

OUR STORY

GOD'S WORK. OUR HOPE.

Chronological Readings

July



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.

July 1
2 Chronicles 29:3-31:21

In the very first month of the first year of his reign, Hezekiah reopened the doors of the Temple of the LORD and repaired them. (2 Chronicles 29:3)

We were introduced to Hezekiah in last week's readings. At twenty-five, he ascends the throne of his father, Ahaz. His father was an evil, idolatrous ruler who led the nation of Judah toward moral and spiritual decline. Ahaz was more interested in impressing the Assyrian leader, Tiglath-pileser, than honoring the LORD God. He abandoned the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, promoting the Assyrian gods instead. As the writer of 2 Chronicles describes,

"The king (Ahaz) took the various articles from the Temple of God and broke them into pieces. He shut the doors of the LORD's Temple so that no one could worship there, and he set up altars to pagan gods in every corner of Jerusalem. He made pagan shrines in all the towns of Judah for offering sacrifices to other gods. In this way, he aroused the anger of the LORD, the God of his ancestors." (2 Chronicles 28:24-25)

Hezekiah moves to reverse the direction of his father's rule. Within the first month of his reign, Hezekiah reopens the Jerusalem Temple. He is determined to lead the people back to the LORD. The Temple, however, was defiled and in disrepair. Hezekiah promptly summons the necessary priests and Levites to restore and purify the Temple, the altar, fixtures, and utensils. They were careful to follow the LORD's instructions. Once completed, the king led the people to rededicate the Temple and themselves wholeheartedly to God. Indeed, it is said of Hezekiah: *"In all that he did in the service of the Temple of God and in his efforts to follow God's laws and commands, Hezekiah sought his God wholeheartedly." (2 Chronicles 31:21)* Hezekiah's actions would lead the nation into a period of spiritual renewal and revival.

And what of us? I reminded us last month that believers in Jesus Christ are now God's Temple. It is within our lives that the LORD makes His presence known. Paul explains, *"Don't you realize that your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body." (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)* What is the state of God's Temple within our lives?

Hezekiah recognized that the Temple in Jerusalem was not as it should be. He led the people to remove what should not be present and rededicate what should be (2 Chronicles 29:17). Are we willing to pursue a similar work of renewal within us? Dare we invite the LORD to open our eyes to our spiritual condition before Him? What activity or attitude needs to be removed? Do we recognize how the LORD is negatively affected? Also, what about our lives should be rededicated and renewed? In what ways does God desire to make a greater difference—to make His presence known?

We should celebrate Hezekiah's commitment to cleansing and renewing the Temple of God. We should also be encouraged to do the same. Will we do so? Will we allow the necessary work to begin, even today?

July 2 Proverbs 25:1-29:27

*These are more proverbs of Solomon,
collected by the advisers of King Hezekiah of Judah. (Proverbs 25:1)*

Hezekiah seeks to restore the nation toward a right relationship with the LORD. He reintroduced worship within the Temple, presenting offerings to God, accompanied by the appropriate fanfare and praise (2 Chronicles 29:18-36). Hezekiah effectively spearheads a spiritual revival as he again elevates God's authority among His people. Regarding the Temple, Hezekiah "*obeyed all the commands that the LORD had given to King David through Gad, the king's seer, and the prophet Nathan.*" (2 Chronicles 29:25)

During this period, Hezekiah also directs his scribes to organize a collection of Solomon's proverbs. Solomon's wisdom was a gift from the LORD, and Hezekiah's advisers worked to preserve this testimony for generations to come. Today's reading represents the fruit of their labor. Hezekiah's officials diligently copied the wisdom that continues to guide our lives. And our response?

First, let's thank the LORD for His activity in preserving the testimony of His Word. God has worked through countless individuals like Hezekiah's advisers to copy and pass on His revelation for our benefit. Do we appreciate that? We may never grasp the number of people the Lord has used over thousands of years to preserve His Word. Let's pause and give thanks as we hold our Bibles.

Yet, may we do something more. From today's reading, let's ask the LORD to impress a lesson on our hearts that we will carry into the day. Of course, the challenge in reading Proverbs is to single out a primary lesson among so many possibilities. That's especially true when we read five chapters at one time. Yet, the point of reading God's Word is to allow it to influence our hearts. Consider then the following approach:

1) Prayerfully read Proverbs 25-29. 2) Place a dot or asterisk beside any verses that resonate within your heart in some way. 3) Prayerfully review the verses that received a notation and attempt to reduce the number to five—your top 5 proverbs from today's reading. 4) Word for Word, write out your top five on a sheet of paper. Reflect upon each as you do. 5) Finally, ask the Lord to single out one of the five proverbs to carry with you. It will be your proverb for the day ahead. Do note: God worked through Hezekiah's advisers to collect these words of wisdom so that we would do more than read them. Let's determine to do so. Will you do it?

Having already completed the above approach, I placed a dot beside 27 verses, which I prayerfully reduced to my top five, leading to my proverb for the day. Here it is: "When there is moral rot within a nation, its government topples easily. But wise and knowledgeable leaders bring stability." (Proverbs 28:2). I pray for wise and knowledgeable leaders amid our troubling day. What proverb will you carry with you?

July 3 Proverbs 30-31

Who can find a virtuous and capable wife? She is more precious than rubies. (Proverbs 31:10)

We have no additional information concerning today's two writers, Agur (whose name means "gatherer") or Lemuel (whose name means "dedicated to God"). Rabbinic teachers speculated that Lemuel may have been another name for Solomon, but there's nothing definitive about that. What we have, however, with the final chapters is a portion of God's revelation that deserves our attention. The last two chapters have been incorporated into the Bible with purpose and design. We should then approach them prayerfully.

What primary lesson stands out from today's reading? As we did yesterday, allow the LORD to highlight a verse or lesson you can carry with you. I am drawn to Lemuel's description of the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31. She has been a source of inspiration and encouragement for generations. I refer to her as the "Wonder Woman of Wisdom." She embodies so many of the qualities that the book of Proverbs promotes. She is a faithful wife (31:11-12, 23), a diligent manager (31:18, 21, 27), a generous provider (31:27), and a gracious teacher (31:26). She's everything a mother would want for her son's wife. She is a beautiful blending of dignity and strength (31:17, 27). And most importantly, she is a woman who actively fears the LORD. As I mentioned, she is the "Wonder Woman of Wisdom."

And the purpose of the profile? It appears to be a mother's counsel to her son toward finding the right woman to be his wife. She highlights the qualities that should be valued. I'm impressed that Lemuel took his mother's guidance to heart—so much that he wrote down her words. It's also worth noting that a father would highlight similar qualities in finding the right person for his daughter. He, too, should be faithful, diligent, generous, and gracious, a man of dignity and strength who actively fears the LORD. See the practical parallel?

For today's lesson, however, I'm convinced that the final emphasis is the key—the fear of the LORD. The fear of the LORD is the foundation from which all other noble qualities arise. Our lives will be lesser if we don't relate appropriately to the LORD. In a sense, the book of Proverbs has come full circle. The book begins by emphasizing the importance of "fearing the LORD." (Proverbs 1:7) It now illustrates the noticeable difference that a proper response to God can make. Will it generate the near-perfection of the Proverbs 31 woman? The answer is "No." But it will certainly contribute toward a quality of life that deserves to be celebrated and praised.

My focus is not on finding the Proverbs 31 person but on becoming the right person who actively fears the LORD. And you?

July 4 Psalms 42-46

God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. (Psalm 46:1)

Our reading today includes five psalms from the sons or descendants of Korah. Though we know little about who they are, their trust and devotion to God stand out noticeably—especially during times of difficulty. A survey of the Old Testament reveals that eleven psalms are attributed to these unnamed descendants of Korah (Psalms 42–49, 84, 85, 87).

Which of today's psalms resonated with you? For me, it is Psalm 46. That is no surprise because Psalm 46 has been a great help to me throughout much of my life. The psalm has been my traveling companion as I have navigated some of life's more difficult moments. I can say that about a number of the psalms because they have enabled me to move through my jumbled emotions toward the LORD. Life will often leave us disoriented and unsteady. The psalms are God's gift to us, designed to give voice to our feelings so we might regain our spiritual footing. To me, Psalm 46 serves that purpose. It is a stabilizing psalm that helps me refocus when life is turned upside down.

With its opening declaration, the psalm seeks to settle our hearts. "God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble." Yes, life gets crazy. The ground feels as if it is moving beneath our feet. What do we do? Panic? Allow our fear to get the best of us? Or do we focus on the One who is with us? The psalmist points us in the right direction. He urges us to lift our eyes of faith and confess, "*God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble.*" (Psalm 46:1)

I would suggest (if you haven't already done so) that you confess the words aloud. Give voice to your faith as you face your present challenge, "*God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble.*" (Psalm 46:1) There's something helpful in hearing the words. Indeed, I will often read the psalms aloud for that very reason. Doing so moves my heart to engage my faith more fully. I strongly recommend it as a spiritual exercise.

