

TUNE MY HEART



*a devotional companion to the
5 Day Bible Narrative Reading Plan*

July—September 2026

INTRODUCTION

Jesus taught in John 15 that his disciples will abide in Christ by having Christ's words abide in them. Someone who abides in Christ will produce much spiritual fruit for our Lord. Psalm 1 describes the blessed man as one who delights in the Word of God. The blessed person is rooted in the Scriptures and will flourish like a tree with deep roots near planted near abundant water. From cover to cover the Bible teaches that growing, mature Christians will be deeply anchored in the Word of God. That is our prayer for you, dear reader.

Many Christians desire to be better students of the Bible, yet don't know the general story of Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, God is telling one big story. The 5 Day Bible Narrative Reading Plan, created by our brother Scott Aniol at G3 Ministries, is designed to take readers through the major narratives of Scripture as well as the Psalms and Proverbs over the course of one year. The plan is designed for only five readings a week, with the weekend set apart for catching up on missed days and preparing your heart for corporate worship. This devotional is designed to accompany this particular Bible reading plan.

Whether you've read the Bible many times before or are reading it for the first time, we trust this resource will be helpful to you. As you grow in seeing God at work in his big story, we pray you will grow in your love and knowledge of Christ. May you abide in Jesus as his words abide in you.



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Our greatest victories may sometimes feel like failures. Elijah prevailed over hundreds of prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. The victory of Yahweh over Ahab's god was clear. Both Elijah and Ahab returned to Jezreel, and the news of Elijah's victory reaches the ears of Jezebel. Whatever Elijah may have expected, Jezebel's response is to threaten his life. She does not acknowledge that Yahweh is God like Ahab's prophets had. Filled with some mixture of failure and fear, Elijah runs for his life. Starting in the north in Jezreel, he runs about a hundred miles far south into the wilderness of Beersheba. Notice that the word of the Lord is not in this scene. This is reason enough to think that Elijah may not be following God in this moment.

The messenger of Jezebel brought a threat of death but the messenger of Yahweh brings life as the angel feeds and nourishes Elijah. Strengthened anew, Elijah goes to Mount Sinai (called Horeb in this passage) which is where Moses met with God for forty days and nights before the giving of the law. Like Moses hid in the cleft of the rock (a cave) when God passed by, Elijah seeks refuge in a cave as God visits him on the same mountain. God asks Elijah the same question at the beginning and end of the mountain meeting. Meeting with God should change Elijah's perspective, but he is too focused on Jezebel's opposition to remember all that God has done. When God appeared to Israel at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19, he arrived in thunder and lightning and smoke in a thick cloud. At Mount Carmel God consumed Elijah's offering in a mighty fire. God certainly could reveal himself in dramatic signs when he wanted, but this time Yahweh is not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. This time God is speaking in a whisper. A whisper is easy to miss; so, too, was it easy for Elijah to miss the hand of God in all that was taking place. God reveals his will to Elijah, but we're not told that Elijah actually obeys. Elisha, on the other hand, is eager to follow God's will as he enters ministry and eventually succeeds Elijah. His quick obedience is a sharp contrast with Elijah's present attitude.

May we not grow weary in well doing. Opposition will come, but we can be confident God is always at work even when we don't perceive it. As Christians today, let us not seek any "still small voices" outside of Scripture. Elijah did hear God speak, but the focus was on God's words. We have the complete, sufficient trustworthy word of God. Will we listen?

Tuesday, June 30

Read: 1 Kings 20

Does the mercy of God amaze you? Does God sometimes show grace to people that you don't think deserve it? We have seen enough of Ahab to know that he is a wicked man. We will see even more of Ahab to assure us that our assessment is correct: Ahab is a wicked man. But God, for his own reasons, shows mercy to Ahab and the rebellious northern nation of Israel.

The king of Syria is busy at war, and he sets his eye on Samaria and Ahab. The pagan king Ben-hadad demands ransom in order to avoid attack. He wants Ahab's greatest treasures—and Ahab agrees! Ben-hadad doesn't trust Ahab and announces his soon coming in order to receive tribute in person. The people of Israel tell Ahab to not go along with Syria's extortion. Even with the people behind him, Ahab still is willing to compromise and give away great treasure (and family!) to avoid a conflict with Ben-hadad. The bully threatens Ahab even further, but this time the king calls his bluff.

Elijah had complained that he was the only prophet left in the land, but here comes another prophet who brings the word of Yahweh to Ahab. In a shocking promise, God promises to give Ahab victory in battle and even gives him the battle plan. Round one of the battle goes in Israel's favor, but the prophet also warns Ahab that Syria will fight another day in the spring. The Syrians have convinced themselves that Yahweh is a local god. He must only be able to fight in certain locations. But once again God graciously sends his word to reassure Ahab: you will know that I am God because I am going to win this unwinnable battle. Against all odds, Israel defeats the Syrians. It's like Jericho all over again. God is saving his people in dramatic ways. Israel is victorious. Ahab should recognize Yahweh's salvation and trust him. Instead Ahab once again acts like Achan (Josh 6–7) and is not faithful in victory. In a bewildering move, Ahab does not destroy Ben-hadad but instead makes a covenant with him. Just as Achan's sin brought trouble upon the whole nation, surely Ahab's will also. Ahab needs a Samuel to hack this Agag to pieces!

The final scene of the chapter is an acted out parable. Another prophet appears and confronts Ahab just like Nathan confronted David. Ahab unwittingly agrees with the judgment that God announces. Ahab will soon die because he failed to execute Ben-hadad. God has shown him much mercy, and yet he fails to repent. Do not harden your heart like Ahab. Draw near to God today. He is full of mercy and grace.

A king is lounging in his palace, and he sees something that doesn't belong to him. He desires what cannot be his, but he seeks to take it anyway. It's the story of David, but it's also the story of Ahab. The spoiled idolator was sullen and vexed at the end of the previous chapter when he recognized that he was under judgment, but now he's sullen and vexed over a vineyard. A vineyard that he desires to turn into a vegetable garden. The only other time that same phrase "vegetable garden" is used in the Old Testament is in Deuteronomy 11:10 where Egypt is described in that way. Whether he realizes it or not, Ahab is trying to make the Promised Land more like Egypt.

One man stands in his way: Naboth. Naboth isn't merely fond of his land; he knows that his land is from God. It is part of his family's inheritance in the covenant God made with Israel. To give up this land would be to give up his covenant relationship with God. No amount of money is worth that! What would you give in exchange for your soul? Jezebel thinks that she can use the power of the kingdom to secure personal gain. She uses the very words God spoke to Elijah ("Arise, and eat" in 19:5, 17) to assure her husband that their devilish desires would succeed. Just as David wrote letters to secure the death of Uriah to cover up his sin, Jezebel writes letters to secure Naboth's death and achieve her sin. Jezebel receives words from the banquet announcing Naboth's death just as David coldly receives word from the battlefield announcing Uriah's death. Ahab's stony path to the garden is wide open.

No one else in town may have seen Ahab's wickedness against Naboth, but God saw. No one else may have known the part Jezebel played, but God knew. God always sees. He always knows. And he will always bring justice in his own time. The Lord sends Elijah to announce to Ahab the impending judgment. Just as dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, so too will dogs lick up the blood of Ahab. The dogs will eat Jezebel in her death. The family of Ahab will be cut off just like the family of Jeroboam was cut off and the family of Baasha was cut off. Ahab's wicked house will come to a cruel end. But it will actually wait until Ahab's son reigns, because Ahab hears the word of the Lord and repents. God will delay the disaster. If God showed mercy to wicked Ahab, is grace not available to the vilest of sinners? Praise the Lord.

Thursday, July 2

Read: 2 Chronicles 18; Proverbs 22

Our narrative has been located mainly in the Northern Kingdom where Ahab reigns, but Jehoshaphat, king of the Southern Kingdom, is drawn into our reading. He is pulled into the story when he marries his son to Ahab's daughter. Jehoshaphat has the blessings of a generally good king, but this decision will bring terrible consequences in the future. Ahab draws away the king of Judah over a great feast and entices him to join forces for battle. This is not the type of reunion between north and south that the nation needs.

Being a somewhat godly king, Jehoshaphat at least cares to know what God says about this prospect. Ahab gathers all of his yes-men, and they tell the king exactly what he wants to hear. Judah's king understands what is going on, and asks again for a prophet who can hear from Yahweh. Ahab knows the right man for the job, but he hates him. Micaiah will stand straight and declare, "Thus says the Lord." While the two kings wait for the true prophet, lying prophets continue to take God's name in vain by saying that Yahweh will give victory when that is not at all what God has said. The messenger bringing Micaiah even pleads with him, "Give the kings the same message. Give a good word to Ahab." The prophet assures the messenger that he will speak only what God actually says.

In a comical scene, Micaiah mockingly gives Ahab the message he wants to hear, but Ahab recognizes this is just a mockery of his favored prophets. When the prophet gives the real message from God, he essentially says, "See, I told you that he wouldn't bring good news!" Not only has God ordained that Ahab will lose the battle, but God allowed lying spirits to tell Ahab that he would win the battle. Ahab is not a man who welcomes or recognizes the truth; therefore, he has been tested by lies. We see the character of these false prophets as Zedekiah attacks the true prophet Micaiah. Ahab's treatment of the true spokesman for God is typical of what many prophets throughout the Bible receive.

The battle that is doomed to fail is due to begin. Ahab disguises himself in an effort to escape certain death and also cowardly tells Jehoshaphat to wear his royal robes into battle. Perhaps the wrong king will die. The king of Judah prays for help, and God answers his prayer. As for Ahab, God sovereignly appoints an archer who shoots the king in just the right place. What might look like bad luck to someone who worships false gods is clearly the divine judgment of God. God's word always comes true.

Many people long for a second chance from God. Jehoshaphat received a second chance. After a foolish alliance with the now–dead Ahab, God had spared Jehoshaphat’s life in that same battle. He safely returns to his kingdom of Judah and his home in Jerusalem. God sends a word of conviction through the prophet Jehu. Now it’s clear that the marriage alliance was actually an act of treason with the wicked. Nevertheless, God graciously gives Jehoshaphat a second chance.

God’s grace in Jehoshaphat’s life is not wasted. The king personally travels his land bringing revival among his people. Then he appoints leaders of integrity who will make sure that the nation is ruled righteously as well. The best way for the nation to avoid God’s wrath is to rule according to his word.

As Jehoshaphat is ruling the nation righteously, he is given an opportunity to exercise his faith in Yahweh. The opportunity will come through the threat of war. Many kings have cowered in fear rather than standing in faith during similar circumstances. How will Jehoshaphat fare? Even though he fears, he seeks the Lord. This is a godly king in his best moments. Challenges and dangers will always arise, but will we seek God by faith? The king leads the whole nation to seek God in prayer and fasting. As he prays, this son of David points to the promises God made with Abraham. He is praying just like godly kings are supposed to pray. His trust is in the Lord.

Like many times before, God’s words come through his prophet and comforts his people. God will fight the battle for his people. They must face the enemy, not in fear but in faith. Before the battle begins, God’s king leads the people to trust in the Lord. They praise the Lord with the constant refrain of Psalm 118: “Give thanks to Yahweh, for His lovingkindness endures forever.” As the people trusted and worshiped Yahweh, the enemies turned on one another and destroyed themselves. God delivered again! He gives great spoils to the nation, and they give great praise to God.

The Chronicler’s verdict upon Jehoshaphat’s reign: he did what was right in the sight of the Lord. He stumbled. He made foolish alliances, both with Ahab and again with his son Ahaziah. God sovereignly ruled through every circumstance for his purposes. Jehoshaphat’s alliances failed. His love for the Lord was real, even if it was not real in many of the people of his nation. This king was as imperfect as we, yet let us trust and serve and praise the same God, for his lovingkindness endures forever.

Monday, July 6

Read: Psalms 31–32

Christians know that we should trust God at all times, but many times that is easier said than done. We know we should trust God, but when life is hard or scary we may not be sure how to truly trust God. The psalms help us put our faith into practice. In Psalm 31 David gives expression to the sorrow and fear that so many experience, yet he trusts God. David praises Yahweh as his refuge, rock, and fortress. He rejoices in the Lord, but this is not a superficial joy. It is not as if David hasn't actually experienced tough times in his life. We've read about the king's many highs and lows, but even here in the text he says: "I am in distress; My eye is wasted away from grief, my soul and my body also. For my life is worn down with sorrow . . ." Are you wasting away in your grief? Are you worn down with sorrow? Many Christians don't even realize that the Bible speaks so candidly about the common experiences of life. The psalms help us put our grief into words and show us how to truly trust God. The tide turns for David in verse 14 when he shifts his focus from his enemies to God: "But as for me, I trust in You." David focuses his attention on who God is, which allows him to truly trust God.

The greatest example of trusting God comes from our Lord Jesus himself, who quoted this psalm at Calvary. Did you know Jesus memorized Scripture? From his youth he studied God's Word. When Jesus quoted a psalm, he wasn't just referring to one phrase but its whole context. As Jesus hung in your place on the cross, he trusted the Lord: "Into your hand I commit my spirit." Jesus perfectly pictured trusting God in the worst of circumstances. None of us will ever face sorrowful grief as deep as Jesus faced. However, by the Spirit at work in us, we can trust the Father just like the Son.

The Psalms began with a picture of the blessed man in Psalms 1–2. The entire psalter fleshes out the idea of being blessed by God. Psalm 32 teaches us that the true blessing comes through having our transgressions forgiven. Much like Psalm 51, this psalm reflects David's repentant heart after committing great offense against God. As you read the text, do you think of your sin as seriously as David? Do you try to cover your sins or do you trust God to cover your sins through Christ? Knowing that in Christ your sins are forgiven, you can truly "Be glad in Yahweh and rejoice" (32:11).

The word of the Lord has come through Elijah to the rebellious northern kingdom that keeps looking more like Canaan than the Promised Land. God has used this remarkable prophet for his own purposes, but now Elijah's work is done. The ministry is being passed to Elisha, whom we briefly met in 1 Kings 19. 2 Kings 2 begins by telling us that Elijah is going to be taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. This unusual earthly exit must not be the focus of the passage because it's revealed from the beginning. Instead the focus seems to be on the transition of ministry from Elijah to Elisha. Like Moses and Joshua before them, the narrator is drawing our attention more to the message than the messenger. God's work will certainly carry on. How will the new prophet be received?

Elisha, as well as the sons of the prophets, know that change is quickly approaching and Elijah is about to depart. For some unexplained reason, Elijah doesn't seem to want Elisha to follow him. Perhaps this is merely a test for the next mouthpiece of God, but Elisha stays near to his father in ministry and requests the blessing that an oldest son would receive—a double portion. Remember that Elisha left father and mother and earthly blessings to follow the Lord. God has already announced that Elisha would succeed Elijah. Elisha wants to serve the Lord in a strength that is stronger than his own. It is a hard thing for Elijah to give this spiritual blessing, but it is no problem at all for the Spirit of God.

Only one verse describes Elijah's exodus. Elisha's mourning is quickly replaced by ministry. He takes the mantle (a cloak or outer garment) and begins to serve Yahweh, the God of Elijah. Moses and his successor Joshua had both miraculously parted water. So did Elijah and now his successor Elisha. Things have deteriorated greatly in the Promised Land since the days of Moses and yet God is not done with his people. He is still speaking and working through his prophet.

Joshua had cursed ancient Jericho, but this new Joshua is able to remove the curse and heal the water which ultimately is bringing life to the city. By the word of the Lord, resurrection life is brought to sinful people. When God's words are welcomed there is a blessing, as pictured at Jericho. When God's words are rejected there is cursing from God, as seen at Bethel. These are not children but scoffing young men. Their fate will be the fate of all who reject the word of God on the last day.

Wednesday, July 8

Read: Psalms 35–36

Have you ever been falsely accused? Perhaps it was a minor confusion that could easily be corrected. Or perhaps it was a life-altering charge that could have ruined everything you stand for and had worked towards. Where do you turn when false charges arise? In Psalm 35 David turned to Yahweh to contend for him against the contentious. David trusted the Lord to fight those who tried to pick a fight with him. The psalm seems to move through three cycles of David describing these malicious witnesses and then resolving to trust in God (35:1–10; 11–18; 19–28). We certainly have to train ourselves to turn to God time and time again. Wouldn't it be great if we could take our burdens to the Lord and leave them there? Too often we fail to take our cares to God in prayer, we fail to trust him to hear, and we fail to trust him enough to leave the burdens with him. We keep right on worrying as if we hadn't told the King of the Universe about our problem. The psalms model for us how to continually turn to and trust in the Lord. David prays that the Lord would remind him, "I am your salvation" (35:2). By the end of that movement, he indeed is rejoicing in the salvation of Yahweh (35:10). Even as those false charges kept ringing in his ears, he continued to turn to God. Jesus suffered the greatest false charges imaginable, and he trusted in Yahweh. Let the psalm point you to Christ, so that your tongue can tell the righteousness of God and his praises all day long (35:28).

In Psalm 36 David continues to contrast the wicked and the upright in heart (remember how the whole book of Psalms is painting that picture of the blessed standing out against the wicked.) Verse 1 offers a chief characteristic of the wicked: there is no fear of God before their eyes. What an apt explanation of sinners: they have no dread of God. They do not acknowledge him or respect him. God simply is not a part of their moral calculation. David explains that people minimize God in their thinking and elevate themselves, convincing themselves that their sins will never find them out. When Paul assembled a long list of Old Testament quotations in Romans 3 that explain the great depravity of humankind, he brought his list to completion with this very verse: there is no fear of God before their eyes (Rom 3:18). The problem for sinful humanity has not changed over these thousands of years, but God's solution remains the same: Jesus Christ, the just and the justifier (Romans 3:26).

