necks of others, and one day, all of it - every last bit - "shall melt with fervent heat". (2 Peter 3:10)

Don't get too comfortable and excited about the things around you. They are quickly passing. Be sure you are connected to - one with - the Word! For it is the Word that is everlasting! (Mark 13:31)

October 28

Reading: Mark 13:32-37; Luke 21:34-38; Matthew 24:36-25:46

"Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

"And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'"

(Matthew 25:37-40)

I have a close friend who has mentioned a few times something that I did for him almost a couple of decades ago. He always thinks of it as a time that he saw me for the "real friend" I was and am.

Honestly... I don't remember doing it!

I'm really glad I did do it ...evidently?... I'm glad it encouraged him. I'm glad it made us closer friends. Mostly I'm glad that I actually did something selfless - when often I feel so selfish.

If we are honest,... OK, if I'm honest... a lot of the time I'm so busy with my own life, problems, struggles, achievements... that I can easily overlook other people. It's a big WHEW! that I actually didn't blow it that one time when it counted. Usually, if I do think to serve others, my human nature gets the best of me, and I want to be noticed - and remembered - the same way I am remembering on my little list all my good works. :)

Jesus portrays the righteous people standing before Him at the end much like the former.

Those at the right hand of Jesus don't even remember having served Him. They can't think of a time when they "did the right thing".

Why not?

I think it's because when we finally learn to just follow Jesus... when we finally quit worrying about being "good" and earning points... when we just decide to be disciples - we begin to do the right thing almost automatically.

As the Holy Spirit begins to take over even our physical selves (given Him at the beginning of each new day when we "deny [ourselves], take up [our] cross daily, and follow [Him]" (Luke 9:23), He fills the sails that drive our lives with the breath of God, and we just... sail.

There's no need to keep track. There's no need to wonder if God is going to remember all this. When we just follow Jesus, He will see and remember more than we ever even realize we are doing.

Have you given yourself to Jesus again today?

October 29

Reading: Mark 14:1-2, 10-26; Matthew 26:1-5, 14-30; Luke 22:1-30; John 13:1-30

"And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us."
(Mark 14:15)

Have you ever really considered the blessings of your life? I mean really thought about not just how wonderful they are to have - but how they actually came about in the first place?

A man is baptized by my son in the congregation where he preaches in Colorado. It is far removed from my life. Or is it?

That man heard the gospel because my son moved to Colorado to preach. He moved to Colorado to preach because of connections that my work had with the congregation there. He became a preacher in need of a congregation because the congregation where he'd been filling the pulpit was hiring a new minister. He'd been filling the pulpit because a friend asked if I knew a preacher. He had the ability to travel there and preach for them because he'd moved to the area after a year of Bible college. He went to Bible college in that area because he'd lived there as a child and wanted to go back. He lived there as a child because... and the story could go on.

A man in Colorado is baptized into Christ because of many, many things that happened not JUST in that man's life - but my son's, my life, my father's life, my grandfather's life... just to pull off that ONE EVENT in a moment of HIStory! All those events had intersected with literally countless other events and lives that were also changed.

All that to say - the way God is constantly working in the background of our lives, moment by moment and decision by decision, is mind-boggling!

How was it that a certain man in the large city of Jerusalem had an upstairs guest room? Even more - how is it that it was already set up for a meal to host at least 13 men!? This guy isn't even named, but I want to hear his story when I get to heaven!

"What in the world happened, man! How did it come about that you were ready, willing, and able to host the Last Supper!?"

God is doing something, preparing something - many somethings - in your life right this moment! Some of them may be for your benefit; some may be for the benefit of others. Don't miss what He will do because you are not ready to act at His command!

And don't miss what God has already done in your life! Think and THANK about that today!

October 30

Reading: John 13:31-38; Mark 14:27-31; Matthew 26:31-35; Luke 22:31-38; John 14:1-15:17

"Peter said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.'

"Jesus said, 'I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.'"

(Luke 22:33-34)

After having the Passover with Jesus, Peter was so sure. Yes, there had been mysterious talk of someone denying Jesus, but in those passionate moments around the table, Peter's resolve was so strengthened. He knew he could never do something like that.

Yet, he did.

Yes, Judas was the betrayer Jesus spoke of at the table, yet there were twelve betrayers in the garden. Maybe a handful followed at a distance to stand outside Jesus' trial, but when it came down to it, Jesus' prophesy about Peter was true.

Embarrassingly and embitteringly true.

As we gather together as God's Church each week - especially around the Lord's table as they did - we do so with a passion. We are in the midst of our Christian family. We proclaim to one another in a solemn supper the Lord's death until He comes. We pronounce that we have examined ourselves and found ourselves still true and faithful to the Savior's Kingdom. Our actions before our brothers and sisters say, "Join me, won't you?"

Yet, we come back every week because we know the harsh reality. The embarrassing and sometimes embittering reality of our lives is: what we proclaim around the table is often forgotten in the garden.

So, as we have yet struggled through another week of life, join me. Join me as I not only remember my faith - but also remember my failures. Join me as I not only proclaim my belief - but also my need. Join me in this passionate moment that I may stick with Jesus still this coming week in my moments of fear.

October 31

Reading: John 15:18-17:26

"And Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away, for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'"

(Mark 14:27)

As Jesus gets ready to be "glorified" through His death, burial, and resurrection - things are going to get pretty dark before the disciples "see the light"! Prophesied hundreds of years before by Zechariah, when the shepherd appears to be "out of the way", the sheep will have no protection. Without a leader, the frightened sheep will run in all directions from the wolves.

It is quite a contrast to today.

Today, the Shepherd sits at the right hand of the Father. Today, the Shepherd rules over His Kingdom. Today, the Shepherd commands His troops through the mop-up operations of a war already won.

But the sheep are scattered.

The Church of God is running in fear, even with a strong Shepherd because the sheep don't hear His voice (Are they even His sheep then? [John 10:3-5]). The sheep are focused on the frightening terrain about them rather than the path in which the Shepherd leads.

They hear of "wars and rumors of wars" (or dangerous illnesses, hyper-inflation, violence, etc) -

they follow after other "Saviors" when people say, "Here [he, she, it, they] is/are!" (Think politicians, miracle drugs, governments, programs - even so-called "Churches" that proclaim "gospels" with no power or Jesus.) They sit at home or huddle-up in the church buildings, keep their mouths shut, and wait for someone to give them the "all-clear".

Church, we do live in desperate times! That much is definitely true. It's scary out there. But it is nothing that Jesus has not told us would be. It's not the Shepherd who's been struck, it's the prince of the powers of the air - the ruler of this world - who has been cast down! He has been CHAINED by the power of the resurrection and the coming of God's Kingdom into this world! (Revelation 20:1-2)

Get up, get out! Don't shut up, but shout out! Don't scatter, but get about the work of following the Shepherd!

November 1

Reading: John 18:1-2; Mark 14:32-43; Matthew 26:36-56; Luke 22:39-53; John 18:3-24

"When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered."

(John 18:1)

John's deep theological treatise gives a nod to the common man here. Among the Hebrews of the time was a known idiom something along the lines of, "He's crossed the Kidron". Meaning, "He's skipped town!" "He's on the lam!" "Time to 'get outta Dodge'!" (idioms of our day).

Things are happening very quickly here. If you've ever been in moments of great agony, terror, or tragedy - you recognize this. It's more than your brain can comprehend all at once. Time is both flying and in slow motion. The mood of all four gospels is ominous and frightening. It is as Jesus Himself says to the mob in the garden, "...this is your moment, the time when the power of darkness reigns." (Luke 22:53b, NLT)

But more than just alluding to a common idiom, John points us directly back to another time in the history of Israel - all the way back to 2 Samuel 15. There in the time of the Kings, Absalom has conspired against his father, King David. "...the people with Absalom kept increasing." (2 Samuel 15:12, ESV) There was no fighting what was going to take place, David - the King - runs. And, in verse 23, "...the king crossed the brook Kidron...". You can read David's own thoughts on it (Jesus' too? Messianic prophecy?) in Psalm 3 and Psalm 63. It doesn't take much to see all the parallels. David, already a type of Christ in so many ways, is certainly here - Jesus the clear antitype. A King "crossing the Kidron" - chased across by His own.

Yet John points to not just that parallel, but the one of victory!

David eventually came back to town. And in this sped-up, fast-forward playing out of the early scenario hundreds of years before, Jesus does too. David came back to reign again. Jesus came back to die - then live - and reign forever!

Point being: even at the darkest hour of life, all is not lost. The story is never come to a close with Jesus. There are always options. There is always a choice in front of us. We will all "cross the Kidron". Do you follow after Jesus as a friend or an enemy?

November 2

Mark 14:53-15:1; Matthew 26:57-27:10; Luke 22:54-71; John 18:25-27

"But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know this man of whom you speak.'" (Mark 14:71)

We don't really believe in curses these days. (We are much too educated for that...?) But what Peter was saying was that may he be an "anathema". Something of intense hatred - to everyone. If he was lying, he said, may he but cut off from everyone.

That seems harsh.

For Peter I doubt it seemed harsh enough.

Peter knows the truth. He knows he is lying. While, yes, he may be trying to escape some kind of ridicule or punishment in this moment - the bitter irony of it is that I think he actually desires this punishment that he calls upon himself.

Big-talkin' Simon the fisherman - the one who said he'd go to the death with Jesus - has betrayed Him as predicted. His pride was hurt, his Friend, Master, and Rabbi was/is hurt (and sentenced to death), and guilt has flooded his soul. In this moment, I don't think Peter can think of anything worse than where he is. So, he swears - begs - to just be separated from anyone and everything. It can't be worse. Maybe that punishment is better than what he feels now.

It's not.

Things can always be worse. Peter is only at a crossroads he will stand at for about three days. He could:

1) take the route of Judas - just go hang himself.

That's worse.

2) hope that someone (God?) will take him up on this curse - this total separation from everything and everyone.

In reality - that is worse.

3) find hope and healing in the overwhelming grace, mercy, and forgiveness of God.

Things can always get better!

...with the right choice.

Reading ahead, we see that Peter chooses God. It takes some time; he doesn't rush off into anything. But the resurrected Jesus visits Peter, and Peter accepts forgiveness and restoration.

Thankfully, Peter is the contrast to Judas' decision. Judas thought things couldn't get worse - and found out they could. Peter thought things would never get better - and found out they could.

Today, you may stand at the crossroads. It may be the crossroads of guilt, shame, grief, betrayal, or any other number or combination of heartaches. But the good news is that Sunday is on the way! You don't even have to wait on Him like Peter - you can run to Him right now!

If we will rightly choose to come to the garden, if we will allow ourselves and all our past to die and be buried with Christ daily (Luke 9:23), we will experience the resurrection daily (2 Corinthians 4:16-17).

Yes, things can get worse. Yes, things can get better. Choose Jesus!

November 3

Reading: Mark 15:2-20; Matthew 27:11-31; Luke 23:1-25; John 18:28-19:16; Luke 22:63-65

"They cried out, 'Away with him, away with him, crucify him!'

"Pilate said to them, 'Shall I crucify your King?'

"The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar.'" (John 19:15)

The Jews of the first century, at least by my understanding, did have quite a confusing government situation. While ultimately part of the Roman Empire, they were allowed to have their own "tribal government" (for lack of better terminology). And then the actual "King" of the Hebrew people was the Roman governor over Galilee (Herod) (Can you say, "Conflict of interest!"). Yet, he wasn't really a King - or even a real Jew. (Confused yet?)

Such is politics.

Especially when people attempt to run from God.

The Jewish leaders should have said, "We have no King but Yahweh!" But it was far too late for that. Wanting to escape political scrutiny, they claim allegiance only to the foreign, godless Emperor of Rome.

Sad.

Yet, many Christians today seem to be confused about where their allegiance lies. While we should all endeavor to obey the ruling authorities (Romans 13:1-7) and be good citizens, let us not forget that where the commands of God and the laws of men intersect that God owns the right of way! Let us say with Peter and the other Apostles, "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29)

We have many governmental officials... aldermen, mayors, governors, and a president. But we have ONE KING!

WE have no King but Jesus!

November 4

Reading: Mark 15:21-41; Matthew 27:32-56; Luke 23:26-49; John 19:17-37

"The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!'"

(Luke 23:36-37)

It's easy to look down on a lot of people here at the cross.

Here are the soldiers - mocking Jesus, gambling for His clothes, making sport of Him in many ways.

Here are the religious leaders saying they would believe in Him if he performed the miracle of coming down off the cross (when they never believed in Him because of any other miracle He did).

Here is one known disciple of Jesus with a few of their female followers - unable to do or say anything for His Master?

When we watch it played out in a Hollywood movie, or really take the time to picture it as we read from the page - it's so surreal. It is tragic, overwhelmingly sad, and angering all at once. We root for Jesus to come down off that cross and wipe out these nasty, mocking people.

Until we look closely at the screen...

Until we peer deeply into the page...

Who is that among the crowd?

"Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers" (Stuart Townsend, How Deep the Father's Love for Us).

There have been some tragic and frankly obscene stories in the news lately. They are just more filth and sadness in the vast post-Christian wasteland our nation is becoming (has become?). Yet, as much as the stories pain me, I don't have the stomach for more finger pointing. I've got less in me lately for seeing the "bad guys" fall.

I am the bad guy.

Jesus told the rich young ruler, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God!" (Luke 18:19, my paraphrase). I have seen the grace of God so very overwhelmingly in my life lately. Not only His grace - providing what I don't have, can't get elsewhere, and definitely don't deserve... but also His mercy - not giving me what I do deserve for all my failures, shortcomings, mistakes, and downright rebellious disobedience to

Him called sin. When I consider what I've been given, what I've been saved from, and how close I've come to some of the downfalls of others that have been made so public...

I just don't have the stomach to criticize.