I also suggest we recite specific verses or phrases that settle the mind. We have an example of this in verse 1, "*God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble.*" Psalm 46:1 is worth memorizing. It can steady our hearts as we encounter the unexpected. When startled by life, we can quickly refocus the heart by saying, "*God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble.*" (Psalm 46:1) Verse 10 is another verse worth memorizing, "Be still, and know that I am God!" Though we are often tempted to panic when life gets crazy, God seeks to reassure us. He appeals to our hearts directly, "*Be still, and know that I am God!*" Don't fixate on the problem. Focus on the One who is with you. Say the words aloud, "*Be still, and know that I am God,*" for that is God's appeal to your heart.

So, which of today's psalms appealed to your heart? How will you carry it with you into the day? I want my traveling companion, Psalm 46, to join me for the day. And you?

July 5

Psalms 47-49; Psalms 84-85; Psalm 87

Come, everyone! Clap your hands! Shout to God with joyful praise! For the LORD Most High is awesome. He is the great King of all the earth. (Psalm 47:1-2)

We continue reading the psalms attributed to the descendants of Korah. As I noted yesterday, we can't identify who the writers are. We can, however, assume that they are worship leaders within the Jerusalem temple who seek to lead God's people into active worship. For example, Psalm 47 commands God's people to clap their hands and shout. Yes, both directives are written commands. Standing quietly or indifferently is not an option. Why is that? Because of who God is! He is the LORD Most High, the great King of all the earth. God then deserves our enthusiastic worship and praise.

Consider also the testimony in Psalm 84, *"With my whole being, body and soul, I will shout joyfully to the living God."* (Psalm 84:2) I love that description. The worshipper is withholding nothing. With all that is within him, the psalmist joyfully shouts to God. When was the last time we let out a holy shout? Our worship services are typically more subdued, but are we missing something?

Interestingly, shouting isn't out of place at sporting events or upon the arrival of good news. We practically expect it. When did expressing joy or excitement become out of place within the church? No, I'm not suggesting we turn our worship services into pep rallies. Nor am I advocating that we work up superficial or insincere emotions. I am, however, questioning whether our general approach to worship is too passive and spectator-oriented. Maybe a holy shout would do us some good from time to time--more importantly, it would honor the LORD.

Again, let me be clear. Shouting for shouting's sake is not what I'm promoting. I'm hoping instead that our hearts might become so aware of the goodness and greatness of our God that we cannot contain our emotions. Whether it's a clap, a shout, or lifting our voices in song—whatever it is—let it be a whole-hearted response to the God we love and serve. The LORD deserves nothing less.

Here's my suggestion. Take a few moments and think about who God is. Reflect upon His love, mercy, and grace directed toward your life. Envision the wonder of what He has prepared in eternity on your behalf, and then respond to Him. Verbalize your praise and gratitude. Express your excitement. Physically respond to Him in worship. But don't be timid about it. Surprise yourself and give God a holy shout. Who knows? It may become something you find yourself doing more often.

Let's give it a try!

July 6

Psalms 1-2; Psalm 10; Psalm 33; Psalm 71; Psalm 91

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. (Psalm 1:1-2)

Today, we begin reading through the psalms that are not attributed to any writer. That makes them no less significant but prevents us from assigning an additional historical context. That said—our chronological Bible inserts the anonymous psalms at this point because they may have been collected during Hezekiah's reign (like Proverbs 25-29). Yet, even that is speculative. We can, however, be sure of this. God's Spirit worked through various individuals to guide and strengthen our hearts. Though we may not know their names, we know who was stirring their hearts. As the Apostle Paul describes, *"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work."* (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Psalm 1 stands out prominently in my reading. Some think the opening psalm was written as a preface to the psalms themselves. If not written for that purpose, at the very least, it's positioned at the start to influence one's approach. In other words, we don't read the psalms casually. We choose to delight in God's revelation and instruction, meditating on it day and night. Is that our approach?

The term *"law"* in verse 2 is the Hebrew word *"TORAH."* It can be translated as *"direction," "teaching," or "law."* It's pointing to more than the so-called Books of the Law (Genesis-Deuteronomy). Instead, the psalmist encourages us to delight in all God's guidance and direction. The LORD has spoken so we might experience His goodness and life. We are wise when we approach God's Word accordingly.

Again, we do more than reading. We meditate upon His revelation, carrying His instructions with us to experience the LORD's blessing and life. It is helpful to remember as we move beyond the midway point of our chronological Bible. Let's avoid reading to check a religious box. Our goal is not to fulfill a religious obligation. We seek to draw near to the LORD as we read each day. Our prayer is to gain insight from His Word. Even more, we meditate on His Word to become fruit-bearing trees sustained by God's life-giving flow. Don't be confused by the word *"meditate."* The term conveys the idea of talking to oneself. We do more than read God's Word. We prayerfully ponder what it says. We talk it forward into our lives, reminding ourselves of the truth. We allow His Word to become a lamp to our feet, a light to our path.

So, what will we do? Will we listen to the misleading voices around us or direct our hearts to the testimony of God's Word. I choose to be a fruit-bearing tree. And you?

July 7
Psalms 92-97

It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to the Most High. It is good to proclaim Your unfailing love in the morning, Your faithfulness in the evening. (Psalm 92:1-2)

Today's reading includes six additional psalms, which means we have six opportunities to be encouraged. Which psalm or lesson will you carry with you into the day? For me, two particular verses are especially beneficial. They are the opening verses of Psalm 92. How are they helpful?

First, the best thing I can do to start the day is to thank the LORD. It forces me to be mindful of the goodness of God and His activity on my behalf. Too often, life's challenges and disappointments distract us from God's presence and provision. We focus more on what's missing than on appreciating the good that's present. As a result, we are more inclined to start the day complaining than to give thanks.

The psalmist offers a better approach. Recognize that it is good to give thanks to the LORD. Of course, it honors the LORD but also refocuses our hearts. It directs our attention to the One who is with us. We all need to know that we never enter the day alone. We likewise benefit by lifting praises to God. Think of it this way. Thanksgiving moves us emotionally down the runway. Verbalizing praise to the LORD gets us spiritually airborne. It shifts our attention from God's activity onto God Himself, and that's always therapeutic. Praising God can lift our hearts as our vision of God comes more clearly into view.

Yet, there's something more. The psalmist directs us toward two additional actions—proclaiming God's unfailing love in the morning and heralding His faithfulness at night. These are our spiritual bookends for any given day. We are assured of God's love at the start of the day and can count on God's faithfulness as the day concludes. Life's circumstances will change, but these constants will not. Again, we are assured of God's love at the start and can count on God's faithfulness to the end.

Why not acknowledge that? Even better, like the psalmist, confess it directly to God. Say to the LORD aloud, "*It is good to proclaim Your unfailing love in the morning, Your faithfulness in the evening.*" Say it repeatedly until the truth of the statements positions your heart for the day. Think about the implications of what that means. We will never enter a day outside the scope of God's love, and there will never be a day when He will prove unfaithful to His commitment on our behalf.

So join me and confess, "*It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to the Most High. It is good to proclaim Your unfailing love in the morning, Your faithfulness in the evening.*"

Amen and Amen!

July 8

Psalms 98-100; Psalm 102; Psalm 104

Shout with joy to the LORD, all the earth! Worship the LORD with gladness. Come before Him, singing with joy. Acknowledge that the LORD is God! He made us, and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving; go into his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good. His unfailing love continues forever, and his faithfulness continues to each generation. (Psalm 100)

We remain in the psalms for another day. For that, I'm grateful. I find the psalms helpful because they direct our hearts to God. Sometimes, they enable us to navigate our disappointment and our hurts. Other times, they take us by the hand and lead us to worship the LORD. Today, we focus on one of my favorite psalms of worship—Psalm 100. Though brief, it is tremendously instructive.

Consider the following questions: Is it possible to shout to the Lord and not be joyful? Can we engage in the activities of worship and not be glad? Can we join others in song and be unaware of God's presence? Of course, the answer to each is "Yes." The activities of worship and genuine worship are not the same. We can mindlessly participate in a church service and be completely unaware of the LORD's presence and work. At its core, worship is our response to who God is and His gracious activity on our behalf. It moves from the mind to the heart and then overflows into action—a joyful shout, a grateful song, a humble bowing of the knee. Do you see the connection? Psalm 100 helps us to do so.

