

OUR STORY

GOD'S WORK. OUR HOPE.

Chronological Readings

August



NORTH FORT WORTH
BAPTIST CHURCH

PRACTICAL APPROACH TO OUR DAILY READINGS

Commit to a consistent time and place (allow 15-20 minutes).

Read each day's passage prayerfully. Don't ask the question, "What does today's reading mean to me?" Read each day, asking, "What truth is God revealing?" Focus especially upon:

What does the reading reveal about God?

What does the reading reveal about humanity (about me)?

What does the reading reveal about what is "relationally" appropriate or inappropriate toward God? God isn't supplying us with a list of rules to follow.

He's inviting us to relate to Him as God so we might walk with Him by faith.

What does the reading reveal about God's unfolding work of salvation?

Underline what stands out. We want to remember key ideas or verses.

Prayerfully identify one promise, insight, or action to carry with you into the day, and then commit it to the Lord in prayer.

Read each day's devotion for further perspective.

Keep in mind—the goal is NOT to read the Bible thru. The DAILY COMMITMENT is to draw near to God by faith and to experience the life-changing power of Jesus Christ.

ENLIST A PERSON OR GROUP TO JOIN YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Agree to hold one another accountable.

Touch base consistently about your readings.

Exchange daily texts, emails, or social media posts to highlight the promise, insight, or action you seek to carry into the day.

Talk weekly or every other week by phone or in person. Discuss specific lessons or questions that especially stand out.

Adopt an approach that works best for you—consistency is the key.

Pray for one another by name for spiritual understanding and growth.

Encourage one another to press through the ups and downs of the journey.

August 1

2 Kings 23:1-28; 2 Chronicles 34:29-35:19; Nahum 1-3

Then the king summoned all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. And the king went up to the Temple of the LORD with all the people of Judah and Jerusalem, along with the priests and the Levites—all the people from the greatest to the least. There the king read to them the entire Book of the Covenant that had been found in the LORD's Temple. The king took his place of authority beside the pillar and renewed the covenant in the LORD's presence. He pledged to obey the LORD by keeping all his commands, laws, and decrees with all his heart and soul. He promised to obey all the terms of the covenant that were written in the scroll. And he required everyone in Jerusalem and the people of Benjamin to make a similar pledge. The people of Jerusalem did so, renewing their covenant with God, the God of their ancestors. So Josiah removed all detestable idols from the entire land of Israel and required everyone to worship the LORD their God. And throughout the rest of his lifetime, they did not turn away from the LORD, the God of their ancestors. (2 Chronicles 34:29–33)

Josiah is a person to admire. He moves humbly and consistently toward the LORD and attempts to influence others to do the same. With the discovery of the Book of the Covenant (the first five books of the Old Testament), Judah's king repents over the nation's sin, which delays God's pending judgment (2 Chronicles 34:28). Josiah also publicly renews God's covenant and requires the people to do the same. He is doing everything within his power to sway the people back toward the LORD.

Of course, spiritual conditions in the land had reached a disturbingly low level. Today's reading describes the situation as Josiah directs the priests to cleanse and restore God's place of meeting. They removed articles used to worship Baal, Asherah, and all the powers of the heavens. The people had brought their defiling practices inside the Temple. They even constructed accommodations for male and female prostitutes within the Temple to facilitate their unholy practices. These details explain Josiah's horror and prompt reaction to reading the Book of the Covenant.

Judah's king does everything within his power to lead the nation back to the LORD—the public reading of God's Word, the restoration of God's Temple, and the re-establishment of the LORD's Passover. With the Book of the Covenant to guide him, Josiah leads by example and command, and the effects are favorable. His faith and devotion will make an impact. The people will relate appropriately to the LORD throughout his lifetime.

Again, Josiah is a person to admire—even more, to emulate. How can we influence those around us toward the LORD? Admittedly, we do not sit on a throne with all its power and authority. We can, however, influence others through our words and actions. With the Bible as our guide, we can move people toward the LORD in personal ways. We can lead people by our example to discover the benefits and blessings of God's wisdom. We can lead them to the LORD. Will we do so? Perhaps we perceive the present circumstances as too challenging. More challenging than Josiah's day? Let's follow the pious king's example. May we humble ourselves before the LORD and follow His lead. It will make a difference!

August 2 Habakkuk 1:1-3; Zephaniah 1:1-2:1-7

Stand in silence in the presence of the Sovereign LORD, for the awesome day of the LORD's judgment is near. The LORD has prepared His people for a great slaughter and has chosen their executioners. (Zephaniah 1:7)

The prophecies of Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah announce a disturbing future for the nation of Judah. God's people will pay a devastating price for their sins and idolatry. The Babylonians are coming and will serve as God's instrument of judgment. Though Josiah's efforts delay the timing of Judah's destruction, the Day of the LORD is drawing near. The prophet Zephaniah announces, *"That terrible day of the LORD is near. Swiftly it comes— a day of bitter tears, a day when even strong men will cry out. It will be a day when the LORD's anger is poured out— a day of terrible distress and anguish, a day of ruin and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet calls and battle cries. Down go the walled cities and the strongest battlements!"* (Zephaniah 1:14–16)

Whether we read Jeremiah, Habakkuk, or Zephaniah, the message is the same—God's judgment is coming! How would you respond to such unsettling news? The prophet Habakkuk laments before the LORD, trying to make sense of everything. He also intercedes on behalf of the people. He prays, *"I have heard all about You, LORD. I am filled with awe by Your amazing works. In this time of our deep need, help us again as You did in years gone by. And in Your anger, remember Your mercy."* (Habakkuk 3:2)

Habakkuk's prayer is two-fold. He seeks God's intervening power (as in the days of old) but pleads for God's action to be accompanied by mercy. The prophet recognizes that the LORD's anger is justified. He hopes, however, that God's mercy might prevail. I like how the Contemporary English Version expresses the same prayer: *"I know Your reputation, LORD, and I am amazed at what You have done. Please turn from Your anger and be merciful; do for us what You did for our ancestors."*

Yet, Habakkuk does more than pray. He also rejoices in the LORD. The prophet declares, *"Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! The Sovereign LORD is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights."* (Habakkuk 3:17–19)

Habakkuk's response may be more instructive than his prayer. Even if God's judgment is not averted, the prophet's faith will not wane. He will still rejoice in God's ultimate salvation. He will trust in the actions of his Sovereign LORD—drawing the necessary strength. Can we do the same? The natural response is to plead for mercy to avoid life's troubles. Rejoicing in the LORD amid life's hardships is a greater example of faith and trust. Let's seek to follow Habakkuk's example as we face the challenges before us.

August 3

Zephaniah 2:8-3:20; 2 Chronicles 35:20-27;
2 Kings 23:29-30; Jeremiah 47-48

While Josiah was king, Pharaoh Neco, king of Egypt, went to the Euphrates River to help the king of Assyria. King Josiah and his army marched out to fight him, but King Neco killed him when they met at Megiddo. Josiah's officers took his body back in a chariot from Megiddo to Jerusalem and buried him in his own tomb. Then the people of the land anointed Josiah's son Jehoahaz and made him the next king. (2 Kings 23:29-30)

Pride and presumption can be a dangerous combination. Sadly, it appears that both may have ensnared Judah's noble king. I have noted Josiah's commendable qualities in previous devotions. Convicted by God's Word, he humbly repents and cries to the LORD in prayer. Afterward, Josiah seeks to lead the nation back into a right relationship with God—cleansing and restoring the Temple, reestablishing the Passover, and publicly leading the people to renew their covenant with the LORD their God. Yes! There's much about his example that should inspire us.

For that reason, the report of Josiah's death may catch us by surprise. As 2 Kings describes, Judah's king faces off against the king of Egypt and subsequently dies. It appears all matter of fact. Yet, there's more to the story. The writer of 2 Chronicles informs us that God warns Josiah to stay out of the way. Indeed, king Neco sends the following message, *"What do you want with me, king of Judah? I have no quarrel with you today! I am on my way to fight another nation, and God has told me to hurry! Do not interfere with God, who is with me, or He will destroy you."* (2 Chronicles 35:21)

And his response? *"But Josiah refused to listen to Neco, to whom God had indeed spoken, and he would not turn back."* (2 Chronicles 35:22) Why the refusal? Did Josiah doubt the message was truthful? If so, why didn't he seek the LORD's counsel himself? There's no indication that he attempts to do so. Instead, Josiah ignores the warning, disguises himself, and leads his army into battle. Tragically, Judah's king is mortally wounded during a barrage of enemy arrows. It all seems so senseless and unnecessary.

Why did Josiah ignore the warning? Again, I would say, "Pride and presumption are a dangerous combination." Josiah determines that he knows what is best. Perhaps the king presumes that his past religious zeal would guarantee his victory. God will undoubtedly side with the king who restored Jerusalem's Temple. Right? So, without seeking the LORD, Josiah leads his army into battle and dies. Just like that, the story of a good and noble king abruptly ends. It seems anticlimactic, such a waste.

And the lesson? Pride and presumption are a dangerous combination. We never graduate from our dependence on the LORD, for He alone is our victory. We are fool-hearted to think otherwise. Consequently, we should consistently seek God's counsel, follow His wisdom, and entrust our situation to the One who sits upon the throne—who is not you. I'm saddened by the end of Josiah's story, but I am also instructed. May you be as well.

August 4

2 Chronicles 36:1-5; 2 Kings 23:31-24:4 Jeremiah 22:1-23;
Jeremiah 25:1-14; Jeremiah 26:1-24

*This is what the LORD says: "If you will not listen to Me and obey My word I have given you, and if you will not listen to My servants, the prophets—for I sent them again and again to warn you, but you would not listen to them—then I will destroy this Temple as I destroyed Shiloh, the place where the Tabernacle was located. And I will make Jerusalem an object of cursing in every nation on earth."
(Jeremiah 26:4–6)*

Upon Josiah's death, the nation of Judah is thrown into a difficult transition period. Josiah's son Jehoahaz is placed on the throne for only three months. Egypt's ruler, Neco, asserts his dominance over the region by replacing Jehoahaz with his step-brother, Eliakim. Neco not only changes who would sit on Judah's throne; he also changes Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim. The consequence of Josiah's misguided opposition continues.

Change, however, is also occurring spiritually within the nation. Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim promptly lead the people away from the LORD (2 Kings 23:32, 37). They reintroduce the idolatrous practices that had previously provoked the LORD's anger. The effects of Josiah's godly influence disappear. So much so God sends His prophet Jeremiah to confront the nation and announce His coming judgment—Jerusalem and the Temple will be destroyed.