It doesn't mean that I don't still recognize sin. It doesn't mean that I don't still speak against it. But I'll speak of my own as loudly as anyone else's, and I'll approach the truth of the matter with love (Ephesians 4:15) rather than condemnation. I even think it's OK to be angry at what people are doing to us or others - but let's also be angry about what people are doing to themselves in their sin!

Jesus was compassionately dying for every one of those mockers just the same as He was for you and me.

And He also died for all those foolish acting people in Washington D.C..

And He also died for those Muslim terrorists.

And He died for that pedophile and that sex-trafficker.

And He died on behalf of Joe Biden, Donald Trump, the Pope, the Dali Lama, Hugh Hefner, Charles Manson, Jeffrey Dahmer.... wanna add some more?

You. And. Me.

"Grace, grace. God's grace. Grace that is greater than all our sin."

November 5

Reading: Mark 15:42-16:11; Matthew 27:57-28:15; Luke 23:50-24:1-12; John 19:38-20:18

"but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."
(Luke 24:11)

The widow's son. He was sick.

Jairus' daughter. She was sick.

Lazarus was sick.

So, perhaps they weren't really dead.

"I mean, sure, they looked dead. But we're no doctors! What do we know? And besides, surely there's a difference between somehow healing someone of... something... and raising yourself from the dead! We saw Jesus beaten. We saw Him whipped to ribbons. We saw Him nailed to a tree. We saw His side pierced, and His blood had already separated. He was dead!"

You have to admit... it did sound like nonsense.

But when you come to understand the truth of the resurrection, that kind of power changes everything.

Once we accept the truth and believe it...

Jesus is who He said He is,
everything Jesus said is true,

the scripture from which He taught is absolutely true,

all the prophets, all the promises, the creation story, the seven days.

If the resurrection isn't nonsense, none of it is nonsense. No wonder the priests and Pharisees had the Romans to concoct a story to explain the empty tomb.

Believe the resurrection; believe it all. Believe the resurrection; believe Jesus can change your life!

November 6

Reading: Luke 24:13-43; Mark 16:12-13; John 20:19-23; Mark 16:14; John 20:24-21:25; Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:44-49

"So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, but they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight."

(Luke 24:28-31)

Over the years in my home, I've enjoyed all kinds of gatherings.

There are very large gatherings where the whole family is in attendance. The room is near bursting at the seams as relatives are crowded around the dining room table, the card table from the closet, the breakfast nook, sitting on the floor... people everywhere - eating, playing music, singing, talking, laughing...

There are some moments I enjoy in my home all alone. My wife is off running errands, and I sit on my patio with my Bible and just talk to Jesus.

Then there are the "in-between". Times when we meet with friends and family on a smaller scale. While the other times are just as cherished, we enjoy a time of closeness in the bond of Christ. Another couple comes over for dinner, for example.

When we gather on the Lord's Day and come around His table, we enjoy that in-between.

We can't gather the whole family of God for the supper (that'll have to wait for the expanse of heaven).

We can't be alone with Jesus at His table. Oh, we can remember His sacrifice, and we should every day! But there is a statement to be made at the Lord's table!

The Lord's Supper is not only a time of inward reflection, but also outward proclamation!

It is important that we come around the Lord's Table - and do it TOGETHER! "[Proclaiming] the Lord's death 'til He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26) means someone needs to be around us to proclaim it to! You can do everything the Bible calls us to do alone with Jesus - except be together!

You certainly can't do that on Facebook.

November 7

Reading: Mark 16:19-20; Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1-2

"In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,"
(Acts 1:1)

There are two times I hear a particular phrase. One time is appropriate; one is not.

"I don't know what to say."

I wish I had a dollar for every time I've heard this phrase over the last three and a half months. Every friend, family member, and stranger who knows the grief my family has suffered with the death of our grandson has said this phrase to me.

When someone dies, it is appropriate if you are going to say anything to a grieving person. Hugs with tears and no words are greatly appreciated... an "I/we love you" is always great... but "I don't know what to say" is appropriate too. It definitely expresses what the person trying to comfort feels - for there is nothing that will really lift the spirits or relieve the pain of the mourner. It's hard to know what to say when the person you want to talk to doesn't even know what to feel!

The other time I hear this phrase is totally inappropriate. It usually comes after a Bible class, conversation, or sermon about sharing our faith in Jesus. "But, preacher, I don't know what to say!"

Seriously?

I know we've probably all said that about telling someone the gospel before, but, if we think about it, it's just not true! Not one Christian should ever utter that phrase in regards to evangelism! We have much to tell!

God spent 4-6 thousand years weaving the story through generations of preachers and prophets. There are four whole narrative books written about many of the things that Jesus did and said - actions and teachings that touch almost any conversation or situation we are in. Luke here in Acts continues his narrative with the way Jesus continues working in the world after His ascension! (Often called The Acts of the Apostles - it could rightly be called The Acts of the Holy Spirit!) In fact, it is the gospel writer John who tells us there is so much more to be told about Jesus that the world couldn't hold all the books!

We can't think of anything to say!?

Perhaps, if we "don't know what to say" - we're not spending much time getting to know Jesus.

Leave the phrase "I don't know what to say" at the funeral homes and cemeteries. When we are talking about Jesus, we are talking life!

November 8

Reading: Acts 3-5

"But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."
(Acts 5:29)

If I were going to write history's shortest devotion today, I'd just say:

"Hear what the government says. Hear what the Bible says. Decide."

That's it, friends. There's really not more to be said. When governments, pseudo-science, educators, or any other human disagree with God's Word - there is a choice to be made.

Yes, I know what Romans 13 says.

But this verse says that when God's commands are at odds with the commands of any other human, we are always bound to yield to God! His Word is the binding authority.

God's Word says, "SING!" (Ephesians 5:19)

God's Word says, "MEET!" (Hebrews 10:25)

God's Word says the disciples MET to, "BREAK BREAD!" (Acts 2:42)

For heaven's sake - God's Word says, "KISS!" (2 Corinthians 13:12)

Will you finally decide, Church!?

November 9

Reading: Acts 6:1-8:1a

"But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him."
(Acts 7:57)

Can you imagine having a conversation with grown adults, and when you started telling them something, they stuck their fingers in their ears and shouted, "Lalalalalalala! I can't hear you! I can't hear you!" Yet, the literally happens here.

The false witnesses accuse Stephen of being against Moses and the Temple. Stephen launches into a sermon that you'd have to be completely ignorant of scripture to misunderstand. But these men were not - not by any means. They were the most schooled of the Jews. Stephen was not preaching against Moses, but accurately and easily using Moses' own words to show the truth of Who Jesus was/is!

He goes all the way back to Abraham to set up the type/antitype of Joseph and Jesus.

The jealousy of his own brothers (sons of Abraham) send Joseph to Egypt; the jealousy of King Herod sends Jesus to Egypt.

Then after 400 years, we see the typology switch to Moses.

Moses rejects his regal robes to redeem His people and lead them to the Promised Land; Jesus left behind the throne of heaven to redeem us.

Yet, the people Moses try to redeem balk, repeatedly reject, and work against Moses - just like these people had done Jesus! - even though Moses himself predicted this great Messiah (along with every other prophet they'd misused, abused, and killed).

It was too much for them. And in a fit of jealous, childish rage they cover their ears and yell.

They will not hear truth.

When you turn on your computer or TV today, you see the same. People who, when confronted by irrefutable truth, just yell louder to drown out what they don't want to hear - what they just cannot accept as truth -

their guilt.

Will you hear and repent today?... or hear and reject?

November 10

Reading: Acts 8-9

"And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus."

(Acts 9:26-27)

Many years ago, I had a couple of young adult men that I was discipling. Neither had ever been involved in Church at all - let alone known Jesus. Over time as we studied, they became believers and were immersed into Christ. As time wore on and we continued to study, they felt ready to serve. I asked them if they might serve communion in the smaller of our two Sunday morning services. It would be an easy task and a small stage for them to get their feet wet.

When the communion hymn was played that morning and it came for them to serve, they approached the Lord's Table as instructed. I was really excited to see them come this far! However, as they neared the Table, two old-timers beat them to the punch and stood in front of the table to serve. Quietly, they let the two young men know they weren't needed to serve.

Both of those young men felt a little embarrassed, and one of them never once came back to church.

That's not the only time I've seen long-time Christians push new disciples to the side - unfortunately. There's a whole lot I could say about the whole situation, but here's a take-away:

You never know how the way you might treat a new believer will effect... well... everything!

Can you imagine the world or the Church without Saul!? Who could have written all the things he did that became much of the New Testament like he did!? Who could have had the understanding, experience, and patience to make so many personal disciples as Saul? What if it were not for Barnabas who was willing to hear Saul out and give him an opportunity to prove himself true?

Sometimes disciple-making doesn't mean we go from the very beginning with someone - back when they don't even know Jesus. Sometimes it means taking a young believer under your wing and vouching for them. It means introducing them to others in the family of God and making them comfortable there. It means treating them like the family they are.

Is there an acquaintance of yours that needs you to be a Barnabas? Barnabas' name Bar-Nabas literally means "Son of Encouragement". Who could you encourage today?

November 11

Reading: Acts 10:1-12:5

"When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.'"

(Acts 11:18)

Most, if not all, of you reading this are Americans. As Americans, we love and speak often of our "rights". Our Constitution starts with a "Bill of Rights". They are RIGHTS; they are not PRIVILEGES. There is a vast difference between exercising certain freedoms (rights) and being allowed to do particular things based on... whatever (privileges). Furthermore, our legal documents proclaim that these are God-given rights. You can take away privileges. You might even say that if a government granted a "right" they could take that away. But if God grants it, only He can take it away!

In America, we love and exercise our rights.

But the Church isn't American. The Church of JESUS CHRIST is not a constitutional republic. We may claim "God-given rights" as an American - but we may not as a disciple of Jesus. In Jesus, we are only privileged.

The only thing God owes us is hell.

That's why grace is grace and why mercy is merciful. It's why God sets the parameters and the requirements for being saved from hell. Our patient God, Yahweh, extends the privilege of even repentance to us.

No one has a right to be saved. No one has a right to repent.

But God in His love and mercy has now - in Jesus Christ - PRIVILEGED, yea COMMANDED - all men everywhere to repent! (Acts 17:30) Rights breed an attitude of entitlement. Privilege breeds an attitude of thankfulness, leading to worship.

Generally, even from childhood, we run after the opportunity to gain a privilege - to take advantage of a privilege. You are privileged to enter heaven by your confession of Jesus as King, repentance of your sins, and immersion in water - have you accepted?

November 12

Reading: Acts 12:6-14:20

"But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe."

(Acts 14:19-20)

I'll admit I've dealt with some discouragement lately. People sit glass-eyed and stone-faced to the preaching. Not an amen is uttered after a song. No one comes forward. Maybe I should just give up.

Yet, here are Paul and Barnabas... They are "one chapter" into their first missionary journey. They've already had people argue with them during the sermon (13:45) (Well, at least that's yet to happen to me!), been run out of town by "influential religious women" (13:50), had a murder plot against them (14:5), and finally been caught, stoned, and left for dead! All the while doing more incredibly marvelous and miraculous things than I! (I guess to get really discouraged, I need to do better!)

But were Paul and Barnabas discouraged? Maybe discouraged - but still filled with joy and the Holy Spirit (13:52). They always just picked themselves up and dusted themselves off (literally!).

I do believe that one day we will suffer grave injustices and persecutions for following Jesus in the United States. That's just my personal opinion and prediction as I see the direction our nation is heading. If we will be discouraged by silence or apathy, will we stand persecution?

Don't be discouraged. Share the Word. Invite people to Jesus (not just to church). Preach against sin. Point to hell. Offer heaven. Love one another. Sing praise. Pray hard. And just keep walking.

November 13

Reading: Acts 14:21-28; Galatians 1:1-3:23

"As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. ...If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

(Galatians 1:9; 2:14b)

In a former ministry, I happened upon a congregation of people who were Jewish, but believed that Jesus was the Messiah and worship Him as such. They wrote books and commentaries; they zealously studied the scriptures and taught others. They claimed to believe the whole of the New Testament. However, they were still trying to keep what laws of Moses they were able to keep. And they believed it was necessary for them to do so.

I asked my acquaintance who was a teacher and writer in this group about the book of Galatians - in particular the first few chapters. His only response was, "Well...Galatians is a problem."

No, the problem is with mankind.

We want to twist the Gospel (good news) until it's no longer Good News (for some reason)!

Some people, like these and others, would like to limit grace. It's human nature to believe that we can do something to make ourselves more worthy - and therefore take more pride in our standing.

Some people, would like to limit their responsibility. "Grace!?! Fantastic! I believe in Jesus!" and they leave it there. They don't want to learn how to receive the gospel and be clothed in Jesus in immersion (3:27).

No, the gospel is that which has already been clearly communicated.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus... having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised Him from the dead." (Ephesians 2:8-10a; Colossians 2:12)

That truth - that good news - is no problem for me.

November 14

Reading: Galatians 3:24-6:18; Acts 15:1-21

"for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ."
(Galatians 3:26-27)

I was musing with a long-retired preacher the other night about memories of Church Camp. He talked about the song "Father Abraham" and how silly it was. Well, the actions are silly - so silly that an important and paramount truth of the song - the only thing the song says - over and over - seems forgotten.

"Father Abraham had many sons. Many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them and so are you. So let's just praise the Lord!"

But are we? How do you become a "Son of Abraham"?

Pre-dating the Law of Moses was God's covenant with Abraham. The KEY in being right with God is being a son of the Promise - being a son of Abraham! Paul's point to the Galatians is that the Law of Moses were only guide-posts, road signs, guard rails - to keep the physical sons of Abraham relying on their faith in the promises of Yahweh. You want to know God? You must be a son of Abraham.