Look again at the appeals: *"Shout with joy. Worship with gladness. Sing with joy. Enter with thanksgiving. Go in with praise. Give thanks and offer praise."* If we remove our awareness of God from the equation, none of the activities make sense. And the emotions? Genuine feelings associated with the actions will disappear. One's awareness of God is the key. We shout with joy because we shout to the LORD. We worship with gladness because we worship the LORD. We sing with joy because (by faith) we come before Him. Do you see the correlation?

Psalm 100 is an effective call to worship because the writer directs our attention first and foremost to the One we worship. Look at the testimony: *"Acknowledge that the LORD is God! He made us, and we are His. We are His people, the sheep of His pasture."* See the emphasis? Look likewise at the concluding verses: *"For the LORD is good. His unfailing love continues forever, and his faithfulness continues to each generation."* The focus is on the LORD, which leads the individual to respond appropriately.

Let's take the lesson to heart and allow Psalm 100 to move us toward the LORD. Remember that worship, at its core, is a response. It moves from the mind to the heart and then overflows into action. May the LORD open our eyes anew to the wonder of who He is so that worship may result—even now!

July 9 Psalms 105-106

Give thanks to the LORD and proclaim His greatness. Let the whole world know what He has done. (Psalm 105:1)

Our psalms today are testimonials. Psalm 105 reminds us of God's covenant activity toward the descendants of Abraham. He promised to bless and sustain them and ultimately give them the land of Canaan. However, the journey includes hardship and testing along the way. Joseph's experience serves as an early example. Initially enslaved in Egypt, God soon elevated Joseph to power and prominence. The nation of Israel mirrors his experience. They also suffer through a period of prolonged captivity to be rescued by the LORD. He delivers them from their enslavement and then miraculously leads them toward fulfilling His covenant promises.

And the LORD's expectation? As the psalmist describes, *"All this happened so they would follow His decrees and obey His instructions. Praise the LORD!"* God redeems the children of Israel so He might be their God and expects them to be His people. Sadly, the people falter in their response. Psalm 106 chronicles their failure. They stumble when confronted by their first obstacle—the Red Sea. Instead of turning to the LORD in faith, they cry out in fear and despair. They forget all that they had previously experienced. As the psalmist reports, *"They soon forgot His many acts of kindness to them. Instead, they rebelled against Him at the Red Sea."* (Psalm 106:7)

Inexplicably, Psalm 106 describes this continuing pattern. Again and again, the people take their eyes off the LORD. Instead of humbling themselves before Him, the nation murmurs and complains. They disobey and rebel—suffering the consequences. Some might question why such a disappointing testimony would be included as a psalm. The answer is obvious. God's people need to recognize their past failures so that they might avoid repeating them. What is true of Israel is also true of us. Yet, there's something more. Recounting yesterday's failure allows us also to remember God's capacity to forgive and restore. That is notably evident in His dealings with Israel. The psalmist declares, *"He (the LORD) remembered His covenant with them and relented because of His unfailing love."* (Psalm 106:45)

Why write down the testimony of a nation's past failings? Because we can be assured that God, who showed mercy in the past, is disposed to show mercy again. Thus, the concluding appeal: *"Save us, O LORD our God! Gather us back from among the nations, so we can thank Your holy name and rejoice and praise You. Praise the LORD, the God of Israel, who lives from everlasting to everlasting! Let all the people say, "Amen!" Praise the LORD!"* (Psalm 106:47-48)

We have two testimonial psalms to lead us to reflect upon our testimony. What should we remember—both good and bad? How have we experienced God's mercy? And how should we respond to the LORD today? May we draw near, mindful of His goodness and thankful for His grace.

July 10
Psalm 107; Psalms 111-114

Has the LORD redeemed you? Then speak out! Tell others He has redeemed you from your enemies. (Psalm 107:2)

Are we silent about the LORD's activity when we should speak out? I fear, at times, that we are more inclined to express our complaints about life than our praise to God. I appreciate the psalmist's straightforward question, "*Has the LORD redeemed you?*" If so, don't remain indifferent or quiet. For goodness' sake, "*Speak out!*"

Of course, our psalmists in today's reading seek to do that very thing. They publicly declare God's greatness and power. They point to His acts of deliverance and salvation. They celebrate the LORD's faithfulness and steadfast love. Again and again, they remind us that there is no one like our God. I smile at Psalm 114's portrayal of God's activity,

"The Red Sea saw them coming and hurried out of their way! The water of the Jordan River turned away. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs! What's wrong, Red Sea, that made you hurry out of their way? What happened, Jordan River, that you turned away? Why, mountains, did you skip like rams? Why, hills, like lambs? Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob. He turned the rock into a pool of water; yes, a spring of water flowed from solid rock." (Psalm 114:3-8)

I agree with the psalmist. The earth should tremble at the presence of the LORD, and God's people should praise Him. Do we? Will we? Consider the earlier appeal. Has the LORD redeemed you? Then speak out! Or, as the English Standard Version expresses the same verse, "*Let the redeemed of the LORD say so.*" (Psalm 107:2)

Come on then, let's look for opportunities today to say so!

July 11
Psalms 115-118

Praise the LORD, all you nations. Praise Him, all you people of the earth. For His unfailing love for us is powerful; the LORD's faithfulness endures forever. Praise the LORD! (Psalm 117)

Our psalms for the day continue to call for us to trust the LORD and praise Him. They remind us that we do not face life alone. Indeed, our God is present and attentive. His steadfast love is assured, and He responds to the prayers of His people. We should, as the shortest psalm in the Bible suggests, *"Praise the LORD."* Why not take a moment and do so?

My focus, however, is on one particular verse—Psalm 116:5. The psalmist offers a threefold description of our God: *"How kind the LORD is! How good He is! So merciful, this God of ours!"* Let's reflect a moment upon each.

First, *"How kind the LORD is!"* The Hebrew adjective (*ḥannûn*) refers to God's kindness, favor, or grace. It reminds us that God is predisposed to help on our behalf. He is not indifferent as we enter the day ahead. Indeed, He is mindful of our situation, and (be encouraged) we can anticipate His grace and kindness.

Second, *"How good He is!"* Our God is not only gracious. He is also "good." This Hebrew term (*šĕd-dîq*) is often translated as *"righteous."* In other words, we can count on God to do the "right" thing in response to our situations. His righteousness will not be compromised or adversely affected by the circumstances. Instead, we can depend on the LORD to respond appropriately regardless of the situation. His goodness assures that He will be there for us—faithful to His Word.

Third, *"So merciful, this God of ours!"* This may be the most important of the three descriptions since we are flawed and sinful individuals. Where would any of us be apart from God's mercy? Without it, the Bible would have ended with Genesis 3. But God, as the psalmist reminds us, is *"so merciful."* This is who He is! The Hebrew term for mercy is *"rā-ḥăm."* It highlights God's compassion despite our failure. Though He is righteous in His character, the LORD is also merciful toward those who are not. May our hearts be strengthened by the thought.

Three descriptions to carry with us: *"How kind the LORD is! How good He is! So merciful, this God of ours!"* Does this renew our confidence for the day ahead? It does for me!

July 12 Psalm 119

Your Word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path. (Psalm 119:105)

I want to be a Psalm 119 person. I want to be the kind of person who responds to God and His Word in ways that noticeably affect my life. And you? Of course, Psalm 119 directs our attention to the invaluable role the Bible should play in our lives. It is more than a religious book. God's Word leads us to experience life with God and the meaningful difference He makes.

The psalm is written as an acrostic following the Hebrew alphabet. There are nine psalms organized in this way. However, none are as exhaustive as Psalm 119. This psalm is divided into twenty-two sections—one for each Hebrew letter. Each section has sixteen lines (8 verses) that begin with the designated consonant. For example, each line in the opening portion begins with the Hebrew letter “*aleph*,” and the next section starts with the consonant “*beth*.” It continues this pattern until it goes through the entire alphabet. And the recurring focus? Each section underscores the importance of God's Word in personal and practical ways.

The psalmist seeks to lead us to discover God's blessing and activity. The opening verse states, “*Joyful are people of integrity who follow the instructions of the LORD.*” (Psalm 119:1) The writer points to the help and support he has experienced. This does not happen by accident. It requires an active response on a person's part. Did you notice the number of ways the psalmist describes his longing for and interaction with God's Word? His testimony humbles me. He actively loves God's Word and delights in it. He does not turn to God's commands and promises as a religious obligation. It is his source of hope and joy because it opens his eyes to God's wisdom and understanding—even more, to God Himself. Can we say the same? If you find yourself racing through the psalm because of its length, go back and look at how the psalmist views God's Word and responds to it. Learn from him. If God helps us reflect the same, our lives will dramatically change.