How do the people respond to Jeremiah's declaration of doom? Instead of humbling themselves before the LORD, they lash out against God's prophet. He's accused of treason, and many demand his death. Jeremiah defends himself by explaining, "*The LORD sent me to prophesy against this Temple and this city.*" He adds, "*The LORD gave me every word that I have spoken. But if you stop your sinning and begin to obey the LORD your God, He will change His mind about this disaster that He has announced against you.*" (Jeremiah 26:12–13) Jeremiah's defense includes an appeal for the people to repent. The prophet also warns, "*If you kill me, rest assured that you will be killing an innocent man! The responsibility for such a deed will lie on you, on this city, and on every person living in it. For it is absolutely true that the LORD sent me to speak every word you have heard.*" (Jeremiah 26:15)

The leaders are swayed by Jeremiah, along with the testimony of others, to release the prophet. Jeremiah's call for repentance, however, is unheeded. The nation remains on the path of self-destruction. God's judgment is coming.

And what might we learn from today's reading? Once again, we're reminded of the impact of godly or ungodly leadership upon a nation. Josiah's death had immediate and far-reaching implications. We're also reminded that it's not easy being God's messenger in a time of spiritual rebellion. Courage is required to speak the truth to a population that rejects God's revelation. To Jeremiah's credit, he stepped up and delivered God's message. Will we do the same? Are we willing to share the truth of God's Word with a culture that refuses to listen? Are we ready to face the consequences? May our actions demonstrate our answer.

August 5
Jeremiah 25:15-38; Jeremiah 36:1-32; Jeremiah 45:1-5;
Jeremiah 46:1-28

This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from My hand this cup filled to the brim with My anger, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink from it. When they drink from it, they will stagger, crazed by the warfare I will send against them." (Jeremiah 25:15-16)

Jeremiah dictates a series of messages to be delivered by his scribal assistant, Baruch. The pronouncements further sound the alarm of God's approaching judgment against Judah but also against the surrounding nations.

The prophet hopes the people will turn away from their sins and seek the LORD's forgiveness. Baruch carefully records Jeremiah's words and carries the scroll to Jerusalem. He then publicly read Jeremiah's messages to the people gathered in the Temple, which attracted the attention of the local administrative officials. They seek a private reading by Baruch and are immediately disturbed by what it reveals. They recommend that Jeremiah and his assistant go into hiding because of the nature of God's pronouncements.

Jehoiakim, Judah's king, hears about the scroll and requests it be brought to the palace. He listens as his servant, Jehudi, reads the prophet's messages. Instead of taking God's warning to heart, the king defies the LORD. He cuts up the scroll and casts the fragments into the fire. Destroying the scroll, however, does not nullify the message. The threat of God's judgment remains. Indeed, in response to Jehoiakim's actions, the LORD directs Jeremiah to rewrite the scroll. This time, God adds to the prophet's revelation. The LORD announces that Judah's king would die shamefully without an heir to assume his throne.

Do we see the relevance of this account to our lives? Ignoring or even destroying God's Word does not alter the truth. God's message remains. As Isaiah describes, *"The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever."* (Isaiah 40:8) Or, as Jesus states, *"Heaven and earth will disappear, but My words will never disappear."* (Matthew 24:35)

Jehoiakim thought his actions would somehow leave God's Word null and void. By cutting out what he didn't want to hear or systematically burning the scroll, the king hoped to escape the truth of God's revelation. But it didn't work. The power and authority of God's Word are not connected to a scroll or page. They are derived from the God who speaks. To discard the Bible or to cut out uncomfortable portions of the Bible will not negate the truth or the ramifications of what is revealed. God's Word remains.

We would prove wise to humble ourselves before the LORD and take His message to heart. Let's do so today!

August 6 Jeremiah 19-20; Daniel 1

Why was I ever born? My entire life has been filled with trouble, sorrow, and shame. (Jeremiah 20:18)

Jeremiah lived a difficult life. God called him to deliver a message of judgment for a prolonged period. People did not welcome or respect God's prophet or his message. Instead, they lashed out against him. Jeremiah suffered physically and emotionally at the hands of God's people. His life was characterized by hardship and loss. Would you have obeyed the LORD if assigned Jeremiah's task?

The prophet confesses that he was left with little option. God's revelation weighed so heavily upon Jeremiah's heart that he could not remain silent. *"If I say I'll never mention the LORD or speak in His name,"* he confesses, *"His Word burns in my heart like a fire. It's like a fire in my bones! I am worn out trying to hold it in! I can't do it."* (Jeremiah 20:9)

Can we imagine the internal struggle? The prophet is between a rock and a hard place. If he refuses to proclaim God's message, it consumes him within. If he delivers God's pronouncements, he suffers rejection and even violence. As previously noted, a prophet's path is difficult to walk. Yet, Jeremiah yields himself to God's call. He bears the responsibility, and God accomplishes His purposes through His weeping prophet.

Do note that God doesn't correct or punish Jeremiah for his honest expressions of emotion. It is similar to Job and the Psalms. God permits His servants to voice their sadness and discontent. Our human emotions will not push God away. The LORD seeks to strengthen and sustain His own. Down deep, Jeremiah knew that, for he also declared, *"But the LORD stands beside me like a great warrior. Before Him my persecutors will stumble."* And he exclaims, *"Sing to the LORD! Praise the LORD! For though I was poor and needy, He rescued me from my oppressors."* (Jeremiah 20: 11, 13) Of course, that doesn't keep the prophet from venting in his weaker moments. Nor should it prevent us.

Let's find comfort in Jeremiah's lament. First, be comforted knowing that we can be honest before the LORD. Don't hold your emotions within during times of confusion and sadness. The LORD will not disown you. God gives His children space to admit their hurt and disappointment. He wants us to confide in Him during such moments, not turn away. Be honest about what you are feeling and draw near.

Yet, like Jeremiah, we should also yield to His continuing work. Despite all that Jeremiah endures, he continues to press forward with the LORD. And his example beckons us to do the same. Jeremiah would call for us to trust the ONE we follow. Though our paths may be challenging, God's faithfulness remains.

May we choose to yield to God's continuing work, starting today.

August 7 Daniel 2-3, Jeremiah 7:1-8:3

This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says: "Even now, if you quit your evil ways, I will let you stay in your own land. But don't be fooled by those who promise you safety simply because the LORD's Temple is here. They chant, 'The LORD's Temple is here! The LORD's Temple is here!' But I will be merciful only if you stop your evil thoughts and deeds and start treating each other with justice; only if you stop exploiting foreigners, orphans, and widows; only if you stop your murdering; and only if you stop harming yourselves by worshiping idols. Then I will let you stay in this land that I gave to your ancestors to keep forever." (Jeremiah 7:3-7)

Judah suffers a resounding defeat at the hands of the Babylonians in 605 BC. The LORD gives Nebuchadnezzar the victory (Daniel 1:2). God's people begin to suffer the consequences of their disobedience. As a result, an initial group of exiles is carried off to Babylon—including four young Jewish men: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. They are forced to live far from God's land of promise and are assigned new names: Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Following Judah's humiliation and defeat, subsequent waves of exiles traveled to Babylon in 597 BC and 586 BC. In 586, Jerusalem and the Temple were utterly destroyed.

Today's reading provides an instructive historical contrast. We observe the faith and devotion of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah as they adapt to their Babylonian surroundings. The goal of Nebuchadnezzar is to assimilate the men into his emerging kingdom. He and his leaders seek to indoctrinate each of them into a new way of life. It would have been easy to bend to the pressure and accommodate the foreign culture. The young men choose otherwise. The four, led by Daniel, display remarkable faith in God and a determination to keep themselves pure before the LORD. Their actions are unexpected when considering the widespread moral and spiritual compromise so prevalent in Judah. It's comforting to observe at least a remnant of faithful individuals.

Their actions, however, are also ironic. If the remaining population in Judah had chosen to relate to God like Daniel and his associates, the nation could have averted further judgment. Indeed, the LORD appeals through His prophet, *"Even now, if you quit your evil ways, I will let you stay in your own land."* Will they repent and heed God's warning?

No, they will not. Again, think about the contrast. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are already suffering due to the nation's disobedience, but they remain faithful to the LORD in a foreign land. In comparison, the leaders in Judah (who could avoid future suffering by turning to the Lord) refuse to do so. They reject God's appeal, resulting in future exiles being carried to Babylon. Consider how different the story could have been if Jehoiakim had behaved like Daniel.

Let's step back and marvel at the uncompromising faith of the four young men. May they remind us how to stand firm in our faith and devotion. They distinguish themselves in ways that God could bless. Will we allow the same? Who knows? If we relate to God appropriately (like Judah is unwilling to do), we may avoid some future challenges altogether. That's worth some prayerful thought.

August 8

Jeremiah 8:4-11:23

This is what the LORD says: “When people fall down, don’t they get up again? When they discover they’re on the wrong road, don’t they turn back? Then why do these people stay on their self-destructive path? Why do the people of Jerusalem refuse to turn back?” (Jeremiah 8:4–5)

The people of Judah persist in their sins, and God expresses His bewilderment. Why do the people not turn back? Why remain on a self-destructive path? It makes no sense. There’s sadness in God’s words as He exposes the people’s defiance. The LORD longs for His people to return. Why do they not turn back? Could the LORD say the same about us? Are we moving in the right direction?

Jeremiah is also burdened over Judah’s defiance and coming judgment. He exclaims, *“My grief is beyond healing; my heart is broken.” (Jeremiah 8:18)* Jeremiah sees the devastation that is coming. He pleads for the people to repent, but to no avail. The prophet is like a heartbroken parent unable to influence his children away from harm. He urgently cries out, but they refuse to listen. Jeremiah adds, *“I hurt with the hurt of my people. I mourn and am overcome with grief. Is there no medicine in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why is there no healing for the wounds of My people?” (Jeremiah 8:21–22)* Can we identify with Jeremiah’s pain? Perhaps we’re not the ones moving in the wrong direction, but we’re unable to prevent those we love from doing so. Can we feel his desperation and sadness?