Initially, God used the physical sons of Abraham to bring the Christ into the world "so the rest of humanity might seek Yahweh, including the Gentiles - all those I have called to be mine." (Acts 15:17, referring to Amos 9:12b, NLT) Paul argues to the Galatians that the Law was never "the way" itself, but only acted as a guardian until Jesus arrived.

In Jesus, a new opportunity to be a son of Abraham has arrived. There is a greater ability to be part of the promise and the People of God. No longer are sons of Abraham simply that by birth (though the real sons of Abraham never were just by birth, but always by faith), but now anyone can benefit through faith in what Jesus has done - not just what He would do!

One may now have the privilege of choosing to be a son of Abraham. How? Paul makes it plain. By grace (Ephesians 2:8), through faith (Galatians 3:26), in baptism (3:27).

Those still trying to be sons of Abraham without Jesus? They forfeit their relationship with him and God. They become children of the slave Hagar, not of Sarah (Galatians 4:25). And in fact, even those who once chose Christ - should they decide to - may forfeit their right as sons of Abraham and become slaves once more!

"For if you are trying to make yourselves right with God by keeping the law, you have been cut off from Christ! You have fallen away from God's grace." (Galatians 5:4, NLT)

Only by God's grace, through faith, at your immersion in water are you putting on Jesus and becoming a son of Abraham. Let us live faithfully - abiding in Jesus!

"...God will judge that person, whoever he is, who has been confusing you." (Galatians 5:10)

November 15

Reading: Acts 15:22-17:15

"And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, 'These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also,'" (Acts 17:6)

Most of us go through life just wanting to fly under the radar. We don't want to be noticed or bothered. We live by "live and let live". As "The Great Oz" said, "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!"

However, when Paul and Silas preached Jesus, they couldn't escape the spotlight. While they accused them with lies, one thing the Jews said of them was true. The above verse literally says that they had been going about "up-standing" people. That is, in their preaching, they were causing people to rise up! They intimated that it was an up-standing or up-rising against the Romans, but they knew that not to be true. It was an up-standing for TRUTH!

There may be arenas and parts of life where Christians ought go about their own lives quietly - such is even commanded:

"...make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: you should mind your own business and work with your hands..." (1 Thessalonians 4:11).

But when it comes to sharing Jesus it is only right that we are "up-standing" and cause others to be "up-standing" for Jesus name as well. We are to raise up a mighty Kingdom of godly disciples from around the world that the banquet table be not empty!

For a Christian to disobey the command to tell others about Jesus, saying, "Live and let live," is really - to borrow from the James Bond movie series - to "Live and Let Die".

November 16

Reading: Acts 17:16-18:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5:11

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: "To the unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.'" (Acts 17:22-23)

Our nation is so very like ancient Athens. We are a nation filled with shrines to gods worshipped by millions daily.

There are temples where tens of thousands gather to worship sports. Darkly lit shrines where the gods of celebrity take us to a make-believe world far from reality. Great pantheons where a few or even thousands scurry from altar to altar serving the god of their currency they believe gives them life. Woodland chapels made by Yahweh are desecrated by some serving the created gods of wood, stone, and creeping things.

And those are only the beginning.

But have you ever thought about the "unknown God" that our neighbors worship - or at least (as the Athenians did) acknowledge? The "unknown God" they speak of when say flippant things such as:

"Oh God!"

"God, I hope so!"

"I pray to God that..."

Sometimes they aren't said flippantly, but they are said in very real and sincere desperation - at the doctor's office when the doctor says, "It's cancer," - at the scene of an accident, on the field of battle in a foreign land. Or maybe it is in the quiet of a dark bedroom in the middle of the night when the soul longs for a God it knows is there - but does not know.

It is our job to be as Paul - to walk among and amidst all these idols, temples, and sanctuaries - and then point out the One God that they speak of, yet do not know.

Do you know how to do that? So many say they don't. But I'd encourage you to read this very short explanation of Who God really is! (Acts 17:22-31) How do you begin talking about Yahweh to a person who knows absolutely nothing about Him - or at least anything true about Him? Paul is a master. Read, learn, and do.

(I'd be interested for you to comment below and tell me what you notice Paul talking about - ask any questions about it - or even comment on what you learn about our God from what Paul says!)

November 17

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28; 2 Thessalonians; Acts 18

"Rejoice always."
(1 Thessalonians 5:16)

Honestly, today was a hard day for me to be "full of joy". Between the grind of work, a tired soul, and bad news - I was just not "feelin' it".

But when Paul says, "Always be joyful," I'm reminded of another scripture about the joy we have as followers of Yahweh. It says:

"...do not be grieved, for the joy of Yahweh is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:10, ESV)

When Nehemiah said this to all the people in Jerusalem, they weren't feelin' it either. They had just found the book of the law of Moses among a bunch of lost stuff. Ezra the priest had just read it, and he and the other priests "gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading" (taught and preached it). As they listened, maybe many of them for the first time to the actual words of God - not just having heard OF it, they were convicted and probably pretty discouraged about how far they'd slipped from God's ways.

But Nehemiah says - again: "...do not be grieved, for the joy of Yahweh is your strength."

See, if we are going to try and be joyful in and of ourselves - it's not going to work. It's the joy of Yahweh that is a strength. I can't muster up joy. I can find happiness in certain things - but it is passing. I can find satisfaction now and again - but it fades. I can get excited about certain circumstances - but others will deflate me.

No, to be joyful - filled with joy - all the time, it will require something greater - the joy of Yahweh.

I think that's 2 things:

It's the joy of KNOWING God - knowing our Creator - knowing His promises and His faithfulness. There is an unceasing joy that cannot be taken by any circumstance when we trust Him. It doesn't mean we walk about with a silly, unceasing grin. But it is what Nehemiah says - a joy that is strength. And you only know how strong it is in the bad times.

Second, I think it is the actual joy OF Yahweh. The joy HE HAS spilling over - filling us - sloshing around - overflowing from us. The joy He has in dwelling with His people through the Holy Spirit. If the joy of KNOWING God isn't enough - I don't even need my OWN joy - He will be joyful for me. He finds joy inhabiting a soul that trusts, loves, and obeys Him.

So, today, I'm not necessarily happy - but I have joy to strengthen me through the day. I hope you will know that joy too.

November 18

Reading: Acts 18:24-19:20; 1 Corinthians 1-3

"Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw - each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

(1 Corinthians 3:12-15)

I remember a saying that a fella told me once when I was young.

I commented on some of his tools that we were using out in his garage. They were an expensive brand and very nice. He said, "If you buy the best the first time, you only cry once."

How true.

It's true about all matters of life and eternity as well.

In this world, you will have trouble! Jesus said it Himself! (John 16:33) We will encounter difficulty. No matter whether we choose to follow Jesus or not, we will shed tears of grief, sorrow, pain, loss, frustration... we live in a fallen, no-longer-perfect world that God is working through His Church to redeem.

However, only some will decide to suffer the pain and loss of dying to self. That brings on a whole different spiritual mourning as we recognize and deal with our poverty by surrendering our lives to Jesus. And, in that sense, when we choose the Best - we will only cry once. Not in number of episodes, but in location. We will do our crying here in this world - but not in the next. Those without Jesus will cry twice - first the tears of not being able to give themselves to Jesus (Mark 10:21-22), and then again at the gates of eternity when they are denied the heaven built for them.

How very sad.

Yet, in much the same way, Paul talks about what's going on in the Church of Corinth (and very much so in many congregations today!). Having the foundation once laid by the Apostles (Jude 3), they work with tears to build upon that heavenly foundation with earthly materials a "church" that will not last.

The wood, hay, and straw of the latest and greatest "church growth strategy", trendy thinking, politically correct speech, cowardice toward earthly authority, social justice, and the like - all in the name of putting people in the seats, equality, or tolerance - will not make disciples of all nations. A firm foundation will not guarantee a lasting, real work if the materials used to build upon it aren't right. Paul says that in the end the builder(s) is/are saved - but the work will burn away.

Did you hear that Church?

When we put all our blood, sweat, and tears into "Church Growth", etc... YOU may be saved - but that's all. Ie., we've done nothing for anyone else. We will have failed at saving anyone else. We will let our world go to hell.

Though very important, the question is not only "What are you building on?" - but also "What are you building with?"!

November 19

Reading: 1 Corinthians 4-7

"For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power."
(1 Corinthians 4:20)

I remember being on the practice field of high school marching band practice when two trumpet players next to me got in an argument. The subject? Who was the real Christian. Each made their claims as to why their faith was more mature than the other or even why the other's Christianity was not valid.

Ironic, huh!?

Yet, it seems the people of Corinth Church of Christ were involved in that very thing. Each thought they were better Christians than another because of who taught them, or baptized them, or preached to them now. But today's verse says it all:

"...the Kingdom of God is not just a lot of talk; it is living by God's power."

Many in the Church today need to "put their money where their mouth is". They talk a big game, but they sacrifice none of self to follow Jesus.

Yet, I will not judge - and Paul did not judge. He said he didn't even judge his own walk! He just followed Jesus to the best of his ability and understanding and waited for Yahweh to judge and reward his work. He simply said that the Corinthians (and we) might do the same!

You don't always have to tell people you're a Christian if you're doing it right - it'll show!

November 20

Reading: 1 Corinthians 8-10

"...'knowledge' puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God."
(1 Corinthians 8:1b-3)

Boy, writing my thoughts on these passages can sometimes come with hard admissions. So, here goes another: I'm not such a touchy-feely guy.

(I know those of you who know me well are stunned!)

I've had to learn from a best friend that "Brothers don't shake hands - brothers gotta hug!" I'm better about that now, I think. Time, age, and children (mostly grandchildren) soften a man to make him more understanding, approachable, compassionate, merciful, and graceful.

In the past, I may have placed more importance on knowledge and performance. Which is not great, considering that I don't have a lot of either, and if I thought I did, Paul says here I'd be wrong. What I need - what everyone around me needs - is love.

Yet, the flip-side is that it's not "touchy-feely-warm-fuzzy-huggy" love! As Paul goes on to show in this passage, loving our brothers leads to a lot of performance and comes from a knowledge of truth! You won't and can't understand everything, but knowing even a little will cause us to love others in a way that changes how we perform (live) and treat/interact with others! Paul talks about all the things he will DO in order to LOVE because he KNOWS TRUTH!

The simple reality is this: Truth has no value without love, and love is not love without truth. Love is truth lived out.

There is no other place we see that more painfully exemplified than the cross.

November 21

Reading: 1 Corinthians 11-13

"So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."
(1 Corinthians 13:13)

"Diamonds are forever," at least the commercial says.

False advertising. They are not.

When Jesus comes back for His Church, diamonds are going to melt just like everything else is. There will be no physical, material matter left on the earth. There will be no earth! (2 Peter 3:10) (By the way, if you believe the fictional depictions of a "secret rapture" with an earthly kingdom, etc, etc, etc, - you might want to read 2 Peter 3:10 again for yourself! But I digress.)

Yet, how much time do we spend preserving and chasing after things that will burn? How much money are we spending on that which doesn't last? Yes, it is expedient that we utilize money and things while we live here on the earth, but let's keep things in perspective! Hadn't we ought invest more in these truly "forever" things?

Faith. Hebrews tells us that faith is knowing and expecting that God will keep all His promises - even when we don't see how it will work. (Hebrews 11:1) Faith will always remain because it will always be essential that we trust God! Yes, as Paul has already said in 1 Corinthians 13, there will be a time when we see fully and clearly, but even in heaven we will look to Jesus as the Creator and Sustainer of all things (even in heaven for our glorious place of eternity is created by Him). (John 14:3; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:2)

Hope. Without hope, faith doesn't work. Hope is not a "wish" as we generally use the word in an earthly sense. When we read the word "hope" in the Bible, you may substitute the word "expectation". Faith is not an "assurance of the things we wish for" - there's no security in that - no reason to live life any differently. If we are only "wishing", we'd better keep working to fix things ourselves because we can't have faith (trust) in God. (Which is, unfortunately, the way many Christians live!) But Hope - real biblical hope - is eternal. Redeemed people will always live in and because of the expectation of God's promises.

Love. Agape. That is a love that is unconditional. It doesn't change. It is itself a promise and a commitment to a protection and loyalty that surpasses circumstances. That's why it's the greatest - because regardless of all else it stands. Or maybe better yet, it is the greatest because it is the unfailing love of God for us that serves as the basis for the trust (faith) we put in Him and the expectation (hope) that we have of Him.

Love never fails; it never fades nor ends. (1 Corinthians 13:8, Amplified)

So enjoy your stuff. Use it to glorify God. Let help you. Utilize it for the advancement of the Kingdom. Be thankful for the stuff you have; buy some Christmas presents; share with others. But invest in faith, hope, and love.

November 22

Reading: 1 Corinthians 14-15

"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."
(1 Corinthians 15:58)

One cardinal rule of speaking (and writing?)... "You must know your audience."

Being a traveling evangelist, sometimes that's hard - you kinda "guess". Being a writer, that might be even harder. You never know who will pick up what you've written - who might be sent a link from someone else. But the rule is why I write what I do today.

What I really want to delve into is a discussion from today's reading about being baptized "for the dead"! Who doesn't want to talk about that!? Well, probably not you when I start bringing technical studies into it. And in the end, I would have to admit - though not without great application to our lives - that I'm only speaking from conjecture.

I'd also like to talk about one of my passions from this passage. PREACHING! There is a lot I could say about its importance and need for clarity today, etc, etc. But you are not all as passionate about that subject as I.

But I do know my audience (you, dear reader) enough to know this: you need to be encouraged today! I know it!

I know it because I'm a human, and as such I encounter the same world you do. No matter your take on any one of a million subjects - there are equally rabid opinions from at least 50%? of the rest of the world! No matter how great your day, as Longfellow said, "...into each life some rain must fall". When all is great - not to mention the days that we may suffer even devastating hardship - we will at least tire in doing good.