Elisha is ministering in the spirit of Elijah. The same God who worked through Elijah mightily, publicly on Mount Carmel also is working mightily, privately through Elisha. We see multiple miracles in 2 Kings 4, all containing echoes of Elijah but also pointing us to Christ through Elisha. In the first scene 4:1–7, a woman who has lost her husband is about to lose her children into slavery due to her great debt. In every way she is about to lose everything. Just like in the days of Elijah, God multiplies oil through the word of Elisha for this widow. The word of God brings life.

Elisha is supported in ministry by a Shunammite woman who frequently prepares meals for the prophet and eventually adds a room onto her house to meet his needs. Whereas the widow in the first scene was vulnerable, this woman is powerful due to her wealth and her safety among her own family. Yet, her situation could change at any moment due to the age of her husband and the lack of an heir. Despite her Abraham and Sarah-like situation, Elisha promises her that she will be blessed with a child. The word of God brings life.

Time moves forward in scene three as this unexpected but beloved son actually dies in his mother's arms. What a tragic ending that would be, but this mother knows this can't be the end. She hurries to find the man of God even though it's not a normal time to visit him. Learning the situation, Elisha sends his younger and faster servant ahead even as he and the woman return to her house. The prophet prays and then acts out the work that the Spirit of God is doing, raising this child to life.

The final scene involves more death as the famine is causing people to scavenge for food, accidentally mixing poisonous ingredients into the pot. The small amount of flour that Elisha adds to the poisoned pot of stew is but a visual reminder that the word of God is actually making the difference. The prophet's multiplication of food to feed a crowd is but a preview of what Christ will do with thousands. The chapter concludes making it plain that this miracle happened according to the word of the Lord. The word of God brings life.

In the days of Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, and Jesus and his apostles, God often validated his messengers by miracles. The miracles pointed to the authority and trustworthiness of the messenger. Today we need not look for miracles; God has given us his authoritative, trustworthy Bible. It contains all we need for life and godliness. The word of God brings life.

Friday, July 10

Read: 2 Kings 5; Psalm 39

Our God is not a local god. He is Lord of heaven and earth. He is sovereign over every nation and gives victory to whom he pleases. He saves people from every tribe, tongue, and nation; indeed, God gives salvation to whom he pleases. We see these truths pictured in the life of one man, Naaman the Syrian.

The commander of Syria's army, Naaman, seems to have it all! He is a great man, a mighty man, a favored man. There's just one problem: he's also a leprous man. While not a Jew and not subject to the ceremonial laws of Israel, this leprosy most certainly negatively impacts the general's life. By the providence of God, a little girl is the source of hope for this big man. Word gets to Naaman and eventually the king of Syria that perhaps there is hope for the leper in the land of Israel. However, when the king of Israel gets wind of the situation, he is not filled with faith but fear. The king of God's people should have confidence in the one who kills and makes alive—Yahweh. The king of the northern kingdom should have heard about the prophet at work in his midst—Elisha, who works many miracles bringing life. The ungodly Syrians seem to have more faith than the king of Israel.

Elisha hears of Naaman's situation and the king's fear, but the man of God knows leprosy is no problem for God. He sends word to the commander, but it is not the word Naaman expected. After traveling all the way from Syria to see this prophet, Naaman expected a great show. If he couldn't see a great show, at least Elisha could have sent him to the great rivers at home instead of the dirty water in Israel. Naaman is thoroughly unimpressed. Even his servants understand the situation better than the great general. They recognize that Elisha is inviting their master to have his flesh restored. His life will be changed forever if he simply accepts the word of God by faith. The mighty warrior must trust God with childlike faith. Naaman's heart is changed, he obeys, and he is healed. Like the skin of the little girl who first told about the power of God, Naaman is healed.

The servant of Syria now worships Yahweh, but the servant of Elisha, who has seen the many miracles of Yahweh does not truly worship the Lord. Gehazi is more interested in the things of earth than the resurrection life that Yahweh brings. This may not be the way we expected the story to end, but these are the stories God writes. He gives salvation freely by faith.

Aren't you glad that God is able to meet small needs as well as large ones? God worked miraculously through Elijah and continued to bring life in deadly situations. With a double portion of Elijah's ministry upon him, the Spirit of God continues to work in Elisha in big ways and small ways, but always pointing to the life found in the word of the Lord.

The first scene can seem perplexing until we remember the value of this axe head for the young prophet in training. If he had to repay the cost of the iron tool himself, the debt could be crippling and could eventually lead to slavery like in the case of the widow in Chapter 4. Elisha isn't simply helping a student, but he is continuing to bring the life-giving, freeing word of God.

In the second scene Elisha is working on a national level to preserve the people of God. We saw uneasiness between Israel and Syria in chapter 5 when Naaman the Syrian commander went to Elisha the Israelite for healing. Remember that the king of Israel thought the Syrian king was trying to use the situation to start a war. Now Syria is making raids upon Israel, but God's people keep avoiding their attacks. The man of God Elisha warns the king of Israel so often the king of Syria is convinced he's got a spy in his administration. The king of Syria makes plans to seize this prophet who seems to know his deepest secrets (and battleplans!).

The king of Syria sends a large army to surround the city of Dothan and seize one man—the man of God. Elisha's servant sees the great army, but Elisha desires for him to see God's greater army. God gives Elisha's servant sight to see the spiritual reality of God's army. Then when the army of the Syrians begins to close in to attack, the man of God prays that the enemies' eyes would be blinded. Whether their eyes are literally no longer able to see or possibly only dazed to the reality of the situation (unlike the servant), Elisha leads the enemy army of Syria right into the heart of Samaria, the capital of Israel. The king of Israel can hardly believe his good fortune in this "battle." The king seeks and submits to the direction of the prophet Elisha, recognizing his authority by calling him "father." This is the last of the raids upon Israel. Soon war will come, but the man of God will work for the people of God in matters both big and small. The word of God brought by the prophet of God will bring life.

Tuesday, July 14

Read: 2 Kings 6:24–7:20

The temporary peace is over. Syria's raids were stopped by Elisha, but that doesn't mean the enemy intends to stop the war. The king of Syria rouses his whole army and heads towards the capital of the Northern Kingdom in Samaria. As they put the city under siege, great famine sweeps through the city. Starvation and inflation are so severe that an unclean animal like a donkey is sold for food at exorbitant prices. Things become so desperate that mothers are eating their children. As this woman seeks justice from her king, how does he respond? He blames Elisha for the famine. He plans to execute the "father" he was just honoring a few verses earlier. Israel has fallen a long way since the days of Solomon who had godly wisdom when dealing with disputing mothers.

Twice in 7:1, Elisha stresses that he's going to announce the Word of the Lord. What have we seen time and again in Kings? God brings life through his word. The man of God is bringing the word of God. Elisha is on record for his accuracy and faithfulness in speaking on behalf of God, so when he announces that the famine is about to be over we would expect people to hear him and rejoice. God is speaking and relieving their suffering! The king's right hand man, who should know exactly who Elisha is and what he can do, scoffs. The Word of the Lord will not relieve his suffering but precede his judgment.

God works in such mysterious ways sometimes. He delivers his people in battle but not by their might and not because they deserve it. God causes the Syrians to hear the sounds of approaching enemy armies that don't exist. The Hittites and Egyptians have not been hired by Israel to attack Syria, but Syria thinks so and they flee. A most unlikely group of messengers deliver the good news to the king of Israel, but he doesn't trust the news! He thinks it is all a trap to lure them out of safety into danger. Soon enough it becomes clear that God's Word through the prophet has come true. The famine is over because God has given his people the spoils of battle. God's judgment is true because the scoffer dies without enjoying the blessing of God's deliverance.

Even though God continues to bring victory through the man of God, things aren't looking good for the nation. This seems to be only a foretaste of what is to come for Israel through judgment. They should be praising the Lord and yet they seem to be walking in unbelief. Let this not be said of us.

We often read and think about history in a linear fashion, but that is not always the way history is given to us in Scripture. 2 Kings 8 presents the Shunammite woman from 4:8–37 again, but the timing of the story seems to be earlier than it's given in the text. We also see Gehazi again in his pre-leprous condition. The king of Israel is asking about the great things of Elisha when he just witnessed them in chapters 6 and 7. It seems that the author of Kings has given us an earlier story at this point in the book in order to connect with the theme of famine we just saw in 6:24–7:20. When we first met the Shunammite woman, she needed no help or repayment from Elisha because of the security of her family and homeland (4:13). However, when famine strikes in Israel, Elisha encourages her to go to the land of the Philistines for provision. Seven years later when she returns, all has been taken from her. Based on the reputation of Elisha and the miracle in her son's life, the woman's house and land are restored.

God had told Elijah way back in 1 Kings 19 that Hazael would be anointed as king over Syria. God's Word is fulfilled now by Elisha. Ben-hadad is just another in a long list of sick kings in this book. Some have suggested this is because earthly kings will always fail us. Others have suggested it is also because all of the other kings are falling short of the standard set by David and Solomon. Elisha tells Hazael that he will soon be king, but the prophet also stares down the soon-to-be assassin and is moved to tears. Elisha knows the wickedness that is to come upon Israel at his hands. We get a preview in the murder of Ben-hadad.

The story shifts back to the southern kingdom of Judah in verse 16. Strangely enough, the names of the kings in both the north and the south are the same: Joram, also known as Jehoram. We have common names shared by many people today (think John or Mary), but perhaps this isn't a mere coincidence after all. The text explicitly says in verse 18 that the king of Judah walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. These kings with the same name are practically indistinguishable in their evil. The next king in Judah Ahaziah is sadly connected to Ahab, the worst king in their history. Things continue to get darker in Judah, Israel, and Syria. God graciously continues to provide and bless his faithful remnant like Elisha and the Shunammite woman.

Thursday, July 16

Read: Psalms 42–44

The psalms were given to shape the people of God into faithful worshippers of Yahweh. They're not random files in a drawer that can be pulled as needed. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the book of Psalms has been given to us in a particular order with a particular movement. Psalms 42–43 begin Book II in the Psalter. They most likely were originally written as one psalm; they certainly should be read together for a fuller understanding. Notice that Psalm 43 has no title while so many around it do. Notice also the repetition that continues from one psalm to the next (see 42:5, 11; 43:5):

*Why are you in despair, O my soul?
And why are you disturbed within me?
Wait for God, for I shall still praise Him,
For the salvation of His presence.*

We've noticed how often the psalms in Book I ask the question, how can a righteous man be blessed in an unrighteous world? Book II often asks the same question, but broadens the question from the personal level to the national level. If you fast forward to the end of Book II, you'll hear the psalmist say: "Let all nations be blessed in him; Let all nations call him blessed" (Ps 72:17). The blessing for the nation can be found in the same place that the blessing for the individual can be found: in Yahweh. As you read through Book II of the psalms, notice the movement from despair towards rejoicing in God. As the Spirit continues to shape us into the image of Christ, we will continue to turn our thirsty, cast down souls to the living water Jesus Christ (see John 4:10; 7:37).

Notice also how the psalmist is speaking to himself. In that refrain found three times in two psalms, he speaks to himself: "Why are you in despair, O my soul?" The psalmist is honest about his situation. He is realistic about the way we sometimes feel separated from God. Due to spiritual dryness, sin in our hearts, or a variety of reasons, we may sometimes feel spiritually separated from God. In those dark moments, we must speak truth to our souls. We must know God's Word and remind ourselves of it. Speak to your soul, no matter how desperate I may feel, nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39). Rest assured, dear Christian, that the psalms are shaping you into faithful worshippers of God.

The Bible clearly portrays God as the judge of all the earth. Does this comfort you or disturb you? **Psalm 50** powerfully pictures Yahweh as the mighty judge of his people. God brings his testimony against his own chosen people. They cannot take comfort in sacrifices done apart from a true relationship with God. Like he often does through the prophets in Scripture, God speaks strong words of conviction to those who have become callous to his covenant. May the text disturb our drifting, cold hearts back to the God of who has saved us. May we never forget God! May we remember he is not like us! But to those who are sincerely walking with God through Christ, the just judge comforts: “I shall show the salvation of God” (50:23).

Remember that Book II of the Psalms is comparing the righteous and the wicked on a national level like Book I made this comparison on a personal level. **Psalm 53** is almost identical to Psalm 14 but with a few noticeable differences. Psalm 14 often used the covenant name for God—Yahweh. Psalm 53 instead uses the generic word for God. What might seem like a minor difference actually reminds us of a big lesson: God is not just the judge of Israel only as you might think from Psalm 14 (or 50) or just the judge of Christians as some people today might imagine. No, he is the judge of the living and the dead, the judge of heaven and earth, whether you acknowledge that or not. When the psalmist looked at Israel, the people of God in Psalm 14, he noted the great wickedness of sin. When the psalmist looks at the entire earth in Psalm 53, he notes the great wickedness of sin. Paul picks up this language in Romans 3:10–12 to remind us again of the universal problem of sin, but then he reminds us that the just judge is also the one who justifies through Jesus Christ.

Time and again, David has tuned our hearts to turn to God when enemies attack. He has felt the attack of many enemies and continued to trust God. In **Psalm 55** David’s enemy is much closer. It is a close companion, a faithful friend. Whether David is referring to his beloved son Absalom, his trusted counselor Ahithophel, or some other circumstance we’re not familiar with, the psalm gives us another circumstance in which we must trust Yahweh to save. We cast our burdens on Yahweh to sustain us and rightly judge the situation, knowing that he judges justly and he truly cares for us (see 1 Peter 2:23, 5:7).

Monday, July 20

Read: Psalms 58, 78

Sometimes the Bible makes us uncomfortable. We know that Jesus is king. We know that he will return in glory. We know that when he comes, he will come in judgment. But sometimes the Bible talks about that judgment in ways that catch us off guard. God's Spirit challenges us with his words: do we really believe what we say we do?

Psalm 58 is one of these passages. David prays in verse 6, "O God, shatter their teeth in their mouth." We know that he is praying against the wicked, venomous men who have been satanic in their serpent ways since birth. We know that there are truly wicked people like this in the world today. But to pray this way seems out of place in our view of the Christian life. Should we really desire for our enemies to be "like the miscarriages of a woman which never behold the sun" as David prays in verse 8?

Whose are the enemies in this psalm? Are they merely David's personal enemies? No, they are God's enemies. They pretend to speak righteousness, but they actually work unrighteousness (verses 1–2). And God has promised that he will certainly judge all unrighteousness. David's prayer is not for his own personal vengeance, but for God to do what he said he would do. The psalm calls for God to keep his Word, to fulfill the Scriptures. The psalms often use this type of language, sometimes called "imprecatory" which means the language has moved beyond mere sorrow or sadness to cursing and condemnation.

"The imprecatory language in the psalms is not unbridled expression of personal rage and vengeance made in a moment of passion. Imprecatory language is not the equivalent of cursing in anger. Rather, imprecatory psalms are expressions of confident trust that God will accomplish his purpose for mankind that he established at the beginning of history."

These are not "expressions of what we intend to do. We do not take up arms and crush our enemies with the sword. We have been commanded by Christ to love and pray for our enemies, to boldly proclaim the good news of the gospel, confident that God will save his elect through the gospel, turning enemies into friends. We currently live in an age of grace in which God through our proclamation of the gospel is gathering his people unto himself from out of the nations."

One day our king shall come. Will we be glad to see him defeat his enemies? Do we pray for God's perfect judgment to be carried out on God's enemies? Do we really believe this? ¹

¹<https://g3min.org/should-christians-pray-imprecatory-prayers/>

Where should God's people turn in the midst of tragedy? The nation of Israel wrestled with this question during the days of David. You remember the many highs and lows of the people under the leadership of David. The great king led the people to great victories and they enjoyed many great benefits of living in God's Promised Land before the great sins of the great king led to their great downfall. The superscription of **Psalm 60** connects the dots between this text and a great victory in 2 Samuel 8. David led the nation to defeat many thousand of their enemies, but apparently it wasn't the smoothest of battles. The victory in the Valley of Salt was almost the victory that never was.

It must have been a day of great tragedy. Verses 1–5 of **Psalm 60** express the sorrow of the people. They felt rejected. They felt broken. Surely the Lord must be angry with them. Surely they have sinned and are facing the consequences of disobeying God. The nation cried out to God. By the end of the psalm, they recognize that their only hope of valiant victory is through God. Only the Lord can fight their battles for them. Only the Lord can save them in their distress. He is the one to whom we must turn in the midst of tragedy.

The picture that Psalm 60 paints on a national level can be seen on a personal level in **Psalm 61**. David is experiencing a personal tragedy. His heart is faint. He needs strength. He needs refuge. Where does David turn in the midst of his own personal tragedy? To the rock that is higher, stronger, and better than himself. While many seek to take David's life, he knows that only God can add days to his life. Only God can preserve him. The Lord is David's only refuge, and he is our only refuge. In any tragedy, personal or national, large or small, let us turn to God.

Over and over in the Psalms, you will notice that the well-being of God's people is connected with the well-being of their king. At first glance David's prayer for long life might seem self-serving until you remember the necessity of God's people to be led by God's king. God has promised to preserve his king. When we read the end of Psalm 61, we can't help but remember there's a bigger story going on than just the life of David. God has promised an everlasting covenant with the Son of David, who will sit enthroned forever. Jesus Christ is our true refuge, our tower of strength. Turn to him today.

Wednesday, July 22

Read: Psalms 62–63

Where is your faith? What do you trust? **Psalm 62** stands as a testimony to faith in God. David writes about waiting for God alone. He waits in silence. He knows that God and God alone is his rock and salvation. Perhaps David has Absalom's threats in mind when he writes, but we know broadly that the world only offers death (62:3). The world will lie about everything and enjoy every second (62:4). So where do you turn? We must turn to God. David calls the entire congregation to trust in the Lord at all times. He is the one we trust. He is the steadfast, gracious God. He is worthy of our trust. **Psalm 63** also paints a vivid picture of the believer's trust in the Lord. We should earnestly seek the Lord. We should prize the lovingkindness of God over life itself. Morning, noon, and night God is worthy of our worship and worth meditating upon.