The good news is that God wants to help us. Again and again, the psalmist asks the LORD to teach him, to give him understanding. He recognizes God as the One who ultimately stirs and instructs the heart. God does not watch at a distance. He engages our hearts as we turn to Him in faith, so let's do so. Allow the testimony of Psalm 119 to become God's invitation to walk with Him more closely as we approach His Word more intently. I want to be a Psalm 119 person. And you?

“Be good to your servant, that I may live and obey Your Word. Open my eyes to see the wonderful truths in Your instructions.” (Psalm 119:17-18)

July 13
Psalms 120-123; Psalms 125-126

*“I took my troubles to the LORD; I cried out to Him,
and He answered my prayer.” (Psalm 120:1)*

Today’s reading includes five psalms of ascent, sometimes called pilgrim psalms. There are fifteen such psalms in the Old Testament—ten of which the authors are unnamed. They are described as pilgrim psalms because they became incorporated into the worshipper’s journey to Jerusalem. Most who observed the Jewish holy days and feasts traveled varying distances to the Temple. These select psalms became a part of their pilgrimage, and they would often sing them to prepare their hearts. They are called psalms or songs of ascent because the journey involved an uphill march to Jerusalem. It may also be based upon the priesthood lifting these psalms in worship as they ascended the steps into the Temple.

Both practices illustrate the value of singing words of faith to move one’s heart to worship—to draw near to the LORD. What songs of faith encourage our journey? I’m convinced that music is a gift of God designed to affect our emotions. Styles of music can soothe, energize, inspire, or move us to contemplate. It’s fascinating how the combination of melody and rhythm influences our perspective. When combined with words of faith, a song can become a powerful instrument of God’s grace. What songs of faith are an active part of your journey? Whether you consider yourself musical or not, appreciate the value of personal songs of ascent that move us toward the LORD. Even now, identify a song or hymn and sing it to the LORD. Observe how it can influence your perspective and emotions.

Focus also on a few verses from today’s psalms. Which verses stirred your heart? I noted the following:

*“I took my troubles to the LORD; I cried out to Him,
and He answered my prayer.” (Psalm 120:1)*

*“The LORD Himself watches over you! The LORD stands beside you
as your protective shade.” (Psalm 121:5)*

*“Those who trust in the LORD are as secure as Mount Zion;
they will not be defeated but will endure forever.” (Psalm 125:1)*

Which verses did you highlight? Can we appreciate how these words of faith would awaken the hearts of worshippers as they journeyed to the Temple? They would move a person one step closer to the LORD. Read aloud the verses that you highlighted. Voice them as a prayer, or even better, put them to a melody and allow them to become your psalm of ascent for the day ahead.

May the LORD Himself lift your heart as you do!

July 14

Psalms 128-130; Psalm 132; Psalms 134-135

From the depths of despair, O LORD, I call for Your help. Hear my cry, O Lord. Pay attention to my prayer. LORD, if You kept a record of our sins, who, O Lord, could ever survive? But You offer forgiveness, that we might learn to fear You. (Psalm 130:1-4)

Can God forgive my sin? Will God forgive my sin? Psalm 130 is another psalm of ascent as the would-be worshippers journey to Jerusalem. Yet, the psalmist's heart is cast down, for he knows he has failed the LORD. He has sinned against God. From the depths of despair, he calls out to the LORD for help. He fixes his hope on the possibility of God's forgiveness. He confesses, *"I am counting on the LORD; yes, I am counting on Him. I have put my hope in His Word."* (Psalm 130:5) His confidence or hope is based on more than a wishful desire. It is anchored on the testimony of God's Word and the LORD's past willingness to forgive the repentant. The psalmist declares, *"I am counting on the LORD; yes, I am counting on Him. I have put my hope in His word."* (Psalm 130:5)

Can God forgive my sin? Will God forgive my sin? The answer is "yes." Psalm 130 extends a hand of hope to those weighed down because of their sin. The sixth of seven penitential psalms (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) expresses the sinner's sorrow and regret but also moves the person to experience God's mercy and forgiveness. Today's psalmist knows that no one can survive apart from God's unfailing love. We would all be lost. But there is genuine hope in God because God's forgiveness is available for those who humbly return to Him. The Hebrew term for forgiveness (*selichah*) describes the removal of one's guilt. Though the person's offense is undeniable, God's pardon is available. There is hope for the downcast.

Can God forgive my sin? Will God forgive my sin? Again, the answer is "yes." We should anticipate God's forgiveness as a watchman anticipates the sunrise. The psalmist exclaims, *"I long for the Lord more than sentries long for the dawn, yes, more than sentries long for the dawn."* (Psalm 130:6) Though the darkness of guilt may surround us, the promise of God's forgiveness is as sure as the morning dawn. We should then lift our eyes of faith and watch for the light of God's mercy to appear. Indeed, the psalmist appeals to all who would hear, *"O Israel, hope in the LORD; for with the LORD there is unfailing love. His redemption overflows. He Himself will redeem Israel from every kind of sin."* (Psalm 130:7-8)

Can God forgive my sin? Will God forgive my sin? These are the wrong questions. The real question is, "Will I return to the God who forgives?" And our answer is?

July 15
Psalm 136; Psalms 146-150

Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! His faithful love endures forever. (Psalm 136:1)

We conclude our survey of the psalms with today's reading. Which of the final six psalms appeals to your heart? What verse or lesson will you carry with you into the day? I am drawn to Psalm 136 and the recurring declaration of God's enduring love. Twenty-six times, the psalmist proclaims the faithfulness of God's love and assures the reader that God's covenant love will never end. The psalmist drives this lesson home in two ways.

First, the writer repeats the phrase—*"His faithful love endures forever."* Throughout the psalm, he seeks to highlight the testimony of who God is and how God has acted to redeem the children of Israel. It's an uplifting tribute to God's power and grace. Yet, the psalmist also helps us to see that we can only understand God and His actions within the larger context of His faithful love. Indeed, every verse makes that clear as he repeatedly announces, *"God's faithful love endures forever."* Over and over again, that is the defining refrain. It is impossible to separate God and His actions from His abiding love.

Second, we should also be encouraged by the Hebrew term for "love" the psalmist uses. He repeatedly utilizes the Hebrew noun *"hesed."* This is one of the most important words in the Old Testament and is used by biblical writers 240 times. Why so significant? The term came to represent God's covenant love directed toward His people. It emphasizes more than a strong emotion or feeling. It communicates an enduring loyalty and commitment on God's part. That's why the NLT Bible translates *"hesed"* with two words—*"faithful love."* It's not enough to say that God's love or affection endures forever. His *"faithful love"* will stand the test of time. His loyalty, attention, and devotion will never wane. As Psalm 136 gratefully declares, *"His faithful love endures forever."*

Consider the implications of this for our lives. We, too, are God's covenant people through Jesus, His Son. As such, there is never a moment when God's love will fail to influence His thinking or actions on our behalf. Of course, that doesn't mean that life will not be disappointing or even heart-breaking at times—for it will. What it means, however, is that God will not act toward us apart from His abiding love. It will even govern His discipline toward our lives when we falter or turn away. We can be assured that God's love and devotion will stand the test of time. So be encouraged. God's *"faithful love endures forever."*

I conclude with Paul's reassuring words, *"I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:38-39) Yes, be encouraged!

July 16 Isaiah 18-23

All you people of the world, everyone who lives on the earth— when I raise My battle flag on the mountain, look! When I blow the ram's horn, listen! (Isaiah 18:3)

Assyria is the dominant power of the day (714 BC). The surrounding nations plot their individual and collective plans in response. Will they attempt to appease the Assyrian ruler or organize a military alliance against him? Isaiah, however, reminds us that God is the supreme power and authority. He is not a spectator of world events, unsure of the outcome. God instead sits upon His throne on high. He is the One who governs the larger affairs of man. Does this negate the voluntary choices of others? No, humanity's free will and God's sovereignty are not mutually exclusive. Instead, God (in His sovereignty) created a system in which His actions and our actions function independently but are intertwined. Sound mysterious? Indeed, it does and further serves to highlight God's greatness and glory. May we never lose sight of who ultimately sits on the throne.

From His position of authority, God addresses the contending nations: Ethiopia, Egypt, Babylon, Edom, Arabia, and Judah. Through His servant, Isaiah, God communicates what they should expect—both the good and the bad (mostly bad). The LORD announces what the future holds so the people (especially Judah) might respond appropriately. We should appreciate that this would not be an easy message for God's prophet to deliver. Yet, Isaiah remains faithful to the task. He communicates God's pronouncements and demonstrates His message in a physically uncomfortable manner. Isaiah publicly discarded his outer garments and sandals for three years to indicate what Egypt and Ethiopia would eventually experience. The prophet's actions illustrate they would soon become enslaved under Assyrian control (Isaiah 20:3-4).