Amid the disappointment and sadness, God still calls out. He seeks to lead His people to the place where they should be. In a helpful, clarifying way, the LORD appeals. *“Don’t let the wise boast in their wisdom, or the powerful boast in their power, or the rich boast in their riches. But those who wish to boast should boast in this alone: that they truly know Me and understand that I am the LORD who demonstrates unfailing love and who brings justice and righteousness to the earth, and that I delight in these things. I, the LORD, have spoken!” (Jeremiah 9:23–24)*

The people are placing their trust and confidence in all the wrong things—earthly wisdom, power, and riches. God redeemed His people so they might discover a fullness of life in Him. He wants His people to know Him, to experience His unfailing love, justice, and righteousness in ways that will bless and enrich their lives—but they turn away.

One more time, what about us? Where do we place our trust and confidence? What is the source of our boasting? May Paul’s words to the Corinthians influence our response.

“The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God . . . Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And He chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God. God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made Him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; He made us pure and holy, and He freed us from sin. Therefore, as the Scriptures say, ‘If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD.’” (1 Corinthians 1:18, 26–31)

August 9 Jeremiah 12-15

How long must this land mourn? Even the grass in the fields has withered. The wild animals and birds have disappeared because of the evil in the land. For the people have said, "The LORD doesn't see what's ahead for us!" (Jeremiah 12:4)

Jeremiah finds himself again troubled and perplexed. With increasing suffering around him, God's prophet hopes it might soon end. Who wouldn't feel that way? Whenever we come face to face with severe anguish and pain, the human heart should be troubled. God fashioned our hearts to sympathize with the afflicted. Tragically, sin often hardens the heart, so we become less sensitive or responsive. That was not the case with Jeremiah. God's servant remains tenderhearted concerning Judah's plight. He keeps looking for a solution, hoping for a reprieve.

No solution, however, will come. Even more, God forbids Jeremiah to intercede. The LORD states, *"Do not pray for these people anymore."* (Jeremiah 14:11) It isn't the first time God asks Jeremiah to stop praying. The LORD instructed the prophet to cease intercession on two previous occasions (Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14). Why the constraint? Because God's people fail to display genuine sorrow or repentance. Their religious activity lacks sincerity, and consequently, God is unmoved.

Jeremiah, however, ignores God's restrictions and prays, *"LORD, have you completely rejected Judah? Do you really hate Jerusalem? Why have you wounded us past all hope of healing? We hoped for peace, but no peace came. We hoped for a time of healing but found only terror. LORD, we confess our wickedness and that of our ancestors, too. We all have sinned against You. For the sake of Your reputation, LORD, do not abandon us. Do not disgrace Your own glorious throne. Please remember us, and do not break Your covenant with us."* (Jeremiah 14:19-21)

I admire the prophet's determination. Tenacity is a good quality within those who serve the LORD. And if you look at Jeremiah's prayer, he says the right things. He identifies with the people—confessing their sins. He appeals to God based on His name and honor. Most importantly, Jeremiah asks the LORD to respond with His covenant in view. But that was the problem. God's people had long since violated and abandoned their covenant relationship. And God's response?

"Then the LORD said to me, 'Even if Moses and Samuel stood before me pleading for these people, I wouldn't help them. Away with them! Get them out of my sight!'" (Jeremiah 15:1) God's answer is "No." The people's persistent pride and defiance have moved them beyond the intercession of God's most significant leaders, including Moses and Samuel. In other words, "Jeremiah, this is not about you. It is about the continuing rebellion of the people and the consequences that will follow."

What stands out from today's reading? First, I want to be like Jeremiah. May God grant us hearts that remain tender to the hurts and struggles of those around us—even if self-inflicted. Second, I want to pray like Jeremiah. May God observe in me a determination that will not take "no" for an answer. I acknowledge that God sees what I do not see and knows what I do not know, and I am confident that His actions are righteous and just. However, I still want to be an intercessor like God's weeping prophet. And you? May God help us care deeply enough to press toward His throne consistently in prayer. Will you seek the same?

August 10 Jeremiah 16-18, 35

This is what the LORD says: “Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans, who rely on human strength and turn their hearts away from the LORD. They are like stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future. They will live in the barren wilderness, in an uninhabited salty land. But blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit.” (Jeremiah 17:5–8)

Are we stunted shrubs or fruitful trees? What’s the difference? Spiritually speaking, stunted shrubs represent those who trust in themselves instead of the LORD. They pretend they are self-sufficient or turn to gods of their own making. From their perspective, the One True God is irrelevant. They ignore His wisdom and defy His commands. Life is what they make it, so why trust in the LORD? Do you know anyone like this?

Sadly, the nation of Judah became a spiritual desert overrun with stunted shrubs. God’s people turned away from the LORD and refused to hear His appeals. They forfeited what could have been. What did they reject? They could have been a thriving grove of fruitful trees instead of unproductive bushes. That was God’s desire all along. If they had trusted in Him—fixing their hope and confidence in who God is—everything would have been different. The LORD would have sustained them like a life-giving river. Not even drought conditions would have jeopardized their fruitfulness if they had only trusted in Him. They chose to be stunted shrubs instead.

And what about us? Are we stunted shrubs or fruitful trees? Are we positioning ourselves to experience God’s blessing or judgment? Are we planting ourselves by God’s life-giving river or making the best of things in a dry and arid land? The answer is directly tied to our response to the LORD or lack thereof. Will we trust in Him or not? Consider the similar testimony of Psalm 1.

Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. But they delight in the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do. But not the wicked! They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind. They will be condemned at the time of judgment. Sinners will have no place among the godly. For the LORD watches over the path of the godly, but the path of the wicked leads to destruction. (Psalm 1)

The people of Judah chose to be stunted shrubs/worthless chaff, and they suffered the consequences. Who are we choosing to be? Do we trust in the LORD? Will we allow God to guide our steps so we might experience even more of His mercy and grace? Withering shrubs or abounding trees, what will we be?

August 11

2 Kings 24:5-9; 2 Chronicles 36:6-9; Jeremiah 22:24-23:32; 49:1-33

“As surely as I live,” says the LORD, “I will abandon you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah. Even if you were the signet ring on My right hand, I would pull you off. I will hand you over to those who seek to kill you, those you so desperately fear—to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and the mighty Babylonian army.” (Jeremiah 22:24–25)

Jeremiah, God’s prophet, continues to announce the advancement of God’s judgment. Judah, however, would not be alone in experiencing the effects of His displeasure. Ammon (Jeremiah 40:1-6), Edom (Jeremiah 49:7-22), and Damascus (Jeremiah 49:23-27) would also face the consequences of their actions. The great nations and the small would soon experience God’s judgment, and the impact would be devastating.

In addition, God’s displeasure would be notably directed toward Judah’s wayward spiritual leadership. They will be held personally responsible for contributing to the nation’s demise. God declares, *“Instead of caring for My flock and leading them to safety, you have deserted them and driven them to destruction. Now I will pour out judgment on you for the evil you have done to them.” (Jeremiah 23:2)* God will hold the spiritual pretenders responsible.

And, of course, God’s judgment will impact Judah’s king. Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim, will also be removed. 2 Chronicles reports, *“Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem three months and ten days. Jehoiachin did what was evil in the LORD’s sight. In the spring of the year King Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin to Babylon.” (2 Chronicles 36:9–10, NLT)* God’s people are discovering that His past pronouncements are not idle threats. They are experiencing the consequences of their actions.

And a lesson for us? Some today suggest that God’s future judgment is not real and that people have nothing to fear. Like false prophets of old, they say what the people want to hear—filling their pockets with gain. May today’s reading cause us to take God’s warnings to heart. But is there no hope?

Thankfully, the LORD also points to a future provision for Judah and us. Consider His words. *“For the time is coming,” says the LORD, “when I will raise up a righteous descendant from King David’s line. He will be a King who rules with wisdom. He will do what is just and right throughout the land. And this will be his name: ‘The LORD Is Our Righteousness.’ In that day Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety.” (Jeremiah 23:5–6)*

Be aware! God’s judgment is coming against sin, but God has provided a way of salvation for all who believe (John 3:16-18). The LORD is Our Righteousness, and His name is Jesus. Let’s not be like Judah, ignoring God’s message. Let’s turn to the One who saves and experiences His power to restore.

August 12

Jeremiah 23:33-24:10; Jeremiah 29:1-31:14

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

Jeremiah 29:11 may be one of the most familiar verses in all of Jeremiah’s writings. It’s a refrigerator magnet kind of verse. One that many people claim for themselves because they think it promises a life of comfort and prosperity. They potentially make the mistake of taking God’s words out of context. And what is the context?

The verse is directed at people who find themselves in exile. A portion of Judah’s population has been forced to dwell in a land far from Judea’s familiar surroundings. They are strangers in a foreign land, disillusioned and discouraged. Jeremiah writes to reassure them. God’s message is that His work on their behalf is not yet done. Yes, they suffer the consequences of the nation’s sins, but God’s intentions remain good. After a lifetime (70 years), the LORD will return His covenant people to the land of promise. The LORD extends hope to a people that may have lost hope. *“My plans,”* the LORD declares, *“are for good and not for disaster.”* He seeks to open their eyes to the promise of what would still be. Hope lives, even for exiled people. And how should the exiles respond?

Jeremiah urges them to get on with life—to build houses, plant gardens, and start their families. Instead of regretting or ignoring the current realities, they are to allow God to work through their lives in personal ways. They are to contribute toward the good of Babylon, praying on the nation’s behalf (Jeremiah 29:5-7). More significantly, they are to renew their faith and confidence in the LORD and toward their future. As the people seek Him wholeheartedly, God promises He will be found (Jeremiah 29:13). The hardships of the exile are what they are, but God is still present. God is still working.

And the lesson for us? Jeremiah 29:11 doesn’t promise that God’s people will never experience difficulty or loss. It’s quite the opposite. Through the verse, God reassures His people that He can work despite their self-inflicted hardships. He is a God who seeks to redeem and restore. Did He hold Judah responsible for their prolonged rebellion and sin? Yes, and they are forced to deal with the far-reaching consequences. Is God committed to bringing them through their suffering? The answer is a resounding “Yes.” That should bolster our hearts, for God consistently works to redeem and restore.

Jeremiah 29:11 is more than a refrigerator magnet verse. It reminds us to trust the LORD despite our current challenges—to relate to Him as God. Our future and hope are in Him. Will we trust Him?

