

THE
HOLY DAY
READER





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Other than that, thanks for reading and keep on Sabbath Thinking!

Version 1.0

*For my little wildflower,
who brightened our world
after a long winter.*

*For the child I wasn't able
to meet in this life.*

Until the graves are opened, little one.

*And for Mary,
always.*

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FOREWORD

I've been in the Church my entire life, and the thing that amazes me the most about God's holy day plan is how there's always something new to learn. After decades of observing the same days and turning to many of the same scriptures, you'd think we'd collectively bottom out on things to say about these days.

But we don't.

Every year, we rehearse the plan of God through the holy days, and every year, there's something more to glean. The core of the messages stay the same, but even though God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, our understanding isn't. On every go-round, we catch things we missed. We see old things from new angles, framed by new experiences and a broader perspective.

"Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old" (Matthew 13:52).

Maybe that's what makes them so fun to write about, too—finding the connections between all the different facets of the bigger picture. Discovering that the new treasure fits perfectly with the old. Gaining a greater appreciation for God's master plan, one beautiful puzzle piece at a time.

In the years since I started Sabbath Thoughts, I've written a lot about the holy days—enough to fill an ebook, it turns out—and every time I do, I feel like I'm scratching the surface of an iceberg. I'm barely putting a dent in what I can see in front of me, and I can only begin to fathom how much is still waiting for me under the surface.

Every time these days cycle back around, they point our attention toward where we came from, why we're here, and where we're going. They remind us of what God has done to make that journey possible—and of what He expects from us along the way.

These are days that begin with a Lamb who was "slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8), and they end with a city where "the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4). This is a plan so massive, so expansive, that the earth we know wasn't around at the beginning of it and won't be around for the end of it.

Is it any wonder there's always more to learn?

You'll notice that this holy day reader starts with a section on Passover—and while it's technically not a holy day in and of itself, it's a feast of the Lord

(Leviticus 23:5) that sets the stage for everything that follows. Without the events of Passover, there would be no holy day plan, and to me, that warrants its own section.

I've tried my best to arrange these Sabbath Thoughts in a way that will be helpful to you as a reader. The first writing of each section is an attempt to distill the core message of that particular holy day, while the last one is focused on taking the lessons of that day and holding onto them into tomorrow, and the next day, and the next.

I hope you enjoy reading these half as much as I enjoyed writing them over the years. If these handful of Sabbath Thoughts are useful to you as you meditate on and observe the incredible days designed and set in place by our Creator, then I'll have accomplished something worthwhile.

May you never stop bringing out treasures from the Word of God—both old and new.

All the best,
Jeremy

PASSOVER

BEGIN

APRIL 22, 2016

When Israel first kept the Passover, it was with the backdrop of a broken, shattered Egypt. God had brought the mighty nation to its knees for the sake of His people, ending years of oppression and captivity in a single, masterful stroke. In years to come, the Israelites were to continue keeping this day, teaching their children about "the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households" (Exodus 12:27). Likewise, the days that followed—the Days of Unleavened Bread—were to serve as a reminder "of what the LORD did for me when I came up from Egypt" (Exodus 13:8).

Begin.

Decades later, when a new generation of Israelites finally settled in the Promised Land, the message of Passover was even clearer. The year had just begun (Leviticus 23:5). The crops were growing in the fields. The world around them was budding and chirping and singing and just generally coming back to life after a cold, rainy winter. The sheaf of the firstfruits would soon be waved before the Lord with gratitude for the harvest He was providing for His people (Leviticus 23:10).

Begin.

Jesus Christ told His disciples, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you" (Luke 22:15), because this was going to be the Passover that changed everything. Christ was slain "from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8), which means this Passover had been in the works since the events of Genesis 1:1. From here on out, the focus wouldn't be on God breaking the chains of Egypt, but the chains of sin and death itself. Through death, Christ was going to "destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Hebrews 2:14-15). The penalty would be paid, once and for all—and for all those willing to repent and change their ways, the slate could be wiped clean.

Begin.

Can you hear it? Can you hear the message of this day?

The Passover season is a season for *beginning*. For starting fresh. It's a reminder that the focus isn't on the mistakes you've made in the past. Whether the backdrop is Egyptian captivity, a field full of new crops, or the sacrifice of the

Son of God Himself, it's clear that God doesn't want us defining ourselves by our past failures and our forgiven sins. Christ's sacrifice was intended to sever you from the things holding you back.

Passover reminds us to "put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him" (Colossians 3:10) and *begin*.

Yes, we all have regrets behind us. We all have things we'd do differently and decisions we'd take back. But the Passover is about how God called us *out* of sins—how the Son of God gave His life to keep us from being held down by them.

What haven't you accomplished this past year? How haven't you grown? Where are you lacking?

BEGIN.

It's time to shore up those weaknesses, to "strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees" (Isaiah 35:3), and to grow ever closer to our God and King.

The chains are broken. The fields are ready. The debt is paid.

Begin.

Until next time,

Jeremy

SMOKING FLAX AND BRUISED REEDS

APRIL 11, 2014

Passover.

By the time this post goes live, we'll be just two nights away. Two nights away from the start of it all—from the lynchpin on which hangs the crux of God's entire plan of salvation. In two nights, we'll be commemorating the death of our Savior—a death that, for us, opened the door to eternal life.

The path to that night is never an easy one. In addition to Satan's increased volleys against God's people, we also face the emotionally taxing process of self-examination. We hold ourselves up to the standard of God's Word, we compare where we are to where we've been, and we measure our spiritual growth against the perfect model of our older Brother.

And if you're anything like the rest of God's people, you'll find that you aren't quite there yet.

Because you're weak. Because you've given in to temptations you thought you'd conquered. Because for every step forward, you can count too many steps back.

Because you were hoping to be a roaring fire, and instead you feel like a smoldering ember. You look back on your shortcomings, your flaws, your sins, and you wonder how much more patience God could possibly have with you—how many more times He can possibly forgive you before deciding you just aren't worth the effort.

These thoughts aren't uncommon, and I think they're one of the big reasons we *need* the Passover service every year—because it's a reminder. A reminder that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). A reminder that He offered up His own life on our behalf "when we were still without strength" (Romans 5:6).

You weren't worth the effort when Christ died for you. You just weren't—not by any human standard. But *He did it anyway*, because He and God the Father love you. You have worth to Them—They want *you* in Their family forever, and so the Son of God willingly died to give you that opportunity. If They were willing to go through with that, do you think God is going to give up on you now just because it's a harder road than you were expecting?

Sometimes I think we imagine God like the Greeks once imagined Zeus: lightning bolt held at the ready, just waiting for the smallest infraction to rain down punishment. But *that isn't the God we serve*. While He certainly won't

abide a person or nation with a heart set on evil, He is also "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

One of my favorite prophecies about Christ is from Isaiah: "A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench" (Isaiah 42:3). How often is that us? How often are we a bruised reed, struggling just to keep ourselves upright? How often are we a piece of flax, lacking the strength to do anything but smolder?

Sometimes, as we make our way through this life, we find ourselves barely hanging on—pinned down under the weight of trials and our own sins, bruised and smoking instead of standing tall and shining brightly. But when our Brother sees us in that condition, He doesn't walk by and snap us in half for being weak. He doesn't snuff out our last dying ember because we're struggling to keep our heads above the water.

Christ *builds us up*. When He sees us at our weakest—when our fire is burning low and we can't find the strength to build it back up, Christ gives us what we need to keep going (Philippians 4:13). It's the reason Paul wrote, "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10). It's the reason Christ Himself said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). If all we have left is the smoldering hope of a flame, Christ is going to work with that.

So maybe you *are* weak right now. Maybe you *are* a bruised reed or smoking flax. But Christ is the same Christ who died for you when you didn't deserve it. God is the same God who gave you His Holy Spirit as a down payment when you hadn't earned it. And that's what Passover is really, truly about—remembering the sacrifice of a Brother who came to reinforce the bruised reeds and give fuel to the smoking flax, and looking to the covenant we made with a Father who calls us His sons and daughters.

When you accepted the sacrifice that Passover reminds us of, you entered into a special relationship with your Creator. You have the covenant promise of a Father who told us, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

No, you're not where you want to be, not yet—but that's okay. *God is going to get you there.*

Wishing everyone a meaningful Passover,

Jeremy

LOST IN THE UNDERTOW

MARCH 27, 2015

It rarely starts with something big.

David was just standing on a rooftop. Achan was just following orders. Eve was just hungry.

Everyone "was just" at some point. That's where it starts: in our court. On our terms. Under our control.

When God recreated the world—when He called forth the dry land and pulled back the oceans—He set a boundary. He told the waters,

|| This far you may come, but no farther,
|| And here your proud waves must stop!
|| (Job 38:11)

We have boundaries, too. We have lines drawn by God, commandments "for our good" that tell us where we must stop—that warn us of the dangers that would overtake us with one more step.

But we're so much like the ocean. We ebb and we flow. Some days we shrink back, keeping our distance. Other days we swell up and see just how close we can get to that boundary.

Insanity. Those lines should terrify us. We should fear them more than we fear death itself. The spiritual forces that wait beyond those lines are the kind that "destroy both soul and body" (Matthew 10:28), the kind that guarantee an eternity of obliteration and nothingness.

Instead we plant our feet near that line and, like a child on a long road trip, declare, "I'm not touching you!"

For now.

Our feet may be firm, but the shoreline we've chosen to stand on isn't. The waves are weak here, but they aren't powerless. The water gently lapping around our feet removes some of the tiny grains on which we're standing, lowering us imperceptibly into the sand.