The Psalms tell us over and over to trust God. We know we should, but sometimes we forget why. Have you considered recently how worthy of a Savior we serve? He is a worthy object of our faith. The world often speaks about faith in a nebulous, squishy way that is hard to define. The attitude of many is to "keep up the faith" no matter the circumstances. What they seem to mean is that they want to keep an optimistic attitude. That's not bad in itself, but our confidence and optimism must arise from the right place (which is not ourselves). In other words, it's not enough to just have faith in faith itself. No, our faith must have an object.

When we sit down in a chair, we demonstrate our faith in the chair. Typically we don't measure the chair, examine its materials, and calculate its weight capacity before sitting down. We just sit down. What holds us up? Is it our faith in the chair that holds us up? No, it's the chair itself. It is a worthy object of our trust. Consider the two boys ice skating on a frozen pond. One boy apprehensively moves onto the ice inch by inch. His faith is weak. The other boy boldly skates out onto the ice. His faith is strong. Which boy will stay above the ice and which will sink? The one with strong faith or the one with weak faith? Both boys stay above the ice! It is not the intensity of faith that saves but the object. Jesus is strong enough to hold us up, no matter how weak our faith may be at any given moment. Keep trusting God, just like the psalms keep telling us.

Finishing well is rare. We see Christian leaders fail all the time, disqualifying themselves before the race is over. The Apostle Paul expressed his desire to finish well even as he finished his final writing in Scripture (see 2 Tim 4). When it comes to the kings of Judah, few finished well.

Joash (referred to as Jehoash in 2 Kings) started well. He was faithful when under the influence of the priest Jehoiada. Many have pointed out that the faithfulness of the kings discussed in the Book of Chronicles can be evaluated based on their actions and attitude toward the temple. Faithful Joash is concerned for the restoration of the temple. It had been sorely neglected during the reign of wicked Athaliah. Joash instructs the Levites to do their biblical duty and begin gathering the monies required from the people in the law of Moses to support the house of worship. The Levites did not carry out their duties quickly enough, so Joash took the lead on making sure the money was appropriately collected and used in the restoration of the temple. Things go well as long as the priest of God is there to influence the king. When Jehoiada dies, the worship of God immediately begins to be neglected. Jehoiada's influence can't be underestimated. His great age and influence are noted as this priest is buried among kings. With the godly priest gone, the officials in the land come and convince the young king that the old man's old-fashioned ways should be rejected. This is not the right path for someone who desires to finish well.

Jehoiada's faith abides in his son Zechariah. The priest boldly prophesies against the people, condemning them for their neglect of biblical worship. As happens so often, the people reject the truth of God's Word. At the direction of the king, they conspire to murder the man clothed in the Spirit of God. What a shocking reversal from the king who started well. With his dying breath, Zechariah announced that Yahweh would avenge his death. It's only a matter of time before Joash will face judgment.

As we've seen so many times before, God often sovereignly uses pagan nations to execute judgment on his people. Joash has not stayed true to the Scriptures, neglected the temple and worship of God, and even murdered a faithful priest of God. God does not overlook these sins, and he uses the recurring enemy Syrian army to defeat Israel. As Joash had earlier conspired to kill Jehoiada, now his officials conspire to kill him in vengeance for Zechariah's death. What a sad picture of a king who did not finish well. Let us learn and be faithful.

Friday, July 24

Read: 2 Kings 13; Psalm 65

Yesterday's reading focused on the southern kingdom of Judah and unfaithful king Joash. Today's reading shifts the focus back to the northern kingdom of Israel during that same time period. King Jehoahaz of Israel begins like any other wicked king in Israel's history. Because of his unfaithfulness, Yahweh's anger is poured out on Israel at the hand of both Hazael and his son Ben-hadad of Syria. In an echo from Judges, Jehoahaz calls upon Yahweh for help and God indeed raises up a savior for his people. The identity of this rescuer doesn't seem to be as important as recognizing the pattern. God gives his people rest until they once again begin to sin and face the consequences of those sins.

The new king in Israel has the same name as the king in Judah whom we read about previously: Joash. The Joash of Israel walks in the same sins of the kings before him, which are generally measured against their founding father Jeroboam who set the evil standard. We already saw that Joash of Judah began well but did not finish well. The text summarily tells of the death of both kings without much fanfare.

The text shifts one last time to Elisha, whom we haven't seen in about forty years. We are not told anything that happened in his ministry during these intervening years, but we find the prophet on his deathbed still ready to serve. King Joash weeps over Elisha and honors him in the same way that Elisha had previously honored Elijah. The man of God is more valuable to the nation than all of its chariots and horsemen. Elisha, too, knows that the nation's victory will come from the Lord and not their military might. The prophet promises the king a series of victories which apparently could have been greater if the king had been more enthusiastic about obeying the word of the Lord.

How many times has Elisha demonstrated life-giving power through the Word of the Lord? The prophet demonstrates this power once more in death. Joash may be tempted to think that God's promises died with the prophet, but God's Word brings life. If the nation will cling to the Word of God, it will be blessed with life. If the nation rejects God, it will bring certain death. The text is clear that God's promises were true even after the death of Elisha. Verse 23 makes plain that God's grace to Israel was not due to any goodness found in the rebellious nation. Instead, God showed his grace to Israel because of his promises to their forefathers. God's grace operates the same way today, by his good pleasure.

Through the centuries many have jeered at Jonah as being a “whale of a tale,” but the Bible presents the short book of Jonah as being absolutely true. 2 Kings 14:25 references Jonah in the same manner it mentions many other historical prophets, and Jesus speaks of Jonah as a real historical figure in Matthew 12:39–41. This rebellious prophet really lived and really received the word of the Lord. He was given three crisp commands: Rise. Go. Call Out. Jonah arose, not to call out to Nineveh but to flee to Tashish. Jonah’s trajectory is clear: as he runs from God, he goes down. Down to Joppa. Down into the boat. Down lower into the deck of the boat where he lays down. Jonah’s location reflects his spiritual condition.

While Jonah is described as a rebellious prophet quickly going down, notice how wondrously sovereign is Yahweh. Jonah wants to flee the presence of God but finds it impossible. Yahweh is sovereign over the great wind. Yahweh is sovereign over the great storm. He is sovereign over the lots. He is sovereign over the great fish. You can’t read this little book and escape the all-powerful bigness of God.

Notice also the evangelistic thread in the first two chapters of Jonah. The prophet is supposed to preach a message of repentance which implies the opportunity for salvation. Jonah is unwilling to take this message to Nineveh. Jonah knows they might actually repent! The man of God is the most distant from God in the narrative. The pagan sea captain urges Jonah to pray. The pagan sailors are willing to turn to Yahweh when Jonah is not. Here is the great irony. The prophet was unwilling to take the name of Yahweh and his message to Nineveh. But in his unwillingness to obey God, he reveals the identity of God to these sailors. They now know the name of Yahweh because of Jonah, and they are willing to pray to him even when Jonah is not. They show compassion for Jonah’s life when he was unwilling to show compassion on the lives of the Ninevites. At the end of chapter one, the mission field seems to be worshipping Yahweh while the missionary sinks even further down. He is hurled into the sea where God’s appointed fish swallows the reluctant prophet.

The prophet’s prayer is actually saturated with knowledge of Scripture, especially the Psalms. Jonah’s prayer crescendoes with the message he was unwilling to take to Nineveh: salvation belongs to Yahweh. If Jonah gets a second chance, will he now obey? Will you take the gospel message to others or will you run from God?

Tuesday, July 28

Read: Jonah 3–4

God is so gracious to give second chances. The rebellious prophet repented, and Yahweh gives him a second opportunity to obey. The command has not changed: Arise. Go. Call out. God has given a second chance, but he is still demanding complete obedience. There is no opportunity for Jonah to change or soften the message. He survived the great storm and the great fish, but will he survive the great city? Nineveh was known for its exceeding violent wickedness and its worthless worship. History tells us that the royal city of Assyria had experienced great political and social upheaval along with natural disasters that surely primed the people to be open to hearing from God. Like the wicked cities of our day and our own neighborhoods, the only question is whether someone will take the gospel message to them.

This time Jonah obeys. He arose, he went, and he preached. We're only told the simple overview of his message, and yet we're told the people repented and believed. They said "Amen" to Jonah's sermons, and a great revival broke out in Nineveh. Even the pagan king repents and leads the nation in turning to God. The king sounds like the captain of the ship Jonah fled on: "Who knows, God may turn and relent." In his gracious mercy, God does indeed relent because Nineveh did indeed repent. Jesus tells us in Matthew 12:41 that Nineveh's repentance was genuine.

Real repentance and conversion in the congregation is what faithful preachers long to see. Not Jonah. He is exceedingly, extremely angry. Jonah's heart is revealed in his response to Nineveh's repentance. He essentially says he would rather die than be the instrument of God's compassion to Nineveh. He sits outside the city hoping that perhaps judgment will still come on the city. The sovereign God is still at work in Jonah as Yahweh appoints a plant, a worm, and a wind to reveal the sad state of Jonah's soul.

The book ends as dramatically as it began. We're not given a satisfying conclusion to the story. We're forced to put ourselves in the place of Jonah. Where is our Nineveh? Do we actually want to see people repent and know Christ? Nineveh's repentance should be convicting to Israel. If the pagan nation turns to God, shouldn't the set apart nation turn to God? Yet, as we will soon see, Israel's rebellion is only growing and they will soon fall. What about us? Will we rebel like Jonah? God doesn't promise second chances for obedience. We should obey him today. In what areas of your life are you knowingly rebelling against God?

Psalm 66 God always keeps his promises. He keeps his promises to all his people, and he keeps his promises to you. Psalm 66 is a joyful psalm that celebrates and gives thanks to God for all of his mighty works. Come and see the works of God! The psalm begins by declaring the world-wide praise of God, but then it begins to focus on God's particular people. Like so many times in Scripture, the Bible points back to the exodus as a benchmark example of God's salvation. In verse 6, the psalmist points back to the crossing of the Red Sea as an example of God's sovereignty and salvation which should result in joy for his people. God preserved his people through many trials—many dangers, toils, and snares—and brought his people into a place of abundance. The psalm shifts from the group to the individual in verse 13. God has been faithful to his people, but he is also faithful to the individual person. How has God been faithful to you? Are you busy proclaiming the good news of Christ? Can you join with the psalmist in verse 16 and say, "Come and hear, all who fear God, and I will recount what He has done for my soul"?

Psalm 67 This short psalm is a wonderful prayer for the blessing of God. Verse 1 calls back to the great blessing of Aaron in Numbers 6:24–26: "May the Lord bless you and keep you and cause his face to shine upon you . . ." The blessing of God results in praises from the people of God. How many times in the New Testament do we see this same idea expressed in greetings like "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"? God's benediction upon us—his blessing—empowers us to proclaim his name to the ends of the earth.

Psalm 68 We're not told the occasion for David's rich celebration of God's care for his people, but the text is full of prayer and praise. God scatters his enemies which causes his people to rejoice (1–3). God is worthy of praise and song, particularly because of his care for the vulnerable and helpless (4–6). The history of God's faithfulness in the past should spur his people on to trust him in the present (7–10). The Lord has victory over his enemies (11–14). God is present among his people, pictured at that time through the sanctuary but ultimately pictured through Christ (15–18; see Eph 4:8). God daily bears the burdens of his people, which will include both Jew and Gentile. The kings of the earth will one day praise him. Blessed be God!

Thursday, July 30

Read: 2 Chronicles 26; Isaiah 6; Psalm 87

King Uzziah reigned over fifty years in Judah, beginning at the age of 16. He followed in the good steps of his father Amaziah before him. He was helped by an otherwise unknown prophet named Zechariah (not to be confused with the prophet we met in chapter 24 or the prophet who wrote the book in Scripture). The text begins by telling of Uzziah's victories. His fame is well-deserved, for he built a great army and made great structural improvements to the nation. Sadly, the problem that has plagued mankind since the garden is revealed in the heart of the king: the sin of pride. We would say that Uzziah has much to be proud of with his earthly achievements, and yet he attempted to seize authority that he did not have.

To put it simply, King Uzziah is a king and not a priest. The king had no right to offer incense before a holy God. This was the work of the priests. 80 priests attempted to tell the king this very thing, but Uzziah would not be stopped. The chief priest Azariah gives the king an opportunity to repent and not offer this sinful sacrifice, but in the midst of his angry response God judges the king. The Lord could have killed Uzziah on the spot as he did with Nadab, Abihu, Uzzah and others. In his mercy the Lord punishes the king with leprosy. Oh dear reader, be reminded of the seriousness of sin. Don't tempt the mercy of God.

Uzziah would not submit to the priests as king, so he now must submit to the priests as a leper. This long history of kings began with a son of David who built the house of God, but now this son of David cannot even enter the house of God. We need the perfect Son of David to welcome us into the household of God lest we meet the fate of Uzziah.

Other acts of Uzziah's reign are given in the works of Isaiah, but not the book we have in Scripture. We do see Uzziah make an appearance in the Book of Isaiah, but it is an appearance in death. In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah had a vision of Jesus Christ in the temple. The cleansing that Uzziah needed was the same cleansing that Isaiah needed, and it is the same cleansing that we need today. We must be cleansed by the true King. Once Isaiah had his sins covered by Christ, he was ready to hear from the Lord and serve him. May we come once again and be cleansed by the King, so that we might be sent out to serve him.

God's Word is amazing. **Psalm 69** was written by a suffering yet sinful man, as David makes plain about himself in verse 5. Yet so much of the text points forward to the sinless suffering servant Jesus Christ. A thousand years before our Lord was crucified at Calvary, God's people were given a glimpse into the agony of their eternal king through the agony of their earthly king.

David protests that he has not wronged the enemies who are attacking him. He says they hate him without cause, and we saw that happen more than once in David's life. The Apostle John tells us that Jesus saw David's situation ultimately as a prophecy of our Lord's own innocent suffering. He was truly hated without cause, yet the hatred that nailed Jesus to the cross was part of the predetermined plan of God to bring about our salvation.

The psalmist associates his suffering with his faithfulness to God. David is so closely identified with the Lord that the reproach he is facing is because his enemies are really bringing reproach upon God. In verse 9, David says that he is eaten up with passionate concern for the worship of God. "Zeal for Your house has consumed me," he says. Jesus's disciples would later realize that these words were perfectly pictured in the Lord's actions in the temple (Jn 2:17). Out of zeal for his Father's house, Jesus drove out the moneychangers and the ones selling animals there in the temple. He had watched until he could watch no more. He was consumed with the purity of his Father's house. Just as David could no longer tolerate the compromise and hypocrisy of the people of God, Jesus could not stand the corruption of his Father's house of prayer, and he drove out the offenders.

In verses 19–21 the psalmist confides to God that even in his deepest despair, he found no comfort from friends. They gave him no sympathy, but instead only gave him bitter food and drink. What may have been a word picture for the writer became reality for Christ on the cross. He was offered bitter gall, a poisonous herb, to eat. He was given vinegar to drink. Food that didn't nourish his life and a drink that did not quench his thirst. This is what was given to the Bread of Life and the Living Water as he died to give us life and nourish our souls. Isn't God's Word amazing to give us such a confident prayer of a suffering sinner like David? Isn't God's Word amazing to give us such a vivid picture of Christ?

Monday, August 3

Read: Psalms 71, 73

Psalm 73 begins book three of the psalter. Asaph was a Levite and a leading musician. We don't know specific details surrounding the writing of this psalm, yet we can learn much from a close reading of the text. The psalmist was growing bitter over the supposed prosperity of the wicked. It seemed like the wicked were getting away with everything! In verses 4–9 he rehearses all the ways they seem to be flourishing. It just didn't seem like they were going to get punished for their sin. The psalmist was far too focused on their seeming success and was sinking deeper and deeper into bitterness. He recognizes that had he continued on the path of bitterness, he would even be harming his family. Bitterness never ends well!

Everything changed in verse 17. Worshipping God changes our perspective. The broken and bitter psalm writer saw things in perspective when he entered the sanctuary of God. Worshipping with the people of God is a key tool that the Lord has given in the Christian life, including in this battle against bitterness. Sitting under the proper preaching of the Scriptures shapes our mind even when our feelings are fickle. There in worship Asaph was reminded of the true future destiny of the wicked. They may seem to be flourishing now, but that's not the end of the story. Those who seem to have everything under control in this life will lose all control at the moment of death. They seem to have it all together but they will be undone in the presence of God.

Looking back at the situation after having his thinking corrected in the sanctuary, Asaph recognizes just how wrong his thinking truly was. In the midst of bitterness the psalmist says he was no better than an animal. Lest you overvalue your furry friend, he says clearly, "I was senseless, brutish, and ignorant." That's not a flattering picture of what bitterness does in the life of a believer! It is an honest one though. We must recognize how dangerously we all flirt with bitterness at times. We see the wickedness of the world, and we think they are going to get away with it. God's word corrects our thinking. Worshipping with the people of God shapes our souls. Be guided by the Scriptures. Be sustained in the sanctuary. Remember the truth of Scripture: the wicked will not prosper. Those who are far from God will perish! This is not something we meditate on flippantly. Remembering the judgment that will befall all who reject God must certainly humble us and help us avoid bitterness. Take refuge in Yahweh, for he is good.

Reading an autopsy is never pleasant work, and yet sometimes it can be required reading. 2 Kings 17 gives us the official understanding of how the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell. It is often said that history is written by the victors. No doubt that many alternate explanations were offered for the death of the nation, but God leaves no room for doubt. Israel is rejected because they rejected Yahweh.