August 13

Jeremiah 31:15-40; Jeremiah 49:34-51:14

“The day is coming,” says the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife,” says the LORD. (Jeremiah 31:31–32)

The LORD promises to make a “new covenant” with the people of Israel and Judah. The mention of that possibility must have astounded God’s rebellious people. They had utterly violated the covenant established by God at Sinai and were now suffering the consequences of their disobedience. Nevertheless, God’s love endures so much that the LORD promises a future covenant that will exceed the old. He points to a better day.

It should be noted that Jeremiah is the prophet whom God affords the privilege of introducing the phrase—“*new covenant*.” Though others will speak of the coming blessing, Jeremiah uses the important language of covenant. He announces that God will join Himself again with His people in an even more intimate and dynamic way. It seems only appropriate for the “weeping prophet” to announce this extraordinary news. How will the “*new covenant*” be different from the old?

With both, God enters into a relationship with His people—like a loving husband to a wife. However, the “*new covenant*” will include a change of heart within the people themselves. The LORD explains, “*I will put My instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts.*” (Jeremiah 31: 33) The old covenant required adherence to a set of commands chiseled in stone, and the people struggled to keep God’s standard. The LORD’s new arrangement will spiritually affect the heart’s inner workings. God will empower His people toward obedience rather than simply pointing the way. God explains further through His prophet Ezekiel. He declares, “*I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put My Spirit in you so that you will follow My decrees and be careful to obey My regulations.*” (Ezekiel 36:26–27) Will action on their part still be required? Yes, their decisions will still be their own. The difference is that God works within them.

Yet, there’s more. God’s people will also discover a greater intimacy with God. “*I will be their God,*” the LORD announces, “*and they will be My people. And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their relatives, saying, ‘You should know the LORD.’ For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know Me already.*” (Jeremiah 31:33–34) In the “*new covenant*,” God’s people will know the LORD in ways they could not have imagined, from the least of them to the greatest. The verb, “*know*,” suggests a close, personal knowledge. He will be their God, and they will be His people. How is that possible due to their past failures and sins? God promises, “*I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins.*” (Jeremiah 31:34)

If you haven’t figured it out, God ushers the “*new covenant*” forward through the actions of His beloved Son (Hebrews 8). Indeed, Jesus’ actions (His death, resurrection, ascension) make the promised heart change possible within everyone who believes in Him—from the least to the greatest. Does that include you? If not, why not? And if the answer is “yes,” don’t step short of what God’s “*new covenant*” provides. Let’s know the LORD our God and discover the transforming difference He desires to make!

August 14

Jeremiah 51:15-58; 2 Kings 24:10-17; 1 Chronicles 3:10-16;
2 Chronicles 36:10-14

Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. But Zedekiah did what was evil in the sight of the LORD his God, and he refused to humble himself when the prophet Jeremiah spoke to him directly from the LORD. (2 Chronicles 36:11-12)

The final four kings of Judah are disappointing on every level. Ascending to the throne following king Josiah's death, his three sons (Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah) and his grandson (Jehoiachin) display none of the virtuous qualities that commended their predecessor. Each of them does what is evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking God's anger and moving the nation closer to God's culminating judgment. Our reading today summarizes Zedekiah's unsuccessful reign. He follows his nephew Jehoiachin's brief (3 months and ten days) ungodly rule. Zedekiah's actions reveal a darkened heart, and his refusal to listen to God's prophet says all we need to know. He is on a self-destructive path and will take the nation with him. Tragically, that is often the case. The failings of a national leader will have far-reaching consequences.

What went wrong with Judah's final king? Plainly stated, *"Zedekiah was a hard and stubborn man, refusing to turn to the LORD, the God of Israel."* (2 Chronicles 36:13) His defiant spirit is surprising when you consider that his older brother (Jehoiakim) and younger nephew (Jehoiachin) are forced into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon's ruler. Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin leave Jerusalem humiliated and defeated. Does that cause Zedekiah to adopt a different approach? Certainly not. He mirrors the mistakes of his older brother. Judah's young king refuses to turn to the LORD, influencing the nation's leaders to do the same (2 Chronicles 36:14).

How does Zedekiah's story end? He rebels against Babylon even though he swore loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar in God's name (2 Chronicles 36:13). Judah's king is defiant toward the LORD and displays the same insubordination toward Babylon's ruler. He fails to understand that God will use Nebuchadnezzar as an instrument of judgment against him and the nation. Ironically, as Zedekiah fears his future defeat at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, he appeals to Jeremiah to pray on the nation's behalf (Jeremiah 37:3). If the stubborn king had only listened to the prophet's earlier messages, he would already have his answer. Even so, Jeremiah sends word that Jerusalem's defeat is assured. He writes, *"Even if you were to destroy the entire Babylonian army, leaving only a handful of wounded survivors, they would still stagger from their tents and burn this city to the ground!"* (Jeremiah 37:10) God's patience has long since ended, and God will hold Judah and their king accountable.

And a lesson for us? Defiance toward God is never a good idea. How often have we discovered that to be the case in our chronological readings? Time and time again, we have observed the foolishness of this approach. Zedekiah serves as one more example. May we choose instead to humble ourselves before the LORD and to walk in His ways. It may not prevent us from experiencing hardship along the way (with Daniel's exile in mind). It will, however, position us to experience God's presence and help as we face the challenges around us. The choice each day is ours. I choose to humble myself. And you?

August 15

Jeremiah 37:11-38:28; Ezekiel 1:1–3:15

On July 31 of my thirtieth year, while I was with the Judean exiles beside the Kebar River in Babylon, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. (Ezekiel 1:1)

As Jeremiah suffers in Jerusalem, we are introduced to another of God's prophets—Ezekiel, son of Buzi. Ezekiel, a Judean priest, was carried into exile in 597 BC along with king Jehoiachin. He is forced to live far from his home and the land of promise. Ezekiel's life would dramatically change because of the nation's sins. God, however, was not done with His people. In distant Babylon, God calls His servant to deliver His message.

How does God commission an exiled priest and prophet? The LORD does so first by opening Ezekiel's eyes to the greatness and glory of who He is. He is granted a vision of four mysterious beings. As Ezekiel describes, *"Each had a human face in the front, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle at the back. Each had two pairs of outstretched wings—one pair stretched out to touch the wings of the living beings on either side of it, and the other pair covered its body."* (Ezekiel 1:10–12)

The mystery surrounding their appearance is exceeded by the heavenly beings' function or role. They accompany a chariot throne and are strangely attached to four sparkling wheels. Indeed, the spirit of the living beings is in the wheels themselves and facilitates the throne's movements—up, down, or in whatever direction. Their movement reverberates like waves crashing upon the shore or, even more, like the voice of the Almighty.

However, a greater vision is revealed. God's prophet beholds the ONE who sits upon the throne. He writes, *"And on this throne high above was a figure whose appearance resembled a man. From what appeared to be His waist up, he looked like gleaming amber, flickering like a fire. And from His waist down, he looked like a burning flame, shining with splendor. All around Him was a glowing halo, like a rainbow shining in the clouds on a rainy day. This is what the glory of the LORD looked like to me."* And Ezekiel's response? He falls face down before the glory of this ONE and listens to His voice. Ezekiel hears the voice of the LORD.

How does God call a prophet who will spend the entirety of his ministry in a foreign land? He opens his eyes to His greatness and power. We will learn some of the significance of the chariot throne later in Ezekiel's writings. For now, marvel over the "otherness" of the ONE sitting on the throne. The LORD is far more than a better version of us. He is mysteriously great, gloriously powerful. There are aspects of who God is that we will never comprehend. Like Ezekiel, we should humble ourselves before the ONE sitting upon the chariot throne.

It's worth noting that it is after Ezekiel humbles himself before the throne that he hears God speak. There's a correlation in that. God ultimately shares His message with those who humble themselves before Him. With Ezekiel, God stands His prophet up and calls His servant to the task before Him. Admittedly, much about Ezekiel's vision is beyond our imagination. Maybe that's good. When we reduce God to easily explained statements or ideas, we diminish the truth of who God is. He is far more than what our minds may comprehend. Let's allow that thought to carry us into the day ahead and be encouraged. May we, like Ezekiel, humbly bow ourselves before Him and allow the LORD to call us to His service. Let us do so today!

August 16

Ezekiel 3:16-4:17; Jeremiah 27-28; Jeremiah 51:59-64

Then the Spirit came into me and set me on my feet. He spoke to me and said, "Go to your house and shut yourself in. There, son of man, you will be tied with ropes so you cannot go out among the people. And I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be speechless and unable to rebuke them, for they are rebels. But when I give you a message, I will loosen your tongue and let you speak. Then you will say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says!' Those who choose to listen will listen, but those who refuse will refuse, for they are rebels." (Ezekiel 3:24-27)

I have previously noted that the life of an Old Testament prophet is frequently challenging. They are not only asked to deliver unpopular news but are often directed to bear unusual hardships to communicate God's message. Their actions become prophetic sermons unto themselves. We are provided two such examples in our reading today.

We see this first in God's instructions to His servant, Ezekiel. The prophet is asked to portray God's coming judgment upon Jerusalem by drawing a city map upon a large clay brick and then recreating the elements of a surrounding siege. It would illustrate the suffering that would soon descend upon Jerusalem's leaders and population. Yet, to me, God's further requirements stand out even more. The LORD commands Ezekiel to do the following:

"Now lie on your left side and place the sins of Israel on yourself. You are to bear their sins for the number of days you lie there on your side. I am requiring you to bear Israel's sins for 390 days—one day for each year of their sin. After that, turn over and lie on your right side for 40 days—one day for each year of Judah's sin. Meanwhile, keep staring at the siege of Jerusalem. Lie there with your arm bared and prophesy her destruction. I will tie you up with ropes so you won't be able to turn from side to side until the days of your siege have been completed." (Ezekiel 4:4-8)

Do we complain about what God might ask of us? Can we imagine how grueling this would be for God's servant to perform? Add to that, the prophet's rationing of food would likewise endure (Ezekiel 4:9-13). Set the meaning of the prescribed actions aside. Consider the hardship itself and Ezekiel's willingness to obey. And we are tempted to grumble about what God requires of us?

Of course, we also read today about the wooden yoke God directs His servant Jeremiah to wear. His action would visually testify to Babylon's yoke being placed upon Judah and the surrounding nations. Jeremiah could anticipate an angry, unfavorable response to his accompanying message. Yet, in obedience to the LORD, he does it anyway. Like Ezekiel, Jeremiah is committed to following God's command. Can the same be said of us?