What do we take away from today's reading? First, we should note Isaiah's devotion to the LORD. His extended ministry would often be challenging. He would prophesy during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Jotham and Hezekiah respond favorably to the prophet, but Ahaz and Manasseh (Hezekiah's son) do not. Indeed, ancient tradition suggests that Manasseh would later execute God's servant. The tradition describes Isaiah as bound, placed within the trunk of a hollow log, and sawn in two. Whether Isaiah died in this manner, we cannot know for sure. What is clear is that he is willing to suffer hardship for the sake of God's calling. Will we do the same?

Second, allow today's reading to remind us who sits firmly upon the throne. Global leaders come and go. They flaunt their power and authority. Yet, it is the LORD who rules and reigns. He sees what we do not see. He knows what we do not know. And He acts in ways we may never fully grasp or understand. We are wise when we actively trust the LORD, placing our present and future situations in His hands. May today's reading encourage us to do so.

July 17

Isaiah 24:1-27:13; Isaiah 29

Look! The LORD is about to destroy the earth and make it a vast wasteland. He devastates the surface of the earth and scatters the people. Priests and laypeople, servants and masters, maids and mistresses, buyers and sellers, lenders and borrowers, bankers and debtors—none will be spared. The earth will be completely emptied and looted. The LORD has spoken! (Isaiah 24:1-3)

Today's reading announces a judgment that will result in the global destruction of God's enemies and the restoration of God's people. Isaiah's words are sobering as we consider the scope and devastation of God's actions. Those who reject the LORD and His ways will suffer the consequences of their unbelief. Yet, there is hope for God's people. In contrast to those who suffer judgment, the people of the LORD will experience His blessing and life. They'll enjoy a feast like no other. As Isaiah describes,

"In Jerusalem, the LORD of Heaven's Armies will spread a wonderful feast for all the people of the world. It will be a delicious banquet with clear, well-aged wine and choice meat. There He will remove the cloud of gloom, the shadow of death that hangs over the earth. He will swallow up death forever! The Sovereign LORD will wipe away all tears. He will remove forever all insults and mockery against his land and people. The LORD has spoken!" (Isaiah 25:6-8)

Isaiah's message of judgment or blessing parallels Jesus' teaching concerning His glorious return (Matthew 24-25). Do note that God's judgment precedes Jesus' earthly reign. But it will also include His people's preservation and blessing. Believers in Jesus will share in the wedding feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19:6-10). They will ultimately experience the blessings of a new heaven and earth—a new Jerusalem (Revelations 21-22). That is something upon which to fix our hope. Indeed, may we join the people Isaiah describes and proclaim, *"This is our God! We trusted in him, and he saved us! This is the LORD, in whom we trusted. Let us rejoice in the salvation he brings!" (Isaiah 25:9)*

What should we do as we await Jesus' return? There's much that can distress us. It may even appear darker at times before the dawn. Isaiah, however, offers God's reassurance. *"You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in You, all whose thoughts are fixed on You! Trust in the LORD always, for the LORD GOD is the eternal Rock."* (Isaiah 26:3-4)

The key is to keep our eyes of faith upon the LORD. When we fix our minds on the LORD and His promises, He renews His peace within. He supplies the necessary confidence as we face an uncertain tomorrow. In contrast, when our peace is absent, that may indicate that our focus has been misplaced. Are we dwelling on the LORD or the problem? Let's voice Isaiah 26:3 to God as we move into the day. *"You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in You, all whose thoughts are fixed on You!"* May we discover God's comfort and support as we do!

July 18
Isaiah 30-33

“What sorrow awaits my rebellious children,” says the LORD. “You make plans that are contrary to mine. You make alliances not directed by my Spirit, thus piling up your sins. For without consulting me, you have gone down to Egypt for help. You have put your trust in Pharaoh’s protection. You have tried to hide in his shade. But by trusting Pharaoh, you will be humiliated, and by depending on him, you will be disgraced.” (Isaiah 30:1–3)

Why do God’s people turn away from the God who loves them? Why do they seek answers and solutions outside God’s wisdom and help? These questions, to me, are not easily answered. Yet, time and time again, that appears to be the story. Instead of allowing the LORD to be their source of life and help, His people walk away. Isaiah expresses God’s disappointment and offense toward Judah’s actions. He is straightforward in announcing their future consequences. The prophet explains that they will be humiliated by choosing to turn to Egypt instead of the LORD.

Tragically, God’s people cover their ears to His continuing appeals. Instead of listening to the LORD’s messengers, they seek to silence them. They exclaim, *“Don’t tell us what is right. Tell us nice things. Tell us lies. Forget all this gloom. Get off your narrow path. Stop telling us about your ‘Holy One of Israel.’” (Isaiah 30:10–11)* Why do God’s people delude themselves? Why pretend everything is alright when it is not? I ask these questions in general. Dare we ask ourselves the same? Are we not tempted to listen to those who justify our behavior rather than admit our disobedience? Paul warns of this very thing when he writes, *“For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear.” (2 Timothy 4:3)* It seems we are living in such days.

I pray today’s reading will lead us to examine our hearts honestly so we might respond to the LORD appropriately. Even when we lose our way, God still seeks to restore the repentant. As Isaiah expressed to the people of Judah, *“So the LORD must wait for you to come to Him so He can show you His love and compassion. For the LORD is a faithful God. Blessed are those who wait for His help.” (Isaiah 30:18)*

Again, why do God’s people turn away from the God who loves them? I pray we respond to the LORD appropriately.

July 19
Isaiah 34-35; Micah 2-5

But this is what the LORD says: "I will reward your evil with evil; you won't be able to pull your neck out of the noose. You will no longer walk around proudly, for it will be a terrible time." (Micah 2:3)

The prophet Micah is a contemporary of Isaiah and Hosea. His message concerning God's judgment mirrors the similar pronouncements of his fellow messengers. God is warning Israel and Judah, but the people are slow to listen. They refuse to accept the consequences of their actions. As they did with Isaiah, they told Micah, "Don't say such things," and the people responded. *"Don't prophesy like that. Such disasters will never come our way!" (Micah 2:6)* Their self-denial will not alter what their actions have put into motion.

Yet, glimmers of hope remain as grim as Micah's prophecies sound. The prophet points to a better day beyond the coming judgment and exile. He promises the LORD will gather His people unto Himself again—like a shepherd gathering His flock. Micah proclaims, *"Someday, O Israel, I will gather you; I will gather the remnant who are left. I will bring you together again like sheep in a pen, like a flock in its pasture. Yes, your land will again be filled with noisy crowds! Your leader will break out and lead you out of exile, out through the gates of the enemy cities, back to your own land. Your King will lead you; the LORD Himself will guide you." (Micah 2:12-13)* Who comes to mind as we reflect upon Micah's promised Deliverer (John 10:1-16)?

Micah later speaks of the promised One's birth in the most unlikely places. He writes, *"But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel whose origins are in the distant past, will come from you on my behalf." (Micah 5:2)* Do note: though the future Ruler and Deliverer will be born in obscure Bethlehem, His origins reach mysteriously back in time. The phrase *"in the distant past"* is translated from the Hebrew text in various ways: *"from of old, from ancient of days (ESV)," "from long ago, from the days of eternity (NASB95)," "from of old, from everlasting (NKJV)." As we can see, the promised One of God will not be an ordinary man. He appears from eternity. Again, who comes to mind as we reflect upon Micah's promised Ruler (Luke 2:1-7)?*

Much of today's reading informs us that God's judgment is coming. The people of Israel and Judah need to beware. But hope also remains as God's prophets point to His promised Messiah. As Isaiah describes, *"And when He comes, He will open the eyes of the blind and unplug the ears of the deaf. The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will sing for joy! Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the wasteland." (Isaiah 35:5-6)* One last time, who comes to mind as we consider Isaiah's testimony (Luke 7:18-23)? Go ahead, say the name—JESUS. Let's do more than that. Let's keep our focus on Jesus as we enter the day ahead. Jesus is our source of hope for today and tomorrow. Let's keep our eyes on Him!

July 20

Micah 6-7; 2 Chronicles 32:1-8; 2 Kings 18:13-37; Isaiah 36:1-22

What can we bring to the LORD? Should we bring him burnt offerings? Should we bow before God Most High with offerings of yearling calves? Should we offer Him thousands of rams and ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Should we sacrifice our firstborn children to pay for our sins. No, O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what He requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:6-8)

God's people refuse to relate to God appropriately. They openly pursue paths that dishonor Him and are convinced that their selective displays of religious devotion compensate for their disobedience. They ask, *"What are we missing? More elaborate or costly sacrifices?"* The LORD answers, *"No!"* The issue isn't the lack of religious fervor. The problem is the absence of faith. God explained this to His people at the very beginning of their journey.