We're introduced to the final king of Israel, Hoshea. We're told about his beginning, but we're not told his ending like we have been with other kings. That is most likely because the kingdom ended before he did. Like we've seen before, the king starts cutting deals with other kingdoms in order to save his political skin. When Hoshea double-crosses the king of Assyria, he finds himself bound in prison. How tragic that all those years ago God delivered his people out of Egypt only for Hoshea to seek help from the king of Egypt in his day. If only he had truly trusted the Lord.

One verse tells of the defeat and exile of the entire nation, but the heart of the chapter explains the reason God caused this to happen. The conquering Syrians would surely say, "Our god defeated your god." Yahweh makes clear that it is not because he is weak that Israel has been defeated. Their downfall is a result of their idolatry. Verses 7–23 rehearse the nation's history of sin. They did not walk in the commandments of God (verse 8). They did not listen to him or believe him (verse 14). The nation that had been told to be fruitful and multiply is darkly sacrificing their children (verse 17). Because the people did not depart from the wicked sins of their previous kings, Yahweh caused Israel to depart from his presence into exile (verse 23). This exile that historically happened in 722 B.C. had been prophesied all the way back in Deuteronomy 28 and repeated in 1 Kings 14. God always keeps his word.

God's people have been cast out of God's land and now pagans are living in the land of Samaria (Israel). The hated Samaritans of the New Testament can be traced back here to the marriages between Jews and those Gentiles who are repopulating the land. The people of the land are mixing the methods of worshipping God with the worship of their false gods. In short, there's as much cultural chaos and confusion in Hoshea's day as there was in Joshua's. The people of God need an even greater deliverance than they received out of Egypt. For now we keep looking for the promised seed of God to come.

Wednesday, August 5

Read: 2 Kings 18–19; Psalm 75

Israel has fallen because of their idolatry. Will Judah meet the same fate? In 2 Kings 18–19 we see a king from the line of David who looks more like his forefather than anyone else so far. Let us meet Hezekiah. It is shocking that wicked Ahaz is the father of good king Hezekiah who does what is right in the sight of God. We're told that Hezekiah clung to Yahweh, and Yahweh was with him (18:6–7). The author reminds us of Israel's downfall at the hands of the Assyrian kingdom (18:9–12). Verse 13 moves the timeline forward a decade with a new king of Assyria to worry about. It seems that this good king is about to attempt to cut a deal with a wicked king to avoid defeat. This hasn't gone well in the past, but how will it go with Hezekiah?

Assyria's king sends members of his cabinet to negotiate with the king of Judah. Hezekiah has already been marked as a man who trusts God (18:5), but his trust is challenged throughout the speech of 18:19–25. The enemy is attempting to intimidate Judah by telling the people that Hezekiah has brought punishment on them from Yahweh for tearing down the altars and high places. Little do the enemies of God realize that this was exactly what the faithful king was supposed to do. Don't miss how much Rabshakeh sounds like the serpent in the garden. His speech could essentially be summarized: "Has God really said?" Just as the serpent made false promises in the garden, Rabshakeh promises the people blessing and prosperity. He says that Yahweh clearly is unable to actually provide for and protect his people. They must merely make their peace with him, not Yahweh. Satan also offers a false gospel!

Upon hearing this message, Hezekiah continues to trust the Lord. In deep emotion he enters the temple and sends for prayers from the prophet. God sends his answer through Isaiah: "Do not be afraid . . . I will make [the enemy] fall" (18:7). God promises to plant a rumor that will bring the defeat of Assyria. The ever-persistent Rabshakeh continues to try and plant doubts in the people of God, this time suggesting to Hezekiah that God himself will deceive him. He essentially says that Assyria has an unbeaten track record, and there's still time for Hezekiah to cave. When he hears of the latest threat Hezekiah himself prays for victory from God and for the glory of God to be made known. Yahweh promises the fall of Sennacherib and promises to protect his people. God perfectly keeps his promises.

2 Chronicles 32 provides a condensed version of what we read in 2 Kings 18–19. As we’ve noted before, the Chronicler often gives the most positive presentation of events. Here he presents Hezekiah in the best light, faithful and strong in the Lord. We’re given only some of his “deeds of lovingkindness” (32:32) or good deeds as we might say. But above all, the Chronicler shows us Yahweh’s faithfulness, for he is the one who will deliver his people.

Hezekiah’s previous acts of faithfulness are tested by the approaching invasion of Sennacherib (32:1). The king leads his people to make practical preparations concerning the city and its infrastructure. He also motivated the people by speaking “to their hearts” and using the language of previous encouraging charges in Scripture like those given by Moses to Joshua and David to Solomon (32:6–8). As we already saw in the Kings’ account, Sennacherib sends servants to taunt and intimidate the people of Judah. The Chronicler emphasizes that the question is a matter of deliverance. Notice how many times in verses 6–19 the words “hand” and “deliver” are used. Sennacherib’s message is simple: “You don’t want to fall into my powerful hand.” He knows that Hezekiah will tell the people to trust Yahweh, so he seeks to undermine that confidence as much as he can. Will Yahweh really be able to deliver them from the mighty king of Assyria (32:11)? Haven’t they heard the gods of the other nations were not able to deliver them (32:13)? This message of Sennacherib through his servants is repeated three times. The Chronicler’s disdain is plain in verse 19. How dare these people speak of Yahweh as if he were like any other god, which is just “the work of men’s hands.” Let us respond in similar disdain when the world tries to intimidate us and undermine our confidence in the Lord. He alone is able to truly deliver us.

Hezekiah and Isaiah fervently pray to heaven, and Yahweh responds to their prayers. The battle that has been so anticipated and feared ends before it begins. God sends his angel to thoroughly defeat the king of Assyria, who must return to his own land in shame (32:21). Praise God that he will ultimately defeat all of his enemies in even greater shame! He demonstrates that here because Yahweh really does deliver his people from “the hand of Sennacherib” and “the hand of all others” (32:22). All of that intimidation and taunting and fearmongering amounted to nothing! Let us remember that the next time we hear the similar taunts of Satan.

Friday, August 7

Read: 2 Kings 20; Psalm 79

2 Kings 20 provides a flashback in the life of Hezekiah. This was about a dozen years before Sennacherib's invasion. Isaiah delivers the somber message to Hezekiah that his sick bed will be his death bed. This is just another sick king in a long line of sick kings throughout this book, but this time the story ends differently. Hezekiah prays, just as we've seen him do in previous chapters. God hears and responds to the prayers of his people. Before Isaiah has even made it out of the temple, the Lord turns him around with a different message. The king will be delivered from death on the third day. (That sounds familiar.) God promised to extend the life of Hezekiah and to deliver his people for the sake of his own name and for David's sake. Yahweh graciously provides a sign to Hezekiah that this promise will certainly be fulfilled.

The news of Hezekiah's recovery has spread to neighboring nations, and the king of Babylon sends ambassadors to Judah. Not only news of his recovery, but news of the miraculous sign and perhaps a desire to form an alliance with Hezekiah spurred on this meeting. Remember that this is a flashback and takes place before the invasion of Sennacherib in chapter 19.

Even in the matter of the envoys of the rulers of Babylon, who sent to him to inquire of the miraculous sign that had happened in the land, God left him alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart.

2 Chronicles 32:31

Tests often produce sad results. Hezekiah's test results come back positive for pride. The king shows off all of his treasures to these foreign representatives. Babylon is a potential enemy, but that does not stop Hezekiah from revealing everything. Judah will soon fall, mainly because of the sin of Hezekiah's son Manasseh, and yet Isaiah seems to be connecting the future destruction with Hezekiah's prideful actions. The prophet announces that great destruction will come soon for the house of Hezekiah which is the house of David. What a strange response this good Davidic king offers. He seems to only be concerned about his own comfort, not the future of his people. How often do we act the same way? Are we more focused on our pride and prosperity that we really don't care about those coming after us? Do we really trust the Lord? It seems Hezekiah did, and yet the conclusion of his story just leaves us with questions. May our trust in God resound with clarity.

RAMAH MONTHLY

Decades of progress can sometimes be undone in just a few months or years. Manasseh's long reign began at a young age (possibly reigning alongside his father for the first decade), but was marked by the evil of his grandfather Ahaz's reign. The summary is given in verse 2, but the itemized list is given in verses 3–7. Manasseh's laundry list of sin is bookended by the phrase: "evil in the sight of Yahweh." We see the son undoing his father's reforms by rebuilding the high places and building idols like their relatives to the north had done. We see Manasseh as father sacrificing his son like other wicked kings before him. We even get echoes of King Saul's darkest night with the mention of witchcraft. As if these sins are not wicked enough, Manasseh's most offensive sin is listed in the heart of the list: he dared to make altars for other gods in the house of God. In the very place where Yahweh was supposed to be worshiped, Manasseh, worshiped other gods.

The Northern Kingdom had fallen for such egregious sins as these. How long can the Southern Kingdom expect to survive? We've previously read of Israel's kings causing the people to sin, but now we're told that Judah's king is causing Judah to sin. God promises that he will surely judge the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Yahweh will take tools for building—the measuring line and the plumb line—to measure out destruction. Like you would wipe a dirty dish, God will wipe Jerusalem clean. His judgment is promised. His judgment is sure.

We've noticed before that the books of Kings and the books of Chronicles often cover many of the same narratives, but yet are given for different purposes. The book of Kings was written to the people of Judah many generations later after they came out of exile. The purpose of the book seems to be to show why they were sent into exile in the first place. The editor of Kings makes that clear with the thorough picture of Manasseh's wickedness. However, the book of Chronicles often presents a more positive light (again written for a different generation and a different purpose). The Chronicler lets us know in 2 Chronicles 33 that Manasseh repented. What an appropriate reminder that as long as you have breath, it is not too late to repent. Some might have looked at Manasseh's horrific evils and considered him outside the reach of God. He sincerely repented and even reversed some of the terrible decisions he had made as king, but it was too late for the people. Judgment would soon come for Judah. If you're reading this, it's not too late to repent. Trust God today.

Tuesday, August 11

Read: 2 Kings 22; Psalm 81

The fate of Judah is sealed. They will face exile and judgment just like their northern brethren. However, God graciously grants them one final righteous king. Young king Josiah blesses the nation by walking in the way of Judah's good kings like David. Instead of doing what was right in his own eyes, he does what is right in the eyes of God. If that was all we knew of Josiah that would be enough to praise him, but we're told even more ways that Josiah honors the Lord.

Like Joash two hundred years earlier, Josiah is concerned about the worship of Yahweh in the temple. We see that the reforms Joash introduced still seem to be serving the nation well, either in practice or at least in principle. Josiah follows the same model in securing the funds for the repairs to the house of God. As an aside, while proper accounting practices are good and right, let it be said of us as it was of these laborers for God: "they deal faithfully" (22:7).

God's Word does not return void (Isa 55:11). While it was neglected and forgotten and perhaps even suppressed for many generations, the Book of the Law was discovered during the days of Josiah. We're not told exactly what happened to the Scriptures. Perhaps wicked kings had sought to stamp it out or fearful subjects had hidden it to preserve the contents. Jeremiah, who began prophesying to Judah five years earlier, had the Word of the Lord. Jeremiah had the Scriptures, but for whatever reason after decades of apostasy, the king himself is finally exposed to the Word of God. Exposure to the Word of God changes people. Some people speculate that Shaphan read specifically Deuteronomy 28–30 to the king which contains the long list of curses for those who break the law of God. You can understand why people think that might be the passage Josiah heard because when the king sees God as revealed in the text, he recognizes his sinful condition as well as that of the nation. The good king laments their neglect of God, and sends some of his leaders to "inquire of Yahweh" (22:13).

We know little of Huldah the prophetess, and we're not told why she was consulted instead of Jeremiah or Zephaniah, both prophets serving during that time. We do know that her message is the same as the one given by the unnamed prophets in the previous chapter. Judgement is coming for Judah. Because Josiah had a soft heart towards Yahweh, he will be spared this judgment but he can't change the fate of his nation. We need a king who can reverse the curse for his people.

The story of good King Josiah continues from the previous chapter. While earlier kings had led the nation into sin, this king is going to lead the people in righteousness. Where should he begin? He begins by reading to them the Word of God. And how do God's people respond to hearing God's Word? Obedience. The people renew their covenant with God according to all that he has spoken.

Having made spiritual vows before the Lord, the obedience of the people is only beginning. Josiah begins leading the people to remove all false worship from the nation. Verses 4–20 provide a vivid testimony of how deep the nation's cancerous sin had grown, but also just how radically committed the faithful king was to removing this sin. Like Samuel before him with Agag, Josiah is committed to hacking to pieces all forms of false worship. All of the vessels made for worshipping false gods in the house of the true God are removed. The idolatrous priests are done away with. With echoes of Moses burning and grinding to dust the golden calf, Josiah does the same thing and dumps the ashes on the graves of the common people who had worshiped these false gods (2 Chr 34:4). False teaching and false worship never stays with the teachers only. It always spreads to the common people.

Throughout all of Judah, Josiah is committed to eradicating the places of false worship but also making it difficult for that false worship to ever begin again. He defiles many places for that very reason. He ensures that no one can sacrifice a child on the altar of Molech again. Josiah is committed to not only tearing down structures used in false worship, but he is willing to do away with horses and chariots used in the worship of false gods. Surely someone considered “redeeming” these horses and chariots and putting them to noble use. Josiah demonstrates a radical willingness to remove all associations with idolatry. Would to God that we would be so committed to cutting sin out of our own lives, even at a personal cost.

Josiah stands head and shoulders above all the kings of Judah, even his forefather David. What praise God lavishes upon Josiah in 23:25. There was no king like Josiah, but Josiah could not rescue Judah from the Lord's soon-coming wrath upon the nation. The greatest earthly king is still a sinful man. Let us look to Jesus, the one who “rescues us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess 1:10).

Thursday, August 13

Read: Jeremiah 1; Psalm 84

Even in the midst of judging his people, God was faithful to speak through his prophet Jeremiah. The son of Hilkiah began serving during the reign of Josiah, the last good king of Judah. He continued to serve even after the kingdom fell under leadership of Zedekiah. The first chapter of the book bearing his name gives a preview of all that Jeremiah will do in ministry. We're given the names of the kings he served under, and they will appear throughout the book. We're given the message of Jeremiah's calling by God, which will anchor him during the dark days of ministry. We're also given some key themes that will appear throughout Jeremiah's preaching.

Jeremiah's words are also God's words, and we get the first report of "the word of Yahweh" in 1:4. In a shining example of the sovereignty of God, we hear Yahweh's call of the prophet. Before God even formed the baby in his mother's womb, God's perfect, divine will was for Jeremiah to be a prophet, not just to Judah, but to "the nations." Moses had balked at the Lord's call way back in Exodus making multiple excuses, but Jeremiah's plea of youth is not met with a rebuke. It doesn't seem like he's trying to escape the Lord's will, rather he humbly feels inadequate due to his age. God promises to be with Jeremiah and to give him the words to say. Isn't it wonderful how the Lord equips us to do what he's called us to do?

Notice how much authority God's words have; authority over nations and kingdoms (1:10). Jeremiah is not speaking in his own authority, but in the authority of God. The words given to the prophet in verse 10 preview his entire ministry. As others have noted, the three phrases in verse 10 will reoccur throughout Jeremiah's over forty years of preaching. "To uproot and tear down" or "pluck up and break down" seems to refer to his preaching against sin, which Jeremiah will do often. He will also "cause to perish and to pull down" or "destroy and overthrow," which is consistent with the recurring message of judgment. The prophet's gospel is not incomplete for he will also "build and plant," which points to the hope and renewal so common in his preaching.

The Lord gives two visions to Jeremiah, with the first vision promising that God will watch over his words. He will certainly accomplish them. The second vision promises judgment. Jeremiah must begin his ministry promptly knowing that opposition and persecution will certainly come. God promises to be with his servant for deliverance. Amen.

Judah has sinned and is facing the judgment of God but can be restored if they will repent. God paints this picture through the hands of a potter in Jeremiah 18–19. The Lord sends the prophet down to the potter’s house. Jeremiah is told that there he will hear the words of Yahweh, but first he must see a literal potter at work at his wheel. The potter easily transforms the ruined clay into another vessel according to his own good pleasure. Yahweh speaks now, asking “Can I not do the same thing with you, O Israel? You are like clay in the potter’s hand.” Using those same themes we saw in chapter one, God reminds us that he can uproot a nation as easily as he can rebuild it. He can promise good or harm for the people. The question is not God’s ability, but rather it is the nation’s obedience. Notice the repetition of the little word “if” in verses 8 and 10. Jeremiah must carry this message of repentance and potential forgiveness to the people, even though they will respond according to verse 12. Repentance will cause God to reshape them into a vessel fit for good use, but the nation is going to continue rejecting the Lord.

Not only do the people vow to reject the Lord’s message, they reject the Lord’s messenger. The people plot and scheme to taunt Jeremiah, but it doesn’t seem they plan to stop until he is dead (18:23). As Jeremiah prays to God, his will lines up with the Lord’s will. God has promised judgment on the people, and Jeremiah echoes those prayers: “May they be overthrown before You: Deal with them in the time of Your anger!” Like we see so often in the Psalms, Jeremiah trusts the judgment (and grace) of God in the perfect timing of God.

Now it’s time for Jeremiah to put an illustration before the people. Yahweh tells him to take an earthenware jar as well as a group of witnesses and stand outside the “Broken Pottery” Gate and announce judgment upon the people. Yahweh promises great destruction and even cannibalism in the face of a city siege. The prophet pictures the crushing brokenness they will experience but break the jar in front of the witnesses. No one will be able to claim they were not warned. They’ve heard God’s warning! The judgment of Jerusalem is coming as surely as that jar was crushed. Instead of repenting, the people stiffen their necks and harden their hearts. Let that never be said of us. Let us not harden our hearts, but instead trust the grace of the Potter.