I recognize the uniqueness of the Old Testament prophets' roles and hesitate to equate what we do with them. Even so, I am challenged and convicted by their examples. May God forgive us for complaining over the little things (comparatively speaking) that He asks us to do. Indeed, may we renew our commitment today to follow God's leadership and commands with the same determination and discipline as Ezekiel and Jeremiah. LORD, may it be so!

August 17 Ezekiel 5-9

Then this message came to me from the LORD: Son of man, this is what the Sovereign LORD says to Israel: “The end is here! Wherever you look— east, west, north, or south— your land is finished. No hope remains, for I will unleash My anger against you. I will call you to account for all your detestable sins. I will turn My eyes away and show no pity. I will repay you for all your detestable sins. Then you will know that I am the LORD.” (Ezekiel 7:1-4)

The judgment of God is always uncomfortable, even disturbing. Some might seek to soften the language or lessen the consequence, but to do so is to ignore the truth. It is to deny the seriousness of Judah’s sin and, in some way, diminish God’s holiness and purity. We are foolish to do so, for God’s judgment is not an idle threat or a manipulative religious tool. It is a physical and spiritual reality. The Sovereign God of the ages will judge righteously from on high. A wise person understands this and responds appropriately.

But what can be done? It is too late once God’s final judgment begins. As expressed above, there’s no hope when God’s anger is unleashed. The unrepentant will have missed their opportunity and will be held accountable for their sin. Keep this in mind. God was more than patient with Judah. He extended His patience for centuries to those who humbled themselves before Him. We witnessed an unexpected outpouring of mercy toward king Manasseh (2 Chronicles 33:12-13) as he turned sincerely to the LORD. The opportunity for forgiveness had been there. They have spurned His overtures for two decades. They lash out at His prophets. And now, as Ezekiel announces, the end has finally come. God will hold the unrepentant accountable.

Do we see a lesson in this for us? I fear many in our day discount or deny the reality of God’s judgment. They dispute that such a thing will happen. They want to believe instead that the threat of punishment is not real or will not affect them. Perhaps they have convinced themselves that they deserve a better outcome. Many in Judah felt the same before they were overwhelmed by God’s fury. Please remember that it is too late once God’s final judgment begins. The opportunity for God’s mercy is not unlimited. What was true of Judah will be true of many on the last day. They will have neglected God’s call for repentance, and there will be no hope.

The good news is that our opportunity for mercy has not yet passed. Salvation is still available—for us and those we love. The key is to turn to God’s Son. He is the embodiment of the LORD’s mercy and love. His actions on our behalf can address the judgment we rightfully deserve. Our need is to respond to Him while the opportunity remains. I remind you again of Jesus’ words,

“For this is how God loved the world: He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through Him. There is no judgment against anyone who believes in Him. But anyone who does not believe in Him has already been judged for not believing in God’s one and only Son.” (John 3:16-18)

The opportunity for mercy has not yet passed. Have you turned to Jesus? Have those you love experienced His mercy? It’s not too late.

August 18 Ezekiel 10-13

In my vision I saw what appeared to be a throne of blue lapis lazuli above the crystal surface over the heads of the cherubim. Then the LORD spoke to the man in linen clothing and said, "Go between the whirling wheels beneath the cherubim, and take a handful of burning coals and scatter them over the city." He did this as I watched. The cherubim were standing at the south end of the Temple when the man went in, and the cloud of glory filled the inner courtyard. Then the glory of the LORD rose up from above the cherubim and went over to the entrance of the Temple. The Temple was filled with this cloud of glory, and the courtyard glowed brightly with the glory of the LORD. (Ezekiel 10:1-4)

Our reading today includes another dramatic vision of God's prophet, Ezekiel. He is transported to the Temple in Jerusalem to observe a disturbing sight. As yesterday's reading highlighted, he sees God's Temple defiled by His so-called people (Ezekiel 8:1-18). They dishonor the LORD in detestable ways by worshipping the foreign gods of Babylon and the surrounding nations. They yield themselves to gods that are not gods, provoking the holiness of the ONE TRUE GOD. Their sinful actions will drive God's presence and glory from the Temple, the promised meeting place.

God allows Ezekiel to observe the disturbing departure. It begins with the reappearance of God's chariot throne (Ezekiel 1). Entering the Temple, the chariot throne (accompanied by four mysterious beings) is positioned in the inner courtyard to the south of the Temple. The unthinkable is happening. God's glory is departing. Ezekiel portrays the stunning withdrawal in stages. First, God moves from the "mercy seat" within the Holy of Holies to the Temple entrance. God's glory then moves from the Temple threshold to the chariot throne. Once resting upon the mysterious throne, the glory of God proceeds to the eastern gate. God appears to be waiting for someone to cry out and stop the progression at each stage. No one does, resulting in God's glory sadly departing the city.

It's done! The sinfulness of God's people has driven His presence, glory, and power away. And what is left for Judah and the city? Judgment will soon arrive, as illustrated early in Ezekiel's vision by the man in linen scattering the burning coals (Ezekiel 10:2). The people have rejected their God and will suffer the consequences.

Is there a lesson in this for us? Plainly stated: Do not drive the LORD away. May we search our hearts and repent of anything that grieves or diminishes God's presence among us. Maybe some question if that is even possible in the church of Jesus. Isn't God's presence assured because of His gift of the Holy Spirit? It's true that those who know Jesus cannot ultimately drive the LORD away. He has (spiritually speaking) joined Himself to us. However, we can push Jesus to a place where His presence and power are ineffectual. Consider the description of Jesus in His letter to the church in Laodicea (Revelation 3:20). He is outside the church knocking on the door, appealing for someone to open the door and let Him in. He concludes the letter by appealing, "Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what He is saying to the churches." (Revelation 3:22) How would the church respond?

Could that be descriptive of us? Will we take today's lesson to heart? May God give us ears to hear.

August 19 Ezekiel 14-16

Son of man, these leaders have set up idols in their hearts. They have embraced things that will make them fall into sin. Why should I listen to their requests? (Ezekiel 14:3)

God's judgment is getting the people's attention. Indeed, a group of exiled leaders seeks God's counsel through His prophet, Ezekiel. They want God's servant to deliver some good news. They hope to hear that God's displeasure might pass.

Instead of reassuring their hearts, like the many false prophets of the day (Ezekiel 13), God directs Ezekiel to expose their sin. Their professed devotion or piety as leaders is an outward show. Inwardly, they have set up idols in their hearts. Their allegiance is not to the One True God but to the false gods of Babylon. They are hypocrites in the worst possible way. Worshipping pagan gods, they now pretend to seek God's wisdom. God is not impressed. Why should He listen to their requests?

That's a fair question. Why should the LORD listen to the empty appeals or requests of a spiritually defiant people? Why should He extend hope to those who display no sorrow for their sin, who express no intention of changing their ways? Again, God is not impressed. He will not indulge in their hypocritical behavior or appeals. Instead, the Sovereign LORD calls this pretentious group of leaders to change their ways.

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "Repent and turn away from your idols, and stop all your detestable sins. I, the LORD, will answer all those, both Israelites and foreigners, who reject Me and set up idols in their hearts and so fall into sin, and who then come to a prophet asking for My advice. I will turn against such people and make a terrible example of them, eliminating them from among My people. Then you will know that I am the LORD." (Ezekiel 14:6-8)

Do we hear the seriousness of God's warning? God is not impressed when rebellious people pretend to seek God's guidance. Regular church attendees should not expect God's intervention or help when they live in utter disregard for who He is and what He teaches. If we genuinely seek God's counsel, repentance is required. "Repent," Ezekiel declares. "Turn away from your idols," the prophet explains, "and stop all your detestable sins." In other words, humble yourselves and relate to God appropriately.

Of course, we might assert that we have "no idols" within our hearts. Yet, any continuing pattern of sin argues otherwise, for our sin exposes what we hold most dearly. And what does our sin reveal? Have we elevated something above God in ways that now dominate our lives?

I'm convinced God's message to Ezekiel is as relevant today as it was in his day. Have we embraced things that make us fall into sin? Is repentance necessary? More specifically, will we turn away from these competing "idols" or "gods" and stop the sins they promote? Will we honor the LORD and walk anew in His ways? And our response?

August 20 Ezekiel 17-19

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "I will take a branch from the top of a tall cedar, and I will plant it on the top of Israel's highest mountain. It will become a majestic cedar, sending forth its branches and producing seed. Birds of every sort will nest in it, finding shelter in the shade of its branches. And all the trees will know that it is I, the LORD, who cuts the tall tree down and makes the short tree grow tall. It is I who makes the green tree wither and gives the dead tree new life. I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will do what I said!" (Ezekiel 17:22-24)

Today's reading includes a riddle/parable describing the foolishness of Zedekiah (Judah's final king) and a discussion concerning God's justice regarding sin. First, consider the riddle. Some people never learn. Instead of recognizing God's judgment through the Babylonian exile and humbling himself before the LORD, Zedekiah pretends he can manage things himself. He seeks a political solution with Egypt's help when the problem is inherently spiritual. He demonstrates yet again the foolishness of acting independently of the LORD. Yet, amid the loss, there's the promise of a future descendant of David that God will establish—a promised king. As highlighted above, Ezekiel is pointing us prophetically to Jesus. Read the testimony and be encouraged.

Yet, interestingly, God also highlights His justice regarding the consequences of sin. Through the prophet, God declares, *"Why do you quote this proverb concerning the land of Israel: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, but their children's mouths pucker at the taste'? As surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, you will not quote this proverb anymore in Israel. For all people are Mine to judge—both parents and children alike. And this is My rule: The person who sins is the one who will die."* (Ezekiel 18:1-4)

God goes out of the way to explain that His justice for sin is that—just. He will not condemn a child for a father's sin. "No," God states. *"For if the child does what is just and right and keeps My decrees, that child will surely live."* (Ezekiel 18:19) Even further, if the wicked father repents, he can rediscover God's help and support. The LORD adds, *"But if wicked people turn away from all their sins and begin to obey My decrees and do what is just and right, they will surely live and not die."* (Ezekiel 18:21) There's mercy with the LORD.