But our feet are firm. The line is still ahead of us. We've crossed nothing; we've done no wrong. We're just here to look.

For now.

A man once told me, by way of justifying his repeated gawking at a pretty waitress, "There's no harm in looking as long as you don't touch."

Oh, but there is. There is. The distance between looking and lusting is often a very short one, which is why John was quick to warn the Church to be on guard against "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16).

David looked. Achan looked. Eve looked. But none of them stopped there.

What starts in the eyes can fill the heart, and what fills the heart can guide the feet. Gradually, the line we came to look at becomes less of a curiosity and more of a desire. The gentle pull of the waves around us grows stronger with every step, coaxing us to take one more step, and then another, and then another, until...

Until it's too late. We've stolen the poor man's lamb, we've hidden away the golden wedge, we've tasted the forbidden fruit. Crossing that line was just a progression of footsteps, and the defining moment wasn't as definitive as we imagined it would be. It just happened. We went too far without even knowing it, and the power we had over the waves became the power the waves had over us. Pulling, pulling, pulling until we lacked the strength to push back. The ground disappears from beneath our feet and the only things we have left are the undertow and a sense of genuine panic.

And then, just like that, we've nailed the Son of God to a tree.

You did it. I did it.

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

(James 1:14-16)

I think the lie we tell ourselves is that we have the power to stop on a dime. I think we convince ourselves that we're in control, that we can turn around before we go too far.

But "too far" often comes sooner than we expect. Or do you genuinely believe you can stand in the ocean and not be affected by the waves?

David lost a child. Achan lost his life. Eve lost paradise.

We're not alone on this battlefield. We have an enemy—a bloodstained, vicious enemy. His goal is not to make your journey to the Kingdom difficult. His goal is to *destroy* you. To absolutely decimate you. To take every scrap of potential you have and crush it; to drag you out beyond the boundaries set by

God and drown you in your own sins.

Satan doesn't want you inconvenienced; he wants you dead.

Why is it that we're so eager to help him? What makes us think that anything good can come from stepping so close to the lines God has drawn to keep us safe?

Not that it's impossible to get back to shore after we've allowed ourselves to be swept past those lines. No, it's quite possible—but it takes a monumental effort to redirect ourselves and fight against the current.

Oh, it takes one other thing, too:

Blood.

Crossing those lines means sin, and sin means forfeiting our lives. More than that, without repentance and forgiveness, sin means forfeiting our sonship in the family of God. And returning to shore has nothing to do with our own strength—it has to do with the strength of an innocent Man who died in our place. An innocent Man who had nails driven through His hands and feet, who had a crown of thorns thrust upon His head, whose every agonizing breath forced His lacerated back to drag across the rough, splintered wood, whose blood poured out like water after a spear was plunged into His side.

That's what gets us back to shore. *That's* what rescues us from the grasp of Satan and sin. *That's* what restores us as sons and daughters of God.

Remember that next time you're thinking of sidling up to a line. Remember what it's going to cost to make the journey back.

The blood of our Savior is not a license to see how close we can get to the things He's forbidden. We were redeemed for better things than that.

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.

(Romans 13:11-14)

Brothers and sisters, we cannot afford to dip our toes in the waters of Satan's world. We cannot afford to treat the boundaries of God's law as playthings. We are fighting for our very lives on a spiritual battlefield against a foe hell-bent on

wiping us from existence. Christ did not lay down His life so that we could stop trying. He laid it down so that we could *win*.

Our salvation is nearer, but the battle is far from over.

Take up the armor of light. Cast off the works of darkness. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Kingdom awaits.

Until next time,

Jeremy

THE PRIVILEGE OF FOOTWASHING

APRIL 3, 2015

Without the footwashing ceremony, the Passover service would require almost no interaction with our fellow Church members. It would be an intensely private experience—a whole congregation in the same room, eating the bread in silence, drinking the wine in silence, singing a hymn and then quietly walking out.

Those parts are important; please don't misunderstand me. The bread and the wine symbolize the very reason Passover—and yes, the entire plan of God—is even possible. But the footwashing ceremony, described for us only in the gospel of John, is our one chance to interact with those around us—and I don't believe it was placed at the beginning of the service by accident.

Footwashing reminds us that *every single one of us in that room* depends on Christ's sacrifice. He died for me, yes—but He also died for my brethren, for the people whose feet I have the privilege to get down on my knees and wash. Footwashing jars me out of my own personal bubble and reminds me that the Passover service, Christ's sacrifice, is as important for those around me as it is for me. They are my brothers and my sisters. They are sons and daughters of God. They are my family.

Christ told His disciples, "You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:13-15). What strikes me about this instruction is that it doesn't include the qualifier we see attached to the bread and the wine. Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 11:17-32 make it clear that the symbols of Christ's body and blood are to be taken only at the annual Passover (the words "as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup" implying not "as often as you want to" but "as often as you observe the yearly Passover").

Christ gave no such restriction when it comes to footwashing. The command was to "do as I have done to you." That sentence didn't end with "but only once a year and because you have to"; it ended with a period. What does that mean? Are we supposed to go out and sporadically insist on washing our brethren's feet all throughout the year?

No, it's something that goes deeper than that. What Christ did to His disciples—what He told them to do for each other—was to serve. The Lord of all creation got down on His knees to perform the kind of job that typically belonged to a servant, and then told His followers, "I have given you an example, that you

should do as I have done to you."

We're not in this alone. We never have been. Thousands have come before us, many will come after us, and right now, in this moment, many are coming *with* us. The bread and the wine at Passover reminds us that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ applies to each of us on an individual level, but the footwashing reminds us that there are other people in the room—that these people are important to God and that they should be important to us too.

Christ served, and then told us to go and do likewise. The attitude behind footwashing might begin with Passover, but it certainly shouldn't end with it. God wants each of us to develop the heart of a servant as we make our way toward the Kingdom, arm in arm with our brethren.

"Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing" (Matthew 24:45-46).

Until next time,

Jeremy

IT'S TIME TO FIGHT

APRIL 7, 2017

It was one of the last sentences Jesus spoke to His disciples before His crucifixion. A warning—and a promise:

"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, *I have overcome the world*" (John 16:33).

Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that trials were coming. The god of this age was going to try and break them, to sift them like wheat—and yet, at the same time, they were to take comfort in knowing that, through His own death, Jesus was about to destroy "him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14).

Earlier that evening, the disciples had taken the Passover with Christ. He'd broken the bread and told them it was His body. He'd poured the wine and told them it was His blood.

Broken... for them. Poured out... for them.

He'd also washed their feet—the Lord of creation, performing the role of a servant—and explained, "I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15).

And so we do. Year after year we come together to follow the Teacher's example. We wash each other's feet, we eat the bread, we drink the wine, and we reflect on the price that was paid for our peace: the wounds. The bruises. The stripes.

Then we sing a hymn and go home.

We go home and, gradually, the rhythm of the world catches back up with us. The next day, there's work to be done. There are meals to make, chores to do, responsibilities to consider. We do our best to remain aware of what God has done for us, but life keeps moving—and without fail, it will attempt to pull you inch by imperceptible inch back into its unceasing and undirected flow. Dulling your focus. Distracting you from the things that matter.

But it's not really "life" doing all that, is it?

Of course it isn't.

Passover refocuses our attention on the undeserved gifts of peace and salvation given to us by the sacrifice of our Brother. But you face an enemy who would rip that from your grasp if it was in his power—an enemy eager to see you burned to ash in the second death, to have your spiritual potential stamped out

and destroyed forever. The moment you leave the Passover service this year, he'll be looking for ways to wear you down—to whittle down your resistance until you lose the will to continue.

You can't let him do that.

Eternity is on the line.

Which is why, this Passover, we will go on the offensive. We will not allow this to be a Passover of passivity, of quietly returning to old habits and old ways. We will wash the feet of our brethren, our comrades in arms. We will eat the bread and drink the wine, we will give thanks for the divine strength that enabled us to put the old man to death and that opened the door to our salvation, and then we will *take up arms*.

Our adversary has been warring with the people of God for thousands of years. He has employed deception and subterfuge, brute force and drawn-out attrition. He has besieged us and sought out our weakest points, pummeling us mercilessly until we are tempted to roll over and take it.

Not this time.

NOT. THIS. TIME.

This time, we fight back. We hold our own. We equip the armor God has given us, and we go on the offensive. We take back the territory Satan has stolen from us. We tear down his strongholds and give him no quarter. No footholds. No compliance. We find his every hiding place in our lives, every fortification where he feels safe and secure, and with the power God has given us, we *drive him out*.

When we walk out of the doors of the Passover service, wherever we are, we'll be walking back into an ancient war against an enemy far stronger than ourselves.

But we won't be walking out alone. We'll be walking out alongside brothers and sisters—fellow soldiers, armed and equipped to face what's coming. We'll be marching under the banner of the Lord of Hosts, God Most High, "from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named" (Ephesians 3:15).

The Passover arms us with the most powerful weapon of all: the truth. The truth that Christ died for our sins. The truth that He did so willingly, because He felt we were worth the cost. The truth that He has not left us orphans, but provided us instead with the Holy Spirit, which is "not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled" (2 Corinthians 10:4-6).

With God's help, we have everything we need to step into this fight and *win it*—because once, a long time ago, a Man named Jesus Christ offered up His body and His blood and *overcame the world*.

Through His sacrifice, we can too.

Brethren—it's time to fight.