Monday, August 17

Read: Daniel 1; Psalm 85

God is sovereign over the nations. We've seen this truth time and again on our journey through the big story of Scripture. As we zoom in on the life of the remarkable Daniel, we can't help but see how many times the sovereignty of God is on full display. We've already read that God has determined for Jerusalem to fall and for Judah to go into exile. It's not that Jerusalem was just weak in battle on a bad day. We're told the Lord gave the king of Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon. The world would have said the Babylonian gods were stronger than the God of Israel, but the Scriptures make this was all part of Yahweh's perfect plan.

To the victor goes the spoils, and to Babylon goes not only some of the best vessels from the temple (the same ones Hezekiah pridefully showed off), but some of the best youth from the land. Taken from their homeland and their culture, these Jewish lads are stripped of their Jewish names and the indoctrination begins with Babylonian names and a Babylonian diet. The names are important because the Hebrew names all are linked to Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel. The Babylonian names are all connected to the Babylonian gods. The renaming process is a key part of trying to break down, brainwash, and assimilate these exiles. That would have been a painful part of the process for the Hebrews. The pleasurable part of the process would have been the luxurious dining upon the king's food, but the four youth restrict their diets as part of their commitment to maintain holy lives in an unholy land. They seek to be faithful to their faithful God. The Lord sovereignly displays his favor upon these four by making them healthier at the end of the ten day trial than their Babylonian counterparts. God is sovereign over victories and vegetables.

God continues to bless Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah by giving them knowledge and insight in greater supply than the magicians and conjurers of Babylon. Put simply, the Hebrew test results were excellent! God is faithful to these four young men, but remember where they are. This is not another week at Youth Camp for these boys. Their lives have been uprooted. You might say their lives had fallen apart. They have been snatched from their homes, perhaps leaving family behind to suffer in their absence if not die altogether. They are pilgrims and sojourners in a foreign land. Yet God is faithful! Shouldn't God's sovereignty in their darkest days comfort us? He is indeed in control, even when life falls apart. Therefore, let us be faithful to him.

Tuesday, August 18

Read: Daniel 2; Psalm 86

Nebuchadnezzar's dreams were causing everyone nightmares. Putting special significance in his troubled dream and desperately desiring to know its meaning, the king has summoned his special cohort of dream interpreters. This surely wasn't the first time their special services had been required, but this time was like no other. The king demanded that they both repeat the dream and explain its meaning. Or else! The Chaldeans (a special group of dream interpreters) state the obvious: No one can do that, O king. No one except a god (2:11).

Not only was the fiery wrath of the king about to destroy those inadequate dream-keepers, the flames of the king's fury were about to engulf Daniel and his friends, too. But God had blessed Daniel (1:17), so he responds with discretion and discernment to these death threats. Learning that the issue is a dream, the four friends begin to pray to the God of all wisdom and knowledge. Notice the high view of God that they present in their prayer (2:20–23). All the magicians of the world could not declare this mystery to the king, but Daniel serves a God in heaven who can reveal mysteries. Daniel goes by faith to deliver this message to the king.

Daniel reveals the dream in verses 31–35, and we can understand the king's confusion. The king saw a large mixed metal statue that was eventually crushed by an even greater stone that becomes an even greater mountain and fills the earth. In verse 36–45, Daniel gives the interpretation that has been given to him by God who reveals dreams. Nebuchadnezzar is the golden head with great power and dominion, but his kingdom will not last forever. After him will come successive conquering kingdoms, but they will not last forever. Ultimately, all of these earthly kingdoms will come to an end. Daniel tells mighty Nebuchadnezzar that there will come a kingdom which will never be destroyed and it will have no end. God's kingdom will stand forever.

Identification of the various kingdoms is sometimes debated. Explanation of various aspects of the kingdom of God should be discussed. These things can't be debated: God is sovereign over nations and kings. He raises up and removes kings. God alone can reveal the great mysteries and he has ultimately done this through Jesus Christ, the King of the kingdom.

Making known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Him for an administration of the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth in Him.

Ephesians 1:9–10

Wednesday, August 19

Read: Jeremiah 24, 37

While the Lord was using Daniel in Babylon, he was also using Jeremiah back in Judah. Nebuchadnezzar takes a second group of Jews into exile in 597 B.C. It was at this time that Yahweh gave Jeremiah another vision. This vision is of two baskets of figs before the temple of God. The contrast could not be more clear. One basket of figs is very good and one basket is so rotten that they cannot be eaten. The God of Israel explains that he will treat the exiles in Babylon well. Though they have been taken from Judah, God promises that he will return them. He will build them up and plant them, not pull them down and uproot them. (Remember the themes of Jeremiah). God will be faithful to his remnant, and he will bring them back to the land. More than that, God will give them a heart to know Yahweh, and they will return to him with their whole hearts. Our readings in Ezra and Nehemiah will tell us of a generation that does return to the land in 538 B.C. However, many Christians believe that the greater fulfillment of God's promise will come in the future when a mass conversion of Jews to the Messiah takes place. (See Rom 11:1–5, 25–27). As for the bad figs, God promises that Zedekiah (the final earthly king of Judah) and all of Judah who remain in the land will face severe hardship. As with the promise for good, God's promise for bad was certainly kept in that day. Many Christians would say this promise of judgment is still being fulfilled in the history of the Jewish people today.

Chapter 37 brings us to the final days of the kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah does not keep the promises of God's judgment to himself. We see him warning Zedekiah the king. Even in the face of oppression and deportation, the people in the land of Judah do not listen to the God of Judah. The Lord specifically warns the king: "Don't be self-deceived. Babylon has gotten distracted by Egypt, but Babylon will return, and Babylon will destroy you." Isn't God gracious to warn us? He offers so many warnings in Scripture, and yet we often ignore them. Zedekiah certainly ignores Jeremiah's warning. Not only does the king ignore Jeremiah, but others persecute the prophet. He suffers in his ministry for the Lord. We are sometimes surprised when opposition comes to our work for Christ. Yet, the Bible warns us many times this will come. Even so, God is on record that he will preserve his saints into eternity. We see a picture of God's protection in this episode with Jeremiah.

Hasty professions of faith are often hastily cast aside. After the God of heaven revealed the mystery of his dream through Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar offered lip service to Yahweh (2:47). Regardless of the words the king said, his heart is revealed in the construction of this massive (90 feet tall and 9 feet wide!) self-glorifying statue. Located on the plain of Babylon with all the people of the earth uniting together for an unholy cause, this is like the Tower of Babel all over again! This forced worship of “all the peoples, nations, and men of every tongue” is Satan’s cheap imitation of the genuine worship that will one day rightly take place around the throne of heaven (Revelation 4–5). All who refuse to worship the true Christ will one day be cast into an eternal hell, but in Nebuchadnezzar’s counterfeit command, all who refuse to worship this idol will be cast into a fiery furnace.

As it is so often with Satan’s schemes, for a while it seems like it may work. Everyone seems to be bowing before the golden image. Everyone, that is, except Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. (Daniel’s absence is not explained in Scripture.) The Chaldeans who had not been able to interpret dreams can understand this much plainly: these men are not obeying the king and they are not loyal to the gods of the king. Would your faithfulness to Christ be so evident in the midst of external pressure? The three friends are hauled before the king where they are given the final ultimatum: bow or burn.

These men had already resolved to obey God no matter the cost. Their response was simple: we will not bow. Verses 16–18 continues to stiffen the spine of faithful Christians all these thousands of years later. God is able to save us, but even if he chooses not to, we will not bow. As the king’s face is surely reddening in anger, he turns up the heat! Nebuchadnezzar is going to show these Hebrews who is really the boss! Who will deliver them now?

Even in exile, God has a faithful remnant. He is faithful to protect and preserve his own. What a comfort are verses 24–27. Jesus promised to be with us (Matt 28:20), and we get an illustration of that truth right here. God is able to deliver! We’re not promised he will deliver us from the trials of this life, but he will certainly deliver us *through* the trials of this life, and he will deliver us through Christ. May we never bow to anyone except Jesus!

Friday, August 21

Read: Jeremiah 38–39

Even prison did not stop the impact of Jeremiah's message. He continues to communicate to the people: "This city will be overthrown. Safety is found in surrender. To continue to fight will mean death." Soldiers were hearing Jeremiah's message and paying attention. Perhaps some were ready to surrender, but morale was certainly going down. This was not the prosperity gospel they wanted to hear! The officials go to the king demanding that Jeremiah be put to death. His message must be stamped out. The people need to be told that everything is going to be fine, according to these princes. Zedekiah is a spineless, weak king, and yields responsibility to those under him. He yields Jeremiah over to them for death. The prophet is thrown into a cistern, similar to a well. Facing certain death, Jeremiah begins to sink into the mud and mire. Yet deliverance comes from an unexpected source. A Gentile (Ebed-melech the Ethiopian) sees what happens, goes to the king, and gains permission to rescue Jeremiah.

The cowardly king Zedekiah secretly summons Jeremiah, for he can't upset the officials who just got his permission to kill the prophet. Yet another time Jeremiah plainly communicates the Word of God to the king. Zedekiah refuses to listen. He does swear the prophet to secrecy though, more for his own sake than Jeremiah's. Jeremiah certainly does withhold information from the officials when they question him, but he is not lying. He just doesn't tell what is none of their business anyway. For now, Jeremiah is safe, but that is ultimately because God had promised to be with him (1:17–19), not because of the protection of an untrustworthy ruler.

The day of destruction finally arrives. Jerusalem is besieged for two and a half years, cut off from all outside help and plagued by all of the disaster that had been foretold. Even then, Zedekiah deludes himself that all will be well, until the gates are finally breached and the city is overrun. Thinking he can escape, Zedekiah runs but does not go far. All of God's promises concerning his judgment come true. God keeps his promises! Word seems to have reached Nebuchadnezzar about Jeremiah, because the Babylonian king protects the prophet of God. God even preserved the life of the Gentile who preserved the life of Jeremiah from the cistern. God is faithful. He cares for his people.

How many warnings had God given to Judah? The warnings can be traced back at least to the book of Deuteronomy! Oh how patient is our God! He continues to warn people today: be reconciled to God! Saints, are you heeding the warnings of God's word? God indeed keeps his promises.

RAMAH MONTHLY

We need a quick summary of chapters 40–42 to help us appreciate chapter 43. God works through the leadership of Babylon to free and provide for Jeremiah. The people of Judah (those out in the country) foolishly tried to rebel against Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem. The Babylonians had appointed a local ruler in Judah named Gedaliah, but the people conspired against him and assassinated him. To make matters worse, the people not only rebel against their conquerors, they are about to rebel against God. In Chapter 42 the people come to Jeremiah asking for direction from God, and they promise to listen no matter what God says. Whether good or bad, they will obey. Jeremiah clearly, repeatedly warns them to not flee to Egypt. If they will stay in the land of Judah, submit as subjects of Babylon, all will be well. If they go to Egypt, it will not go well. The message is plain: don't go to Egypt!

Chapter 43 begins with arrogant men yelling out to the prophet: “You’re a liar! That’s not what God told you to say!” How often people reject the message of God’s Word because they don’t like what it says. Everything Jeremiah has told them has come true, and yet they still think they should reject him now because they just don’t want to obey God. How wicked is the human heart! These scoundrels slander Jeremiah as well as his faithful friend Baruch who served alongside him in ministry. They refuse to listen to God.

These self-appointed leaders of Judah ignore God’s clear command (“Don’t go to Egypt!”) and load up the entire nation and head to Egypt! They enter the eastern delta of the nation known as Tahpanhes. When they arrive, the Lord speaks through Jeremiah once again. The people think that they will find safety in the land of Egypt, but God promises that Babylon is going to come and conquer Egypt, too. The Jews cannot escape their enemies. Verse 12 is hard to translate into English from the original Hebrew. It could mean that the king of Babylon will conquer the land of Egypt as easily as a shepherd wraps himself in his cloak. It could also mean that Nebuchadnezzar will pick Egypt clean as easily as a shepherd picks small insects off of his cloak. Either way makes the point clear: Egypt is going to pose no threat to Babylon at all, and it provides no safety for Judah. At all! They cannot escape the judgment that is justly coming. How foolish that some think today that they will escape the judgment of God. How foolish are you if you think you can escape the judgment of God.

Tuesday, August 25

Read: Jeremiah 52; Psalm 89

The final chapter in the book of Jeremiah provides a summary of the fall of Jerusalem. This monumental judgment in the history of Israel is so important that it is recorded four times in Scripture (2 Kgs 25, 2 Chr 36:11–21, Jer 39:1–14, Jer 52). We begin by being reintroduced to the final king of Judah, wicked Zedekiah. (Don't be confused by his genealogy in verse 1; that's a different Jeremiah in his family tree. Cf 1:1). Because of the great sins of Zedekiah and his predecessor Jehoiakim, Yahweh pours out this judgment on Jerusalem and Judah, casting them out of the land and the presence of God. This faithless leader of God's people is indeed captured, his family executed before his eyes, and he is bound in prison in Babylon until his death.

We read previously in Chapter 39 about the burning and destruction of the city in general, but now we're told of the burning of the temple specifically. The temple is burned. The palace is burned. The noble houses are burned. The walls are torn down. More people are taken back to Babylon. Even the temple furnishings are looted and taken back to Babylon. Even the servants of the temple are taken! Seven whole verses are dedicated to the destruction of the temple with details that most modern readers are ready to overlook. How could these utensils and furniture really matter that much that they're recorded in Scripture? The author is showing the depth of the destruction. What a phenomenal loss for the people of God, all due to their sin. More lives are lost. Positions are listed, but ultimately the total number of people is itemized. God has been more than patient. He's been long-suffering. He's been gracious. But God is faithful to his promises. And the judgment that he warned about many times has finally come.

Even in judgment, God is still faithful. He promised David that from David's line would come a kingdom that would have no end. Even in judgment upon the entire nation, God has preserved the line of David. The Book of Jeremiah concludes with faithfulness in the matter of the king of Judah. Captive for over thirty-five years, Jehoiachin is shown kindness by Nebuchadnezzar's son Evil-merodach. Just as David had shown kindness to Mephibosheth as Saul's line ended, God through the Babylonian king is showing kindness to the line of David. This isn't the promised son of David, but God will certainly be faithful through this preserved line of David to one day bring the ultimate Son of David, King Jesus.

During the same time that Jeremiah served in Judah and Daniel served the Lord in Babylon, God also spoke to and through the prophet Ezekiel. He had been taken captive at age 25 and was called into ministry at age 30. He served the Lord well over two decades (that are documented in Scripture). Ezekiel saw many spectacular visions, but perhaps the third vision—the one in chapter 37—is the most well-known. The prophet dated his visions, helping us follow the chronology of his book. Ezekiel heard of the fall of Jerusalem in 33:21. At a time when all hope must seem lost, the prophet soon sees a vision pointing to the Lord's restoration of his people.

God had promised in chapter 36 that he would give his people a new heart and a new spirit. He promised to remove the heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh (36:26). Surely the exiles would wonder how this precious promise could ever come true. In Ezekiel's vision, he paints a helpless picture of the hopeless nation. He sees the people as nothing more than dead, dry bones. Yet, God has just promised that they would have new life—these bones would indeed live. In the vision Ezekiel proclaims the word of the Lord and the breath of God enters the bones and the nation arises into a wonderfully large army. The Lord reiterates: "I will put My Spirit within you, and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, Yahweh, have spoken and done it," declares Yahweh" (37:14).

Psalm 137 gives another perspective from the exiles in Babylon. Amidst the taunts of their captors, the Jews declared they had not forgotten their homes. No matter how long they were removed from Jerusalem, they desperately desired to be back in the land of Israel. The second half of the psalm can leave us uncomfortable because of the direct prayers for judgment upon Israel's enemies. We forget that God has already promised to judge his enemies. It seems that the Edomites joined with the Babylonians in destroying Jerusalem. In one sense they served as God's executioners. But on the other hand, they participated in excessive violence against Judah. History agrees with the psalmist in suggesting that the enemies destroyed the babies of Israel. As Israel prays for the same judgment to meet the Edomites, their prayer is not a prayer of vengeance but a prayer for justice. Even today, we as Christians are not allowed to be vengeful, for that belongs to God. However, we can certainly pray that the just God will bring justice to our broken world.

Thursday, August 27

Read: Daniel 4; Psalm 91

God's sovereignty has been on display in a variety of ways. He gave his people over to exile into the hands of wicked Nebuchadnezzar. He reveals dreams. He preserves his people in circumstances as difficult as a fiery furnace. Is there anything God can't do? Daniel 4 provides the testimony of the same wicked ruler who defeated the people of God but is humbled to give praise to the true God. Nebuchadnezzar bookends his testimony in chapter 4 with summary praises in verses 1-3 and 34b-37. Something dramatic must have happened in the life of this powerful ruler to admit that there's someone even more powerful than he.

The king was living a life of comfort when he began to have another fearful dream. Like before Nebuchadnezzar receives no help from the Babylonian magicians but looks to Daniel to interpret the dream. This time he doesn't have to guess the dream; the king tells him directly. Just as Pharaoh recognized that the Spirit of God was in Joseph which allowed him to interpret dreams, so too Nebuchadnezzar knows that Daniel will have no difficulty interpreting the dream thanks to the Spirit of God within him.

The king's alarming dream alarms Daniel, too. We're not told that it takes any great length of time for Daniel to understand the dream, but it takes time before he's willing to explain the dream to the king. In compassion he expresses how much better it would be if the dream applied to Nebuchadnezzar's enemies. After hesitation Daniel must truthfully explain: the dream is about you. Strong, great, powerful Nebuchadnezzar will be cut down. For seven years he will not act like a great king but like a wild animal. This severe judgment is most assuredly coming for the king. Unless he repents. The prophet is calling the pagan king to submit to the God of Israel. If he will humble himself and bring himself down to earth, he will not be cut down to the ground.