Does this mean that the sinful actions of a parent do not harm a child? Obviously not. We have all witnessed the devastating effects of an ungodly parent or adult. What it does mean, however, is that the guilt of the parent's sin is not applied to the son or daughter. God's judgment for sin is just. And it should be noted—God finds no pleasure in holding people accountable for their sins. God reveals, *"Do you think that I like to see wicked people die?"* says the Sovereign LORD. *"Of course not! I want them to turn from their wicked ways and live."* (Ezekiel 18:23)

There's much to reflect upon from today's reading. Let's conclude by listening to God's heart as He appeals, *"I don't want you to die,"* says the Sovereign LORD. *"Turn back and live!"* (Ezekiel 18:32) Of course, that is made all the more real as we turn to Jesus, His promised king. Come on. Let's turn to Him and live (John 10:9)!

August 21 Ezekiel 20:1-22:16

Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: “Again and again you remind Me of your sin and your guilt. You don’t even try to hide it! In everything you do, your sins are obvious for all to see. So now the time of your punishment has come! (Ezekiel 21:24)

Ezekiel’s ministry is a difficult one. His message is frequently one of judgment. As highlighted above, God’s pronouncement is clear—the time of punishment for God’s people has come. Yet, as today’s reading illustrates, it is a slow culmination of a painful history. God recounts His patience toward their past failures. Indeed, even at the beginning, their idolatrous practices were present. The people refuse to forsake their pagan Gods while God delivers them from Egyptian captivity. God Himself recounts, *“But they rebelled against Me and would not listen. They did not get rid of the vile images they were obsessed with, or forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I threatened to pour out My fury on them to satisfy My anger while they were still in Egypt. But I didn’t do it, for I acted to protect the honor of My name.” (Ezekiel 20:8–9)*

I marvel at God’s patience. While the LORD rescues and redeems, the children of Israel dishonor Him—even at the start. Yet, as God expresses through His prophet, it was only the start. In the wilderness, their disobedience and idolatry would persist. The same spiritual defiance would reappear as a future generation enters the land of promise.

Honestly, it is hard for me to grasp—the spiritual infidelity of the people and the remarkable patience of the LORD. Of course, as the LORD confesses, their actions provoked His fury. Again and again, they are deserving of God’s judgment. Yet, it is repeatedly diverted. Did you notice why?

The testimony is the same. God withholds His judgment, as He expresses, *“to protect the honor of My name.”* God will not allow the testimony concerning Israel’s deliverance to become a source of mockery or shame. God states, *“I would not allow shame to be brought on My name among the surrounding nations who saw Me reveal Myself by bringing the Israelites out of Egypt.” (Ezekiel 20:9)*

The honor of God’s name would produce patience toward the people that would be observed again and again (Ezekiel 20:14, 22, 44). Tragically, God’s patience is finally exhausted. There’s a real sadness in the testimony. God declares, *“I will scatter you among the nations and purge you of your wickedness. And when I have been dishonored among the nations because of you, you will know that I am the LORD.” (Ezekiel 22:15–16)*

Yes, there is sadness. But is there a glimmer of hope? In their shame, His people will come to know that He is the LORD. Ah, their story is not done. For that matter, nor is ours. God’s work of redemption will continue for the honor of His name. It will become even more personal as God redeems His people by introducing a new name for Himself. That new name will be Jesus, and He will save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). Amid the sadness of today’s reading, think about the rest of the story and be encouraged.

August 22

Ezekiel 22:17-24:14; 2 Kings 24:20b–25:2; Jeremiah 39:1; 52:3b-5

The LORD said to me, “Son of man, you must accuse Oholah and Oholibah of all their detestable sins. They have committed both adultery and murder—adultery by worshiping idols and murder by burning as sacrifices the children they bore to Me. Furthermore, they have defiled My Temple and violated My Sabbath day! On the very day that they sacrificed their children to their idols, they boldly came into My Temple to worship! They came in and defiled My house.” (Ezekiel 23:36–40)

The prophetic drumbeat of God’s judgment is intensifying. Judah will soon experience God’s wrath over the nation’s moral and spiritual infidelity. Today’s reading highlights the inevitability of Judah’s demise. The people have spurned the LORD and will suffer the consequences.

God compares Israel/Samaria and Judah/Jerusalem to two sisters (Oholah and Oholibah) who betray a husband who rescues them from a life of prostitution. Instead of reciprocating the husband’s love, they display indifference and disdain. They defile their relationship in every imaginable way and pursue a self-destructive path. Oholah (Israel) would be the first to experience ruin. The outcome of her spiritual adultery could have served as a warning to Oholibah (Judah), but it does not. Instead of learning from Oholah’s downfall, the younger sister moves in the opposite direction. Her misbehavior exceeds that of the already-judged sister. Indeed, she chooses a course of action that magnifies and guarantees her destruction. Judah’s devastation is assured.

Let’s agree that today’s reading is disturbing. We want to look for a glimmer of hope. However, the defiance of Judah’s leaders prevents that from happening. As God declares, *“I looked for someone who might rebuild the wall of righteousness that guards the land. I searched for someone to stand in the gap in the wall so I wouldn’t have to destroy the land, but I found no one. So now I will pour out My fury on them, consuming them with the fire of My anger. I will heap on their heads the full penalty for all their sins. I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken!”* (Ezekiel 22:30–31) There’s sorrow in God’s assessment. The LORD waited for someone to come to their senses, but no one did. Their rebellion persisted, and God’s judgment would result. Spiritually speaking, the younger sister (Oholibah/Judah) would soon experience the fury of God’s righteous judgment.

The crescendo of God’s prophetic drumbeat finally erupts with the siege of Jerusalem. As 2 King records, *“Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon. So on January 15, during the ninth year of Zedekiah’s reign, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon led his entire army against Jerusalem. They surrounded the city and built siege ramps against its walls. Jerusalem was kept under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah’s reign.”* (2 Kings 24:20–25:2)

What do we learn? Honestly, I’m saddened by Judah’s hard-heartedness. Their sin is worse than Sodom’s (Ezekiel 16:48), and God’s judgment will prove no less devastating. Why did they not open their spiritual eyes and repent? Yet, my heart is likewise saddened for God, who redeemed His people from Egypt. He acts with love toward His covenant people. He intends to bless and honor them but suffers one betrayal after the next. The level of spiritual defilement and disregard at the end of Judah’s rebellion is disgusting and provokes God to action. I grieve for the LORD. May God help us understand sin’s seriousness and respond to Him with the love He deserves. May we gain corrective insight from Israel and Judah’s foolish decisions.

August 23

Ezekiel 24:15-25:17; 29:1-16; 30:20-31:18; Jeremiah 21:1-14; 34:1-22

Then this message came to me from the LORD: “Son of man, with one blow I will take away your dearest treasure. Yet you must not show any sorrow at her death. Do not weep; let there be no tears. Groan silently, but let there be no wailing at her grave. Do not uncover your head or take off your sandals. Do not perform the usual rituals of mourning or accept any food brought to you by consoling friends.” So I proclaimed this to the people the next morning, and in the evening my wife died. The next morning I did everything I had been told to do. (Ezekiel 24:15–18)

Ezekiel’s devotion to God exceeds my own. That has been demonstrated repeatedly as the prophet faithfully follows the LORD’s instructions during his Babylonian exile. His trust in God and obedience to God’s commands expose a noticeable inconsistency on my part. Ezekiel responds in a way that I don’t know that I could. The death of Ezekiel’s wife displays this most vividly.

God informs His servant that his wife (his dearest treasure) will be taken from him before the day ends. Can we imagine the shock? My heart aches just reading the words. Please know that God’s heart did as well. To read today’s account and conclude that God is uncaring and unmoved by what He reveals is to ignore the larger testimony of God’s Word. I’m reminded of Jesus’ response to Mary as she grieves over the death of her brother, Lazarus. Jesus is deeply moved by what He sees and weeps (John 11:33). Even though Jesus knew that He would soon raise Lazarus from the dead, He identifies with Mary’s emotional pain—as He identifies with our own. Jesus is the embodiment of God’s heart. The LORD is not unmoved by human suffering or loss. He is not unaffected by the unfolding events. As the psalmist attests, *“You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.” (Psalm 56:8)*

Again, don’t read today’s account and project a calloused indifference on God’s part. Choose instead to view the death of Ezekiel’s wife as a further indication of the national tragedy that is taking place. God’s beloved people (His dearest treasure) and the people’s privileged place of meeting (the Temple) would soon experience destruction and loss. Everything happening is heartbreaking to witness; yes, God asks Ezekiel and his wife to share in the suffering. As a person of faith, I want to remind myself that death is not the end—that God ultimately provides for Ezekiel and his wife through death. Even so, my heart aches for God’s prophet. He loses (as some translate) the *“delight of his eyes”* and is asked to bear this emotional burden without any public displays of grief. Why is he forbidden to grieve publicly? His actions would model the appropriate response for God’s exiled people following the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Their silent acceptance would be a humble acknowledgment of God’s promised judgment.

Does any of this make Ezekiel’s loss easier to bear? No. Once more, my heart is affected by the death of the prophet’s wife. I also marvel at his prompt acceptance and obedience. His faith challenges my own, and, I suspect, it does the same with you. May God help us trust Him as we face our share of losses. We are not immune, and God (we can be assured) is not indifferent toward our pain. May we learn from Ezekiel’s example and relate to the LORD accordingly.

August 24 Jeremiah 32:1-33:26; Ezekiel 26:1-14

Jeremiah said, "The word of the LORD came to me: Behold, Hanamel the son of Shallum your uncle will come to you and say, 'Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.'"... And I bought the field at Anathoth from Hanamel my cousin, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver ... I charged Baruch in their presence, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware vessel, that they may last for a long time. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.'" (Jeremiah 32: 6-7, 9, 13-15)

God's judgment against Judah is inevitable. The nation will soon be overrun by Babylon's army one final time, resulting in Jerusalem's defeat and the Temple's destruction. It is a dark chapter in Judah's history. Yet, despite the recurring pronouncements of judgment, God offers a future hope. The LORD directs Jeremiah to purchase a piece of property from his cousin, Hanamel. Some might view the purchase as unwise with the Babylonian threat before them. Who buys land when a foreign power potentially claims everyone's property as its own? God, however, directs Jeremiah and the people to anticipate a better day.