Until next time,
Jeremy

UNLEAVENED BREAD

KEEP GOING

APRIL 29, 2016

You didn't get it all, did you?

Even now, as the Feast ends and we're allowed to bring things like bread and baking soda and self-rising flour back into our lives, we're faced with the uncomfortable truth that we missed something. Maybe it was the bagel sitting in plain sight all week. Maybe it was the nearly invisible crumb of a long-forgotten muffin nestled deep within the crevices of your living room couch. Either way, no matter how hard we tried, *we missed something*. Short of burning your house to the ground and starting over, there's simply no way to get it all.

No matter how many times I keep these Days, that's the inescapable truth: I can't do it. Not perfectly. Not on my own. No matter how surgical my approach, no matter how precise my attack plan, I am practically guaranteed to overlook *something*.

There are a lot of lessons in all that. We can talk about how easy it is for sin to hide right under our noses, completely unnoticed. We can talk about sin's capacity to burrow deep into the crevices of our hearts and remain untouched for years. We can talk about the way our favorite activities and pastimes can be laced with sin, but we never bother to check the ingredients label because what could possibly be wrong with *that*?

We could talk about all those things, but I think, buried deep underneath it all, is a far more important question:

Why bother?

If we're going to fall short of God's command—if no amount of effort can guarantee that we'll remove every solitary scrap of leavening from our homes—why bother at all?

When we find ourselves up against the impossible, there are two paths we can decide to take:

- It's impossible, so give up.
- It's impossible, so look to Christ's sacrifice and *keep going*.

The Days of Unleavened Bread remind us of a standard we're incapable of reaching on our own: a perfect, sinless life. Even as we're striving to put sin out, we're forced to accept the fact that we can't do it perfectly on our own.

But we're not on our own. Jesus reminded His disciples that "with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26), and the author of Hebrews reminds us, "We

do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:15-16).

If the message of Passover is *begin*, then the message of Unleavened Bread is *keep going*. Even when you've failed. Even when the task at hand seems impossible. Christ has your back, and He's already paid the price of falling short. All He and God the Father ask now is that you keep going. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and try again:

"A righteous man may fall seven times and rise again" (Proverbs 24:16).

And next year, maybe you *will* notice the bagels sitting in your pantry. Next year, maybe you *will* vacuum a little deeper into the couch and get the crumb that's been hiding there for the past decade. Next year, maybe you *will* check the label of that food you thought was leaven-free and throw it out in time.

And that's why we bother. Unleavened Bread reminds us of the bigger picture. Even though we didn't overcome all our sin this year, we hopefully did a better job than last year. And even though we won't overcome it all next year, we'll hopefully do a better job than this year—every year becoming a little more aware, a little more diligent, a little closer to where we're supposed to be, all while trusting Christ's sacrifice to fill in the gaps when we fall short.

Unleavened Bread isn't about being perfect. It's about pushing toward it.

Keep going.

Until next time,

Jeremy

UNDER THE SURFACE

APRIL 10, 2015

There are few transgressions our modern society hates as much as hypocrisy. We all know what a hypocrite looks like, and we can identify one almost immediately—the shifty little weasels who “say one thing and do another” aren't exactly hard to spot.

Except...that's not hypocrisy. Not really. Strong's Concordance defines the Greek word *hypokrites* as nothing more than “an actor under an assumed character (stage-player).” A hypocrite, at the most basic level, is an actor. Someone who plays a character on stage for the sake of an audience. Someone who “says one thing and does another” would make an absolutely lousy actor—the word we're looking for to describe that particular problem isn't “hypocrite,” but “liar.” Or, in many instances, simply “being a human being.” How many of us hold a set of high standards that we often fail to reach? Or is that just me? Does that make us all hypocrites, or just flawed, flesh-and-blood human beings that are trying to be better?

No, hypocrisy is a transgression that goes much deeper—one that Jesus Christ particularly hated and opted to say a few choice words about.

This past week has been one of symbols and of self-examination. We prepared for it by removing leaven from our dwellings, and we spent the week eating *unleavened* bread—removing objects that represent sin, and making a conscious effort to “keep the feast” and fill ourselves “not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:8).

Sincerity and truth. Honesty and integrity. Holding fast to what's genuine, living with integrity, taking down our facades—none of these things describe a hypocrite. In fact, Jesus warned His disciples to “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, *which is hypocrisy*” (Luke 12:1). In starkest contrast to the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth is the leaven of hypocrisy.

All actors—all *hypocrites*—play a part. To take on a new role, they'll change their diet, they'll change their workout, and some of the more dedicated actors will do anything they can to get into the head of their character. We often think of hypocrisy as simply “talking the talk,” but the truth of the matter is that a

hypocrite is just as determined to “walk the walk” as well. A hypocrite goes to great pains to convince you of his sincerity, but inside... inside is a different story.

The best hypocrites are the ones we never spot—the ones who play their roles perfectly, who go through all the right motions, who say all the right words at all the right times while being someone completely different under the surface.

There's a difference, though, isn't there? Christ wasn't condemning all acting; He was condemning a specific *kind* of acting. We expect actors to be someone else while the camera is rolling or the audience is watching—it's their job, it's what they signed up to do and what we pay to watch. The hypocrisy Christ condemned is the kind of acting that exists outside of the studio and on the stage of our day-to-day lives.

He didn't mince words, either. In speaking to the religious leaders of the day, respected members of the Jewish community, Christ proclaimed, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness” (Matthew 23:27).

Whitewashed tombs. What a picture that paints: beautiful on the outside, filled with rotteness and death on the inside. And that's exactly the kind of acting God hates. Why? Because God desires “truth in the inward parts” (Psalm 51:6). Because “the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). God sees past the charade and the beautiful exterior that everyone else looks at—He focuses in on the heart.

King Solomon warned, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Proverbs 4:23, NIV). He was right. Every major battle of Christianity is won or lost in the arena of the heart—the one place least likely in any hypocrite to see change.

Hypocrites aren't concerned with who they are. They're concerned with who people *think* they are. They make changes on the surface to ensure others see them as they want to be seen. To the outside observer, a sincere Christian and a skilled hypocrite look identical. The only One who can truly tell the difference is the One who looks at the heart.

And that, truthfully, is the real lesson we can learn from hypocrites: it's possible to go through all the motions of Christianity, saying and doing all the right things,

and never truly allow the power of God to transform us. We can look the part and still be dead inside.

Sincerity starts within. We're reminded of that when we eat the unleavened bread of "sincerity and truth." It has to be internalized; it does its work in the secret places of the heart where no one but God can see. That's worthless to a hypocrite—an action without an audience. Christ promised, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (John 14:23). A hypocrite never truly keeps God's Word—just the appearance of it.

What does that mean for us? We don't possess the ability to see into the hearts of others, and we've already established that a sincere Christian and skilled hypocrite are nearly indistinguishable on the outside. Why should we care what hypocrisy is if it's so difficult to recognize it in others?

Because there *is* one heart you can look into:

Your own.

Christ warned us to beware the leaven of hypocrisy—not so that we could seek it out and identify it in others, but in ourselves. It's the enemy of sincerity and truth. It's the enemy of everything the Feast of Unleavened Bread pictures. What's most important to God is what's happening in "the inward parts"—in that secret arena of your heart that only you and He can see.

Eating the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth means allowing God to reshape us from the inside out into true sons and daughters of the Most High. The leaven of hypocrisy means taking the reverse approach, trying to wear those outward changes like an actor's costume, but never allowing them to make a real and lasting impact on our character. It's the difference between taking action to be seen as better and taking action to truly *be* better.

At the end of the day, it comes down to a question only you can answer:

Who are you under the surface?

Until next time,
Jeremy

RUINED

MAY 6, 2016

The other day, a friend and I were talking about marking our Bibles. We're both terrible perfectionists, so we were lamenting how easy it is to feel like we've ruined a Bible. I don't know about you, but if I misspell something in a margin or if my underlines get a little squiggly, my knee-jerk reaction is, "Great, let's just throw the whole thing out and get a new one, because this one is ruined forever."

That's such a heavy word. *Ruined*. There's only one thing you can do with something that's ruined, and that's throw it away. It's not really good for anything else.

How did your Passover prep go, by the way? I'm betting we all saw some pretty unsettling things. If you're like me—if you're like every other follower of God on this planet—then when you took a good long look in your spiritual mirror, you saw weakness. You saw failure. You saw God's perfect standard and you saw all the times you fell short of it.

That's the nature of the beast, unfortunately. That's what we have to grapple with every year right around this time: our own human nature. And it's in those moments, when we catch that glimpse of who we are and how far we still have to go, that it's very, very easy to begin to convince ourselves that we're ruined.

A little over two weeks ago, we took of the bread, and we took of the wine, and we were reminded: He was bruised for us. He was beaten for us. He was scourged, He was mocked, He was spit on and abused—for us. He was nailed to a tree and run through with a spear *for us*.

We were reminded of all those things, and then we had to look at ourselves. At our shortcomings. At our woeful inadequacies. At the hidden imperfections no one else can see, and we had to wonder: Me? He did this for *me*? But I'm not worth it. I can't *possibly* be worth it. Look at me. Look at all the stains and the bruises and the scars. I'm ruined. Worthless.

But here's the secret:

In the eyes of God, you are not ruined. Stained, maybe. Bruised, maybe. But not ruined. Stains can be removed. Bruises can heal. Scars can fade. *That's not ruined*.

David understood that. He wrote Psalm 51 at his absolute lowest point. He had lusted, he had lied, he had stolen, he had committed adultery, and he had intentionally sent an innocent man to his death. Until Nathan the prophet jolted

him out of his apathy, David was about as far from God as a person can get. He was, according to every conventional standard, ruined.