But even in this - don't give up!

"...nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless."

Key words? "For the Lord"

As we saw in yesterday's reading, that - things of and for the Lord - is all that will last. Even things we say are for the Lord - built on the Truth of Jesus - will not last/may in fact be useless - if we've used the wrong "materials" (see November 18).

How do I know?

One question we might ask is this: "Is that work something Jesus would sign His name to?"

Things prayed in and for Jesus' name must be things for which Jesus would truly ask the Father for. Even when our motives are good, we must ask if He would truly take that approach? Is it important enough that Jesus would think it important?

Another is: "Who will get the glory for it?"

If it is done to showcase you, your congregation, your team, your anything, it's not for Jesus it's for YOU!

So, yes, throw aside, quit doing that which is not for Jesus' sake. Definitely "throw off the sin that so easily entangles" (Hebrews 12:1 (and discourages you and everyone else). But "let us not grow weary or become discouraged in doing good," (Galatians 6:9, Amplified). "Nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless" and "you will bear much fruit" (John 15:5, NIV).

November 23

Reading: 1 Corinthians 16; Acts 19:21-20:6; Romans 1

"Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together."
(Acts 19:32)

Well, "the Brothers" are in trouble again! Paul gets separated from a couple of his traveling companions and watches helplessly as they are dragged off in a mob to the town meeting place. While he wants to go in and offer help - or at least suffer alongside them, other believers hold him back and keep him safe.

Inside the arena, it's a madhouse. People are rioting; there is yelling and chanting for hours. Out of control, many people show up to see the train wreck and join in. And they don't really even know why they're there!

It's very easy to read this verse and quickly liken it to things we see on the news today. People fed lies by the media gather, riot, burn buildings, beat people, loot businesses, and chant about matters they don't even know the truth of.

But before we wag our heads, I want to make a little application to the Lord's Church this morning.

Like many people who just show up ignorant of facts - just wanting to rail against authority, could I suggest that many Christians are ignorant of Truth and just want to rail against... somebody?

I can sure get on-board with being against abortion - but will we stomp our feet, yell, maybe even carry a sign - while we live in the very sexual immorality that leads to the selfish end to murder children?

I can get on-board with those preaching against greed - but do you withhold your tithes and offerings refusing to share yourself?

I'm sure we could come up with many more examples of how we may rightly shout out against worldliness - while we remain willfully ignorant of the ways we are exacerbating the problems. We may shout against the world, but I'm not sure we "even know why [we are here]"!

We are not here to simply yell at the world. Our God is not of wood or stone that Yahweh may even be challenged like Artemis of Ephesus. We do not preach to have something to be angry about - but to change the world!

...Beginning with ourselves!

November 24

Reading: Romans 2-4

"on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.
(Romans 2:16)

Eventually I got tired of the show I guess and quit watching, but for a while my wife and I watched a show on TV called The Blacklist. Long story short, James Spader plays a convict - spy-type of criminal - who is allowed to live outside prison as long as he helps the FBI with a list of the most uncatchable villains out there. The thing was "Red", as he was known, had a secret life. The heroine of the show, "Elizabeth" was married to a fella named "Tom" - not far into the series, we find Tom also has a secret life! Later we find our main character, Elizabeth, also has a secret life - one she doesn't even know about!

Guess what? We all have a secret life.

All of us, to some extent, have things about us that no one else knows. There are thoughts we've never even allowed ourselves to utter aloud. Maybe we even shoo them from our minds - but they are there. There are sins we've covered up - maybe even still commit - that no one else knows about. There are places we have been or still go, dreams we dream, ambitions, decisions... All part of a secret life.

There are even parts of our secret life we don't know. Things so long denied that we've forgotten the truth of the matter. And those things often play into how we live moment by moment today.

However, this verse reminds us: our secret life is secret to everyone - maybe even ourselves - except God. Nothing is secret to Him.

And though He will judge even our secret life, the comfort is that just the same as the sins of our public selves are forgiven - so is all our secret life, if we will but acknowledge it.

Give up the life of the shadowy, secret figure. The facade is too hard to keep up - even for yourself. Bring the secret life to light for yourself - because it is already in the light of God.

November 25

Reading: Romans 5:1-8:17

"Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope"
(Romans 5:3-4)

Recently, I traded some stuff for a vintage, hand-made guitar. To the casual observer, the guitar isn't all that wonderful. Some of the finish is in bad shape; it's got lots of nicks and scratches on it. It could really do with a professional set-up too. But if another guitar player and I were looking at it, we'd just say "that's character"!

This wasn't some museum piece. It's not hot off the assembly line like every other identical guitar hanging on the wall of a guitar store. No, each divot tells a story. Perhaps it was out on the road and... who knows what, or where, or who was playing it. And the sound? Oh the sound! There are still great guitars with wonderful tone being made. But even though this guitar didn't start out as an expensive one, it is made from tone-woods in 1972 that aren't available today. And because of it's craftsmanship and the aging of that solid wood - the tone is only getting better and better - as good as any very expensive guitar out-of-the-box today.

There are also guitars made that come straight from the factory with "character". Really! They wear off the finish in tell-tale places, leave parts off for that "customized" look, comes with nicks, scratches, and tobacco smoke-stained ivory and binding. If you don't have time to develop character before you take the stage - at least look like you have some!

We'd like to get through life with a shiny, new, mint-condition appearance. We'd rather avoid the bumps in life's road (sometimes canyons) that cause pain, distress, heartache, confusion... But it just ain't happenin', friends. But if we allow our trials to do so, that endurance will bring character. And that character is what gets you through. It's what makes your hope and faith authentic. It's the difference between knowing the facts about God and having lived the facts about God with Him. You just don't know the real truth - you just don't have the real understanding of what faith is - unless you have to use it repeatedly.

Oh, there are those who prefer to look like they have character. And they have been through some things... but they never faced it with endurance - the endurance that brings character. Many an old Church member looks authentic, but their life doesn't have a seasoned tone.

I love new shiny guitars. I love old beat-up cheap ones that are survivors.

I love new shiny Christians... but it's the beat-up survivors that really sing.

What is the tone of your faith like?

November 26

Reading: Romans 8:18-10:21

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."
(Romans 8:18)

Of all the things the Bible says, perhaps I find this the most hard to believe. Yea, unbelievable.

I've known pain. I've known suffering. There is pain I believe that I will carry with me the rest of whatever time I have left on this earth.

But Paul says, in comparison to... well, wait... there is no comparison to be made between my suffering here and the glory of heaven.

Seriously?

Yes.

Why not?

Because what this verse is comparing is emotion versus a reality.

Most of what we suffer today is a feeling. They are strong, and they are "real" (to an extent). I can live with the physical pain of this world. Sometimes the real, literal pain of something is short-lived. Sometimes it is lingering. But events will pass. Physical pain will subside. Yet, the physical pain is not the worst of the suffering.

Real suffering is not generally the actual physical nature of a problem - it's the emotion of it.

The personal loss that accompanies any kind of pain is the suffering - it's all the "I'll never be able to...", "I didn't get to...", etc. The actual physical event we experienced may have happened forty years ago or four days ago - but the suffering is still there. The emotion we feel over it? It's real - but it's not real.

But the glory of eternal life, friend - that will be real! The glory of heaven is not just an emotion that we are hoping with crossed-fingers will be enough to replace the emotions of life's pain. It is an everlasting reality that - then fully experienced with all five senses - will overwhelm every and all emotions we ever had. While we suffer with emotions fueled by experience and an unseen hope here, there, in every palpable moment we will experience a reality that fuels an everlasting satisfaction.

Count it joy to suffer just as Jesus did. To know what He went through for our redemption will mean so much when we see what He left behind to do it!

It really is going to be OK!

November 27

Reading: Romans 11-14

"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor."
(Romans 12:9-10)

Our world has no earthly idea how to really love one another.

From Dionne Warwick singing, "What the world needs now is love, sweet love" to Rodney King asking, "Can't we all just get along?", and including today's "Love is love" slogan - none of it is going to work. The world doesn't know what love is.

In these two quick verses, Paul speaks of love three different ways - and there is actually a logical progression to it.

He begins with a command: really, really love people. Not a fake love - not a pretend love - really love. One problem is though that many people think they are really loving others! But there is a surgical precision to real love.

Real love is not saying, "You do you!"

It is a love that divides.

It hates.

That's right. Real love hates.

Paul said it. Real love hates wickedness - what is wrong. It hates wrong in my life (that I might do to you) and it hates wrong in your life (that you might do to you!).

And therein lies the surgical precision.

Like a physician, I must carefully assess and remove the plank(s) from my eye(s) - separating myself from those things so that I might carefully remove that which is detestable from your eye. (Matthew 7:5) If I am willing to either let you stay blind and hurt yourself - or try to help you in blindness myself - how is that love!?

Yet, that is precisely what most of the world calls love.

In their brokenness, the world prefers to say of their sin, "This is me. It's who I am." They now fear the process of treatment, grief, and recovery more than the "self" they have become accustomed to living with. And, sadly, many are willing to let them if we can just overlook our need for healing too.

The other surgical part of love is the "sewing up" of the wound, if you will. It is not enough to meticulously separate the bad - but we must cling to the good. Literally, Paul says to "join ourselves" to it. Separate this - join that.

THAT is love for others.

What follows, he says, will then be a more personal kind of love. No longer just a love that is concerned with healing disease - like a physician, but one that cares on a personal level - like a brother - so much so that there is a real affection for others that continues to put their well-being ahead of our own.

When you think of it, it is exactly this kind of love that God has shown us in Jesus.

Assessing our need, the Great physician came and invited us to be healed. Those whom He loved He called, not servants or clientele, but friends. As He showed His brotherly affection for us on the cross it stirs a love that causes us to trust Him to continue to care for us.

"We love Him because He first loved us." (1 John 4:19, KJV)

November 28

Reading: Romans 15-16; 2 Corinthians 1:1-2:4

"...For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. ...But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.
(2 Corinthians 1:8b, 9b)

I don't know all of what Paul was referring to when he spoke of his struggles in Asia. (You can read quite a bit of it in the book of Acts previous to this second writing to the Corinthians - and most likely Acts 19:23ff.) I don't know all the troubles and trials that you've endured in your life. But I can tell you this - while I don't know the circumstances - I know the feeling (emotion) of what he says here.

I have felt crushed, overwhelmed - beyond my ability to endure. For. Sure.

To those who say, "God will never give you more than you can handle," I say, well, to paraphrase Aunty Em in The Wizard of Oz - "now, being a good Christian man, I can't say it!" It is simply not true. Even the Apostle Paul experienced what was beyond his ability to endure.

At that point, there are three options:

a) go ahead and "check out" yourself. This is an option for the truly hopeless that should never, under any circumstances, be considered. While the thought flashes through the minds of the most spiritual (because the enemy will indeed place it there!), there is always a way out! (1 Corinthians 10:13) Many who don't end their own lives in desperation will "check out" by "checking in" to the bottle, the needle, or the pipe - which is really only way to deal with the second option -

b) live with enduring suffering. Drag through each day letting "that moment" define you and your life - letting "that experience" make your choices - letting that whole mess dominate everything you do and everything you are.

Or, we can -

c) live with enduring hope! I'm not saying that it is easy to do. I'm not saying that it isn't something that you have to continually learn to do every day - maybe for a long while. But Paul said his option was that he and his companions "...stopped relying on [themselves] and learned to rely on God...".

Wow. If the Apostle Paul had to learn this, what makes you - or me - think that we won't struggle ourselves to rely on God!?

Sometimes we get pretty full of ourselves. Oh, sure, we love God. We serve God. We praise God. We acknowledge God. But when it comes down to it, if we could really see objectively, we are often living life by our own power and abilities. Our faith has become weak and flabby from not exercising any. In these times, God can use the most difficult of circumstances - even those that are beyond your endurance - to help you see Who is really holding things together, and - hint: it ain't us, friends!

It has become cliché, but that doesn't mean it's not true: "When Jesus is all you've got, you'll find out He's all you need."

That doesn't make things easier - at least not all the time. It doesn't make things less tragic. But it does make them enduring - even if we still can only believe that one minute at a time.

Why does that realization work/help? Paul tells us why: because Yahweh is the God "Who raises the dead." And as we said in yesterday's reading, that realness of reality will always trump the realness of our emotion.

Even if we do die in our trials, Our. God. Raises. The. Dead.

If He can beat death, He can get you through the day.

Walk on.

November 29

Reading: 2 Corinthians 2:5-6:13

"Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end,"
(2 Corinthians 3:7)

The old proverb, not a biblical quote – but very biblical idea – "There are none so blind as those who will not see" is certainly true.

It wasn't that the Israelites couldn't look upon Moses' face when he came out of the Tabernacle; it was that they didn't want to! It was frightening. It was frightening to be reminded of just exactly how real Yahweh is!

Does the reality of an all-powerful God frighten you? Does knowing that no matter how high you build your tower – God will always stand above it – bother you?

Does the reality of an ever-present God frighten you? Are you annoyed with the fact that God is your constant partner – that you can't shake Him no matter where you may run?

That ever-present reality leads to the fact that God is all-knowing. Perhaps that is what bothers you most of all. God knows. He knows everything – about you.

If you veil your eyes, those things will frighten you. When we childishly close our eyes believing that makes us all alone – that whatever we don't see isn't real – we only fool ourselves. But if we remove the veil – if we believe in Jesus – that which frightens everyone else – that which has an odorous smell of pestilence – is a soothing fragrance

(2 Corinthians 2:15-16) that overwhelms all fear and sorrow. There comes a great comfort in knowing YHWH as an all-powerful Father, always with us, always knowing our sins, yes, but also always knowing our hurt and need for healing.

Today, don't look away. Don't shield your eyes.

"Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace."
- "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus" by Helen H. Lemmel

November 30

Reading: 2 Corinthians 6:14-10:18

"I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. So now finish doing it as well... I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness"
(2 Corinthians 8:8-11a, 13)

Did I ever mention to you that the devil likes to perversely imitate the qualities and work of God?

Well, he does.

I am so sick of hearing the word equality in the news. But, here it is - right in our own Bibles. Yet, if you think the equality that the world shouts for is what Jesus is asking for - think again!

The world forces financial and material equality. It forces equality through the redistribution of wealth in taxes and other such methods. Then it says, "If equality is good and right there - then everyone should be equal in every way." It then forces "equality" by laws that require blindness to certain characteristics of job applicants. The world forces the "right" for sin to be held equal with righteousness. In short, the world, as pawns of Satan's scheme, want everyone to be equally lost, equally sinful, and equally damned.

God simply wants people to love one another.

Love is to be the motivation, and salvation is to be the destination of our giving!

Don't want to help others of God's Church who are in need? Don't. But don't say that you are loving.

Don't want to help others who won't work? Don't. Literally - don't! (2 Thessalonians 3:10) Does a widow have children? They should help her. (1 Timothy 5:3ff) (Not to mention whether or not she is and has been living a holy life!) The point is not to "make life easy for others and hard for yourselves". It is to mimic the sacrifice of Jesus so as to help others see and follow Him.

Biblical equality is not everyone being equal all the time. Biblical equality is God distributing His wealth according to His principles to those who have the capability of being stewards of it so that it will go where it is needed when He directs it to go there.

It is a huge subject with so much to be said about it. But let's leave it where Paul did: Prove your love for God, His Church, and one another by being generous when and where you can.

How 'bout that?

December 1

Reading: 2 Corinthians 11-13; Acts 20:7-12

"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me."
(2 Corinthians 12:9)

Many times people have said to me, "I wish there was something I could say; I wish there was some way I could help you - something I could do for you. But I've been praying for you."

When you feel so weak that "all you can do is pray" - you've finally gotten out of God's way!

In those times, we realize how truly hopeless and helpless we are to do the most important things. I could give money to help someone with bills or food. I could serve them in a way they physically cannot serve themselves. But it's too easy for us to think that we are doing those things. We are doing them by our own resources - our own money or strength. (Though, if we really stopped to remember, even those belong to God.)

But to heal a heart... to mend a soul... that we are helpless to do.

So when we say, "I've been praying for you," (if, in fact, we truly have been) we admit to ourselves that "[we] are weak, but He is strong!". And, if in fact, we are doing that, we are bringing the most powerful thing we can to the table. When "all we can do is pray" God's working is not obstructed by our miscues; His glory cannot be stolen; His power cannot go unnoticed. When we are too weak to help - then, if we will pray, relying only on God - we are strong.

Being on the receiving end of that intervention by God into your life through the prayers of others is just as enlightening. We can do and endure things unimaginable when the Holy Spirit uses someone to intercede on our behalf.

The next time someone says, "I wish... so I'm praying," reply, "That's all you can do; and it's all I need!"

December 2

Reading: Acts 20:13-21:36

"But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."
(Acts 20:24)

People are begging Paul not to go to Jerusalem - bad things await!

At the end of his second letter to the Corinthians, he describes all he has already suffered for telling people GOOD NEWS! (2 Corinthians 11:20-27)

How is it that it is such a struggle to "[tell] others the Good News about the wonderful grace [gift] of God"!?

Have you ever tried giving something away?

As our thoughts are beginning to turn to the Christmas season... Imagine that someone shows up at your door - or perhaps your workplace - or on the street - or at your church house. He begins to explain to you about an incredible gift he has for you - one like you could never imagine. It is worth more than all the stuff you already have put together. Would you accept it?

Let me tell you, it's hard to give something away!

Be it a bottle of cold water, a cold Coca-Cola - people will turn away the free gift. I know of a couple who faced all manner of excuses from people who turned away a free gift of concert tickets. Why?

People assume there's a "catch". People think you're manipulating them. People think the gift can't be real. People are too proud to take something from someone else. (I think some would rather steal it so they can at least feel they earned it by their conniving!)

Imagine this: You are on death row. Some day, though you don't know when, you know that you will be executed for your crimes. A man shows up at jail with a "get out of jail free card". FOR REAL! FULL PARDON! The catch? Well, if you want to call it that, there is one...

All you have to do is ADMIT your wrong-doing and promise to begin walking the right path.

"Hey, if I admit it, they've got me for sure! It's a ploy to mess up the pardon my lawyer's working on! Maybe I can still get out and live how I want!"

Well, it will take faith to believe the offer. But friend, the pardon is not coming from anywhere else!

The Good News is truly good news! "...the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23) But it takes faith and humility to receive it - a belief, an admission, a commitment... it's too much for some to hear of - even if the gift is so great.

Don't give up though. We are simply emissaries of the King. We are relaying the easy terms of full pardon. But don't expect the sly counsel of the convict to help him accept. He doesn't want the best for his client; in fact, he cares nothing for him. He just doesn't like the King. The war is not against you, but the King. Yet, as such, our lives mean nothing if we are not relaying the message.

By the way, have you accepted the free gift of the King? If you need to, please message me here!

December 3

Reading: Acts 21:37-23:35

"And now why do you wait? Rise and be [immersed] and wash away your sins, calling on his name."
(Acts 22:16)

The other day my wife and I were hiking in the Appalachians. Almost constantly, there was a rustling of the fallen leaves. Chipmunks were our onlookers all the way down and back up the mountain. It reminded me of a trip I took when I was a young boy.

I was with my family hiking in the Rocky Mountains on a path always strewn with tourists. The chipmunks there were very accustomed to getting close to people and were always eager to eat some peanuts out of your hand. It was a lot of fun to come so close to something so "wild" and form somewhat of a bond. There was a trust there, born from experience.

Perhaps with the right food and more time, like their Rocky Mountain cousins, I could have coaxed the small Appalachian creatures closer for our mutual enjoyment. But as it was they were suspicious of our forrest invasion and content to chatter at us from afar.

It must be so much like that with God.

He is constantly attempting to coax us closer. He only wants to bless us. Even when he asks us to do something difficult - to put a beloved sin aside, to give up trusting in ourselves or others - He is only wanting to help us, to feed us, to care for us. If we only knew the wonderful peace, joy, rest, and comfort that await us when we choose God's path and receive from His hand....

But oh how difficult it is to lay aside our fears and pride.

It may be that the invitation we are hearing from God is to simply pick up the Bible - or to be immersed (as Saul was encouraged to here). It may be to repent of a sin - one that resides in that last part of your heart where you've never allowed God before.

But somehow - for some reason - we just can't.

So we wait. We make excuses. We have a few more wild oats to sow before we get to such serious business. Maybe the feeling will pass. We'll see what someone else thinks about it.

But when such wonderful things are in the balance - the only question is the question asked of Saul...

"What are you waiting for?"

December 4

Reading: Acts 24-26

"As [Paul] reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the coming day of judgment, Felix became frightened. "Go away for now," he replied. "When it is more convenient, I'll call for you again." He also hoped that Paul would bribe him, so he sent for him quite often and talked with him. After two years went by this way, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus...."

"Suddenly, Festus shouted, 'Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!'"

"But Paul replied... '...King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do -' Agrippa interrupted him. 'Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian so quickly?'"
(Acts 24:25-27a; 25:24, 27-28, NLT)

Three rulers. Three responses. All intriguing.

Felix knows the truth. He responds to it with a strange combination of fear, enlightenment, and perverse hope. He seems to listen to the gospel like one might watch a scary movie or hear a ghost story. He can't bear the implications of the story if it's true - yet, because it is truth, he must hear it more. Or, if he can get the story-teller to bribe his way out of prison, he will know that it's not true. But the fact that Paul is willing to stick to his story - willing to endure captivity - makes it all the more scary to Felix.

Festus is unwilling to hear. I believe he is the least intellectually honest of the three. He will not hear reason; he just waves Paul off as a religious nut.

But Paul - great strategist he is - uses Festus' receptiveness (or lack thereof) to the gospel as a tool to speak to both him and to King Agrippa.

"Festus, I'm not crazy! Your buddy sitting next to you here believes these same things! Right, King Agrippa!?"

Festus must ask himself if his friend King Agrippa is also crazy - or if Paul's words warrant further understanding. But Agrippa... I can see him begin to squirm on his throne. His eyes grow wide - perhaps he blushes - he looks about to see if everyone has heard and understood Paul's question - yes, all eyes are on him.

"Uh...haha...um...well,..."

The Jews wait to see if their King believes the prophets. Festus wonders if his friend really does believe - or if it's just an "act" to be King over these people. Paul waits with an innocent look on his face as he knows he's painted the King into a corner.

"Paul! Haha, uh, do you think I'm going to follow Christ?" (What a politician. Doesn't answer the question.)

But I think I can relate to Agrippa.

I don't fear the judgment like Felix because I know my Advocate before God. And I've taken more time than Festus to thoroughly investigate Paul's claims and know what he is saying is true.

But those who follow Jesus become King Agrippa each day in our communities. Ultimately it is Jesus who is on trial before men. But as Jesus will stand up for His followers in heaven - we must stand on trial in His stead here. (Matthew 10:32-33)

All eyes are on us.

Do you believe this?

Do you truly believe that which some say is crazy? Do you truly believe that there is a judgment, a heaven - and a hell? Do you believe it enough to say so? Do you believe it enough to remain in prison? Do you believe it enough to speak your piece before the ruler of the known world? Do you believe it enough to die?

Communion is not just for our own benefit. It's a proclamation of our belief to the rest of the world.

What do you say, Agrippa?

December 5

Reading: Acts 27

"And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius. ...And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for."

(Acts 27:1, 3b)

Because of fear, we often make poor judgments. And that includes the way we view people.

What if Paul had shied away from Julius? Who would have thought that a Roman captain would in any way care for a "religious nut" and his friends? "Let's just keep our heads low, try to be invisible, and not say anything!"

Might that have been our plan on the ship?

But Paul knew that wherever he was - that was his audience. By the time the chapter ends, they have weathered a two-week storm and Julius is taking advice from Paul and saving his life from the plots of his own soldiers!

Let's not miss the opportunity to befriend anybody we can. Let's not miss the pulpit that God puts us in every day to say something for Jesus - or at least kind - to someone else.

We never know who God might use for our benefit when we put Kingdom business first!

December 6

Reading: Acts 28; Ephesians 1-2

"He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."

(Acts 28:30-31)

Here is another situation where we might well have feared the worst! And who could blame us?

After all the attempts on his life, shipwrecks, snake bit - he finally gets to... prison.

Sort of.

Paul has appealed to Caesar, thinking it best to plead his case there. But what he really gets is a government paid mission trip! Of course, he doesn't get to just roam around like a free man - but he finally makes it to Rome - where he'd been longing to go all this time! He lives in his own rented home. People are allowed to come and go freely. There is no more door-to-door, town-to-town, synagogue-to-synagogue. No more watching over his shoulder for assassins - he has personal guards keeping watch at all times. He preaches the gospel to whomever shows up on his own home turf, and for TWO YEARS preaches Jesus, as the King James Version says, "unhindered"! Who would have thought that Paul might have some of his most productive and SAFE years in PRISON! But here he is - living the good life. OK, maybe not "the good life", but it's a much better

life - in prison. Here he writes Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philipians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and maybe even Hebrews. (My personal opinion is he didn't - but maybe!) And who knows how many people heard and accepted the Gospel when they visited his house.

So often we complain... uh, scratch that. We wouldn't complain, right? We pray that God would change our situation. And then, as he does, we begin to fear the unknown and complain... I mean, pray about that! My situation, nor yours, may be perfect. But it may be much better than it could be. Wherever we are, God can certainly make great use of us right here and now! Or, maybe, God has been hearing your prayers. And He is answering yours as well. Yet, perhaps you are dragging your feet. Perhaps you are going kicking and screaming into this new season or phase of life or career. God is going to use you just as much or more there as now. And you might even like it better to boot!

December 7

Reading: Ephesians 3:1-5:14

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."
(Ephesians 4:32)

Do you play favorites? You should! Surprise you? This verse says that, in the Church, we ought to unconditionally favor one another.

Paul doesn't use the same word for forgiveness here as other places. He's not talking about the forgiveness of putting away punishment, nor is he speaking of removing an offense from the debits people make in our lives. He is not speaking of dismissing charges we might have against one another. (Though, all those ideas may well be appropriate at different times and highlighted in other verses of the Bible.)

What if the Church was a body of people who showed favor to and for one another all the time, unconditionally? What if we truly did care for widows and orphans of the Church that were in need? What if our congregations were truly characterized by the love that Jesus said would denote people as His real followers?

I think people would clamor to be a part of it!

As it is, sadly, the Church doesn't treat it's members any better than anyone else - and sometimes worse! The problem is that the Church has become too much like the world. The world doesn't need a club to belong to that is just like itself - but with more moral rules and usually less beneficial impact on the community. They can accomplish more in Lion's Club or the Rotary Club - and still "enjoy" their sins to boot!

But that which draws us to Jesus is that which will draw men to His Church - unconditional favor - GRACE. Let us treat one another with some of that!

December 8

Reading: Ephesians 5:15-6:24; Colossians 1

"submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ."
(Ephesians 5:21)

Bob Dylan sang, "It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody!"

Truth.

Every being - save God the Father - is a servant to someone or many someones. Even Jesus Himself took "the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:7) and served both the Father and all mankind.

Yet, when it comes to today's verse, I'm not sure any verse of the Bible is more hated, misunderstood, and misapplied. But it is simply the introduction of a passage that is summarized by Dylan, "you're gonna have to serve somebody!".