Jeremiah's land purchase is a prophetic reminder that God's people will return to the land and that life will be restored. "*Houses and fields and vineyards,*" God explains, "*shall again be bought in this land.*" Though it will not benefit Jeremiah nor most of the generation at hand, a better day for the descendants of Abraham is nevertheless assured. Yes, the nation of Judah will suffer the devastating consequences of their spiritual rebellion, but a future hope remains. Indeed, the LORD later declares,

"I will certainly bring My people back again from all the countries where I will scatter them in My fury. I will bring them back to this very city and let them live in peace and safety. They will be My people, and I will be their God. And I will give them one heart and one purpose: to worship Me forever, for their own good and for the good of all their descendants. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good for them. I will put a desire in their hearts to worship Me, and they will never leave Me. I will find joy doing good for them and will faithfully and wholeheartedly replant them in this land." (Jeremiah 32:37-41)

How will this be achieved? Who will usher forth God's better day, His everlasting covenant? The LORD declares, "*In those days and at that time I will raise up a righteous descendant from king David's line. He will do what is just and right throughout the land. In that day Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this will be its name: 'The LORD Is Our Righteousness.'*" (Jeremiah 33:15-16) Please take a moment and marvel with me. At Judah's darkest moment, God points to His people's ultimate source of Light (John 1:5; 8:12)." God's Promised One will also be given the name of JESUS (Luke 1:31-32), which means "God saves." That's right! "*The LORD Is Our Righteousness*" will save His people from their sins. Now, that is something to encourage the heart.

Let's again focus on God's promise of hope. Amid the threat of judgment descending upon a sinful nation, let's fix our hearts upon the "*The LORD Is Our Righteousness.*" Consider the difference Jesus came to make. And our response to Him?

August 25

Jeremiah 16-18, 2 Kings 25:3-7; Jeremiah 39:2-10; 52:6-11

But the Babylonian troops chased the king and overtook him on the plains of Jericho, for his men had all deserted him and scattered. They captured the king and took him to the king of Babylon at Riblah, where they pronounced judgment upon Zedekiah. They made Zedekiah watch as they slaughtered his sons. Then they gouged out Zedekiah's eyes, bound him in bronze chains, and led him away to Babylon. (2 Kings 25:5-7)

The older I get, the more uncomfortable I've become with violence and bloodshed. Even the smallest amount in a movie or program causes me to look away. That's all the more true in real life. Human suffering in its mildest forms disturbs me. It goes without saying that today's reading is unsettling. Even though we've been informed of God's approaching judgment, my heart is no less uneasy. Of course, God warned Zedekiah not to oppose the Babylonians. Jeremiah could not have been more direct. *"If you want to live, submit to the yoke of the king of Babylon and his people. Why do you insist on dying—you and your people? Why should you choose war, famine, and disease, which the LORD will bring against every nation that refuses to submit to Babylon's king?" (Jeremiah 27:12-13)*

Does Zedekiah listen? He does not. He persists in rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar in the same way he defied and sinned against the LORD. Judah's king refuses to learn, only to discover God's warnings and pronouncements are true. Do we display the same stubbornness of heart? God warns us away from particular paths. He calls us to trust Him and follow His lead. Do we listen or suffer the consequences of our defiance? As confounding as Zedekiah's actions prove to be, I am just as baffled by the choices of many today. How often must God steer us away from self-destructive paths? How frequently must we experience the pain and suffering of our decisions? Will we listen? Will we learn?

Zedekiah and Judah would not suffer God's judgment alone. Tyre and Sidon would experience the same devastating outcome. Consider the Sovereign LORD's pronouncement against Tyre, *"I will make Tyre an uninhabited ruin, like many others. I will bury you beneath the terrible waves of enemy attack. Great seas will swallow you. I will send you to the pit to join those who descended there long ago. Your city will lie in ruins, buried beneath the earth, like those in the pit who have entered the world of the dead. You will have no place of respect here in the land of the living. I will bring you to a terrible end, and you will exist no more. You will be looked for, but you will never again be found. I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken!" (Ezekiel 26:19-21)*

God help us! May we seek and find His mercy before we reach a place of no return. People's sinful actions will produce consequences far beyond what they ever imagined. God's heart is to redeem and restore, but that doesn't eliminate the harsh reality of His divine judgment against those who refuse to listen. Zedekiah refused to listen, and we are left to read the disturbing end to his reign. Will we learn anything from his example? Again, I would say, "God, help us, please!"

August 26

Jeremiah 39:11-40:6; 52:12-27; 2 Kings 25:8-21; 2 Chronicles 36:15-21;
Lamentations 1:1-22

The LORD, the God of their ancestors, repeatedly sent His prophets to warn them, for He had compassion on His people and His Temple. But the people mocked these messengers of God and despised their words. They scoffed at the prophets until the LORD's anger could no longer be restrained and nothing could be done. So the LORD brought the king of Babylon against them. (2 Chronicles 36:15-17)

Judah has suffered the consequence of its sin. The people's persistent rejection of the LORD has resulted in His judgment at the hands of the Babylonians. The writer of 2 Chronicles provides a straightforward summary of the nation's spiritual journey. The LORD desired a right relationship with His people, but they rejected His compassionate appeals. They mocked His prophets and scoffed at their recurring message. Judah's refusal to listen guaranteed the pain and misery that followed.

Of course, Jeremiah was one of the prophetic voices that God's people ignored. He warned the nation and its leaders for decades. His message was consistently clear and to the point—the Babylonians would overwhelm the nation and even destroy the Temple because of the people's spiritual defiance and sin. They punished God's messenger instead of heeding Jeremiah's call to repentance. Indeed, Jeremiah suffered a great deal as a result of his unpopular message. That, however, did not alter the truth of his words. As 2 Chronicles states, *"The message of the LORD spoken through Jeremiah was fulfilled."* (2 Chronicles 36:21)

And what happens to God's prophet? Today's reading provides the following details: *"King Nebuchadnezzar had told Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, to find Jeremiah. 'See that he isn't hurt,' he said. 'Look after him well, and give him anything he wants'... The captain of the guard called for Jeremiah and said, 'The LORD your God has brought this disaster on this land, just as He said He would. For these people have sinned against the LORD and disobeyed Him. That is why it happened. But I am going to take off your chains and let you go. If you want to come with me to Babylon, you are welcome. I will see that you are well cared for. But if you don't want to come, you may stay here. The whole land is before you—go wherever you like.'" (Jeremiah 39:11-12; 40:2-5)*

Is it surprising that the Babylonian leaders grasped God's actions against Judah better than God's people? The nation suffered this disaster because they *"sinned against the LORD and disobeyed Him."* Nebuchadnezzar recognized the truth and then acted to provide for God's messenger. He offers Jeremiah a choice through his local commander. The LORD's prophet is invited to live in Babylon, where he can dwell comfortably, or Jeremiah can remain in Judah—with the poor and beleaguered. What would you have decided? Jeremiah chooses to stay in the land. Once again, Jeremiah distinguishes himself as someone to be admired. The prophet's devotion to God and His people is an example. Jeremiah doesn't choose the easy path after years of suffering and hardship. He places himself in the setting where he hopes to make the greatest difference.

And what of us? Do we choose the easy path or the one with the greatest impact? Do we aim to be comfortable, or are we willing to become a source of God's comfort to others? Jeremiah's example has already challenged us in the past. Will we allow his actions to influence us again today?

August 27 Lamentations 2-4

I have cried until the tears no longer come; my heart is broken. My spirit is poured out in agony as I see the desperate plight of my people. (Lamentations 2:11)

The suffering of Judah's population is almost indescribable as God's people experience His judgment for their prolonged rebellion and sin. The pain, misery, and hardship appear unbearable. There's such sorrow and loss. The book of Lamentations provides some perspective on what the people endured and felt during Jerusalem's siege and destruction. The emotions are raw, but their understanding is clear. God's judgment has come!

The Book of Lamentations is a collection of five poems or laments. The author is not identified, but the writings have traditionally been attributed to Jeremiah, God's "weeping prophet." Whether the emotionally charged poems are from Jeremiah's pen or that of another, the author is an eyewitness to the horrors and distress of Jerusalem's collapse. The person witnesses the unimaginable and expresses honest emotion and grief. "Tears stream from my eyes," the writer explains, "because of the destruction of my people!" He adds, "My tears flow endlessly; they will not stop until the LORD looks down from heaven and sees." (Lamentations 3:48-50) There is such sadness and anguish among God's people.

The poems are a sincere attempt by the author to express his emotions so he might spiritually work through them. Four of the laments (Lamentations 1-4) are organized as alphabetic acrostics. The writer allows the Hebrew alphabet to focus his thoughts and emotions. Though the fifth lament or prayer (Lamentations 5) does not follow the same pattern, it is no less thoughtful. The point is: that the book of Lamentations is not the ramblings of a heart overrun by emotion. Instead, each poem represents an honest attempt to process what happened. They remind us that we, too, should be open with our feelings as we work through the challenges and disappointments surrounding us.

However, the writer also points to the faithfulness of God. He does not allow his heartache to close his eyes to the truth of God's love and support. Instead, he confidently declares, "The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is His faithfulness; His mercies begin afresh each morning. I say to myself, 'The LORD is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in Him!' The LORD is good to those who depend on Him, to those who search for Him. So it is good to wait quietly for salvation from the LORD." (Lamentations 3:22-26) It represents one of the Old Testament's greatest testimonies of God's faithfulness and love. Yet, it rises from the darkest of hours. Is it possible that we see the LORD's goodness most clearly when we feel helpless and heartbroken? Is there a lesson to be learned?

I don't know what your present circumstances may be. I doubt any of us have come close to experiencing the nightmare of Jerusalem's siege and collapse. Our worst days do not even begin to compare. Have we allowed our difficulties to close our eyes to God's goodness and love? Have we permitted our disappointments to turn us away from the One who loves us? Have you? May we choose instead to voice the testimony of Lamentations. "The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in Him." May it be so!

August 28
Lamentations 5:1-22; Obadiah 1-21; 2 Kings 25:22-26;
Jeremiah 40:7-16; 41:1-18

The day is near when I, the LORD, will judge all godless nations! As you have done to Israel, so it will be done to you. All your evil deeds will fall back on your own heads. (Obadiah 15)

Judah will not suffer alone in response to a nation's sin. Jeremiah and Ezekiel announce that God's judgment will also touch the surrounding nations (Jeremiah 25:15-38; Ezekiel 25-32). Think about it. If God holds His people accountable for their sins, how much more will He hold those who live outside a covenant relationship with Him responsible? Even Babylon, the instrument of God's judgment against Judah, will experience His righteous fury at the LORD's appointed time. The righteousness of God is not selectively applied. God will hold all nations accountable in His time.