Thankfully, God's standard is far from conventional. David repented, and he wrote,

Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts,
And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Make me hear joy and gladness,
That the bones You have broken may rejoice.
Hide Your face from my sins,
And blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,
And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.
(Psalm 51:6-12)

Because of God's mercy, David was not ruined. In the New Testament, Paul affirms that David was a man after God's own heart. Ezekiel prophesies that David will once again reign over Israel.

David understood a fundamental principle: If God washes you, *you are clean*. And not just clean, but *whiter than snow*.

Paul writes, "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8). I guess for me the real question is *why*. What did Christ see in us that made Him willing to go through what He did? That made Him willing to commit to it from the foundation of the world?

We can find some insight in the book of Hebrews. The author encourages us to be "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

Here's a question: What was the joy set before Christ? We're told that He did what He did for the joy that was set before Him. What was it? Eternal life? Did He give up eternal life for the joy of receiving eternal life? Did He give up sitting at the right hand of the throne of God for the joy of sitting at the right hand of the throne of God?

That doesn't make much sense, does it? He already *had* those things. The joy set before Christ was something He didn't already have. What was it? What did He gain when He gave up His life on the cross?

You. He gained *you*. And me. And a multitude of other potential brothers and sisters. *We* were the joy set before Christ. He *had* eternal life, He *had* the right hand of the throne of God—but He didn't have *us*, and for that, He was willing to come to this earth as a human being and die the most humiliating, most painful death the ancient world knew how to administer.

For you. For me.

It's easy to look at ourselves and feel ruined. But a ruined thing is worthless. A ruined thing is beyond hope. A ruined thing is not worth the effort.

The Son of God did not die for ruined things.

He died for brothers and sisters. He died to open the door to eternity and forgiveness, to give us a chance, to clean us up and present us to His Father as His brethren.

It's hard for me to look at myself and believe that. It's hard for me to know the things no one else knows about me and still believe Jesus Christ is willing to love me.

But it's true.

The Church members in Corinth didn't exactly come from the most pristine backgrounds. Paul reminds them of this in his first epistle to them. "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Whoever you were before this—*whatever* you were—you were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified. You're different now. You're a child of God now. Not because you deserved it or because you were somehow necessary to God's plan, but simply because He loved you. He still loves you, and He began a good work in you, and *He is going to finish it* (Philippians 1:6).

David once asked God, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?" (Psalm 139:7). And the answer, of course, is nowhere. There is nowhere we can go where repentance and the blood of Jesus Christ is not enough to make us clean.

You were washed.

We're reminded of that truth at every Passover. We wash each other's feet, we eat the bread, we drink the wine, and we reflect on the price that was paid to make us clean.

The Days of Unleavened Bread come with a different reminder, though. These days remind us that *we're not done yet*. There are still sins to root out, to repent of, and to overcome. It's a work in progress, but we can do it—because our older Brother is in our corner, helping us make it happen.

So now what?

Earlier, we were in Hebrews 12, but we only read half a sentence. Let's go back and read the whole thing now, because that sentence ties together the themes of Unleavened Bread and Passover, and gives us the marching orders we need to move forward:

"Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and *let us run with endurance the race that is set before us*, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

You were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified. And now, brethren, it is time to *run*. The Kingdom of God is ahead, and the example of our older Brother has paved the way.

Run, and don't stop till you've reached the finish line.

Until next time,

Jeremy

RESISTING TO BLOODSHED

MAY 12, 2017

Here's the bad news: Satan is out to get you. To *destroy* you. He wants very much to rip away your salvation, to crush your spiritual potential, and to leave you empty and ruined by the wayside of life.

Here's the good news: He can't. You and I are safe in our Father's hands. We are Christ's sheep, and He promises, "My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand" (John 10:29).

More bad news: Just because Satan can't attack our salvation directly doesn't mean he can't convince us to give it up. After 6,000 years of antagonizing the human race, Satan has an impressive repertoire of ways to leave us distracted, discouraged, and disillusioned about the path we're on. At every opportunity, he's going to bombard us with everything he can to get us to walk away from God's calling of our own accord. He wants us to be too tired, too focused elsewhere, too resentful, too doubtful, too bitter to continue seeking the Kingdom of God.

More good news: That's a fight he can only win if we let him.

Last month, we went one week without eating leaven—a week designed to teach us about taking the sin out of our lives, about being aware of all the ways our adversary tries to sneak it in without us noticing, and about replacing that sin with God's righteousness.

It's also a week that teaches us about resisting.

Being aware of Satan's tactics doesn't make us impervious to them. The Bible is full of admonitions to actively oppose him. Peter warns, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. *Resist him*, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world" (1 Peter 5:8-9).

Resisting isn't a passive thing. We don't resist by simply "not giving in." We resist by *pushing back*. Planting our feet on God's truth and shoving our enemy backward.

Paul tells us, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:11-12). Wrestling doesn't mean "sitting there and taking it." It means grappling with

our opponent and refusing to surrender. It means stepping onto the mat with every intention of winning.

Not that it'll be easy. Not that we're capable of winning that fight without God's mercy and grace. This is a battle that requires us to always be on guard, "lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices" (2 Corinthians 2:11).

Quick physics question for you: Two empty, identical clay flower pots fall from two equally high ledges at the same exact moment (no doubt due to the shameless machinations of a cat). When they hit the ground, one pot shatters immediately while the other bounces off the ground.

Which pot hit the ground harder?

Common sense would suggest the first pot. After all, it hit the ground so hard that it shattered! But common sense would be wrong.

You're probably familiar with Newton's third law of motion: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." In our little flower pot scenario, that means that when the flower pots hit the ground, *the ground hit back*. As gravity did its work, the pots applied more and more force to the ground, which applied it right back to the pots. For the first pot, the stress was too much. It shattered, and both it and the ground stopped pushing so hard. But the pot that bounced actually absorbed (and applied) the most force—enough to bounce back into the air.

Satan would like to shatter you. He wants to break you like that flower pot—which means he's going to ratchet up the pressure every chance he gets, hoping you'll crack.

But here's the thing: We only shatter if we give up. If we stop pushing back. And no one understands that better than Jesus Christ, who "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). We can be certain that Satan used every weapon in his arsenal to take a swing at the Son of God, but none of it worked. Satan hit Jesus with everything he had, and Jesus pushed right back. Satan was standing in between Christ and His goal, and Christ refused to give in—which is why we in turn may "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

And we *will* have times of need. We'll have moments where the battle is too much for us, when we falter and stumble—but through the grace and mercy of God, we can find the strength to get back on our feet and *keep resisting*.

|| For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself,

lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons:

"My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord,
Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him;
For whom the Lord loves He chastens,
And scourges every son whom He receives."

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?

(Hebrews 12:3-7)

We are the children of God. Our Father is shaping us in His perfect image, allowing us to endure the trials we need to build the character He requires in us. Meanwhile, our enemy is hoping those same trials will shatter us.

Resist.

Resist now; resist all the way to bloodshed if that's what God allows. That's what Christ did. He strove against sin until His last breath, paving the way for us and opening the door to salvation. Now He stands as our High Priest, sympathizing with our weaknesses and providing the strength we need as we journey toward the Kingdom.

In this life, Satan is never going to stop pushing.

Keep pushing back.

Until next time,

Jeremy

PENTECOST

DO THE WORK

JUNE 10, 2016

From a calendar perspective, Pentecost is an odd duck. It stands a good distance away from the hustle and bustle of the initial spring holy day season. Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread are preceded by a flurry of intensive cleaning and meaningful introspection—but as the Last Day of Unleavened Bread ends, it's easy for all that momentum to peter out. For a while, there's nothing right around the corner, no urgent feeling of "What's next?" to keep us focused on the next key element of God's plan.

And then, after Pentecost, it's easy for that feeling to intensify. The next holy day is a small eternity away—with the exception of the weekly Sabbaths, Pentecost is the last annual commanded assembly we'll see for a while.

After Pentecost, the holy days become a waiting game.

We're still waiting for Trumpets to be fulfilled. We're still waiting for the events pictured by Atonement and Tabernacles and the Last Great Day to unfold. The big events of Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Pentecost have already come and gone. Christ died on the cross, gave us a way to put sin out and replace it with righteousness, and then gave us the tools we need to make it all happen. Now there's nothing left to do but wait.

Except that's the worst possible approach we can take to God's holy day plan—*especially* Pentecost.

From an agricultural perspective, Pentecost makes perfect sense. It's the Feast of the Firstfruits—and firstfruits take time. They have to be planted, they need to be cared for, they have to be watered and nurtured. They need time to grow and come to fruition.

The time between the Last Day of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Pentecost is a reminder that we need to be *growing*—not *waiting*. You're not where you need to be yet, and neither am I. We need to be taking every opportunity to grow in grace and knowledge, to cast aside the sin which so easily ensnares us, and to develop into the spiritual firstfruits God would have us become.

Pentecost itself, though—I think Pentecost is a reminder of something else:

We have work to do.

It's so easy to turn the cycle of personal growth into a way to hide. Self-examination means we're confronted with our own flaws again and again—the reasons we're not good enough, the ways we're falling short of where we should

be, the reasons God can't use us...

And then we're Moses, standing in front of the burning bush and explaining to God why His plan won't work because, hey, let's be honest, we're just not the right person for the job. We're so far from where we need to be; we have so much more growing to do before we're ready to—

And then God tells us to quit making excuses and to go do the work. When Moses told God he wasn't a good public speaker, God replied, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the LORD? Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say" (Exodus 4:11-12).