God graciously gave the king a year to repent, yet he refused. He didn't humble himself; he kept puffing himself up even greater! As he surveys his kingdom and boasts in his might, (while the words are still in his mouth!) Nebuchadnezzar is brought down low. A medical condition called lycanthropy would be the diagnosis given today, but God's diagnosis was simpler: pride. Pride goes before a fall. Pride brings down both the powerful and the poor. Will we learn the lesson about pride? The Lord sustained the king during his seven years of punishment. After experiencing the chastening hand of God, his pride is turned to praise, not of self, but of the sovereign God.

Over two decades have passed between Daniel 4 and 5. Nebuchadnezzar is dead and his son (or possibly grandson) Belshazzar is on the throne. Whatever spiritual awakening his father may have had after the seven year stay in the pasture, the son learned none of those lessons. The king is throwing a lavish feast when he decides the opulence of the palace is not enough. What the party really needed is some holy vessels ransacked from the temple of God in Jerusalem, the ones Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem all those years ago. What a mockery of Yahweh! These drunken pagans call out to the gods of their desired riches using the vessels consecrated and set apart for the worship of the one, true, living God. God sees. He responds.

A mysterious hand begins writing on the wall. The message is clearly seen but not clearly understood. Belshazzar's fear is plainly seen by all, and he begins seeking answers from the royal magicians and sorcerers. We've seen this one before. We know they don't have the answers. This time there's an additional source of interpretation that we haven't met before: the queen mother. She reminds Belshazzar (or informs him for the first time) that there is a man in the kingdom who has a proven track record of interpreting difficult puzzles and dreams. Listen to him.

Daniel is brought in before the king, but the king does not give the prophet the respect he received under the previous administration. Daniel is unimpressed with Belshazzar as well and tells him that he can keep his gifts. The interpretation will come without reward. But first Daniel reminds (or informs for the first time) of the lessons learned from his ancestor Nebuchadnezzar. To put it succinctly, Belshazzar is not a fraction of the man that was Nebuchadnezzar. He has not humbled himself, but God will certainly humble this king, too, but without a year's warning. Belshazzar has been weighed in the balance and found wanting. His kingdom will not stand. The king tries to reward Daniel for interpreting this message, but it is a useless reward because that very night the kingdom of Babylon falls to the kingdom of Persia. God can use one nation to punish his people Judah, and then use another nation to punish the sins of the first. He is indeed sovereign over all.

God continued to preserve Daniel even as the reigning kingdom changed. The prophet remained faithful in the midst of a chaotic and changing world. Daniel read the Scriptures of Jeremiah and trusted that exile would not last forever. He prayed, trusting God and looking for the Anointed One, the Messiah, who would come.

Monday, August 31

Read: Daniel 6; Psalm 92

God had preserved the three faithful friends as they stood against the wickedness of Babylon. The Lord has used Daniel in high positions in that Babylonian court. There's a new kingdom in charge now. Will God continue to preserve his people under the rule of Persia? Will Daniel continue to be faithful?

With a new administration comes new organization, and with worldly organizations comes worldly cutthroat competition. Daniel quickly rises to the top of this new Persian kingdom as he had also been elevated in the previous Babylonian kingdom. Daniel's jealous, competitive colleagues sought to find a way to trap him, in much the same way that his friends were conspired against back in chapter three. These deceptive politicians realized that the only possible way they could trap Daniel would be to pit his faith in God against his service to the king. By stroking the king's ego, they get the king to enact an irrevocable law that only prayer and petitions can be made to King Darius for the next thirty days. Anyone caught praying to anyone else will be thrown into the den of lions.

How would you respond if someone threatened your life if you visibly prayed to God? Most of us would probably choose to pray in our hearts and keep our heads. Not Daniel. He had already built a practice in his life of praying three times a day with the windows open towards Jerusalem. No earthly edict would change his heavenly communion. We're not told that we have to pray a certain way or a certain number of times a day, but for Daniel, to cease his practice in the face of opposition would have been compromise. He could no more stop praying as he always had than his three friends could bow to the idol made of gold.

This is exactly what the conspirators were planning on. They caught Daniel in the act of praying and reported back to the king. When the king heard the words of the officials, he knew that he had been manipulated. He immediately set his mind on saving Daniel. He had until sunset. Darius could offer no help, but even as Daniel was being cast into the lions' den, he pointed Daniel to the One who could help. The true God does indeed deliver Daniel. The false accusers are thrown into the den to face the punishment they desired for Daniel. The prophet was faithful even in the face of death, and God will use this faithfulness to stir up the heart of a pagan king to send God's people back into their land, just like he promised. Isn't our God faithful?

Tuesday, September 1

Read: Ezra 1, 3; Psalm 93

Kings make royal proclamations all of the time, but this was no ordinary royal proclamation: the pagan King Cyrus is going to fulfil the Word of Yahweh. God had spoken through Jeremiah the prophet (see Jer 25:11; 29:10–14) that after seventy years, God's people would come back to the land of promise. And God always keeps his promises. Here is the Exodus 2.0. For those who want to return to Jerusalem, the king tells them to return and rebuild the temple. And for those who want to stay settled in the land they've known all their lives (Babylon), they should support those who are going to return. God is still making it possible for his people to worship him!

The Lord moves in mysterious ways. He stirred up the Persian king to do his will. He stirred up his set apart people to do his will. Even those who stayed behind in Babylon strengthen those who return with a love offering to meet their needs on the journey and when they make it home. Even Cyrus contributes to the caravan by giving them the holy vessels that had been in the temple when they went into exile. You may not get excited by a list of dishes but consider this: Nebuchadnezzar had plundered the temple, removed them as an act of conquest, and carried these vessels all 800 miles back to Babylon. Belshazzar feasted on these dishes the night he died and his kingdom was defeated. And now Cyrus has them safely stored in the treasurer's house, ready to return them to their proper place. Even after seventy years of exile, God is faithful to his people and making it possible for them to worship him. He's even providing them the tools they need!

The return to the land is carried out in three waves over a century. The first wave is covered in Ezra 1–6, and we meet the leaders in chapter 3: Jeshua and Zerubbabel. We see that this returning generation was committed to the Word of God. They rebuilt the altar in order to offer burnt offerings, as it is written in the Law of God. They celebrated the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) as it is written. They began rebuilding the temple and praising Yahweh according to the directions of David. These people take God's Word seriously. They've come out of exile purified and prepared to obey the Lord. Yet the older generation recognizes that things aren't as glorious as they once were. Will they live in the past? Or will they learn from the past and see what God is doing in the present? God has been so faithful to keep his promises!

Wednesday, September 2

Read: Ezra 6; Psalms 94–95

Opposition to the work of God and the people of God will always arise. The exiles who returned to Jerusalem have faced opposition on many fronts. Ezra 4 offers scenes of opposition. Chapter 5, verse 1 lets us know that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah ministered during this generation. A study of their books lets us see that spiritual apathy had spread among the people. The apathy and opposition seem to be receding in chapter 5 and the work to rebuild the temple is continuing. Then the local government shows up raising questions about the authority of the people to be doing this work. They want to know, “Who are you, and who told you that could be doing this work?!” Their answer should suffice: King Cyrus. But there’s a new king on the throne of Persia: Darius. Will he allow the work to continue or have the people come this far to only be stopped now? The fate of God’s people seems to rest in pagan hands rather than Jewish hands.

Chapter 6 continues the story with the king issuing a decree. Darius tells his people to search high and low. They search the National Archives, and it is not found. Instead, it’s found in the king’s summer home in Ecbatana. Only God could preserve his people by someone finding just the right scroll at just the right time in the king’s garage at his vacation house! The last king’s approval has been documented, but what about the new king? Darius could still stop the work of Judah, and that’s certainly what his government officials in Jerusalem are hoping for. Instead the bureaucrats are told: “Keep away from there. Leave that work on the house of God alone!” More than that, Darius does exceedingly above all they could ask or think and foots the bill! He makes provisions from the royal treasury for the cost of the rebuilding project. Only God could work things out this way. Make no mistake, Darius is self-serving and wants to cover his religious bases (6:10), but God is sovereign even in the heart of the king.

While all of the government red tape was being worked out in Babylon, the work had continued in Jerusalem. Notice that the elders of the Jews did not stop working in the face of opposition (this time) and did not hold their breath waiting on permission from the king. They had been motivated by the preaching of the Word of God (6:14). They’re not weeping anymore. Their work gave way to great rejoicing and worshipping the God who worked all things together for their good and his glory.

Exposure to the Word of God shapes us. It changes us. By the power of the Spirit at work in us, the steady diet of God's Word will make us more like Christ. Nehemiah 8–9 shows a people changed by the Scriptures. They hear it and submit to it. This causes confession of sin, but also comfort from the Scriptures. Time has steadily marched on in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The first wave of people returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua in approximately 538 B.C. Eighty years later in 458 B.C. the second wave of people returned from Babylon to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra. Around a dozen years later the third wave returned with Nehemiah leading them. Ezra has been teaching the people God's Word (see Ez 7). Nehemiah has been rebuilding the wall surrounding Jerusalem. God has been faithful, and the people respond in worship.

The scene at the Water Gate still encourages us all these years later. The people are united in the desire to hear God's Word. They don't have to be summoned or begged. They gather as one man and demand of Ezra: bring the book! Notice who was there: men, women, and all who could understand. Who else could that be but the children? The children were not segregated off in the worship of God. Notice the reason they gathered. To hear the book of the law. Notice all the names of those men who supported Ezra's ministry and provided understanding of the law to the people. Notice how long the people stood for the reading of the Bible: from morning to midday. How hungry the people were for the Word of God! Oh that our churches would be marked by a hunger for the Bible!

When the people are exposed to the words of God, they recognize their sins against God. They begin to weep and must be comforted by their leaders. This was a holy day that must be celebrated. It is not a day for sorrow. Perhaps you've had occasion to put grief on pause in order to celebrate a child's birthday or something similar. The calendar controlled. The people indeed celebrate on that day, and the next day they come back to study the Bible again. They confess their sins. They renew their covenant with God. Saints, this is what we do every Lord's Day. We gather as a united people to hear God's Word. It exposes our sins and comforts our hearts through Christ. The Scriptures are taught and explained. Every week we renew our covenant with God in worship. Hallelujah! Bring the book!

Friday, September 4

Read: Psalms 96–98

Portions of Psalms 96–98 (as well as Psalm 100) are also found in 1 Chronicles 16 when David dedicated the tabernacle on Mount Zion. They are joyful psalms of praise, but they are not restricted to Israel. The praise is pictured as spreading to the ends of the earth. Do we see this taking place today? Of course not. Israel did not see that during its day either. Yet, a careful reading of Scripture shows that the blessing on Abraham and his family was always for the purpose of blessing all of the families of earth. It has always been God's plan that Israel bring forth the Messiah for all the nations.

Psalm 96 not only pictures all of the earth praising God, but specifically praising Yahweh for he comes to judge the earth. He will rule and reign with righteousness. Only the Messiah can bring peace on earth. The earth presently groans awaiting its redemption (Rom 8:14–22), but Psalm 96 pictures the rejoicing the earth will one day enjoy. Yahweh comes. He comes to judge the earth! The psalm begins with a call to sing “a new song.” That idea appears again in the New Testament in Revelation, when Jesus comes to judge the earth. When we see the King's perfect reign, we will indeed ascribe to the Lord the praise due his name; that is to say, we will truly worship the King.

Psalm 97 continues the idea of rejoicing in the reign of King Jesus. Just as God appeared in spectacular physical glory at Mount Sinai, the psalm begins with rich imagery of the presence of Yahweh. Some New Testament passages like Matthew 24 and Revelation 19 carry this same imagery in reference to the Lord's Second Coming. God is greater than all earthly idols made with human hands. He alone is worthy of worship. Because he is worthy of worship far above all worthless gods, we rejoice with gladness over his coming judgments. Earthly judgments sometimes get it wrong. Sometimes it seems like the wicked are flourishing. Yahweh purely hates evil. He perfectly preserves the life of his saints. He delivers them from evil hands. Therefore, we rejoice with joy!

Psalm 98 carries forward the ongoing theme of joy over the king's future coming and perfect rule. He is worthy of praise because he has powerfully worked salvation, which has been seen to the ends of the earth. All of the earth should rejoice in Yahweh for he is king. As with Psalm 96, even creation is rejoicing over the perfect judgment of King Jesus.

We don't have to wait until the last day to praise our King. Let us sing to the Lord!

RAMAH MONTHLY

Psalm 99 The Lord reigns over all things. The psalm speaks of Yahweh seated on his throne, reigning in strength, justice, and equity. He is king! Yahweh is a holy king, emphasized three times in this psalm (99:3, 5, 9). All of creation should respond in humble worship when confronted with our great God. Can you believe that God has allowed us to worship him? He has entered into a relationship with a particular group of people, ultimately all who will come to him through Christ. Verses 2–3 hint that the day is coming when Gentiles will be able to praise the Lord. We get a preview of that sort of intimate, personal relationship in verses 6–7 with the mention of Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. They spoke to God, and he answered them! Not only does God answer his people, but he forgives them (99:8)! Let us worship this holy God!

Psalm 100 climaxes a series of psalms that have celebrated God as King. It is a psalm of thanksgiving. How appropriate that we give thanks and praise our Shepherd-King (100:3). We have complete assurance that Yahweh alone is God and no one else. He is our Creator and Savior. We belong to him and are dependent on him, just as sheep depend on their shepherd for absolutely everything. Yahweh is a good shepherd. His lovingkindness is steadfast. His grace is enduring. From generation to generation. Forever. We as his sheep should praise our King. We gather with his people as verse 4 pictures. We don't forsake the gathering of ourselves together as the author of Hebrews preaches (Heb 10:25). When we gather, we most certainly sing praises with thankful hearts. We sing his praises, even if our singing can best be described as "joyful noises." We also serve our great God, both in the gathering and throughout our lives.

Psalm 101 David's personal reflection on the type of king he desired to be was not written only for himself. In some ways he measured up and in some ways he failed, but David knew there would be another king after him. The people would have longed for a king to come who also measured up to these standards as God's Word shaped their expectations of a king. Christians reflecting on the text realize that as hard as we strive to reach these standards on our own, we will certainly fail. Only the true Son of David, King Jesus can perfectly embody or live out this psalm. But Jesus can also strengthen his people to live by his Spirit and press toward the goal of this text with thankful hearts.

Tuesday, September 8

Read: Luke 1

God continues to move his grand story along. We saw God's people go into exile, where the Lord was faithful to his faithful remnant. He brought back a small group into the land of Judah, where they rebuilt their land and themselves according to God's Word. But much time has passed. Over 400 years of silence from God. No prophet has been sent. The promised king has not come. Will God keep his promises to his people?

Dr. Luke begins his carefully–investigated narrative of God's fulfilled promises with two parallel miraculous birth promises. We first meet a righteous older couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth. The text is clear that they are blameless (not perfect) before God, but their childlessness would have been viewed in their culture as punishment from God. In God's perfect timing an angel announces to Zechariah that they will indeed have a child, even in their old age. While the Jewish people may have wondered if God's Spirit had been active among them these last centuries, this child will most certainly be filled with the Holy Spirit. God has much for this son of the priest who will go forth in the spirit of Elijah. This son, John the Baptist, will go forth as the final old covenant prophet. He will be the forerunner of the promised Messiah. God has spoken. He has promised. Yet the righteous priest doubts God's promises.

If that story were not wonderful enough, we read next the promise to young Mary concerning the holy child she will carry in her womb. God has not forgotten his people. God promises that he is still bringing forth a promised king who will reign over the house of Jacob forever. He will rule from the throne of his father David. There will be no end to the kingdom of this promised child! This is the promise of God.

Notice that both Zechariah and Mary asked questions concerning these promises, yet Mary's question is answered while Zechariah is silenced until the birth and naming of John. This would imply that Zechariah's questions arose from a place of doubt while Mary's questions were from a place of (perhaps weak) faith. Yet God kept his promises to both! God will remove the disgrace of Elizabeth, and he will remove the disgrace of his people. May we be like Mary, saying, "Let it be done to me according to your word."

This promised child will be named Jesus, which means "Yahweh saves." God's big story is the story of the God who saves. He has not forgotten his promises. He will keep every single one.

Luke's orderly sequence in chapter one has woven together the stories of Jesus and John the Baptist. We've seen the announcements of their births and the praises that erupted in response to the God who has looked upon the "humble state" (1:48) of his servants and visited and "accomplished redemption for His people" (1:68). Now in chapter two, Luke zooms the lens of his pen in on the birth of Jesus alone.

We've seen God's perfect providence at work in both big and small details throughout his story, but don't miss how God's sovereignty shines in this narrative. A pagan king decrees a census at just the right time. The census is implemented throughout the land at just the right time. This man Joseph from just the right family travels to just the right place at just the right time—the time when Mary must give birth. God's promises about this Son of David's mother (Isa 7:14) and even his birthplace (Mic 5:2) are perfectly being fulfilled. This promised king is welcomed, not in a palace but in a manger. Not by royal officials but by rural shepherds. From his earliest days, this child along with his parents are pictured as being perfectly obedient to the law of God. What a contrast to the many wicked kings in the nation's past.

Luke gives the historical narrative of Jesus's birth, but John helps understand even further the theological significance. The babe born in Bethlehem is God. The eternal Word of God, the second member of the Trinity, Jesus Christ our Lord became flesh and dwelt among us. He came to us because we could certainly never go to him. He became like us in our humanity, so that he could make us like him. He came in grace and truth, and he came to explain the Father.