"And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? He requires only that you fear the LORD your God, and live in a way that pleases Him, and love Him and serve Him with all your heart and soul. And you must always obey the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good." (Deuteronomy 10:12-13)

Through His prophet, God calls His people back. What does the LORD require? He requires His people to walk with Him in faith. They must do what is right, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God. There is no substitute for the dynamic of faith within a person's life. Keep in mind that faith is more than a confessional statement. I fear sometimes we convince ourselves that saying "WE BELIEVE" is the same as believing. That was not the case with Israel, nor will it be with us. True faith finds its way forward into everyday life. It influences what we say and do. It determines the paths we follow. It should be evident in who we are becoming. As the New Testament explains, *"Faith apart from works is dead (James 2:26, ESV)."* In other words, "Our response to who God is should influence who we also are." Get the point?

Let's quickly admit that a life of faith will not result in perfect obedience. I wish it did, but we all know it doesn't. Even so, our life of faith should nevertheless be evident. So, as we enter the day ahead, let's refocus our hearts on the One we trust. As we do, may we also commit ourselves to doing what is right, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. That sounds like a good plan of action for the day ahead. Care to join me?

July 21

2 Kings 19:1-37; Isaiah 37:1-38; 2 Chronicles 32:9-19

This message is for King Hezekiah of Judah. Don't let your God, in whom you trust, deceive you with promises that Jerusalem will not be captured by the king of Assyria. (2 Kings 19:10)

King Sennacherib, Assyria's ruler, announces Jerusalem's inevitable capture. He taunts Judah's king but, more notably, mocks Judah's God. He arrogantly declares that Assyria's victory is assured, only to be proven dramatically wrong. God demonstrates that the most powerful military force of the day would prove inadequate against the power of the one true God.

The LORD initially diverted Assyria's energies away from Jerusalem for a period (2 Kings 19:9) but then directly defeated Assyria's armies to display God's greatness and power. The LORD intervenes on behalf of His people. The writer of 2 Chronicles recounts the event, *"And the LORD sent an angel who destroyed the Assyrian army with all its commanders and officers. So Sennacherib was forced to return home in disgrace to his own land."* (2 Chronicles 32:20-21) Assyria's ruler defies the LORD and is proven foolish in the process. Sennacherib became an object lesson to Solomon's familiar proverb, *"Pride goes before destruction, and haughtiness before a fall."* (Proverbs 17:18)

In contrast, king Hezekiah of Judah humbled himself before the LORD. When confronted by Assyria's ruler, he clothes himself in burlap. The king places Sennacherib's threatening letter before the LORD and prays, *"Now, O LORD our God, rescue us from his power; then all the kingdoms of the earth will know that you alone, O LORD, are God."* (2 Kings 19:19) Hezekiah's prayer is honest and to the point. The king of Judah directs his confidence heavenward, and God's response would leave no doubt where the ultimate power resides—it is the LORD's.

Two rulers—one defies the LORD and suffers loss. The other trusts the LORD and experiences God's deliverance. One arrogantly views himself as invincible and in control. The other humbles himself, admitting his need and dependence on God. Which of the two rulers do we more resemble? Whose attitude will we display in the day ahead?

May we learn from the actions of both men and choose to renew our trust and confidence in the LORD.

July 22

2 Kings 20:1-19; Isaiah 38:1-22; 2 Chronicles 32:24-31

About that time Hezekiah became deathly ill, and the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to visit him. He gave the king this message: This is what the LORD says: “Set your affairs in order, for you are going to die. You will not recover from this illness.” (2 Kings 20:1)

What would you do if God informed you to get your affairs in order because your death is near? We can only imagine Hezekiah’s emotions when Isaiah delivers the LORD’s sobering news. Hezekiah responds promptly. The dying ruler turns humbly to the LORD and pleads his cause, *“Remember, O LORD, how I have always been faithful to You and have served You single-mindedly, always doing what pleases You.” (2 Kings 20:2-3)* Emotionally, Hezekiah weeps bitterly before the LORD. And the results? God directs Isaiah to return with the following message:

“Go back to Hezekiah, the leader of My people. Tell him, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of your ancestor David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears. I will heal you, and three days from now you will get out of bed and go to the Temple of the LORD. I will add fifteen years to your life, and I will rescue you and this city from the king of Assyria. I will defend this city for My own honor and for the sake of My servant David.’” (2 Kings 20:4-6)

The account is quite dramatic, but what might we learn from Hezekiah’s experience? We can learn from the king’s humility and faith in response to Isaiah’s initial message. Again, how would you have reacted to the prophet’s announcement? Hezekiah models an appropriate disposition of heart. However, we must be careful not to use Hezekiah’s example to become the basis of our expectations for healing. Can God help the sick? Absolutely yes. Does the LORD heal everyone who humbles themselves in faith? Undeniably no. An honest survey of Jewish and Christian history would indicate as much. Indeed, more men and women of faith die due to illness than are healed. The issue is not that the person lacks the *“right kind”* of faith or fails to respond to the LORD appropriately. The point is that people generally die of terminal illnesses or injuries. That is the natural order following Adam’s rebellion (Genesis 3:17-19; Romans 8:20-22).

In Hezekiah’s case, God extended his life by fifteen years. It was God’s decision according to God’s larger purpose and plan. Why fifteen and not seventeen or twelve? Again, it was God’s decision according to His wisdom and timing. Like Hezekiah, can we humble ourselves and ask for healing? Most definitely. I would encourage it if facing a terminal situation. Yet, I remind us that we must submit to God’s larger plan. God sees what we do not see and knows what we cannot understand. We must learn to trust in His wisdom and plan.

Hezekiah’s dramatic healing is a fascinating story to consider. May God encourage our hearts as we reflect further upon his experience. More importantly, let us respond to the LORD with the appropriate humility and faith in God’s unfolding plan.

July 23
Isaiah 40-43

Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with My victorious right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)

In today's reading, God seeks to encourage and reassure His covenant people who find themselves far from where they would prefer to be. They are exiles in a foreign land—exiles in Babylon. Again, this is not where they would choose to be. It is, however, where their past actions have caused them to be. Their refusal to listen to God's past warning has resulted in their exiled state. Their spiritual disobedience and neglect would have lasting consequences.

Even so, hope remains through a series of prophetic messages. Chapter 40 opens, *"Comfort, comfort My people."* (Isaiah 40:1) Though much about their exile would weaken the strongest of hearts, God opens their eyes to His continuing activity and work. Isaiah declares, *"The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth. He never grows weak or weary."* (Isaiah 40:28) The prophet invites God's people to turn to the LORD. Isaiah adds, *"But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint."* (Isaiah 40:31)

Take heart. The people's exile did not separate them from God's willingness to help. The LORD is willing and able to renew their strength as they refocus their faith on Him. Think about the implications of this. Like the children of Israel, our past actions may place us in situations we would not prefer. However, it does not sever us from God's continuing work of grace. Like God's people of old, the LORD is willing to renew our strength if we would redirect our hearts to Him. Will we do so?

Yet, God extends His comfort and support further. Like a reassuring voice in the darkness, the LORD calls out, *"Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with My victorious right hand."* (Isaiah 41:10) God's words of assurance are what we need when we find ourselves in situations beyond our control.

First, God promises His presence. However, we may wrongly conclude that life's difficulties indicate that God has abandoned us. His sustaining presence remains. God lovingly appeals, "Calm your heart. You are not alone." He states, "I've got this, for I am your God." The problem or the circumstance is not greater than the One who is with us. His help and support will be more than adequate in our hour of trouble. God even promises to carry us when needed. God pledges, *"I will hold you up with My victorious right hand."* Once again, God is saying, "Trust Me. I've got this, for I've got you."

Isaiah 41:10 has brought me through many dark moments. Read God's promise aloud and be encouraged as you face the challenges before you.

July 24
Isaiah 44:6-48:11

This is what the LORD says to Cyrus, His anointed one, whose right hand He will empower. Before him, mighty kings will be paralyzed with fear. Their fortress gates will be opened, never to shut again. This is what the LORD says: "I will go before you, Cyrus, and level the mountains. I will smash down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. And I will give you treasures hidden in the darkness— secret riches. I will do this so you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, the One who calls you by name." (Isaiah 45:1-3)

Isaiah prophesies concerning Judah's eventual defeat and exile (Isaiah 39:5-8). He also promises God's sustaining grace on the part of His exiled people (Isaiah 40-44). Our reading today highlights that Isaiah likewise foretells the emergence of a military leader and ruler who will subsequently free God's people from their Babylonian captivity. A century before his birth, God's prophet announced the military dominance of Cyrus the Great (also known as Cyrus II).