When Jeremiah told God, "I cannot speak, for I am a youth," God replied, "Do not say, 'I am a youth,' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces, for *I am with you to deliver you*" (Jeremiah 1:6-8).

God knows who you are. He knows your weaknesses and your limitations—and He has a job for you to do. When we tell God all the reasons we can't, He tells us all the reasons *He can*. Then He tells us to get to work.

We don't get excuses with God. He made us; He formed us; He knows exactly what we're capable of—and, more importantly, He knows exactly what *He's* capable of.

Christianity is, in many ways, intensely personal. It's about self-examination and how you're growing as an individual. But Christianity isn't compartmentalized, either. It's not a matter of me growing quietly over here while my neighbor grows quietly over there, and we'll just exchange pleasantries when our paths happen to cross.

God gave the Church work to do—and *the Church is you*. It's me. It's the entire assembly of God's called-out ones, not just a handful of people working at a headquarters or home office. We all have different roles to play, for "there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to *each one for the profit of all*" (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

We have work to do, you and I—and Pentecost reminds us to get to it. Trumpets—the return of Christ—is still off in the distance. For all we know, that day is a lifetime away. Right now, in this empty space between now and then, we must do the work.

When Peter gave his sermon on that fateful Pentecost in AD 31, he got a

response. His audience was "cut to the heart" and determined to find out the answer to an important question:

"Men and brethren, what shall we *do*?" (Acts 2:37).

Peter gave them the initial steps: repent, be baptized, receive the Holy Spirit. But it doesn't stop there. Any veteran of the Church knows that receiving the Holy Spirit is only the beginning of the work; only the first step into a much grander and much bigger world.

Skip down a few verses, and you'll find that "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Why do you think that was? Was it only Peter's ability to deliver sermons that stirred people to action? Or did it have anything to do with the Church members who "ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people" (Acts 2:46-47)?

Which had the greater impact—one extremely effective speaker, or 3,000 lives all setting an example of Godly living for their friends and families and even enemies to see?

I think God used both those avenues to accomplish some incredible things, and I think it's a powerful reminder that as members of the body of Christ, the work we must do extends so far beyond just showing up for services once a week.

"You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16).

Light. *Good works*. We can't stay forever in a loop of self-examination. Eventually, we have to stop navel-gazing and *start doing*, being "diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). Our internal growth *must result in action*.

Passover teaches us to **begin**. Unleavened Bread tells us to **keep going**. And Pentecost has a message for us, too:

No more excuses. No more delaying. No more hiding.

Do the work.

Until next time,

Jeremy

WHAT KIND OF FIRSTFRUIT WILL YOU BE?

JUNE 7, 2014

Tomorrow, God's people will once again gather together to celebrate the annual Feast of Pentecost. For the ancient Israelites, this was a day to worship God by offering Him the firstfruits of their new grain harvest (Leviticus 23:16; Numbers 28:26). Today, this holy day carries the added meaning of the day when God poured out His Holy Spirit on His Church (Acts 2:1-4)—the day when we became the firstfruits of God's harvest.

The Hebrew word translated "firstfruits," *bikkur*, refers to "the first of the crops and fruit that ripened, was gathered, and offered to God" (blueletterbible.org). While God's plan of salvation will one day include the entire world, He is at present only working with a small group of believers, "brought ... forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (James 1:18).

During His ministry on earth, Christ gave a famous parable about a sower who went out to sow. For years, I've read this parable solely as an explanation for why some people reject or walk away from God's calling—but with Pentecost drawing closer, I can't help but think there's more to it than that. What if Jesus spoke this parable not just to help us understand others, but to help us understand ourselves as well? What if the story of the sower is a roadmap, intended to lead us from where we are to a deeper relationship with our Creator?

What if the real question to be asking ourselves in reading this passage is about the kind of firstfruits we're becoming?

Since we're going to be spending time examining it, let's go ahead and start with the parable itself. Matthew's account records the story this way:

Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

(Matthew 13:3-9)

Certainly not the most self-explanatory metaphor. Luke's account has the disciples coming up to Jesus afterwards and tactfully explaining that they had absolutely no clue what He was talking about (Luke 8:9). Fortunately for them (and us), Christ took the time to explain the parable piece by piece: the seed represents "the word of God" (Luke 8:11), while each of the four types of ground it falls on represents a way in which people receive that Word. But these aren't just conditions that prevent other people from accepting God's calling—they're conditions that can and will creep into our lives and stunt our growth as firstfruits unless we actively seek to counteract them.

So. How do we do that? Well, let's start with...

1. The wayside

The problem: The Greek word for wayside suggests a heavily traveled pathway. This dirt would have been so compacted by foot traffic (Luke 8:5) that, for growing purposes, it may as well have been cement. Likewise, we can be so set in our ways that God's Word literally cannot get through to us. It's a condition that occurs when we start to believe that we either have nothing left to learn about God's way or that we are "good enough" as we are and have no need to change. When we have the wayside mindset, it's not difficult for Satan to snatch away God's Word from us (Matthew 13:19)—because we never bothered to make it a part of us in the first place.

The solution: The University of Florida notes that one effective way to **improve compacted soil** involves manually breaking up the dirt and amending it with looser dirt and compost. The same is true for us—before we can allow God's Word into our lives, we're going to have to dismantle our own ideas of how things should work. We're going to miss the truths God is revealing to us if we're too busy telling Him how we think things ought to be. Christ's command to "become as little children" is extremely relevant here. Unless we become teachable and pliable in God's hands, we "will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3).

2. The stony places

The problem: Unlike the wayside, the dirt here isn't the problem—it's what lies underneath. Rather than rich soil filled with nutrients for growing healthy plants, this type of ground is filled with stones—rocks, pebbles, and other debris that makes growing a real challenge. Jesus explained that at the first sign of resistance, the plants growing in the stony ground withered away "because they had no root" (Matthew 13:6). If we find our faith faltering every time it's put to

the test, it may be because we're trying to put down roots in a spiritually stony place.

The solution: A plant depends on its roots to gather nutrients and water from the soil in which it grows. The strength of God's Word in our lives likewise depends on the extent to which we feed it with nutrients like prayer, study, fasting, meditation, and fellowship. To do that, we first need to remove the rocks—the things in our lives that fill up the spaces where these nutrients should be. The more we replace the rocks with nutrients, the deeper God's Word can integrate into our lives—and the more resilient our faith will be during trials that would otherwise overwhelm us.

3. The thorns

The problem: The thorns become a problem after we've allowed God's Word to take root in our lives... but not exclusively. Jesus identifies these thorns as "cares, riches, and pleasures of life"—areas of life that threaten to choke out God's calling in our lives until it will "bring no fruit to maturity" (Luke 8:14). These thorns are aggressive competitors, growing at a rapid pace with the sole purpose of overshadowing and choking God's Word. Anything in our lives that becomes more important to us than our calling—whether it's something we're worried about, whether it's our bank account, or whether it's just a hobby we really enjoy—is a thorn, and it *will* damage our relationship with God.

The solution: Having concerns isn't wrong. Having money isn't wrong. Having hobbies isn't wrong. What *is* wrong is when these things start detracting from our relationship with God. Make no mistake: anything that comes between you and God, however innocent, will eventually squeeze the life out of His Word within you. We have to aggressively weed out these thorns just as aggressively as they grow, because "no one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24).

4. The good ground

Good ground is defined by what the bad ground *isn't*. The wayside was too hardened and set in its ways to even allow God's Word in; the good ground is malleable enough to accept instruction. The stony ground lacked the nutrients God's Word needed to truly take root; the good ground is filled with Bible study, prayer, fasting, fellowship, and meditation—all the ingredients required for faith to flourish. The thorny ground allowed intruders to compete and detract from God's Word; the good ground is kept clear of anything that might choke out that

Word.

Christ tells us that the seed that fell on good ground "yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (Matthew 13:8). If we become that good ground, then the Word that God plants within us is going to become something truly incredible. And what does that crop look like? Well...

Time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again.

Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.

And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

(Hebrews 11:32-40)

The men and women throughout the ages who allowed God's Word and Spirit to grow and thrive in their lives, who with God's divine aid powerfully overcame the obstacles that Satan laid before them—these men and women are now asleep, waiting for the trumpet and the shout that will call them from the graves and into eternal life as a member of God's family.

We can have that future, too. But first we have to decide whether or not we're going to allow God's Word and Spirit to take root and grow in *our* lives.

The Word of God isn't difficult to come by in our world of wireless communication and cloud computing. Virtually anyone who wants to read God's Word can—but only a certain kind of person is going to provide ground where that Word can take root and flourish. Only a certain kind of person is going to answer God's call to become a firstfruit of His Kingdom.

The parable of the sower teaches us what we must do to *become* that person.

Until next time,
Jeremy

DO YOU WANT TO BE MADE WELL?

JULY 3, 2015

The pool of Bethesda was a magnet for the sick and the infirm of Jerusalem. A great and pitiful multitude lay sprawled out across its five covered porches, each of them looking for a miracle.

They were in the right place. Everyone knew Bethesda's pool was the place to go for a miracle. On a regular basis, an angel would enter the water and stir it up, and the first person to enter the pool would be healed. Just like that. All you had to do was be first.*

But being first wasn't easy. The cards were already stacked against you: a veritable host of the sick, the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed all wanted the same thing you did, and if you were a man who had been without the use of his legs for 38 years, the odds were simply not in your favor—unless, of course, the Son of God happens to walk up and speak with you.