Women, who have been cursed from the garden with an innate desire to control things (Genesis 3:16b), do not want to submit to their husbands. Yet, submission applied to wives is exactly that - to let the husband lead. (Now - KEEP READING!)

However, the passage does not end with verse 24! The bulk of submissive responsibilities actually rests with men! The passage continues, "For husbands, this means...". Men are not let off the hook. They must submit to their wives! The application looks different - but the act is there. To submit is to take "a position under". Men put themselves under their wives in caring unconditionally for her spiritual needs (v.26) and her physical needs (v.28) - so much so that they are one body! (v.31)

Now if we have a good body neck down (wife) and a good head (husband) then the body will function properly, effortlessly, and in union. If the body refuses to hear the head, or if the head refuses to pay attention to its body - look out! We call those kind of people diseased or mentally ill! Things will not be good.

(AND, by the way, Paul says, "Church, learn a lesson! That's why God made the family this way - in fact, why there is a family - to model the Church!" If the family works like God and His Church is supposed to work, we will have great families. The problem is that too many times the CHURCH is disobeying the Head too! WE are diseased!but that's another devotional!)

Children, you too must submit by obeying. But (back to MEN AGAIN) Fathers, you must put yourselves under your children by caring for their spiritual and common instruction in a loving manner! Good instruction given in an unloving manner - or "love" given without instruction...neither will work! Submit properly!

Finally, slaves must submit - but so must masters! There is a long discussion here on slavery then vs. today - but suffice it to say this: If you work for someone, work for them like they themselves are God! And if someone works for you, reward them faithfully and generously with mercy and grace like God does us!

Wasn't ol' Bob right? I think that's pretty much everyone!

"It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord - but you're gonna have to serve somebody!"

Go forth and be submissive to Jesus and others today!

December 9

Reading: Colossians 2-4

"And say to Archippus, 'See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.'" (Colossians 4:17)

Sometimes I love a good mystery. And right here is one. Who is Archippus, and why did Paul want the folks in Colosse to tell him this?

Let the surmising and guessing begin!

The only other time we hear of the "Master of Horses" (meaning of Archippus' name) is in the following prison letter Paul writes to Philemon. He addresses the letter to one particular member's household in Colosse and then to the congregation that meets there in his home. Among those - as the wording suggests? - that live in the house is Archippus - perhaps he is Philemon's son. Others tell us that it is possible Archippus was also a leader of the Church in Laodicea - about twelve miles from Colosse. This may well be correct as Paul desired that his letter to the Colossians be taken next to the Church at Laodicea.

Regardless, the message is what's important.

Paul told Archippus to always be looking for an opportunity to serve. How? Why? Whatever way he'd said he would - because he'd accepted - he had welcomed - that ministry and calling.

Had Archippus gotten lazy about his ministry? Did he need reminding or encouraging?

Here is another thought: Something that stands out to me is how Paul relays this message as a quote! He often says, "Tell 'so-and-so' to...," but I can't think of another place where Paul has a direct line to be delivered to someone! Perhaps this is something he always says to Archippus. Perhaps it is well-known that Archippus says it to everyone else! It's almost like there is a back-story or an inside joke of sorts to this curious "say this exact thing".

Then again - maybe I'm reading too much into it. But regardless...

Every one of us who claim to follow Jesus need this message. We all get distracted, discouraged, lazy... We all need to be reminded to constantly be on the look-out for a way to fulfill the ministry we have taken on in Jesus.

And, you know, it wouldn't be a bad thing to be known for saying. It wouldn't too be bad to end every conversation saying to our brothers and sisters: "Be sure to carry out the ministry the Lord gave you! Bye!" It's the Christ-followers version of "Have fun storming the castle!" (See *The Princess Bride*)

So -

Be sure to carry out the ministry the Lord gave you!

December 10

Reading: Philemon; Philippians 1-2

"I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother"

(Philemon 10-11, 16a)

Can you imagine being maybe fifty years old and finding out you have a new-born brother!? God must've performed a real miracle!

And He did.

God worked in the life of a fella that Paul admits was "useless" (ESV). It wasn't that Philemon was a bad person - a terrible and harsh slave owner. Paul recounts him as generous, faithful, loving, kind, and refreshing! (vv.6-7) Onesimus was just "useless"! I'm not sure how or why, but a slave that is useless is of negative benefit. He must still be cared for - housed, clothed, and fed - but does not benefit the master.

Perhaps, however Onesimus found himself enslaved to Philemon was a hard story. While Philemon has cared for him and redeemed him from whatever pit Onesimus found himself in - there was still root of bitterness in his heart that colored everything he thought, said, and did. Finally, he runs away. He gets all the way to Rome and "somehow" (we know it is by the providence of God) he runs into folks that introduce him to Paul. "Somehow" it is that while Paul preaches the very thing Philemon has lived out before Onesimus, he can hear it in a new way. "Somehow" this very Father of his faith "just so happens" to be the Father of Philemon's faith! God sure works things out for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose, (Romans 8:28) doesn't He!?

Who are you in this short letter? We've probably been at least two of the people in this story, and there is ample opportunity to be the third!

I think all of us have been Onesimus.

We have a Master to whom, at least at times, we are "not much use". We've been bought out of our hopeless situation by the precious blood of Jesus. Yet, sometimes we resent, in a little bitterness not yet healed (because we've not yet released it), having been in the situation to begin with. We find others to blame. We still believe "if only I'd had..." "if only I'd been able to..." "if only..." - that we could've saved ourselves. Yea, would not have even needed saving! The old man rises up in rebellion and wants to live life on his terms... and we run from God. The Master and His household (the Church) find no benefit from us; we only detract from the mission.

But in His mercy, he puts people in our path. If we will but listen to them, we will find that we owe them our very souls (v.19) as they point us back in the right direction. We then will find grace from that loving Master.

I think many of us Christians have been Philemon.

For most of us, there is that member of our "household" (or workplace, or classroom, or... fill in the blank) that, no matter how hard we try to love them - to help them - they push back. But don't despair. Just pray.

Pray God will put in their path people who will, like Paul, not be colored by judgment about where they've been, but eagerly help them be born again. (John 3:3)

We might have been - and definitely could be - Paul.

If we are, as Paul encouraged Archippus to be, always looking for a way to fulfill our calling (Colossians 4:17), maybe we will be that person to our Onesimus! Maybe you are the one who will reap the harvest of a seed sown long ago.

Be one of these today. Repent like Onesimus. Pray like Philemon. Or tell like Paul.

Or - maybe just do all three!

December 11

Reading: Philippians 3-4

"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him"
(Philippians 3:8-9a)

Just down the street from the White House at 700 Pennsylvania Ave, Washington, D.C., is the National Archives Building. Within that building, in the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom, is the display case that holds the original copies of The Declaration of Independence, The United States Constitution, and The Bill of Rights. You can stand before those writings and gaze upon them from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m..

But each night at 5:30, a specially built elevator lowers the display case down into a vault. The original vault was built in 1953 by the company that was contracted for safe-keeping gold at Fort Knox, as well as building a safe that survived the atomic blast at Hiroshima.

These documents aren't our freedom. Copies of them abound in all sorts of places - even on the shelf of the study at my home. But these documents are representative of that freedom in a way that my copies aren't. They are signed by men who gave their very lives and fortunes for my rights. In a sense, they are signed in blood. There is something special about seeing things such as these in-person. You can read about them, have copies, see them on TV - but the value puts a lump in your throat to stand before them.

While our country's forefathers' foresight is valuable to us as Americans, like Paul's pedigree as an Israelite, it is trash next to knowing Jesus! And, it is one thing to talk about the sacrifice of Jesus. It is one thing to read about it from scripture. But it is another thing to know Jesus. It stands in stark contrast to having the living God inside us in the personage of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord is here!

December 12

Reading: James 1-3

"Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom"

(James 3:13)

Almost anywhere we lived growing up, my brother and I had a basketball goal. It was on a post in our yard or on a stand in the drive. My grandparents put us up one on the front of their garage so we could play on their newly blacktopped drive. Neither of us ever even played on a basketball team, but we enjoyed playing a lot of H.O.R.S.E..

If you're not familiar, one person must follow the other in a series of shots - however they are done, from wherever they are taken. If you fail to make a shot the other does, you will eventually (after having done so five times) lose the game.

I don't know if it was a rule in the official handbook of H.O.R.S.E. (if there is one), but my brother and I always played "prove it". On the shot that would put a person out of the game, the loser could say "prove it". The person making the shot originally had to "prove" it wasn't a fluke and remake the shot. If he couldn't, his opponent was back in the game.

James says it's not enough to attend the assembly, teach Bible school, and declare your faith in God and wisdom from above. He says, "Prove it!"

He says proof of faith and godly wisdom come from two things:

1) Living an honorable life. He says our behavior needs to be ideal. Ever heard someone say, "Well, ideally..."? That comment usually proceeds a justification as to why something - while you'd like it to be better - isn't. I think a lot of times we tend to look at our walk with Jesus and admit, "Well, ideally, no, I wouldn't..." or "Ideally, yes, I would...". We justify our sinful desire by saying that since we "can't" be the ideal Christian, we won't try. But James says the wisdom that comes from knowing God should bubble up out of us into truly ideal behavior!

2) Doing good works. Good works gets a bad name by the faith-only crowd. Sure, everyone knows (or at least they should) that we are not saved by being good. But James has spent a lot of time previous to this explaining that your belief - yea, even conviction - about the Word you have heard doesn't mean anything if it's not proven by good works. Belief itself doesn't save, it's the trust inherent in real faith that makes it saving faith, and you don't prove trust without works!

But good works can be done by anyone. James qualifies the kind of good works the one with godly wisdom and understanding will do. They are works with humility. It's not wise to do things with a puffed-out chest, blowing trumpets, and receiving honor. Your motives will be seen for what they are, and your reward will be complete with such earthly gain.

So, come on, Church! You've thrown up the challenge! You're waving your flag - where is the ideal life? Where are the works?

December 13

Reading: James 4-5; 1 Timothy 1-2

"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?"

(James 4:1)

You get a splinter in your finger. If you don't remove it, it will eventually come out. The body will push it out.

Buy a Coca-Cola at the store. Set it on a shelf and leave it a few years. Though it's never been opened, it will be flat. The air trapped in the soda will have escaped.

Drive down the same stretch of road several times through a big curve. Each time, take the curve just one mile an hour faster...then just one mile an hour faster...then... eventually that "one" mile an hour will cause you to lose control and wreck.

Things that go on "inside" other things... things that seem OK...until it's not - that describes and diagnoses all conflict in the world. Whether it's in the Church, at work, in your home, in the government, or society at large - conflict is caused by a war, a conflict, within our very selves!

When my brother and I would get into an argument as kids, it never did any good to say, "But he started it!" Mom would always say, "It takes two to fight."

You never have an argument with your spouse; you never have a disagreement with a friend; there is never a conflict with another Church member without you - to some degree - being in the wrong. At the very least, if we are in the right in every other way, we are not trusting God to take care of our interests and well-being. There is a conflict of faith within us. We have the old man, once crucified with Christ rising back up to life within us (Romans 6:6); and he loves to fight! And so what is buried deep within us - even that which may start as a very small thing - escapes. It pushes its way out.

I'm not saying - and neither would James - that there is never a time to defend your life. He and I are just talking about the common quarrels and fights we see (and participate in?) every day. Most of the time, we just want to be right!

This becomes especially problematic when our quarrels with one another affect our witness to the unsaved world. To this, Paul said, "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?" (1 Corinthians 6:7b)

Before you fight or quarrel, stop.

Take time to ask yourself, "Why am I getting worked up into a fight?" Are we working for the right? Or just trying to be right?

December 14

Reading: 1 Timothy 3-6

"the household of God...which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth."
(1 Timothy 3:15b)

I know of congregations that have men in their own pulpits who don't actually teach the very things the congregation says they believe. They don't care.

I know even more congregations where elders and deacons are not only men who don't fit the qualifications, but also don't actually do any of the work of elders and deacons but only criticize the Evangelist and hear money and building reports. But they justify it.

I know Christians who don't take care of their family members.

I know congregations that spent time caring for widows who are gossips, had terrible children, and had horrible marriages. "But they're old and need help!"

I've seen women wear things to Church that would make a Memphis street walker blush. (Not to mention what they and/or their daughters may post to social media!)

Yet, in many (most?) congregations, if you ever pointed out these things and urged them to be addressed, one, or all, of three things might happen:

1) People would look at you like you've grown a second head! They've never taken time to read their Bible, so they don't even know that Paul has just been telling Timothy, the Evangelist of the Ephesus Church of Christ, to have all these details correct!

2) People would simply, either bluntly or in not so many words, say they don't care what the Bible says. Because:

3) If you say anything about such things you're being judgmental and mean-spirited!

But look, friends! Paul says, "Here is why all these things - and others - matter so much!"

"...The Church of the Living God...is the pillar and foundation of the Truth."!

Let me remind you of something - or enlighten you if you don't know.

There is NO OTHER ENTITY in all the world that CARES about TRUTH!

Sometimes they may use truth - but only if it suites their agenda - only if it helps gain control. Mostly, the whole rest of the world wants to promote untruth!

I don't always know exactly why certain rules God has laid down for His Church matter. Usually it's pretty clear why, but ultimately it doesn't matter. If we really trust God - if we have saving faith - we will accept it. We will not question it or let our feelings interpret or color it. It is TRUTH, Jesus says, that sets us free!

Let us not shy away from these or any other biblical truths. Let us read our Bibles. Let us know the truth. Let us speak the truth. And let us determine that our congregations will take their God-given responsibility to provide the unchanging truth as the foundation and pillar of our families and our communities.

December 15

Reading: Titus; 2 Timothy 1

"whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,"
(Titus 3:6)

There are some things that Canadians can really do well.

There is fried-up codfish. Amazing!