The Persian ruler and king would fulfill Isaiah's prophecies. God will enable Cyrus to achieve extraordinary military victories. However, all his accomplishments would ultimately serve God's larger purpose and plan. The LORD appointed Cyrus to set His people free and facilitate their safe return to the land. He would become God's anointed on their behalf. Isaiah explains, *"And why have I called you for this work? Why did I call you by name when you did not know Me? It is for the sake of Jacob My servant, Israel My chosen one."* (Isaiah 45:4)

Behold the power of our God. He foresees the future. He works according to His purpose to fulfill His unfolding plan. Isaiah adds, *"I am the LORD; there is no other God. I have equipped you for battle, though you don't even know Me, so all the world from east to west will know there is no other God. I am the LORD, and there is no other. I create the light and make the darkness. I send good times and bad times. I, the LORD, am the One who does these things. Open up, O heavens, and pour out your righteousness. Let the earth open wide so salvation and righteousness can sprout up together. I, the LORD, created them."* (Isaiah 45:4-8)

We will read about Cyrus' future actions in September. For now, let's pause and marvel at the abilities of our Sovereign God. Sadly, some deny the miraculous nature of Isaiah's prophecies by suggesting several writers wrote the book over a long period. I accept Isaiah's prophetic ability concerning Cyrus, but more significantly concerning Jesus—God's suffering servant (Isaiah 53). God enables His servant, Isaiah, to see what the future will bring so we might recognize His power and authority.

Who has the greater power? Cyrus, with his future military victories? Or the LORD, who announces Cyrus' emergence and facilitates His success? The answer is clear—it is the LORD. Let us humble ourselves before the One who foresees the future and yield ourselves to His continuing work of grace. The LORD is worthy of our trust and devotion. Will you trust Him?

July 25
Isaiah 48:12-52:12

The Sovereign LORD has given me His words of wisdom, so that I know how to comfort the weary. Morning by morning He wakens me and opens my understanding to His will. The Sovereign LORD has spoken to me, and I have listened. I have not rebelled or turned away. I offered my back to those who beat me and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard. I did not hide my face from mockery and spitting. Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore, I have set my face like a stone, determined to do His will. And I know that I will not be put to shame. (Isaiah 50:4-7)

As Isaiah introduces Israel's military deliverer (Cyrus), he also speaks of a greater Deliverer or Servant (Jesus) who will intervene on God's people's behalf. Centuries before Jesus' public ministry began, Isaiah supplies a series of messages or songs (Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-13; Isaiah 50:4-11; Isaiah 52:13-53:12) highlighting the character and spiritual nature of God's Promised One's mission and purpose.

Consider the passage above. The Promised Servant of God will comfort the weary at great expense to Himself. He will be beaten and mocked but ultimately vindicated by the LORD. As we read these words, do we recognize Jesus as God's anointed? Consider an earlier passage,

“At just the right time, I will respond to you. On the day of salvation I will help you. I will protect you and give you to the people as My covenant with them. Through you I will reestablish the land of Israel and assign it to its own people again. I will say to the prisoners, ‘Come out in freedom,’ and to those in darkness, ‘Come into the light.’ They will be My sheep, grazing in green pastures and on hills that were previously bare. They will neither hunger nor thirst. The searing sun will not reach them anymore. For the LORD in His mercy will lead them; He will lead them beside cool waters. And I will make My mountains into level paths for them. The highways will be raised above the valleys. See, My people will return from far away, from lands to the north and west, and from as far south as Egypt.” (Isaiah 49:8-12)

Again, do we recognize the prophet's description of Jesus? Isaiah speaks of a future day that will only find fulfillment in Jesus and His work. Ponder Isaiah's descriptions and renew your focus on Jesus and the difference He seeks to make. May it prepare our hearts for tomorrow's reading. As we do, let's celebrate with God's people of old.

“Sing for joy, O heavens! Rejoice, O earth! Burst into song, O mountains! For the LORD has comforted His people and will have compassion on them in their suffering.” (Isaiah 49:13)

July 26
Isaiah 52:13–57:21

Who has believed our message? To whom has the LORD revealed His powerful arm? My servant grew up in the LORD's presence like a tender green shoot, like a root in dry ground. There was nothing beautiful or majestic about His appearance, nothing to attract us to Him. He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on Him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care. Yet it was our weaknesses He carried; it was our sorrows that weighed Him down. And we thought His troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for His own sins! But He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on Him the sins of us all. He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet He never said a word. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, He did not open His mouth. Unjustly condemned, He was led away. No one cared that He died without descendants, that His life was cut short in midstream. But He was struck down for the rebellion of My people. He had done no wrong and had never deceived anyone. But He was buried like a criminal; He was put in a rich man's grave. But it was the LORD's good plan to crush Him and cause him grief. Yet when His life is made an offering for sin, He will have many descendants. He will enjoy a long life, and the LORD's good plan will prosper in His hands. When He sees all that is accomplished by His anguish, He will be satisfied. And because of His experience, My righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for He will bear all their sins. I will give Him the honors of a victorious soldier, because He exposed Himself to death. He was counted among the rebels. He bore the sins of many and interceded for rebels. (Isaiah 53)

Why read the Old Testament? Because it tells our story. It exposes humanity's need and God's loving response. It points to One who would come on our behalf. Isaiah 53 does so in astounding fashion. Centuries before Jesus' public ministry and crucifixion, Isaiah describes His future actions in eye-opening detail.

Marvel over the testimony. The Promised One is *“pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins.”* (Isaiah 53:5) Still further, *“the LORD laid on Him the sins of us all.”* (Isaiah 53:6) How can anyone read this and not think of Jesus? The prophet adds, *“My righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for He will bear all their sins.”* (Isaiah 53:11) Isaiah describes how God's servant would become a sin offering to restore His people's relationship with a holy God. Jesus makes us righteous before the LORD by bearing our guilt and shame upon the cross. We should be astonished by Isaiah's ability to describe the future. We should be even more amazed by what the prophet declares. Jesus died for us—He died for you.

And our response? Faith in the Savior is the starting point. Shouldn't there be more? Love and devotion? Trust and obedience? How should we respond to the One who endured God's judgment on our behalf? More specifically, how will we respond today? The decision is yours.

July 27
Isaiah 58:1-63:14

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon Me, for the LORD has anointed Me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent Me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed. He has sent Me to tell those who mourn that the time of the LORD's favor has come . . .” (Isaiah 61:1-2)

Yesterday, we focused on Isaiah’s prophetic description of Jesus’s suffering and sacrificial death. Jesus bore our sins so we might experience forgiveness and life. We should pause and thank God daily for Jesus’ redemptive work on our behalf. Apart from Him, we would have no hope. Because of Him, we are right with God and can step toward the future with peace and confidence. May we never lose sight of Jesus’ saving actions.

A portion of today’s reading focuses on another prophetic passage—a messianic passage Jesus claims for Himself. Consider Luke’s account, *“When He came to the village of Nazareth, His boyhood home, He went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written: ‘The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, for He has anointed Me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD’s favor has come.’” He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at Him intently. Then He began to speak to them. ‘The Scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!’” (Luke 4:16–21)*

Isaiah describes the future mission of God’s anointed servant. The Promised One would come onto the scene, heralding good news with power and authority. His words and actions would reveal the truth of His identity. Jesus declares Himself to be the fulfillment of this prophecy in His hometown of Nazareth. Sadly, He experiences the truth of the adage, *“No prophet is accepted in his own hometown.” (Luke 4:21)* The people reject Jesus’ claim and drive Him from their midst.

That day, the crowd failed to see Jesus for who He is and missed out on what could have been. Their absence of faith prevents them from experiencing Jesus’ power and life. They could have discovered spiritual comfort and release but rejected Jesus instead. And what of us? Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies foretold. He is the anointed One of God. In Him, there is life, hope, and peace. Have we embraced Him by faith, or do we (like the people of Nazareth) drive Him away? Do note that one’s faith in Jesus does not cause Him to be who He is. Jesus is the anointed One of God whether we believe in Him or not. Our faith response, however, enables us to be affected by who He is. It allows Him to impact our lives in ways only the Savior can. I choose to see Jesus for who He is. By faith, I embrace the life He offers. And you?