That's exactly what happened to one man during the ministry of Jesus Christ. Why this particular man? I don't know. We're not told. But Jesus, in His infinite wisdom and understanding, singled this one man out of an entire multitude of the sick and mangled and then asked him a question:

"Do you want to be made well?"

For 38 years this man had been unable to walk, and Jesus asks him if he wants to be made well. *Do you want to be made well?* Does the sun rise in the east? Does gravity pull us back down to earth?

What kind of question is that?

I don't claim to know the mind of Christ in that moment, but I do know this: Jesus never healed the same way twice—not in the recorded gospels, at least. Every time we see Jesus perform a miracle, the procedure is a little different. I suppose He could have adopted some sort of trademarked move—the wave of a hand, a few important-sounding words, some elaborate ritual—but the fact that each healing was unique pointed back to the fact that *God* was the one doing the healing, not some magical concoction or mysterious phrase. The only thing all these healings had in common was Jesus Christ Himself.

More than that, the healings performed by Jesus all convey something deeper than the healing itself. They're there to teach us something. When Christ healed a leper, Luke made sure to include in his account that Jesus "put out His hand and touched him" before healing him (Luke 5:13). Jesus didn't need to do that. He could have stood at a distance and healed the man just as effectively, but Christ

touched him. Lepers were untouchables, pariahs whose disease forced them to remain quarantined from the rest of civilization. In reaching out and touching that leper, Jesus revealed His deep compassion for a man who had likely been bereft of human contact for quite some time—and, by extension, His deep compassion for all those who need healing.

But what about this man at the pool of Bethesda? What made Christ ask what He did?

The gospel account tells us that from the moment Jesus saw the man lying near the pool, He "knew that he already had been in that condition a long time" (John 5:6). He knew. He *knew* how long the man had been plagued with this disease. He knew the man was at the pool where people went when they needed healing. He knew the man was looking for a miracle.

And yet He still asked, "Do you want to be made well?"

Why?

If you look carefully, there's actually another question buried within in the one Jesus asked:

"Are you comfortable being broken?"

Being healed would change everything about this man's life. It would change how he got up in the morning and it would change *why* he got up in the morning. Christ was asking a legitimate question: "Is this what you want? I can make you well, but are you ready for your life to change on a fundamental level?"

All Scripture is given for a reason. As Paul said to Timothy, it is "given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16). So why was this healing—and, more specifically, Christ's question—recorded for us?

I think because Jesus is asking all of us that same question.

Baptism isn't the end of the journey. It's a step. That journey starts with repentance and continues on until perfection, and as Christians we're all somewhere along that continuum.

Do you want to be made well?

Are you comfortable being broken?

Because it can happen. I'd wager it *has* happened to each and every one of us. It's a human tendency to stop at "good enough"—better than we were, but not quite where we'd intended to be. Are you there yet? Are you where you wanted to be? Are you where God wants you to be?

We can get so used to the way things are that the way things could be or the

way things should be starts to scare us. Deep down, in the hidden parts of your heart and mind that only you and God can see, do you want to be made well?

Healing means changing. It's a blessing, but it's also a responsibility. "To whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Luke 12:48). When God heals us spiritually, He makes us capable of doing more. Of *being* more. Healing comes with the responsibility of putting that brand new potential to use.

Jesus told the man at Bethesda to take up his bed and walk, and the man did. Thirty-eight years of infirmity and atrophy, reversed in a single moment. But the blessing comes with a warning: "Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you" (John 5:14). The gift of walking physically came with the responsibility of walking spiritually.

How long has it been since God gave you the use of your legs? How long has it been since He led you to the straight and narrow path and pointed you toward salvation?

How far have you come in that time?

Probably not as far as you'd like. I know I haven't. I can see the path stretching on before me, and behind me I can see all the obstacles that have slowed me down—many of them of my own devising. Jesus wasn't exaggerating when He said that the road we're walking is narrow and difficult. But He also wasn't exaggerating when He said it was worth walking—that at the end of that journey is a crown and a future worth striving toward.

Do you want to be made well?

Then take up your bed and walk. There's a long road ahead.

Until next time,

Jeremy

THE GAP

JUNE 2, 2017

So often, Pentecost feels to me like the last ellipsis before we trail off into deafening silence. We have this meaningful, tangible build-up to Passover, then right into Unleavened Bread, then we pause for a bit, then Pentecost, and then...

And then nothing. For a while, at least. We're left with a gap between what is and what will be. An impassable chasm between what's been fulfilled and what we're still longing for. And the temptation is the same as it always is:

Wait. Get busy with other things, put God's plan on the backburner. Tabernacles will be here before we know it, and there are plenty of other things to busy ourselves with in the meantime.

Except the gap isn't a reprieve, is it? It isn't permission to take a break. It's a reminder, and it has a message for us, just like the feast days do:

A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas, and said to them, "Do business till I come."

(Luke 19:12-13)

Do business, Christ tells us. Get busy with *My things*, He says.

Yes, there are things in this life that deserve our attention—but we still have a job to be doing in the gap. Christianity is not a passive thing; it takes *doing*, not just *being*.

When our Nobleman went to receive His Kingdom, what did He deliver to us?

But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, "Where are You going?" But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send [it] to you.

(John 16:5-7)

The Holy Spirit. Not a mina for us to bury in the ground—a mina for us to use. To do business with till He comes.

What did the nobleman in the parable expect to hear when he returned? "Master, your mina has earned ten minas," and, "Master, your mina has earned five minas" (Luke 19:16, 18). He expected to see growth. Improvement. He

equipped his servants to end with more than they started with.

What about our Nobleman? What does He expect to hear upon His return?

What about, "Master, Your Spirit has produced peace"?

What about, "Master, Your Spirit has produced gentleness and love"?

What about, "Master, Your Spirit has produced patience, self-control, and joy"?

If we sit on our hands during the gap, we won't be able to say that. We'll only be able to say what the wicked and lazy servant said: "Master, here is your Spirit, which I have kept put away."

Translation: I didn't do anything with it. I didn't use it to make a difference. I didn't use it to grow to be more like You. I kept it safe.

Protected.

Useless.

We know how that story ends. We know those excuses don't work. God has equipped us to do some incredible, impossible things, to grow in ways we never imagined possible, and to *succeed*—"for God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7).

Power and love and a sound mind. That's not just flowery language—that's the truth. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). Here we are, chunks of clay brought to life by the Almighty God, walking around with His Spirit, "hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (2 Corinthians 4:8-10).

We're in the gap right now. We're going to be in the gap until Christ returns with His Kingdom and asks to see what we've done with what we've been given.

God gave His Spirit to you.

God.

Gave *His* Spirit.

To *you*.

What are you going to do with it in the gap?

Until next time,

Jeremy

TRUMPETS

THE KING IS COMING

SEPTEMBER 30, 2016

It's been a long time since Christ told the Church, "Surely I am coming quickly" (Revelation 22:20). Almost two millennia, actually.

And for those two millennia, Church members have had their eyes fixed on the state of the world, believing, *knowing*, that the return of Jesus Christ was right around the corner—probably within their lifetimes.

Except they were wrong. Paul, who wrote about "we who are alive and remain" (1 Thessalonians 4:17) at Christ's return has been dead and buried for centuries. Tens of thousands of faithful believers have lived and died since then—and "these all died in the faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13).

I think the usual question to ask here is, "If you knew Jesus was returning tomorrow, would that change how you live?" That's a good question. It's one we should think about. But it's not the one I want to ask. I'd rather ask this:

If you knew Jesus was *not* returning tomorrow, would that change how you live?

What if you knew—absolutely knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt—that He wasn't returning within the next ten years? The next hundred?

The next *thousand*?

Kicking into spiritual overdrive is easy when we feel like we have a deadline looming. It's so easy to sprint when we're certain the finish line is just ahead, but that's not a sustainable pace if the line is actually ten, twenty, eighty years ahead of us. Sprinting toward that is a surefire way to collapse from exhaustion; to burn ourselves out.

Christ gave the example of a master who left for a wedding, leaving his servants behind to manage his affairs. He said "Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. ... And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants" (Luke 12:35-36, 38).

Peter asked for clarification, and Christ elaborated on two types of servants: a "faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household" (Luke 12:42) and a wicked and lazy servant who "says in his heart, 'My master is

delaying his coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and be drunk" (Luke 12:45).

What stands out the most to me in this story is that the faithful servants were ready no matter when their master came back. It could have been the first watch, the second watch, or the third watch—their waists were girded and their lamps were burning.

This year on Sabbath Thoughts, we've been looking at some of the messages embedded in each of God's feasts. Passover tells us, "*Begin.*" Unleavened Bread reminds us, "*Keep going.*" Pentecost urges us, "*Do the work.*" And Trumpets? Trumpets promises us, "*The King is coming.*"

The danger with a mentality that says, "Live like Christ is returning tomorrow" is that Christ probably *isn't* returning tomorrow. For almost 2,000 years, He hasn't been returning tomorrow, because "I am coming quickly" means something different to God than it means to us (2 Peter 3:8). But that mindset encourages us to enter a spiritual sprint, attempting to cram decades of growth and study into a single night—only to find that Christ isn't returning tomorrow. Or the next day. Or the day after. And then?

"Scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:3-4).

I think it's important to ask ourselves, "If Christ returned tomorrow, would I be ready?" But I also think the "Live like Christ is returning tomorrow" mentality can set us up for spiritual exhaustion and disappointment when He doesn't return as soon as we're expecting. I'd like to propose an edit to that approach:

Live like Christ is returning.