They will catch and steam you the biggest most delectable lobster you've ever seen and tasted. Delicious!

There is no rival to a big Digby, Nova Scotia, scallop from the Bay of Fundy. They are not like those little button-sized, Red Lobster imposters.

But in the South, we like gravy. And they don't know about gravy in Canada. In fact, my wife and I had some of our dear friends over to the home we were renting there and made'm dinner with some pork chops and gravy (gravy they kept quaintly calling "sauce").

Without gravy, you just can't really enjoy a fried pork chop, chicken fried steak, chicken fried chicken - or nearly any other meat ...or potatoes ...or biscuits ...or - well, gravy makes everything better. And not just a little! Don't skimp on the gravy! We probably should only be able to know what's UNDER the gravy by the outline and shape of the covered items. You should just see gravy!

There are no superlatives to adequately describe our salvation from our sins. Mercy and grace at the expense of the life of God's Son just can't be improved upon. Hallelujah!

But what if that's where it ended? What if there was no Holy Spirit?

Without the Holy Spirit, the scriptures are words on a page with no power to speak to us.

Without the Holy Spirit, our good works are merely natural talents with no heavenly purpose.

Without the Holy Spirit, we have no comfort in travail, no voice in prayer, and no assurance of heaven.

Without the Holy Spirit, Jesus has "left the building" - a world without God.

I shudder to think!

But Paul told Titus, God has "richly" - he has "generously" - poured out the Holy Spirit upon us! When your trust in Jesus finally moves you to confess your need for Him in repentance and immersion in water, God doesn't "just" forgive you; He doesn't hand you your plate until He pours on "the Gravy"!

God covers us with His Holy Spirit. He makes everything better. It brings an "aroma" to our lives. The unique flavors of our time, talent, testimony, and treasure as individuals are brought together under a unifying blanket that says, "This - the Church - is God. It is the body of Christ!"

Yet some want their gravy "on the side, please". They just want a little of God - when it suits them. They want to be "them" - untouched by God - from Sunday night through Saturday night and just take a little dip on Sunday morning.

Folks, our lives ain't nothin' without the Gravy! Let the Holy Spirit cover you - as God served Him to us - day-by-day, 24/7. The world will be glad you did!

(No offense to any Canadians, Yankees, or foreigners [including Californians] intended)

December 16

Reading: 2 Timothy 2-4

"For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,"
(2 Timothy 4:3)

I was browsing around a bookstore one day when I heard a one-sided conversation. It was someone having a telephone conversation. I had only come to that town with my wife, yet the voice I heard was so familiar. I kept browsing, thinking it was just my imagination. Finally, I decided to look; I knew that voice!

I turned and saw him. I did recognize the voice, though I did not know the man. There in a t-shirt and sweat pants was the owner of a voice I'd only known through my TV. I'd never watched his program, but the advertisements for it seemed constant. That televangelist - the one who doesn't seem to read his Bible (no matter how many times he holds it up at the beginning of his "sermons"), has the big smile, and the friendly Texas accent... was standing feet from me. (Checking out his book sales?)

He and others that shall remain nameless are the epitome of the kind of "teachers" Paul talk about here. Some are on TV, but many more of them fill the pulpits of even small congregations dotted across our country. Many of them have even become Bible college presidents and professors teaching a whole new crop of would-be false teachers.

It is a sad thing.

But here is the rub, friends. Just like we complain about "those ball players who make all that money to play a game", there are no false preachers and teachers without those who pay them! There are no ear-tickling, fake-joy inducing, crowd-pleasing, charlatans without those who want to be deceived!

What is it that you desire to hear?

Paul might say that our desires have nothing to do with hearing the Word of God. We don't come to the Bible looking to get what we want. We should approach the Bible looking to receive what God will give us!

While what we hear may not always make us happy - it will bring us joy.

While what we read may make us sad - there is always a note of encouragement.

God's Word, read or preached, when we set our own desires aside, will - like the All-Knowing Physician, bring us true healing. Sometimes it's a delicious tasting syrup! Other times it's a painful surgery. But it will bring you healing!

Trust God's Word each and every day to provide everything you need for life and godliness.

December 17

Reading: Hebrews 1-4

"So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,... Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

(Hebrews 4:9,11)

As I write this morning, I don't feel very tired.

I slept well. I'm enjoying time with God and a couple of my kids. I'm drinking coffee. I feel pretty refreshed in all that.

But the day will wear on. I will face some challenges - some bigger, some smaller. Things will attempt to prey on my mind. While I'm by no means "old", neither am I nineteen; there will be moments when my aging body hurts a little. And, by the time the day ends, I'll be plenty tired.

There are other days I start tired. Maybe I didn't sleep well. Or maybe I did sleep well, but my mind is so weary from a multitude of worldly concerns that I begin the day dragging.

I used to think "old people" were crazy when they said they were ready to go to heaven. I don't think that way anymore.

I'm more like Paul. I'm more than willing to serve here as long as God requires. I will enjoy my family, my work, the people I serve, and life as much as I can. But I'm also ready to rest - real rest. It will be a lasting rest that comes from no more striving, eyes that clearly see reality, a mind no longer filled with questions - but at peace with the Creator's answers.

Don't you want that? If so, make sure you are prepared to receive what you want!

The "doctrine" of "once-saved-always-saved" is heresy. The book of Hebrews is rife with warnings about not falling away - not falling short of heaven - that you can still be lost - even if you are currently following Jesus!

It's not that your sins constantly move you in and out of salvation (the straw man argument some will make). It's not that there is no grace for our sins and rebelliousness as Christ-followers. The problem is that disobedience to God eventually leads to unbelief, and it was because of their unbelief that many Israelites did not enter the "first rest". (Hebrews 3:19)

A life that consistently disobeys will eventually disbelieve! And that disbelief will keep you from the rest you desire. Guard your rest and faith with a listening, obedient ear toward God.

December 18

Reading: Hebrews 4-7

"It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior."
(Hebrews 7:7)

Quit trying to please God.

Did I just blow your mind? Well, I don't really mean it the way it sounds. It's just that what we think "pleases" God and what actually does please God is usually two different things.

Sometimes we treat God like our children. If we can do a little something for them once in a while, they'll stay happy. If we buy them a candy-bar at the check-out, they will quit whining.

But God is not the child in this relationship. We are.

We don't have the power to "bless" God in the sense that He blesses us. We do not have the capability to add anything to Him. We cannot add to His treasure. We cannot add to His greatness. We cannot enable Him with greater power. We only have the ability to obey.

Does that bless God? Well, yes, in a sense. But He is not changed if we do or we don't. We are the only ones changed by our obedience - or disobedience.

We begin thinking incorrectly about this because God doesn't really have first place in our lives. His commands and ways become a distraction and hinderance to our lives' agenda. So, we attend services, read our Bible a little, maybe say a prayer, and hope that will quieten the Holy Spirit's insistence to be noticed, heard, and worshipped.

Remember what this verse says? The person with the power is the one who can bless. Regardless of how we act toward God, we don't have the power! We can't bless (add to) Him; we can't hardly bless ourselves!

That is why Jesus said, "Steep you life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met." (Matthew 6:33, The Message)

December 19

Reading: Hebrews 8-10

"not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."
(Hebrews 10:25)

In 2020, the world went through what the media told us was a "great pandemic". Some believed it was a very dangerous disease - some did not. Some believed great caution had to be exercised - some did not. Some said, "Believe the science!" Some said the science was bogus. Some believed that cloth masks would protect them - others didn't. Some said vaccination is necessary and would defeat the dreaded virus - some said it wasn't and it wouldn't.

On all these points, most Christians managed to "agree to disagree". On many things, you can hold your own opinion and should be allowed to exercise your own options. But here are a couple of things upon which we must agree:

The Bible says that God's Church is to meet together. Don't think so? Re-read today's verse! That is non-negotiable. God said it.

If I am a Christian, I must see it as a command, and I am bound to obey it. No one - man nor government - has the right or the power to disallow or otherwise cancel out what God has asked of His people. Take whatever precautions in the assembly you think are necessary or wish to take! But you are to assemble.

Here is the other thing upon which we must agree: Months of disregarding Christ's command hurt the Church.

I think there were some people who were never really committed to Jesus to begin with and were looking for an opportunity to quietly bow out. Some might have been lulled into the habitual neglect of the Lord's Table and assembly by fear or the temporary closing of the doors. But the fact is this: Attendance around the Lord's Table - to encourage one another with our presence - to spur one another on to love and good deeds (v.24) - in congregations that closed have, to some extent, suffered a seemingly irreparable loss.

Finally, regardless about what you think about what I've said... If you will continue to disagree with me on the first point... let me also say this:

I don't think anyone can rightly ever say again that "attending Church doesn't mean anything". Meeting together does effect the vigor with which the body of Christ works in the world.

So, let us not give up meeting together - as some are in the habit of doing. But let's get together... let's encourage one another... all the more! Jesus will soon be back!

December 20

Reading: Hebrews 11-13

"Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,"
(Hebrews 12:12)

Through most of college, besides preaching every weekend, I was the warehouse manager and lead delivery person of a local furniture store. Unlike today where you have to order everything, we kept most all styles and variations of style in stock. So, several times a month a semi-truck would roll in full of furniture.

The days we dreaded most were when the sleeper sofas would arrive. You may have had the joy of moving one sleeper sofa from one side of a room to another to "redecorate"... Imagine a semi-load of sleepers to be unloaded and stacked six to eight high - by hand.

I was younger then and though it was hard, I almost relished the work. It felt amazing to be able to do something most regular folks couldn't. But even then, by days end, when it came to stacking, everyone would have to say, "Hang on a second; Set this down and let me get a better grip."

When you get tired, you need to get a grip.

If you've been in the Church a while, you might feel pretty well-seasoned about life. You've been through some things. You've learned to live by faith. It can be easy to look at ourselves and think we've arrived. But when you look at the end of Hebrews 11... When you see some of the things that people had endured in faith even before the Gospel got to them... When the Hebrew writer thinks of all that he may know is coming before him and all of us... he says, "Get a grip!"

I can't read - especially aloud publicly - Hebrews 11:36-38 without tearing up and getting a lump in my throat. "Some died by stoning, some were sawed in half..."

And I complain!?

When you do get tired, stop. Get a new grip. And "strengthen your weak knees".

Ever get weak in the knees? I have - literally. I've stood in the pulpit so intimidated or so humbled by something happening in my life that I could barely walk.

How do you strengthen something? You have to use it. And Christians use our knees best bent in prayer. We need a whole lot more of that now and when we are weak in the knees. In fact, prayer is probably the best way to "get a grip".

December 21

Reading: 1 Peter 1:1-2:3

"In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials," (1 Peter 1:6)

There is such an art to living life.

They say, "Don't look back. Your past is your past." There are certainly ways in which that is true, but we also know that "those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it"! There is some value in looking back over past days - as long as we don't live there.

We are also told, "Don't wish your life away! Don't miss the joys of the journey just because you aren't where you want to be." It can be easy to miss all the good things in life while we slave toward retirement, or an empty nest, or achieving a goal, etc. Don't miss today.

But occasionally, there really isn't much good about today. Life can be so demanding, trying, or heartbreaking that today is a day we want to get through and never think about again. Today's verse says that even when you in the midst of one of those days, you can still be glad!

You can be glad because of what's already happened; go ahead and look back at the past. Look at what God has done! We've received mercy and been born again because "God raised Jesus Christ from the dead" (v.3).

That means you can be glad today because of what's going to happen in the future! "We live with great expectation" (v.3) (aka HOPE) and there is an "inheritance kept in heaven for you" (v.4).

Today's road sign, regardless of what the terrain looks like right now, says, "WONDERFUL JOY AHEAD!"

Just keep walking!

December 22

Reading: 1 Peter 2:4-5:14

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."
(1 Peter 2:9)

I remember a song from when I was a little boy. Sing along if you know it!

"A sunbeam, a sunbeam,
 Jesus wants me for a sunbeam.
A sunbeam, a sunbeam,
 I'll be a sunbeam for Him."

Forgive me for being nerdy, technical, and scientific, but really, we should rather be moonbeams for Jesus!

The beams of the sun come from their own self-perpetuating power. The sun doesn't need anything else to accomplish it's job of being the "greater light" for the day (Genesis 1:16).

But the "lesser light" to rule the night, relies upon the sun. The moon has no power to illuminate anything alone. It only reflects the light of the sun as it peaks around the edges of the earth.

Christians - called by several names here (chosen people, royal priests, holy nation, God's possession) - are much the same. None of these characterizations or roles Christ-followers are labeled with here have anything to do with them; the power, ability, and purpose are all God's! As we come into the light to which He has called us, His goodness peaks around the world of sin and darkness and strikes us! We then reflect the glory of God to the world. That's the priest's job!

But as Peter has been saying, that can only happen when we live holy lives that are worthy of the holy God we serve. Were the moon too close to the earth, the sun's rays couldn't reach the moon. It would always stay dark. Too many people who name Jesus have lives lived in perpetual eclipse. They live in the shadows of a dark world. They can't reflect God's goodness to anyone because they don't want the light of God to expose their own worldliness. You can't help the world being of the world, Church! Being like the world won't make you relevant, it just puts out your light.

If we would be these wonderful things Peter reminds us we are in Jesus, we must heed Paul's call.

"Awake, O sleeper!
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you!"
(Ephesians 5:14b)

December 23

Reading: 2 Peter

"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,"
(2 Peter 1:3)

Occasionally, I hear Christians pray for the Holy Spirit to "fill this place", or say that we need "more of God", etc. This verse says:

"No. You don't."

When we come to know Jesus, just as this verse says ("We have received all of this by coming to know Him,...) we get all of the Holy Spirit we can have or will need. Our sins are taken away as the old person is buried in water immersion, and a new person is raised by the power of the Holy Spirit - indwelt by the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38) When verses such as Ephesians 5:18 tell Christians to "be filled with the Spirit", we are not being told to seek out more of Him; we are instead being told to be influenced by Him.