July 28

Isaiah 63-66; 2 Kings 20:20-21; 2 Chronicles 32:32-33

This is what the LORD says: "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Could you build Me a temple as good as that? Could you build Me such a resting place? My hands have made both heaven and earth; they and everything in them are Mine. (Isaiah 66:1-2)

Today, we conclude our readings in Isaiah. The opening verses of the final chapter (Isaiah 66) are fitting. It is a glorious description of God's greatness and power. "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool." Is that how we see God? We can simplify much of Isaiah's message in two ways: 1) God's people suffer when they lose sight of who God is and turn away. 2) God's people are blessed when they see the LORD for who He is and relate to Him appropriately. Of course, much of the book includes God's activity to bring the people back into the right relationship. Inherent throughout is the people's perception of God. Who do they view Him to be? Is He a lesser god of their own making? Or is He the ONE TRUE GOD, maker of heaven and earth? "Heaven is My throne," God declares, "and the earth is My footstool." Is that how the people see Him? And what about us?

Again, a proper vision of God will lead to an appropriate response. Remember God's revelation of Himself to Isaiah. "It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of His robe filled the Temple. Attending Him were mighty seraphim, each having six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. They were calling out to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Heaven's Armies! The whole earth is filled with his glory!" Their voices shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire building was filled with smoke." (Isaiah 6:1-4) The vision of God is lofty and transcendent.

Remember also Isaiah's response to God's revelation, "It's all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the LORD of Heaven's Armies." (Isaiah 6:5) See the correlation? Our vision of God impacts our response. One naturally leads to the other.

Why the emphasis? We live in a world that increasingly denies God's existence or, at the very least, diminishes the truth of who He is. As a result, our vision of the LORD can be tainted or distorted. And, if we are not careful, we may adopt a lesser view of God, which facilitates inadequate or self-destructive responses. God supplies through Isaiah a fresh vision of who He is. "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool . . . My hands have made both heaven and earth; they and everything in them are Mine."

Is that how we see Him? If so, how will we respond?

July 29

2 Kings 21:1-22:2; 2 Chronicles 33:1-34:7; Jeremiah 1:1-2:22

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. He did what was evil in the LORD's sight, following the detestable practices of the pagan nations that the LORD had driven from the land ahead of the Israelites . . . Manasseh also sacrificed his own sons in the fire in the valley of Ben-Hinnom. He practiced sorcery, divination, and witchcraft, and he consulted with mediums and psychics. He did much that was evil in the LORD's sight, arousing His anger . . . But Manasseh led the people of Judah and Jerusalem to do even more evil than the pagan nations that the LORD had destroyed when the people of Israel entered the land. (2 Chronicles 33:1-2, 6, 9)

The death of Hezekiah resulted in a dramatic change in leadership. Manasseh, his twelve-year-old son, ascends to the throne, and the nation begins a downward spiritual decline. The young ruler abandons the LORD and leads the people to do the same. Their evil exceeds that of the surrounding nations, provoking God's anger and judgment.

God appeals to Manasseh and the people to no avail. They ignore His warnings (2 Chronicles 33:10) and suffer the consequences. Indeed, the nation is defeated, and Judah's king is bound and carried off into captivity (2 Chronicles 33:11). Manasseh's humiliation and suffering produced a spiritual change of heart. Second Chronicles recounts, *"But while in deep distress, Manasseh sought the LORD his God and sincerely humbled himself before the God of his ancestors. And when he prayed, the LORD listened to him and was moved by his request. So the LORD brought Manasseh back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh finally realized that the LORD alone is God!"* (2 Chronicles 33:12-13)

Two observations stand out. First, the scope of God's mercy is surprising. Manasseh represents a dark-hearted, morally despicable individual who humbles himself before the LORD and discovers God's forgiveness and mercy. With Manasseh's story before us, we should be confident that we are never beyond God's mercy and love as we humble ourselves before Him—regardless of our guilt and shame.

Second, Manasseh's repentance is sincere. He removes the foreign gods from the Temple, restoring the altar of the LORD. Manasseh demonstrates genuine repentance that produces noticeable change. Repentance is more than regret over one's actions. True repentance leads to actual change, as illustrated by Manasseh's change of direction. The king who led the nation into spiritual darkness would now move them toward the LORD—a further testament to God's mercy and grace.

Where are we today as we reflect upon Manasseh's experience? Are we moving toward the LORD or away? Is our influence positive or negative? Do we need to humble ourselves before the LORD so we, too, might experience His mercy and grace in fresh ways? I remind you. Repentance is more than saying, "I'm sorry." Let's move toward the LORD!

July 30
Jeremiah 2:23–5:19

*My heart, my heart—I writhe in pain! My heart pounds within me!
I cannot be still. (Jeremiah 4:19)*

Jeremiah is sometimes referred to as the “weeping prophet.” Over the forty years of his prophetic ministry, much will weigh heavily upon Jeremiah’s heart. He will address God’s wayward people before and after their Babylonian defeat and exile. His years of service will often be difficult and lonely, but his call by God (as noted in yesterday’s reading) was undeniable: “*I knew you before I formed you in your mother’s womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as My prophet to the nations.*” (Jeremiah 1:4–5)

Jeremiah is called by God (like the prophet Samuel) as an older child or younger teenager. The spiritual reforms introduced by king Josiah (2 Chronicles 34:1–7) would influence Jeremiah’s early years. Sadly, Josiah’s reforms did not alter the downward spiritual trajectory of the people. The moral and spiritual compromise promoted during the reigns of Manasseh and Amon persists and leads to the nation’s demise. As the LORD declares through His young prophet, “*My people are foolish and do not know Me,*” says the LORD. “*They are stupid children who have no understanding. They are clever enough at doing wrong, but they have no idea how to do right!*” (Jeremiah 4:22)

Jeremiah’s ministry will be directed toward people (in large measure) who refuse to listen. Their spiritual infidelity will continue—despite the LORD’s appeal. Again, Jeremiah’s ministry will not be an easy one. His heart will often “*writhe in pain,*” and tears of sorrow will fall. We should keep this in mind as we continue our readings.

We might also ask ourselves, “Would we remain faithful to the LORD’s call over such a long and difficult path?” Let’s agree. It’s easy and energizing to serve the LORD when we enjoy the fruit of our labor. But when the going gets hard? When circumstances worsen instead of improve? How, then, will we respond?

I pray that God will speak to us through Jeremiah’s message and his example. Who knows? We may be facing similarly difficult days ahead.

July 31

Jeremiah 5:20-6:30; 2 Kings 22:3-20; 2 Chronicles 34:8-28

Are they ashamed of their disgusting actions? Not at all—they don't even know how to blush! Therefore, they will lie among the slaughtered. They will be brought down when I punish them, says the LORD. (Jeremiah 6:15)

Today's reading provides a striking contrast between a repentant king and a spiritually defiant people. Josiah continues to influence God's people toward a right relationship with the LORD. He directed his leaders to restore Jerusalem's Temple, which resulted in the discovery of the "Book of the Law." The recovered book or scroll likely refers to the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament). As Josiah hears what is written, the king publicly tears his garments in repentance and sorrow. Judah's king recognizes that God's people are far from where they should be. He promptly directs Hilkiah (the priest) to intercede on the nation's behalf. *"The LORD's great anger is burning against us,"* he exclaims, *"because our ancestors have not obeyed the words in this scroll. We have not been doing everything it says we must do."* (2 Kings 22:13)

Josiah recognizes that the people deserve God's judgment. The LORD, however, mercifully responds to Josiah's contrition of heart. Indeed, God promises to shield the repentant king from a future punishment that is coming.

The same would not be true of the nation. The people's defiance would result in God's judgment on their behalf. Their refusal to listen to His Word guarantees their destruction. As the LORD announces, *"They will lie among the slaughtered. They will be brought down when I punish them."* (Jeremiah 6:15) God's pronouncement is disturbing to read. It also could have been averted if they had responded like Josiah, who heard God's Word and humbly repented. The general population listened to God's Word but brazenly turned away. Josiah experiences mercy. The nation takes one step further toward God's judgment. As I noted, the contrast could not be more striking.

And our response? When confronted by God's Word, do we humbly submit? Or do we rationalize and justify our sinful behavior? The LORD describes the people of Judah as incapable of blushing (Jeremiah 6:15), which is revealing. They became so accustomed to their sin that they became insensitive to right and wrong. They had eyes that did not see and ears that did not hear (Jeremiah 5:21). Could that be said of us?

Our response to God's Word reveals the answer. If the truth of God fails to stir, convict, and guide, then something is spiritually wrong. God's Word is intended to affect the heart, to provoke a response. As Hebrews states, *"the Word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires."* (Hebrews 4:12) Is that our experience? God's Word penetrated Josiah's heart, resulting in change. May this also be descriptive of us as we continue our chronological readings.

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