Not tomorrow. Not a hundred years from now. Those numbers are irrelevant, because, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority" (Acts 1:7). Instead, let's focus on the truth Trumpets assures us of: Christ is returning. The King *is* coming. It doesn't matter if it's the first watch or the third watch—the simple fact that Christ is coming means *every day not spent preparing for the King's return is a wasted day.*

That's true today. That's true tomorrow. That's true every day from now until Christ's return, whether that's five years from now or five *thousand* years from now. What we need to be doing doesn't change. Who we need to be becoming doesn't change. Every day we're given is another opportunity to push toward those goals.

Therefore, "Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you

yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them. And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants" (Luke 12:35-38).

The King is coming. Are you preparing?

Until next time,
Jeremy

AS HE IS

SEPTEMBER 15, 2015

The hardest thing about being a Christian, in my experience, is being a Christian—that is, a physical being from a physical world trying to follow a spiritual God from a spiritual world. It's a battle—a constant, unending battle between the will of the flesh and the will of the Spirit.

But I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. Anyone who's ever accepted the calling of God and striven to do battle with spiritual enemies without and within knows that it isn't easy. Paul knew it, too. If you'd like a quick reference, go check out every epistle he ever wrote. To the Galatians, he wrote, "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another" (Galatians 5:17). To Timothy, he wrote, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (1 Timothy 1:15). To the Romans, he wrote, "I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. ... O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:21, 24).

Et cetera, et cetera.

On a physical level, on our own, it's impossible to even *begin* to understand the things of God. "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). We need God's Spirit working around us and then, eventually, within us before any of this starts making sense. Why? Because "the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God" (1 Corinthians 2:10).

But even then, it's not enough. Our carnal minds and human nature—the "old man," as Paul terms it—refuses to lie down and die, even after baptism. It's a fight. Day in and day out, it's a struggle to yield to God's way and resist our natural inclinations.

The seventh trumpet is going to change all of that.

It'll happen "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet ... and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:52-53). And not just "changed." Not just "made different." John writes, "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2).

Let that sink in for a minute.

We will see God as He is, because we *shall be like Him*.

At the seventh trumpet, we will be completely and fully born into the family of God, *and we shall be like Him*. God, "dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see" (1 Timothy 6:16). God, who sits upon a throne of sapphire with "the appearance of fire with brightness all around" (Ezekiel 1:27). God, whose eyes burn like fire and whose feet shine like brass and whose voice sounds with all the force of roaring waters, whose face shines like the sun in its strength (Revelation 1:14-16), *that God is the God we will be made to be like*.

Paul asked, "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" and in his next breath answered his own question: "I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25).

At the seventh trumpet, the pulls of the flesh stop pulling. At the seventh trumpet, the old man is destroyed once and for all. At the seventh trumpet, the mind that is in Christ completely becomes the mind that is in us, and we will see God as He is.

As our Father. As our King. As our Redeemer and Creator. As *El Shaddai*, Almighty God, Lord of all—the One who took away the filthy rags of our own righteousness and clothed us in His mercy and forgiveness, who shaped us from the dust of the ground and then welcomed us into His eternal family.

In this life, we will never be completely free of the tug-of-war between flesh and spirit. As long as we're flesh and blood, there's no way around it—but today, the Feast of Trumpets, pictures the day when that internal war is finished—not because of our own might or our own strength, but because of God's grace and God's mercy.

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

Therefore comfort one another with these words.

(1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

A joyous Feast of Trumpets to you all.

Until next time,
Jeremy

REVERSE-ENGINEERING YOUR DESTINY

SEPTEMBER 22, 2017

The seventh trumpet.

It's the moment everything changes. It's the reason "the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now" (Romans 8:22). It's the reason "we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body" (Romans 8:23).

As Christians, that trumpet will be the moment that defines us for eternity. As our Lord and Savior descends through the skies and voices from heaven proclaim Him King of Kings and Lord of Lords, we'll either rise up to meet Him...

...or we won't.

Those are the possibilities. There isn't a third option. If our minds are open to God's truth and we've accepted His calling, then this is our chance. *This* is our day of salvation. We don't get to scoot into the second resurrection with the rest of the world and try again in round two. "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more" (Luke 12:48).

We've been given much. How we live now—*right* now, today and every day that follows—determines what happens to us when Christ returns.

Do you want to be there on that day? Do you want to be made fully and completely into the image of God Himself? Do you want to live forever as a child of God?

Then reverse engineer it.

Start with the finished product—the moment you want to get to—and work backwards. The seventh trumpet sounds, and you're transformed into a spirit being.

How did you get there?

Step backward in time. What kind of life did you live? What kind of choices did you have to make along the way? What did you value, and what did you let go of? What did you have to overcome? What aspects of your character changed—and what stayed the same?

Take another step backward. How did those changes happen? What habits did you develop or break that helped lead to them? Who influenced you—and who did you have to step away from so they'd stop influencing you? What sacrifices did you have to get used to making, and what things were so important that you

vowed to never let go of them?

Keep stepping backward from your future until you get to the present, then connect the dots.

God's Word lays out the causes and effects pretty clearly. It explains how to fail and how to succeed. It's our compass and our map, and God's Spirit helps it all make sense. Using the tools we've been given, we chart our way to the finish line, plotting out a life that leads to hearing, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21).

Or we can ignore all that, let life push and pull us wherever it wants, and let the finish line catch us unprepared and unaware.

Because the seventh trumpet *is* going to sound. We *will* be judged based on how we live our lives in the days and years to come. What we have right now is the opportunity to course-correct, to take a closer look at the direction we're heading and to make sure it's the direction we *want* to be heading.

This isn't just a thought exercise.

Your destiny hangs in the balance.

If you want to make sure it's a good one, now's the time to reverse engineer it.

Until next time,

Jeremy

ATONEMENT

REMEMBER YOUR CREATOR

OCTOBER 11, 2016

Six thousand years of human history. Six thousand years of empires rising to the height of power, of discoveries allowing us to harness the laws of the universe for our own purposes, and of civilizations producing wonders that leave us in awe of what mankind is capable of accomplishing. Six thousand years of that, and all it takes is 24 hours without food to rob us of our strength and reduce us to almost nothing.

The human race has accomplished some incredible things, but at the end of the day, what are we?

"All flesh is grass" (Isaiah 40:6), says God. "Certainly every man at his best state is but vapor" (Psalm 39:5), muses David. "All are from the dust," writes a despondent Solomon, "and all return to dust" (Ecclesiastes 3:20).

Grass. Vapor. Dust. For everything our race has accomplished, our lifespans are blips on eternity's radar—and the Bible makes that clear.

And yet, even then, it's easy to forget. Nebuchadnezzar forgot when he praised himself for building Babylon "by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty" (Daniel 4:30). The rich man forgot when he told himself, "You have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry" (Luke 12:9). The entire nation of Israel forgot once they found themselves in "large and beautiful cities which you did not build, houses full of all good things, which you did not fill" (Deuteronomy 6:10-11). And if we're honest, sometimes we forget, too.

Atonement cuts through the noise and reminds us. It doesn't matter how much money we have; it doesn't matter what we've accomplished; it doesn't matter who we are—24 hours without food or water reminds us that we are *dust*. We came from it; we're going back to it.

Grass. Vapor. Dust. Moments in time. That's all.

Atonement also reminds us of a momentous step in God's plan: the step that deals with the angel who thought he deserved to be God. Since the Garden of Eden, Satan has been actively deceiving the human race (Revelation 12:9), masquerading as "the god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4).

But the Bible tells us that Satan wasn't always this way. He was created to be "the anointed cherub who covers," "the seal of perfection" (Ezekiel 28:12, 14). When Satan was created, he was absolutely splendid—one of the crowning

jewels of God's creation.

And then he forgot. Satan forgot who he was—and *what* he was. God laments, "Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor" (Ezekiel 28:17). Satan, the enemy of God's people, the deceiver, the serpent of old, the accuser of our brethren, the devil himself was once a favored angel of God. But it wasn't enough. He wanted more. He *deserved* more—at least, that's what he believed in his increasingly twisted mind.

"I will ascend into heaven," he told himself, "I will exalt my throne above the stars of God ... I will be like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:13, 14). God responds, "Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the lowest depths of the Pit" (Isaiah 14:15).

Atonement is the day that sees Satan bound for a thousand years, powerless to influence mankind or interfere with God's plan. It's also a day with a clear message for God's people—a message that Satan failed to act on:

Remember your Creator.

Pride. Pride is what ultimately brought Satan down, and it's what can ultimately bring us down, too. God's calling doesn't make us immune to pride, either. Quite the opposite—that calling gives us a whole new list of things to be proudful *about*.

After all, out of the whole world, God picked *us* as His firstfruits. We know the plan of God, we have the Spirit of God, and we know the right way to live. We're special. The Bible even says so. We're "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people" (1 Peter 2:9).

Satan wanted to be like God. We *will* be like God, "for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2). Behind us is the Feast of Trumpets, which reminds us that we will be transformed into eternal members of the God family. Ahead of us is the Feast of Tabernacles, which reminds us that we will reign with Christ for a thousand years. "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). We have every reason to feel a sense of pride at who we are and what we'll become—that is, until we step back and look at the bigger picture.

God didn't place Atonement between Trumpets and Tabernacles by accident.

Yes, we are His own special people, but we weren't always. We were called out of darkness. We were once not a people. We had once not obtained mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10).