In the context of Ephesians 5, Paul is comparing being filled with wine (which will definitely influence you!) to being filled with the Spirit. Now, alcohol will take over your mind and influence you beyond your will. However, while the Holy Spirit lives in us as Christ followers, He will not override our minds and wills! The power and ability of God is always fully at-hand within us - but it is up to us to allow His influence.

It is as the sail of a ship. There is always some wind to be had on the sea. Sometimes it is weaker - sometimes stronger. The sailor just knows how to turn his sail to utilize what's there. He must turn his sail for it to "be filled" with the ever-present power there. God's "wind" (literally His Breath/Spirit) are always at full gale strength. The question is: Have we turned our sail toward the Spirit? Do we allow the powerful influence of God to shape our lives?

How wonderful to know that we HAVE EVERYTHING WE NEED FOR LIVING A GODLY LIFE!! But have you learned the art, discipline, and obedience that will make your life go?

December 24

Reading: 1 John

"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life."
(1 John 5:13)

Perception is important, isn't it?

I was sitting across from a counselor one time who told me something very enlightening. He said, "Children are fantastic observers, but they are terrible interpreters."

If you have children, you know that there is nothing - no mood, no words, no actions - absolutely nothing that your child won't pick up on. They are watching us constantly. However, many of us grow up with warped ideas

because without experience, knowledge, or a host of other things, we grow up with false perceptions of what those things mean. For instance, it's easy for a child to see that a parent is angry; it's difficult for a child to know why. He will surmise a reason, but 95% of the time or more he will be wrong. He has a very limited perception of reality.

With all that goes on in our lives, with our human frailty, with the fact that our spirits are wrapped in physical bodies attempting to fight spiritual forces - we have a great lack of perception about many things in life. We are very short-sighted. Paul said that it is as if we are looking through dark glass. (1 Corinthians 13:12) We don't see clearly. We lack perception.

So, when people of John's time came along and said, "You don't know all you think you do. We are the people who are 'in the know'" (the gnostics or "knowing people"), many Christians thought, "Well, maybe they're right! How do I know that I know Jesus?"

John says that this is what his letter has been about. All the things he writes about are so that they will "know you have eternal life". He writes so that they will clearly perceive, not only the truth about Jesus, but the truth of where they stand in relation to it.

And over and over throughout the letter he says the test is two-pronged: Do you love people? Do you obey God? You can't disregard either and say you know Jesus. If you do know Jesus, your life will be marked by consistent love for God's people and obedience to His word.

What do John's words cause you to perceive about your life today? Are you obeying Him? Do you love His Church?

December 25

Reading: 2 John; 3 John

"because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever:"
(2 John 2)

We all know certain people that, when we see them, we know what will be discussed. Somehow at some point the conversation will come back around to one particular thing or person that they love. They are known for that passion.

Ever have something you cannot stop talking about?

For John, it's Jesus. And in particular God uses the Apostle John to continually refer to Jesus as the Word, the Light and the Truth. Word, light, and truth are hallmarks of all his writings. If you were to go back in time, I'm sure you'd be sitting in a congregation he visited, and as he preached - at some point - you'd say, "OK! Here we go! Wait for it...wait for it..." And he would start talking about light and truth.

The joyous truth of Christmas is that the Word - eternally present with and equally deity with the Father and Holy Spirit - came into the world. That Word - the incarnation of every philosophical and doctrinal thought about God was the Truth that brought light to a dark world.

Don't sit in the dark! Don't sit in the darkness of sin, sorrow, despair, or hopelessness; the Truth "lives in us" who know God and "will be with us forever". Church, when we don't walk in the Truth - the reality of Jesus illuminating every corner and crevice of life - we are missing perhaps the greatest blessing of this present world.

Jesus didn't "just" come to fit us for eternity, but He came that we might have life - as a redeemed creature - to the full right now! It is one of the greatest gifts of Christmas!

December 26

Reading: Jude; Revelation 1-2

"These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires; they are loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage."

(Jude 16)

I wish God would have used the Lord's younger brother Jude to write more scriptures. In this short book he uses no less than three metaphors and nine similes to describe one kind of people.

Metaphorically speaking, these people are compared to fallen angels, the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the devil himself.

In simile, he says they are like: unthinking animals who live only by instinct (v.10), Balaam - who deceived people for money (v.11), the rebellious Korah (v.11), dangerous ship-wrecking reefs (v.12), shameless, selfish shepherds (v.12), clouds blowing over the land without giving any rain (v.12), trees that can't produce because they are doubly dead (v.12), wild waves of the sea (v.13), and wandering stars doomed to darkness(v.13)!

Who are the people of whom Jude speaks? Bad Church members!

They must be really bad Church members! They are. Some of the worst of it?...

They are grumblers and complainers.

Really? That's all?

Yep.

Oh, yes, he mentions other sins of immorality and such about these people, but that's the way he sums it up. Grumblers and complainers are an especially deadly, divisive, and ravenous viral disease in God's Church. While the sin itself is bad enough, more than that, it shows an unredeemed heart bent only on self. Think I'm overstating it? Jude has already said that they are ungodly, condemned people who do not have God's Spirit in them! (vv.4, 19)

In contrast, Jude calls his "dear friends" to be the kind of believers who "build each other up", "pray in the power of the Holy Spirit", and to have an evangelistic fervor to reach those who would obey the gospel. (vv.20-23) That's the good Church member! Not much about "self" there - that of which the grumblers and complainers are most concerned.

So, before you grumble and complain...

December 27

Reading: Revelation 3-6

"and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. And one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'

"And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain,..."
(Revelation 5:4-6a)

So close - yet so far away.

As John receives these messages for several different congregations in Asia, it is clear that things are going to get a lot worse before they get better. And besides the specific letters to them, there is further a message that they all need to hear. It is a matter of life or death. A letter that may determine their eternal destiny.

Across the throne room of God John sees the scroll. Surely this is the information that is needed! God's answers will be revealed. But the information can only be released by someone worthy - authorized - to break the seal on the letter.

Of the at least thirty beings there to receive the message - John, twenty-four elders, and 4 "beasts" - no one was worthy. When you are that close to the answers - yet so far away... you can only weep - and weep bitterly.

Bitterness comes from a lack of hope. There is a feeling of unfairness. Bitterness is a huge cloud of "'if-only'-anger".

And at this point, it is the only logical response.

Many times I have felt that cloud's presence. It brings a burning pain that is seemingly irreducible. Life is not fair. Life is hard. And sad, sad is the bitter wail of those so close, yet so far from hope.

But as John weeps those appropriate tears of bitterness, the Worthy One appears. Jesus, the Lamb Who Was Slain, arrives. He was (in his incarnate visit to earth), is (in heaven now), and will always be (throughout eternity) the One able to deliver a message of hope from the Father that is - by faith - the anchor of our souls.

If you know Jesus, rejoice in the expectation of God's promises. The answer for our souls. That whatever happens in life - whenever it happens - wherever it happens - if we love God and are live our lives by the purpose of His calling on our lives... IT IS GOING TO BE OK!

God will strengthen us here; and He will heal us there. The Lamb is here to assure us of that!

December 28

Reading: Revelation 7-10

"saying, 'Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.'"

(Revelation 7:3)

Ever use a stencil?

A stencil is an easy way to produce an image. It's easy because even though you can use broad strokes that "cover" the whole piece, only certain parts of a piece are touched completely, leaving an image from the contrast. While every analogy breaks down somewhere, I think it's a good illustration of what God is doing here (or did in the beginnings of the Church John writes to).

God is going to pour out His wrath (as we will see it later) upon the Roman Empire, but before He does, He "covers" His people - which "marks" them. They will be surrounded by the effects of what He does - so that their lives are not necessarily completely untouched. But compared to how the idolatrous world and the Roman Empire experiences what He does, it will leave a stark contrasting mark that is a message to the world through His people.

After His people are marked here in chapter seven, there are seals broken, then trumpets blown, then bowls poured out. These are not three different events, but the same story of what God will do (in their time - what he's already done from our perspective looking back). The way His people deal with and are protected in the long-run in the "seals" perspective differs greatly from the experience the ungodly have in the trumpets or bowls perspective.

Just like then, God doesn't spare us from living in a world with troubles - even tragedy. But He "covers" us so that our lives through it contrast from the unbelieving. We see Jesus standing with and among His people in chapter one (among the lampstands), and still here we see that He is ever-mindful of them as they endure the suffering of a sinful world.

Take heart! Jesus has marked you if you know Him. He knows who are His. Life may be hard, but He will use your story of faithfulness as a contrasting message in, and to, the world.

December 29

Reading: Revelation 11-14

"This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666."

(Revelation 13:18)

I don't have to tell you that people go nuts over this number... 666. But let me tell you plainly - and really, fairly simply - what it means and how you need to live.

God has already marked His people. (Remember yesterday's reading? 7:3) Did God literalistically mark them? I believe He literally did (and still does). That is, He knows who are His own people. But even though it says they

were going to "[place] the seal of God on their foreheads", do you really think that God's people physically walked around with some kind of "seal" on their heads? I believe we can and must take the Bible literally - but not always literalistically. Sometimes the Bible uses - just like we do and especially in genres of writings like poetry or prophecy - figures of speech.

In the same way, people were not "tattooed" or otherwise physically, literalistically marked. They were marked the same way we are "marked" or "sealed". You have or have not the Holy Spirit; you think or think not the thoughts of God; you do or do not the works of God. Your head (mind) and your right hand (actions) are marked and you are known - both to God and the world - by the way you live.

The number? The number "6" in ancient literature would have been known to John's readers as a number of incompleteness. In the Bible the numbers "3" and "7" are numbers of completion. "666" simply means "completely incomplete". In these chapters following the birth of God's Church (see chapter 12), the devil tries in vain to recreate or parody (as he always does) what God is doing. John simply tells his readers, "The devil, his works, and his people will all fall short." That is the legacy of Satan. Incomplete rebellion and complete destruction.

So don't read fiction books about the scary "end times" and fall for silliness about tattoos, micro-chips, barcodes, etc, etc, etc... Just let your life be marked by godly thoughts and deeds.

Simple, huh!?

December 30

Reading: Revelation 15-18

"Then I heard another voice from heaven saying,
'Come out of her, my people,
lest you take part in her sins,
lest you share in her plagues;'"
(Revelation 18:4)

The best part of the revelation is yet to come, but the next to best is here in chapter 18. The Roman Empire comes to a close. That nation which both enabled the Church with its relative peace, freedom, and great roads which crossed the known world - and persecuted the Church when it threatened its power - is defeated. The tribulations of the seven congregations will be complete, and their faithfulness rewarded.

But don't get too excited. There is one last warning. You don't stand next to a lightning rod in a storm. In the same way, don't cozy up to the world! God is already pouring out His wrath on it (Romans 1:18). Stand back!

Since Rome's fall, countless other nations, false religions, and personalities have replayed the same attempts against Jesus and His people as the Ceasars - yet to no avail. They have not and never will prevail. But just because the Church has always and will always be victorious is still no reason to get lazy about our walk with Jesus! If the world will receive its just punishment and justice, how much more is the Church accountable for its lifestyle? The Church knows truth and will therefore be the first to be judged! (1 Peter 4:17)

Yes, rejoice in justice. But you've been called out for a reason. Come away and stay away!

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December 31

Reading: Revelation 19-22

"He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"
(Revelation 22:20)

Back when I was on that "social media giant which shall remain nameless", I remember posting one day, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus!" One of my "friends" commented, "I don't know what to say to that."

If you don't know Jesus, I suppose you wouldn't. Is it simply a fairy tale you shrug off unknowingly? Or, if you don't know Him, but in your heart of hearts know He's real, you don't want to hear that. All you have worked and lived for is... THIS. What lies before you in the here and now and what you are striving to achieve in the near, or even distant, future is your goal and hope. When you are confronted with the fact that it will all come to a quick end - perhaps sooner than later... I suppose you "don't know what to say to that".

Perhaps you have been a Christian, but you have long since joined back with the world. You no longer live with an eye to eternity and the work of the redeemed outside time and space. You've been distracted with the pursuit of worldly wealth, comfort, and purpose. When you're reminded of what you've lost... I suppose you "don't know what to say to that".

But if you are like me, you know that these last two chapters of the Revelation - and fittingly the last two chapters of the collection of books we know as the Holy Bible - is the very best part of the book. Evil is forever conquered. Those who love it receive their choice. Death, sorrow, crying, and pain are banished. (21:4) The nations are healed (22:2) (Note that the "ethnon", the ethnic groups, the nations will finally be healed there. We will work to get along and love all men here, but the one human race of Adam will not find healing between nations ultimately until there is eternal peace.) When you see all that is there, why not proclaim with John, "YES! Come, Lord Jesus!"?

I used to think like that friend on "the social media giant that shall remain nameless". Though I loved Jesus, loved His Church, and endeavored to follow Him, I still wanted to know and experience what the world had to offer. Thirty-some years since still having those thoughts and feelings I will tell you this: I love my family, my life, my work. I am blessed and happy to serve God in time on earth as long as He wills. But I would not delay Jesus' return for having had any of it. For the pain and the struggle, the glories and wonders - only have their meaning in eternity, and they will never compare to the incomparable riches of His grace (Ephesians 2:7) or the eternal weight of glory we shall receive in the eternal, unseen things. (2 Corinthians 4:17-18)

So, today, at year's end, as I hear Jesus say, "Yes - it is true. Surely I am coming quickly - swiftly, speedily." I will respond, "Amen - so let it be! Yes, come, Lord Jesus!" (The Amplified Bible)

Do you say that with me? If you can't, please private message me. Let's not waste one more minute!