How should we respond to these passages of Scripture? Like the shepherds, let us glorify and praise God because in Jesus we have found the Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Like Mary, we must treasure these things and ponder them in our hearts. Don't let familiarity with Jesus cause you to fail to see Jesus as he is. Like Anna, let us give thanks to God for the ways that he specifically fulfilled all of the promises leading to our Lord's first coming. Like she patiently waited then, let us patiently and expectantly wait now for his second coming.

Thursday, September 10

Read: Matthew 2; Psalm 102

God's promised king continues to fulfill ancient prophecies even in his earliest days. Matthew 2 tells us of at least four fulfillments of Scripture accomplished in three successive scenes. As the scenes grow darker, the supernatural preservation of the Messiah shines brighter.

The first scene is most familiar, bringing to mind three regally dressed men riding camels right up to the feeding trough where baby Jesus lay. When we study the text carefully, it seems like as much as two years have passed, and Joseph's family is now living in a house instead of that temporary shelter on the night of Mary's delivery. We realize three gifts are mentioned but the men are not numbered. The magi whom we often refer to as "wise men" were probably something along the lines of astrologers from the Far East. For all that we think we know about these men but the Bible doesn't actually make clear, we are told this important fact: they came looking for the King of the Jews. Herod thought he was the king of the Jews! Is someone attempting a coup? What a sad state of affairs in the capital city when the religious leaders could point to the prophecy concerning Bethlehem but were too apathetic to make the short journey to Bethlehem. Herod's question does not raise any questions for them. Everything is business as usual for the religious elite, but for these pagan stargazers, they have seen the star sent from heaven and they worship the child the star leads to, the true King of the Jews.

Herod soon recognizes that the magi have not obeyed his treacherous request that would have revealed Jesus's location. The angel of the Lord instructs Joseph how to safely lead his family as God preserves this promised son from the puppet king's plans. Not willing to allow any threat to his throne, wicked Herod orders the slaughter of all baby boys in Bethlehem under the age of two. Matthew tells us that both events—Jesus's escape to Egypt and the death of the children in Bethlehem—in some sense fulfill Old Testament prophecy. Even the fact that Jesus was raised in Nazareth instead of Bethlehem after returning from Egypt is also another meticulous detail fulfilled in God's perfect plan.

God preserved the promised Messiah. He comforted the weeping mothers of Bethlehem. He led Joseph as this new father sought to protect and rear the most unique of all children. Saint, don't you think that God can also preserve, comfort, and lead you? For all of this and more, let us worship Christ the king.

When Christians speak of how Jesus saves us, we often point to his death, burial, and resurrection. That is most assuredly true! We are saved by the death of Jesus Christ. We are saved by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Did you realize we are also saved by the life of Jesus Christ? Jesus was the perfect sacrifice for our sins, because he not only died the death we deserve but also because he lived the perfect life we could not live. We are only given one scene in Scripture of Jesus's life between infancy and adulthood, but it gives us great insight into the perfect active obedience of Jesus Christ. Luke tells us in 2:40 that Jesus is growing physically and mentally and the grace of God is upon him. Luke gives us one scene as an illustration of this truth.

Joseph and Mary faithfully traveled to Jerusalem each year to celebrate the Passover, but it was customary for sons to celebrate their first Feast at age 12. This prepared them for their bar mitzvah at age 13 when they became a “son of the commandment.” Jesus's faithful parents are raising him faithfully as well. After the days of the Feast are completed, the family begins their journey home. Realizing Jesus is not among their caravan of relatives and acquaintances, Mary and Joseph turn back to Jerusalem where they eventually locate their son in the temple. Luke has told us that Jesus is being filled with grace and wisdom, but this wisdom seems to be beyond his years. He is respectfully listening to and asking questions of the teachers. His understanding seems beyond their understanding. His response to his anxious parents seems beyond their understanding. Jesus clearly knows by age 12 that his greatest obedience is to his heavenly Father, even above his earthly father. To be clear, Jesus has been obedient and respectful to his parents. Their separation was not due to rebellion but rather misunderstanding. Jesus continues in submission and obedience to his earthly parents as well as his heavenly Father.

Jesus will perfectly obey throughout his entire life. He will obey when tempted in the wilderness. He will obey when rejected and scorned. He will obey all the way to the cross. And by his perfect active obedience, we live. In his incarnation, Jesus did not stop being God, but he has taken on full humanity. Unlike the first human, this human will obey the Father perfectly. Because of his perfect obedience, he can impute righteousness to our disobedient accounts. Now we can obey in his strength. Let us treasure all these things in our hearts.

Monday, September 14

Read: Matthew 3:1–4:11; Psalm 104

The forerunner, the baptism, and the temptation—this reading covers three significant events in Jesus’s earliest days of ministry. Luke told us of the remarkable conception and birth of John the Baptist, but here Matthew tells us about his remarkable ministry. Echoing Elijah, John dresses like a prophet. He eats like a prophet. He preaches like the prophet Isaiah said a future prophet would preach. John preaches the same message that Jesus will soon preach: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” As the last prophet in the long line of old covenant prophets, John’s ministry matters in paving the way for the ministry of Jesus.

John came preaching, but Jesus came to John to be baptized. Whether John fully understands Jesus’s identity before the baptism or not until after the voice from heaven speaks at the baptism, John knows something is not right with this picture. John has been baptizing people in connection with their confession of sin, so why would Jesus need to be baptized? He is emphatic in his attempt to prevent Jesus’s baptism. Yet Jesus knows that it is fitting and necessary that he be baptized to “fulfill all righteousness.” Just as Luke showed us that Jesus perfectly obeyed the law from his earliest days, now Matthew shows us that Jesus is still fulfilling the law and righteousness of God. Furthermore, Jesus is identifying himself with the people he came to save. Jesus doesn’t need to repent, but you do. Jesus doesn’t need to be cleansed, but you do. Jesus doesn’t need to have his sins forgiven because he’s never sinned, but you have sinned and you need to have your sins forgiven. Jesus is identifying himself with the people he came to save, and the Father speaks with pleasure from heaven. As the Spirit rests on Jesus to empower him for ministry, we realize that all of this is the work of our triune God.

Immediately afterwards the Spirit thrusts Jesus into the wilderness for this dramatic three-fold temptation by Satan. Sometimes we walk away from this narrative concluding, “Jesus answered Satan with Scripture; therefore, the big point of the passage is that I also memorize Scripture so that I’ll stand strong in the face of temptation.” It’s true that Christians should memorize Scripture, but is that the point? No, something far greater is going on. The first Adam was tempted in a garden and failed. Israel was tempted in the wilderness and failed. The second Adam, the true Israelite, our Savior Jesus Christ was tempted in the wilderness and was faithful! The only reason we can ever stand strong against temptation is because of the work of Jesus in us! Praise the Lord!

RAMAH MONTHLY

The Apostle John gives us insights into some of Jesus's earliest days of ministry that the other Gospel writers do not mention. Of course, John himself tells us that there are many other things Jesus did that were not recorded in Scripture (21:25). The Apostle tells us of John the Baptist's proclaiming Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. John gives us more insight into Jesus's earliest disciples, even mentioning that Andrew and Peter had also been disciples of the Baptist. We learn of Jesus's supernatural knowledge because he tells Nathaniel things only Nathaniel himself could have known. This blunt man from Cana (21:2) who doubted that anything good could come from Nazareth quickly identifies Jesus as the Son of God, the true King of Israel. Jesus assuredly says that this is only the beginning of heaven communicating with earth. Just as Jacob got a glimpse of heaven coming down to earth through his ladder dream, Jesus the Son of Man will continue to reveal the Father in heaven to his disciples on earth. This is only the beginning. They will begin to receive further identification and confirmation concerning the Christ in just a few short days.

Nathaniel's home town of Cana is the location for one of Jesus's earliest but best known miracles—turning water into wine. The week-long wedding celebration is about to end on a note of disappointment rather than a prolonged note of joy due to the groom prematurely running out of wine. Since Jesus and his disciples are all guests at the wedding, it's probably that they were close friends or relatives of someone in the wedding party. Perhaps that explains Mary's involvement with the wine situation. Jesus is not disrespectful to his mother, but he does seem to be distancing himself from the mission at hand. He has a mission from heaven that is on a divine time table. Nevertheless, Jesus does manifest his glory through this first sign. Only God creates. Creating wine from water points to Jesus as being the Creator God.

The Apostle speaks often in his Gospel about the signs of Jesus. The other writers spoke of miracles but John is intentional in his choice of words. The miracles of Jesus are not mere displays of power. They point to the identity of Jesus as God. The other Gospel writers certainly are making those same connections, but John's evangelistic fervor causes him to be selective and intentional about the signs of Jesus. He has written so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we might have life in his name (20:31).

Wednesday, September 16

Read: John 2:13–3:21; Psalm 106

While Jesus cleansed the temple in Jerusalem during his passion week just days before his death, John informs us that our Lord also cleansed the temple at the beginning of his ministry. The money-changers provided a vital service for those traveling from around the world to Jerusalem to worship, yet their trade was being conducted in such a way as to actually hinder the worship that was supposed to be taking place. In this powerful act of forcing the money-changers out of the temple, Jesus angered those with authority over the temple who were likely profiting from the arrangement. Jesus takes worship seriously, and the leaders have corrupted the worship of God.

Failing to understand Jesus's rebuke, the leaders ask for a sign that would permit Jesus's actions. They also fail to understand Jesus's response. He does not refer to the physical temple but his physical body. The disciples didn't fully understand at the time, but they did after the resurrection. John also lets us know that it seemed that many others did understand the signs Jesus performed. He tells us that many believed. Or did they? Jesus sees the heart and knows what is in man. Jesus did not entrust himself to those who professed faith. Some truly believed and others did not. Time would tell.

Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus is an illustration of his divine knowledge. Nicodemus is a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Pharisees. His prominence among the religious elite likely explains why he comes to Jesus at night. He doesn't want anyone to see him talking to this troublemaker and table-turner. Nicodemus not only respects Jesus but acknowledges that no one can perform the signs Jesus performs unless God is with him. Jesus gets to the heart of the matter: to enter the kingdom of God, you must be born again. Rather than understanding that Jesus means he must be born from above, Nicodemus thinks he must be delivered a second time from his mother. Jesus clarifies that he means a spiritual birth, a spiritual cleansing. The wind blows where it wants to blow. You cannot harness the wind or control it, but you can see the wind's work. Likewise, the Spirit cannot be harnessed or controlled, but we can see evidence of its work. As a learned teacher in Israel, Nicodemus should have understood the connection to Ezekiel's promise of the Spirit's work. He should have understood the incident of Moses and the bronze serpent. The Scriptures testify that we each individually must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven. These same Scriptures testify of God's love through Christ for sinners just like us. Truly believe in Christ today.

RAMAH MONTHLY

Jesus has boldly confronted the religious establishment of the Jews in his day. He drove out the moneychangers from the temple because they were corrupting the worship of God, even as he was being challenged by the leaders of the temple who allowed and oversaw that corruption. Immediately afterward, John tells us of Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus, a leader among the Jews. Even the highest of Jewish leadership must be born again. Their religious credentials will not save them but their corruption of the worship of God will certainly condemn them. Now in chapter 4 we're told of Jesus confronting the Samaritan religion, but we also receive more confirmation that Jesus is the Messiah, indeed a loving Savior for the nations.

It seems Jesus had a divine appointment to pass through Samaria, but we must remind ourselves why that is significant. Remember that the nation of Israel divided after the death of King Solomon with the ten northern tribes forming a political union. Samaria became the new political capital (1 Kin 16:24), but sometimes the entire kingdom was referred to as Samaria. After the Northern Kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. many Jews were deported from the land while many non-Jews were brought into the land. This led to a lot of intermarrying which eventually led to lots of ethnic prejudice between those who were purely Jews and those who were not. The Samaritans eventually stopped worshipping Yahweh in Jerusalem and created their own methods of worship on Mt. Gerizim there in Samaria. While Jews did sometimes travel through Samaria on their way from Judea to Galilee, the animosity between Jews and Samaritans was typically strong.

For all these reasons the disciples are shocked at the conversation between Jesus and this Samaritan woman at the well. It breaks all social and religious protocol. Modern readers might find the conversation a bit confrontational for Jesus deals with the issue of her many previous husbands as well as the differing view of worship among the Samaritans. His attitude towards her is actually quite loving, but none of this should cause us to miss Jesus's point. He is the Messiah (4:26). True worship of God should not be confined to a particular place or people, but instead should be marked by both "spirit and truth" (4:24). The truth insists that our worship have the correct object—God alone—and be regulated by his word alone (the truth). The worship of God is not merely an intellectual exercise, but is also to be done "in spirit." The truth should shape and produce the inward response of our heart (spirit). Will you worship God in spirit and in truth?

Friday, September 18

Read: Luke 4:14–44; Isaiah 61

The prophet Isaiah received great insight from the Lord into the characteristics and work of the Servant of the Lord hundreds of years before Jesus was born and ministered in Capernaum and beyond. This Messiah will be empowered to serve by the Spirit of Yahweh. Isaiah says the Anointed One will be anointed for a seven-fold ministry: 1) to bring good news to the afflicted, 2) to bind up the brokenhearted, 3) to proclaim release to captives, 4) to proclaim freedom to prisoners, 5) to proclaim the favorable year of Yahweh, 6) to proclaim the day of vengeance of our God, and 7) to comfort all who mourn. What a message the Messiah will bring! Wouldn't any preacher desire to proclaim this message? Yet Isaiah looks to the future to a particular preacher who is yet to come. Luke helps us identify just such a preacher.

The Spirit of God came to rest upon Jesus at his baptism to empower him for ministry. The Spirit threw Jesus into the wilderness for the temptation by Satan. The same Spirit brings Jesus to Galilee where he preached in synagogues and was glorified in them. Every synagogue, that is, except one: Nazareth. The synagogue was the local assembly of worship in Jewish communities in contrast with the singular temple in Jerusalem. The synagogues are not mentioned in the Old Testament but were well-established by Jesus's day. It was common practice that portions of Scripture scrolls would be read and explained by the teachers. As the visiting preacher that day, Jesus is handed the Isaiah scroll. Verse 17 demonstrates that Jesus intentionally selected his text. He read what we would call Isaiah 61:1-2a. He moves from standing reverence for God's Word to being humbly seated in the position of one who is teaching the Scriptures. Luke builds the tension as he tells the story: "the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." What will Jesus say about this passage?

Our Lord straightforwardly says that he is the fulfillment of the passage he read. It has been fulfilled that day in their presence. At first everyone marvels and speaks well of Jesus. Knowing their true thoughts, Jesus reminds them that Israel rejected prophets from God many times. When Israel rejected messengers from God, the Lord sent them to the Gentiles. Recognizing that Jesus is suggesting that they might not receive God's grace while Gentiles could receive his grace, the people are enraged. Murderous opposition to Jesus is present from the beginning. Jesus paused in his reading because the day of Yahweh's vengeance has not yet come, but one day it most certainly will. Are you ready?

The Gospels repeatedly emphasize that Jesus taught and preached with an authority that was unlike any other religious leader of the day. When Jesus spoke, people listened. His message was validated by the many healings and other miracles he performed throughout his ministry. We often get caught up in the power of these miracles and miss their purpose. The Scriptures had promised that God's coming Messiah would perform many healing miracles. Here comes Jesus doing exactly what Scripture promised! He must be who he says he is.

Mark 1:21–45 records a fast-paced narrative of many healings. A demon-possessed man yells at Jesus in the synagogue of Capernaum. The demon has good theology! (Has anyone else correctly identified Jesus yet?) He knows who Jesus is, and he knows his days are numbered. Yet today is not the last day, but the demon still must obey. Even the unclean spirits obey Jesus. Jesus goes next door to Peter's house and quickly heals Peter's sick mother-in-law. The merciful Savior not only heals but strengthens her to serve him. (Is there any other disciple who has begun to serve Jesus at this point? What an example she is.) Both publicly and privately, Jesus is healing many. It's almost like he's wiping out all the disease in the whole city. This Jesus has authority over diseases and demons. His fame is spreading throughout the land.

The next morning Jesus prioritizes prayer, but Peter prioritizes the physical needs of the people. Jesus offers a needed correction: he came to preach more than he came to heal. Yes, Jesus will still heal many, but the healings serve to prove who he is but are not the focus of what he came to do. To put it differently, the healings of Jesus are the side dish. The preaching of Jesus will be the main course. We often spotlight the miraculous things Jesus did without listening to the message those miracles pointed to. Jesus came to preach: "Repent and believe the gospel."

Even still, these moving pictures of Jesus's compassionately healing people also provide analogies for the spiritual healing he offers sinners. Here comes a leper racked with the effects of his illness in the same way that sinners are racked with the curse of our sins. One word from the willing Jesus makes all the difference. Immediately we are made clean. The clean Savior substitutes himself for the unclean sinner and brings healing. Perfect, permanent, eternal healing. As Jesus announces the kingdom, he is giving a preview of the kingdom, a sampling if you will. For all the blessings that the King will bring in his kingdom, we wait 'til the end of the story.

Tuesday, September 22

Read: Matthew 5–7

Jesus has come preaching the kingdom of heaven, but what does it look like to be a citizen of the kingdom? How do you enter the kingdom? Jesus addresses these questions and more in what we commonly call “The Sermon on the Mount.”

The Beatitudes (5:3–12) serve as Jesus’s sermon introduction. The blessed man that we have been musing on since Psalm 1 is ultimately pictured as the blessed kingdom citizen of the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes do not function as a contract where we can earn our entrance into the kingdom, but they reflect the characteristics of kingdom citizens. May the king of the kingdom continue to make us more and more blessed.