The book of Obadiah illustrates this truth concerning the nation of Edom. Of all the surrounding kingdoms, the population of Edom should have known better. They are distant cousins of Israel—descendants of Esau. They should have displayed some concern, even support, for Judah—descendants of Jacob (Esau's brother). They choose instead to capitalize on their neighboring nation's misery, and God holds them responsible. The LORD raises His servant, Obadiah, to expose Edom's offenses. The prophet denounces their behavior.

"You should not have gloated when they exiled your relatives to distant lands. You should not have rejoiced when the people of Judah suffered such misfortune. You should not have spoken arrogantly in that terrible time of trouble. You should not have plundered the land of Israel when they were suffering such calamity. You should not have gloated over their destruction when they were suffering such calamity. You should not have seized their wealth when they were suffering such calamity. You should not have stood at the crossroads, killing those who tried to escape. You should not have captured the survivors and handed them over in their terrible time of trouble." (Obadiah 12-14)

What motivates Edom's actions? Greed, self-interest, pride? For whatever reason, the Edomites feel justified in their response and perhaps shielded from future repercussions. God, however, announces otherwise. *"I will cut you down to size among the nations." (Obadiah 2)* He later adds, *"You have been deceived by your own pride because you live in a rock fortress and make your home high in the mountains. 'Who can ever reach us way up here?' you ask boastfully. But even if you soar as high as eagles and build your nest among the stars, I will bring you crashing down." (Obadiah 4-5)*

Edom did not escape the LORD's gaze, and He will hold them accountable. And what about us? As we observed God's pronouncements against Ammon, Moab, Philistia, Tyre, and Sidon (the list could go on), are we concerned about what He might say about our nation? Do we think the Sovereign LORD is no longer paying attention? I don't raise the question to alarm us but to cause the appropriate introspection. Whenever I read about God's judgment against a nation, I wonder, "If them, why not us?" As you consider the same, may it lead us to humble ourselves before the LORD and pray. Let's not presume upon God's mercy. May we actively seek it. Indeed, the day may come when the LORD decides to cut us down to size. Let's not test God's patience. May we turn to the LORD instead.

August 29
Jeremiah 51:15-58; Jeremiah 42-44; Ezekiel 33:21-33

Pray that the LORD your God will show us what to do and where to go. (Jeremiah 42:3)

Judah remains a place of instability and uncertainty. The Babylonian-appointed governor, Gedaliah, is assassinated. Though the perpetrator, Ishmael, is driven from the land, the population fears severe repercussions by Nebuchadnezzar. They anticipate another violent response. Amid growing fears, they seek God's counsel through His servant, Jeremiah. Their request is to the point: *"Show us what to do and where to go."*

God provides His reply ten days later. *"Stay here in this land,"* the LORD explains. *"If you do, I will build you up and not tear you down; I will plant you and not uproot you. For I am sorry about all the punishment I have had to bring upon you. Do not fear the king of Babylon anymore,"* says the LORD. *"For I am with you and will save you and rescue you from his power. I will be merciful to you by making him kind, so he will let you stay here in your land."* (Jeremiah 42:10-12) God's message is full of hope, but the LORD extends a sobering warning. *"If you are determined to go to Egypt and live there, the very war and famine you fear will catch up to you, and you will die there."* (Jeremiah 42:15-16)

The choice seems straightforward. Stay in Judah and anticipate God's provision. Flee to Egypt, and God's judgment will follow. It's not much of a choice if one thinks about it. The obvious answer is to trust the LORD and remain in the land. Yet, once again, the people reject God's counsel. They accuse God's prophet of lying and determine that Egypt will be their future home. They pursue the specific path God warns would be their undoing, forcing Jeremiah to make the journey with them.

Reading today's account stirs so many emotions. The people seek God's counsel but then reject God's wisdom and choose the path of self-destruction. It makes me cry out, "What are they thinking?" Of course, the problem is they refuse to listen to God's Word. They only go through the motions of seeking God's will. They have no intention of following His lead. They expect Jeremiah to tell them what they want to hear. They seek validation, not revelation. The consequences are severe. God pronounces His judgment, *"Therefore, this is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says: I am determined to destroy every one of you! I will take this remnant of Judah—those who were determined to come here and live in Egypt—and I will consume them. They will fall here in Egypt, killed by war and famine. All will die, from the least to the greatest. They will be an object of damnation, horror, cursing, and mockery."* (Jeremiah 44:11-12)

Again, I ask, "What are they thinking?" Do their actions expose a tendency among some today? People turn to the Bible and religious leaders to tell them what they want to hear instead of allowing God to address their lives. They don't want to reject God outright. They just don't want God telling them what to do, where to go, or who they can become. How much disappointment and suffering will people inflict upon themselves before they finally humble themselves before the LORD? Of all the people who should submit to God's authority, it should have been those who survived Babylon's final invasion. But they refuse to listen and then force others (like Jeremiah) to experience the devastation in Egypt that will inevitably follow. "WHAT ARE THEY THINKING?"

Let's learn from their negative example. May we seek God's wisdom and then submit to His Word. God promised His provision and care if the people would trust Him. They refused to do so. May we choose to do so. The question is, "WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?"

August 30 Ezekiel 34-36

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds, the leaders of Israel. Give them this message from the Sovereign LORD: What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? (Ezekiel 34:2)

Today's reading includes both good news and bad news. The bad news is directed toward the spiritual leaders who failed the nation of Judah. They were to guide and protect God's people like shepherds watching a flock. They were to act on the people's behalf but were instead driven by self-interest and desire. God denounces their failure through His prophet, Ezekiel. *"You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. So My sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal."* (Ezekiel 34:3-5)

God pledges to hold the fraudulent shepherds accountable. The Sovereign LORD declares, *"I now consider these shepherds My enemies, and I will hold them responsible for what has happened to My flock. I will take away their right to feed the flock, and I will stop them from feeding themselves. I will rescue My flock from their mouths; the sheep will no longer be their prey."* It is bad news for those who have spiritually neglected God's people.

The bad news, however, is balanced with good news—in fact, great news. God announces that He will assume responsibility for shepherding His people. He declares, *"I Myself will search and find My sheep. I will be like a shepherd looking for His scattered flock. I will find My sheep and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on that dark and cloudy day. I will bring them back home to their own land of Israel from among the peoples and nations. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel and by the rivers and in all the places where people live."* (Ezekiel 34:11-13) The LORD later states, *"I Myself will tend My sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace, says the Sovereign LORD. I will search for My lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak."* (Ezekiel 34:15-16) And how will this be achieved? *"And I will set over them ONE SHEPHERD, My servant David. He will feed them and be a shepherd to them. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David will be a prince among My people. I, the LORD, have spoken!"* (Ezekiel 34:23-24)

I can't read these words and not think of Jesus. He's the One who came *"to seek and save those who are lost."* (Luke 19:10) He's the promised Shepherd prophesied by Ezekiel. He's the One sent to make the essential difference. As Jesus says of Himself, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices His life for the sheep. A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don't belong to him and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know My own sheep, and they know Me, just as my Father knows Me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice My life for the sheep."* (John 10:11-15)

Let's focus today on the good news—God's faithful shepherd. May we marvel over the LORD's promise and renew our trust in the One who laid down His life on our behalf. Jesus is more than a hired hand. He is the good Shepherd who deserves our faith and devotion. Let's focus on the good news and be encouraged as we do!

August 31
Ezekiel 32:1-16; Ezekiel 37-39

The LORD took hold of me, and I was carried away by the Spirit of the LORD to a valley filled with bones. He led me all around among the bones that covered the valley floor. They were scattered everywhere across the ground and were completely dried out. (Ezekiel 37:1-2)

The destruction of Judah and Israel is complete. The nations that once represented the twelve tribes of Israel now cease to exist. The land has been conquered, the Temple has been destroyed, and God's covenant people have been scattered abroad. The aspirations of a once proud and defiant people have come to a dramatic end. Judah and Israel are no more, but is all hope gone? God answers this question through another visionary experience by His servant, Ezekiel. God transports the prophet to a valley of dry bones. In every direction Ezekiel looks, he observes the vestiges of death and shame. It must have been disturbing for a Jewish priest to see. The valley testifies to an enormous loss of life without the deceased afforded the dignity of burial.

The unsettling scene, however, will become the basis of God's message of hope. The valley of dry bones represents the death of the nations of Judah and Israel. The unburied bones symbolize the shame and dishonor that the people deserved. Yet, God restores life and purpose in the most unexpected ways. Indeed, the LORD asks his servant a surprising question, "*Son of man, can these bones become living people again?*" (Ezekiel 37:3) The expected answer would be, "No, dry bones will not live again." But to the prophet's credit, he recognizes the authority of the One raising the question. He responds instead, "*O Sovereign LORD, You alone know the answer to that.*" (Ezekiel 37:3)

Ezekiel's confession proves insightful, for God will enable the prophet to facilitate the impossible. Lifeless bones will dramatically come together, which will then be followed by the reappearance of muscle, ligament, and flesh. This disturbing valley of death becomes the setting for a miraculous display. Yet, the Lord does something more. He sends a life-giving wind or spirit from the earth's four corners to reanimate the bodies. God reintroduces life where there is no life.

What is the catalyst of this supernatural display? It is the spoken word. God commands Ezekiel to prophesy over the scattered bones and then witnesses the bodies miraculously reassemble. God then directs His servant to call forth the four winds, and God's breath of life achieves the impossible. God resurrects an unlikely army to fulfill His divine purpose and plan. And all of this is achieved through the spoken word. But not just any collection of words or sayings. The power rests in God's revelation and promise. The LORD empowers what He promises and commands. We must always keep that in mind.

What does all of this mean? The LORD interprets the vision Himself. "*O My people, I will open your graves of exile and cause you to rise again. Then I will bring you back to the land of Israel. When this happens, O My people, you will know that I am the LORD.*" (Ezekiel 37:12-13) Though the nations of Israel and Judah have visibly died a painful death, hope remains. God promises to restore life to His people and bring them home. God will do what they are incapable of doing for themselves. He will resurrect His people from a valley of dry bones. Again, behold the power of the Sovereign LORD.

The implications of this message should encourage our hearts. God restores life where death abounds. His words are powerful enough to affect any situation. May we remember this as we move into the New Testament and reflect upon Jesus' words. Envision the difference Jesus can make as we hear Him speak with authority over our situations and lives. May He cause our dry bones to rattle and to bring life where there is no life—to bring hope where all hope is gone. May God grant us ears to hear.

Devotions written and prepared by Stephen Lowrie
All references unless noted: New Living Translation