It seems the main idea of Jesus’s sermon is found in the demand for superior righteousness in 5:17–20. Jesus did not come to overthrow or abolish the Law or the Prophets. Instead, Jesus is the only one who can fulfill or accomplish these Scriptures, and often he himself is the fulfillment of those Scriptures. Since Jesus is not lowering the standard of the kingdom, then we must have a far superior righteousness to that of the scribes and Pharisees to enter the kingdom. We’re in trouble! This becomes more apparent as Jesus expounds Old Testament law in 5:21–48 and shows that our sin problem extends past external actions of “keeping the law” right down to our hearts!

In chapter 6 Jesus preaches about the practice (6:1–18) and priorities of righteousness (6:19–34). Jesus begins with a warning against striving to have a superior righteousness that is simply trying to be noticed by others. Don’t be a hypocrite, the king says; otherwise you will have no reward in heaven. Jesus illustrates the demand for unhypocritical righteousness in the areas of giving, prayer, and fasting. To help those who listen to his sermon understand the priorities of righteousness, he contrasts two kinds of treasure, two conditions of the eye, and two masters (6:19–24) while also showing the results of proper priorities (6:25–34). After discussing the disciple’s relationships (7:1–12), Jesus moves to his conclusion (7:13–27). He presents two roads and gates, two trees and fruits, two confessions, as well as two hearers and builders. Each hearer must consider their standing before the king of the kingdom. Will you enter the kingdom through Christ the King?

Who preaches this way? The King who has all authority. He began the sermon seated in the position of authority and his conclusion left everyone astonished at his teaching with authority. Will you come to the mountain and learn of Jesus, the King of the Kingdom?

Jesus's fame is spreading and the crowds are growing. He preaches with authority and heals with authority. Is there anything he can't do? In the healing of the paralytic, the truth we have already discussed is made plain: Jesus's physical healings are provided to validate his ability to bring spiritual healing. His miracles verify his message. His authority is so great that he even has the ability to forgive sins!

Jesus is preaching to a packed house. Literally. There's no room for anyone else to enter; they will have to listen from outside. But what about these four men who are coming with a cot? They have a paralyzed friend. Jesus has healed so many, perhaps he could also heal this man. Oh it's no use, they'll never be able to get close to Jesus. These faith-filled friends are not deterred by the crowds. Their confidence in Jesus leads them to unroof the roof. They remove enough thatch tiles to create an opening large enough to lower the paralyzed man right in front of Jesus. Perhaps Jesus had ignored the distraction while preaching until it could be ignored no longer. Presented with yet another man needing a touch from the Master, what will Jesus say?

This man's physical needs have not actually been the point of the story. They provide the background to move the story along. The drama has only been building with the story of this man and his friends, but Jesus makes the point plain when he announces: "Child, your sins are forgiven." It's not just another healing story after all. The one who teaches with authority is now claiming to have authority to forgive sins. Christians might take this for granted today, but the scribes had many questions. They didn't ask them out loud, of course, but in their hearts they had lots of questions! "Who talks this way?!" they angrily wondered. They know that only God can forgive sins, and so they recognize that Jesus is claiming to be God. What so many cults and skeptics alike have missed, the scribes rightly understand: Jesus claimed to be God! Ironically, it is the scribes who are blaspheming or speaking against God, not Jesus. He is who he says he is.

Jesus's identity is verified by the paralytic's healing. If Jesus can bring the physical healing that no one else can bring, most certainly he can bring the spiritual healing that no one can bring. His ability to forgive sins does not guarantee all physical healing in this life, but it does preview the permanent healing of his kingdom. Both the forgiveness of sins and the healing that will one day be complete come only through faith in the Son of Man, Jesus Christ.

Thursday, September 24

Read: Psalms 113–116

Psalms 113–118 form a series of six psalms of praise to God. They are commonly referred to as the “Egyptian Hallel.” Hallel means “praise” in Hebrew. These songs would have been sung at a variety of times throughout the year, but most often at Passover. As the Jewish people celebrated their deliverance from Egypt generations earlier, each present generation would sing these praises to God as if they had personally been delivered from Egypt. Psalms 113 and 114 would have been sung before the Passover meal while Psalms 115–118 would have been sung afterwards. One of these psalms, quite possibly Psalm 118, would have been the hymn that Jesus and his disciples sang after their Passover meal (Matt 26:30).

Psalm 113 begins the series with the command to praise the Lord. Servants of Yahweh should most certainly praise him, but the psalm also foresees the day when God’s name will be praised forever by all! Yahweh is higher than his creation, yet he is merciful to his creation. He helps the poor and needy as well as caring for the barren. He is the giver of good gifts. Praise the Lord!

Psalm 114 is more explicitly related to the Exodus than the others in the Egyptian Hallel. God brought his people out of bondage in order to keep his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The earth trembles at the presence of God. Praise the Lord!

Psalm 115 gives voice to the people proclaiming the glory of God and not themselves. He is worthy of worship and not the idols made by human hands. Israel, of course, failed to heed this counsel after the Exodus. They quickly desired to return to Egypt and even made an idol to try and get them there. Oh how true verse 8 is in the life of God’s people. Israel trusted in false gods on many occasions and became like them. Yet God preserved his faithful remnant, those who truly trusted in Yahweh as their help and shield. Some in each generation did remember the failures of their forefathers as well as God’s promises to Israel and Aaron, and they committed to bless Yahweh from this forth and forevermore.

Psalm 116 is a prayer of thanksgiving upon being spared from death. Verses 3, 8–9, and 15 all point to that personally painful experience, and yet the psalmist does not keep his praise of God private. The text clearly shows that the psalmist’s praise will be complete only when given among the congregation. How many times has God shown his mercy in our lives? Let’s not keep it to ourselves. Praise the Lord!

Roman soldiers were not known for their care and compassion, yet we meet a centurion who deeply cares for the well-being of his slave. As the fame of Jesus spreads and the centurion hears, he sends a delegation of Jewish elders to Jesus pleading for the Lord to come heal his slave. As much as the slave is well thought of by the soldier, the soldier is well thought of by the Jewish community in Capernaum. The centurion has endeared himself to the Jews by his personal support of the nation by building their local synagogue. We begin to see that the Roman is sincere in his humility, for he dared not approach Jesus with the initial request and when Jesus draws near to the house, he again sends word to Jesus: “I know I am not worthy of you.” The Roman leader recognizes that he is a Gentile and cut off from the people of God. If John the Baptist was not worthy to untie Jesus’s shoes, this man is not worthy of Jesus coming under his roof. Yet, this soldier understands authority. Being well-acquainted with human authority, he trusts that Jesus has heavenly authority. If Jesus will simply say the word, he knows his servant will be healed. That’s the authority of Jesus! Of course, the centurion was exactly right, and that’s exactly what happened. The Lord points to this man as an example of the faith that must mark all who are in the kingdom—Jew and Gentile alike.

Healing the sick from a distance is quite a feat. What about the dead right in front of you? Will Jesus be able to heal this widow’s son? It’s clear that this mother’s situation is dire, not only due to the death of a son but because this is her only son. Who will care for this widow? A great crowd of her fellow townspeople are supporting and encouraging her now at his funeral, but what will happen in the days ahead? As we see on many occasions, Jesus is moved with compassion and resolves to change the situation. Touching a dead body would make you ceremonially unclean according to Jewish custom, yet Jesus is not made unclean. Instead the unclean corpse is brought back to life. This Jesus of Nazareth is able to bring the dead to life. He is not made unclean by unclean sinners; instead he cleanses what seems impossible. He does the things only God can do. The people are slowly recognizing that something is taking place in their midst. This man is at least a prophet. Perhaps God is visiting his people. Will you see Jesus clearly and worship him?

Monday, September 28

Read: Luke 7:36–50; Psalm 120

Great sinners require great forgiveness, but Christ is a great Savior who is able to forgive even the greatest of sinners. Our Lord taught this lesson vividly at Simon the Pharisee's house. A casual reading might remind you of the occasion when Lazarus's sister Mary also anointed Jesus with a flask of alabaster, but a careful reader will notice these are two different occasions. That happened during Passion Week outside Jerusalem in Bethany. This event in Luke 7 takes place earlier during Jesus's ministry in Galilee. That took place in the house of Simon the (former) leper while this takes place in the house of Simon the Pharisee. That involved Mary the sister of Martha, but this involves an unknown woman clearly known as a great sinner. Similarities aside, the differences set the two stories apart, with this narrative emphasizing Jesus's ability to forgive even the greatest of sins for those who come to him in repentance and faith.

While dining at Simon the Pharisee's house, an uninvited guest arrives with a valuable gift, not for the host but for the guest of honor. This woman—a known sinner—weeps profusely as she takes her alabaster jar of perfume and anoints Jesus's feet. Simon failed to offer this act of hospitality when Jesus arrived at the party, but this woman is overwhelmed with gratitude just to be in his presence and gladly cleanses his feet with her tears, hair, and perfume. When Jesus healed the widow's only son, the people wondered if a prophet were in their midst. When this woman worships Jesus, the Pharisee concludes he can't be a prophet. A true prophet would not allow a sinful woman to touch him, for that could make him ceremonially unclean. Jesus knows Simon's thoughts (like a true prophet) and challenges him. Like Nathan the prophet used a parable to convict David, Jesus tells a story to reveal his host's lack of hospitality.

Simon rightly answers that the one who has been forgiven a greater debt will love the lender more. This woman who is a great sinner will have a great number of sins that need to be forgiven and yet will love more than Simon can comprehend in his self-righteousness. Just in case the other guests have misunderstood, Jesus looks to the woman directly and says, "Your sins have been forgiven." This woman's lavish love has been a result of the great forgiveness she received. Our Lord is eager to forgive sinners. All who come to Christ—even with the greatest of great sins—will find in Jesus a great Savior. Have you come to Christ in faith seeking forgiveness? He stands ready to save even you.

Why did Jesus teach in parables? Was it to make things simpler and plainer like when a preacher uses an illustration in his sermon? Many people assume that Jesus was making his teaching clearer with parables, and yet that's not quite what he himself taught. When questioned alone by the twelve, Jesus explained that parables actually serve multiple purposes. For some the parables reveal, but for others the parables conceal. For those inside the kingdom, the parables will clarify, but for those outside the kingdom the secrets have not been given. This understanding of the parables is not a new teaching from Jesus, but is what God prophesied through Isaiah.

Parables are sometimes described as earthly stories with heavenly meanings. The literal idea is to lay two things alongside one another for comparison. Jesus often says, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." He uses common objects or situations with a bit of a twist to make a spiritual point. When explaining the purpose of parables to the twelve, he pointed to the parable of the sower as being almost foundational to the other parables. If we do not understand this one, will we understand any? Jesus gives the interpretation of the parable of the soils; how can we not understand it? The word of God is sown like seed among many types of soil. Some people hear the word, but it does not penetrate the soil of their mind at all. Some people receive the word with great external expression, but the word does not actually take root in their minds. They soon fall away. Others may seem promising and yet the cares of the world and deceitfulness of riches choke out the word in their lives. Perhaps most shocking of all is that the word does take root in some people. Some people hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, even much fruit! Oh that God would give us greater understanding and fruitfulness!

Mark gives three more short parables from Jesus. The light of the gospel is not to be hidden, but rather to be proclaimed and revealed. We can rest in the sovereignty of God as we share the gospel seed, for the gospel spreads while we sleep just as grass grows at night. We may not see it, but we can trust God that he will build his kingdom. We are to be faithful laboring in the harvest, and we are to labor in confidence. What may start as tiny as a mustard seed will most certainly grow into gospel shade for all the nations. The seed of God's Word is powerful. Let us sow it freely in confidence.

Wednesday, September 30

Read: Luke 8:22–39; Psalm 107

Understanding the identity of Jesus shows us the authority of Jesus. These two dramatic scenes in the ministry of Christ reveal who he is and how we should respond. While their familiarity may cause us to assume we already know the meaning, a careful reading often provides a richer understanding of the text. Luke sets the scene with Jesus and the disciples getting a boat for the purpose of crossing the Sea of Galilee. While Jesus sleeps on the boat ride, a great storm quickly appears to the point that seasoned sailors are fearing for their lives. They awaken Jesus believing they are all about to die. They have faith that Jesus can do something about the situation, and yet they are filled with fear. Jesus rebukes the winds and the waves and the waves obey. This must not be what the disciples expected, because they wonder aloud, “Who then is this, that He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey Him?” (8:25).

They arrive on the other side of the lake, safe and sound after all. No sooner do they make landfall than they encounter demon-possessed men, with Luke emphasizing the leader and his broken condition. Demons dwell in him, and he does not dwell in a house but among the tombs. He lives with the dead people. His sad physical condition is surpassed by his desperate spiritual condition, for the man is filled with a legion of demons. The words of Jesus calmed the storm on the sea and the words of Jesus calmed the storm of the demon-possessed man as the Lord gives permission for the demons to enter the swine. We ask with the disciples, “Who then is this, that he commands demons and swine, and they obey him?”

We know the stories are connected because Matthew, Mark, and Luke all retell the events consecutively. The disciples question in verse 25 is answered by the demon in verse 28. Who is this man? Jesus the Son of the Most High God. Jesus’s miracles continue to demonstrate and validate his identity. His identity explains his authority. Only God can calm the stormy seas, and yet Jesus is God. Only God has authority over the darkest demons, and yet Jesus is God. It makes perfect sense that Jesus is able to calm the storm and cast out demons. We should respond to these truths by worshipping and trusting Jesus. Yet we often have little faith like the disciples. We fail to fully recognize Jesus like the disciples, so we forget his authority and are instead filled with fear not faith. When we remember who Jesus is, how else can we respond but to tell others the great things God has done?

Psalms 120–134 are often labeled “the Songs of Ascent.” They’re connected with the journey many Jewish pilgrims made each year to Jerusalem for the various feasts. Because of the city’s high elevation, people always spoke of going “up” to Jerusalem, no matter what geographical direction they were coming from. This large group of psalms has a variety of authors and historical contexts, but their organization reminds us of the intentional editorial process that assembled the 150 psalms in the order we have today. Ultimately the Holy Spirit is responsible for each psalm individually as well as the entire psalter collectively.

Psalm 122 This psalm of David is a joyful celebration of Jerusalem. David acquired and set apart this land as the capital of Israel. Solomon fulfilled David’s desire to build a temple for God in Jerusalem. The worshipping pilgrims would praise God for dwelling among his people as they travelled to that symbolic dwelling place in Jerusalem. Many people that Christ will rule from the throne of David in the city of Jerusalem during a perfect earthly reign. Even so, the earthly Jerusalem ultimately points us to the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22–24). We don’t have to be in a particular location to draw near to God; instead we must simply be found in a particular person—Christ.

Psalm 123 is a short psalm of lament. It is corporate in nature rather than individual. The people of God look to their King, the One enthroned in heaven. In the same way that a slave is dependent upon his master, so the people of God are dependent upon God. The people are saturated with contempt, but we’re not told why. Perhaps the faithful remnant are scorned by unbelieving Israel. Perhaps the nation is heckled by their half-breed cousins, the Samaritans. Perhaps it is the age-old conflict between Jew and Gentile. Whatever the source of scorn, the people plead with God for mercy. His mercy alone will comfort. His mercy could convict the contemptuous. His mercy will sustain his saints.

Psalm 124 is a fitting psalm of thanksgiving for the redeemed of all the ages. As a psalm of ascent, you can imagine faithful pilgrims calling to one another with the opening refrain. The details of the text are broad enough to cover a variety of situations in Israel’s history, Time and again, Israel was almost entirely destroyed. Enemy nations raged. The people plotted in vain. How many times were the people of God almost wiped away? Yet the Lord was faithful. If the Lord had not been on their side, where would they be? If it had not been Yahweh who was on your side, where would you be?

Friday, October 1

Read: Matthew 9:18–32; Psalms 125–126

Many people reject Jesus because he doesn't meet their expectations. This was certainly true for the Pharisees in the first century and many people still today. Yet the Bible presents Jesus as the perfect answer to faith-filled expectations. For those who come to Jesus in faith, it is the difference between life and death.

We see this illustrated in the father of the dying daughter in verses 18–19. Matthew doesn't give us his name (Jairus) or the scope of his authority (synagogue). We're just told of his daughter's impending death, and we immediately begin to feel his desperation and grief. Yet, he is a desperate man with a determined faith in Jesus. On the way to care for this daughter, Jesus encountered a suffering woman who becomes a daughter (9:20–22). Without a clear diagnosis, we're just told that she has suffered with ongoing bleeding for twelve years. She's living, but she's as good as dead because her unending uncleanness has separated her from everyone and everything. Yet this dying woman has a determined faith, because she has been telling herself repeatedly, "If I can just get to Jesus, he can save me." She expects this man to be able to do something that no one else has been able to do. In weak, imperfect but determined faith she reaches out and touches him. Just as Jesus looked at the paralytic man on the cot and said, "Take courage, son, your sins are forgiven you," Jesus looks at this woman saying, "Daughter, take courage, your faith has saved you." Immediately, all of her expectations have been fulfilled in Christ. But what about Jairus? He still has faith-filled but unmet expectations of Jesus. Arriving at Jairus's home, they find the funeral has already begun. The mourners do not expect Jesus to have any authority over death, so they laugh at his evaluation. Yet Jesus raises this twelve-year old girl to life, and the father's expectations are met and fulfilled in Christ.

Jesus has all authority. He has authority over disaster, demons, disease, and death. He has the authority to forgive sins. The big story of the Bible makes that clear, and we've seen much of those themes wrapped up even in this one narrative. Looking to the broader context, Matthew 8–9 have been illustrating these truths with story after story. The melody of the text has been the authority of Jesus, but the harmony most certainly is faith. The object of our faith is Christ, for he has all authority. And he doesn't save based on the intensity of our faith. He far surpasses the expectations of our weak faith, and that makes all the difference between death and life.

HOPE

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