What changed? Was it us? Did we somehow earn the right to be God's people? Did we become entitled to His light and mercy?

No. We were dead. We were worthless. "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). Why? Because we deserved it? "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Our calling, God's Spirit, our future in the Kingdom of God—it's a gift, every bit of it. An unearnable, undeservable gift extended to us because of God's goodness and not our own. Paul calls it "this grace in which we stand" (Romans 5:2).

Remember your Creator.

Remembering our Creator requires something of us. It requires acknowledging that we were *created*. We exist because God said so. That's the key; that's what Satan forgot and we must remember. We are grass. Vapor. Dust. Dust with the potential to join the family of God, sure, but dust all the same: for "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

When our eyes were opened to the truth, that was of God and not of us. When we obtain forgiveness for our sins, that's of God and not of us. When Christ returns and welcomes us into His family as His brothers and sisters, it will be of God and not of us. And when our adversary is at long last chained and bound and removed from the affairs of men, *it will be of God and not of us*.

The gift we have is not earned, "lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:9). We have work to do—work God expects of us—but the most important things cannot be earned. They've already been given. "Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:7-8), for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

Atonement pictures the day our battle with Satan finally comes to an end—but it's also a day for us to bow our heads and bend our knees before the God who makes that end possible.

All flesh is grass,
And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
Because the breath of the Lord blows upon it;

Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.
(Isaiah 40:6-8)

Remember your Creator.

Until next time,
Jeremy

THE DEVIL DIDN'T MAKE YOU DO IT

SEPTEMBER 22, 2015

Here's a fun thought experiment: Where do you think the human race would be today if Satan hadn't been in the garden with Adam and Eve? The third chapter of Genesis would certainly be different, but *how* different?

I don't know. I'm not that smart, and I don't suppose anyone but God is. But it's still a question worth thinking about, because couched within it is another, far more important question:

How responsible is Satan for our sins?

The first question is ultimately a moot point—interesting to think about, but largely inconsequential. Satan was in the garden and no amount of hypothesizing will change that. That last question, though, *does* matter. At the end of the day, who's responsible for your sins: you or Satan?

I think we know the answer to that question. If Satan is ultimately responsible, then the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was superfluous, because He would have been paying for sins that weren't really our fault. But when James writes about sin, what does he say?

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

(James 1:14-16)

Not a word about Satan. Not a word about the devil being to blame for our poor decisions. James instead points the finger squarely at our own desires. At us. The ultimate problem isn't Satan, it's us. Our hearts. Our desires. Our lusts.

In other words, we *don't need Satan to sin*.

Think about that.

Back in the garden, our good friend Eve saw that the forbidden tree was "good for food ... pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise" (Genesis 3:6). Sure, Satan pointed it out to her. Sure, he made a compelling sales pitch. But Eve had eyes. She didn't need Satan to see the tree. It had "knowledge of good and evil" right there in its name. Do you think she wasn't already a little curious? Do you think she wasn't already intrigued? Satan didn't twist Eve's arm; he played on a desire that was (at least partially) already there.

That's what Satan does. He markets evil. Makes it look appealing. He can't force you to buy it, but he sure knows how to make it hard not to look. "And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). Satan used to *be* an angel of light, and he still knows how to put on that costume and pretend. He knows how to take something that's rotten at the core and dress it up to make it look wholesome and good.

(Side note: Who convinced Lucifer to become Satan? No one. No one convinced God's anointed covering cherub to become the most wicked being in the universe. He did that all on his own. He was led away by his own desires—and now he actively works to lead *us* away with *our* own desires as well.)

When an angel of God descends to lock Satan in the bottomless pit for a thousand years (Revelation 20:13), the world will be rid of a lot of things. It will be rid of an ancient, evil enemy—"that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world" (Revelation 12:9). It will be rid of masterfully crafted deceptions, illusions, and smokescreens. It will be rid of a malicious antagonist eager to derail the plan of God.

But it won't be rid of sin. Not right away. Even with sin's greatest salesman locked up for a thousand years, the human heart will still find the road to wickedness. In the book of Zechariah, God prophesies that during Christ's Millennial reign, some nations will stubbornly refuse to keep the Feast of Tabernacles (Zechariah 14:9). Even without Satan to influence them, these nations will openly defy the God of the universe while following after their own desires.

So why does the binding of Satan matter? Why does it factor so heavily in the plan of God?

Satan might not be the source of sin, but he is its greatest champion. He devotes his energies to promoting rebellion, warping perspectives, muddying the waters, vilifying God and attacking His people. Before the world can ever handle a conversation with God about what's *right*, the poster child for everything that's *wrong* has got to go.

Our 24-hour fast during Atonement helps us to remember that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4)—and the day itself pictures a time when the rest of the world will come to understand that, too. And I guess that's the real beauty of this day. It might not picture the day when all is made right with the world, but it certainly pictures the day we start heading in that direction.

Wishing you all a deep and meaningful Day of Atonement.

Until next time,

Jeremy

THE DAY WE WIN

OCTOBER 3, 2014

For roughly six thousand years, the human race has been embroiled in a bitter war with a ruthless enemy. It's a treacherous war, because most people don't believe he even exists—and many of those who do aren't fighting for the side they think. This enemy is crafty. He does not eat, because he does not grow hungry. He does not sleep, because he does not grow tired. He does not die, because he does not grow old—and he devotes the entirety of his warped genius toward our complete extinction.

He's been there since our beginning. When Eve cast her eyes upon the forbidden fruit, he was there. When Cain picked up that rock and beat the life out of his brother, he was there. When Nimrod and his followers built a tower in defiance of God, he was there. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, when the apostles were martyred, when the Church of God was persecuted and defamed—pick the moment, he was there. He operates in the background, on a spiritual plane we can't comprehend using weapons we struggle to perceive—but he's there. Influencing. Manipulating. Intimidating. Corrupting. Deceiving. Perverting. Destroying.

The Bible calls him Satan. The adversary. He is the enemy of God's people, the accuser of our brethren, the fallen angel, the devouring lion, the cunning serpent, and the fiery dragon. He alone is responsible for more pain and suffering than any other being that has ever existed. And I don't have to give you examples, because you know. You know the kind of damage Satan can do because *you've seen it*. You've seen it in history books. You've seen it on the news when you turn on the TV. You've seen it in the lives of friends and family, and you've seen it in your own life and in your own heart. The most malicious being in the world has an intense desire to destroy you and everything you care about.

But it's okay. Why? Because of today. Because of the Day of Atonement.

Because today is the day *we win*. Today is the day *we beat the dragon*.

In the days of ancient Israel, Atonement was the day when the high priest would come before the ark of the covenant and make atonement for the sins of Israel (Leviticus 16:15-16). It was also the day when an azazel goat was selected to symbolically bear "all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions" (Leviticus 16:21) before being banished into the wilderness.

Today, we understand the Day of Atonement to picture a **monumental step in the plan of God**: the imprisonment of Satan. We know from the book of

Revelation that this day is coming—a day revealed to the apostle John in a vision, where he saw "an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished" (Revelation 20:1-3).

This is that day.

The Day of Atonement pictures a day in the future when Satan, the true azazel goat, will be held responsible for his innumerable crimes and sealed away for a thousand years of peace, the like of which the world has never seen. Satan, the fiery dragon and our perpetual foe, will be rendered impotent by the mighty hand of God and stripped of all his influence.

Our enemy will be defeated.

Things are tough right now. They're tough for everyone, and I see that more and more every time I talk with people. But let's not forget *why* they're tough—because Satan is running out of time, and he knows it. Every day that passes is one less day for him to harass God's people, so he's eager to do everything he can with the time he has. That means turning up the pressure and pushing the envelope as far as God will allow him in this present age.

But it can't go on forever. It has to end, and it is *going* to end when that angel descends from heaven and locks him away for a thousand years. And that's part of the message of Atonement: *That day is coming*. Atonement isn't just the day where we don't eat for 24 hours. It isn't just the day we have to get through to get to the Feast of Tabernacles. It's a day that pictures all of humanity being freed from the clutches of a being determined to ruin their lives and their future. It's a day when this terrible war will end and we will find the rest for which we have been longing. It's a day integral to the entire plan of God.

So what about right now? What about this moment, when Satan is still unbound and our fight is still unfinished?

We take a hint from the apostle Paul, who reminds us, "now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:11-12).

One day, this war will end. But today, in this moment, it still rages on. We're still fighting, and we will be until we see our enemy locked away. So take up your armor, take up your swords, and fight the good fight.

Onward, Christian soldiers.

Until next time,

Jeremy

IN WHATEVER STATE I AM

SEPTEMBER 29, 2017

I had my first fast when I was six years old. I remember it because of how excited I was leading up to it. I *wanted* to do this. I was going to do a Special Thing that only grownups did. For a six-year-old, that's like sneaking into some highbrow club where you know you don't belong and having everyone treat you like an actual member.

I also remember it because I spent most of services lying on the floor, my eyes drifting lazily across our brightly colored quilt, quietly wondering if this is what death felt like. (That was, coincidentally, also the day I learned that not all Special Things that grownups do are actually Fun Special Things. But I digress.)

A lot of things have changed since then, but my inability to gracefully make it through the 24 hours of Atonement has not. On the outside, I might look like a grown adult sitting respectfully through services, but on the inside I'm that same six-year-old boy sprawling across a quilt, wondering how my body's internal systems can possibly function for five more *minutes*, much less another five *hours*.

(Look, I like food, okay?)

It's a tough day for me. The minute the sun dips below that horizon and the countdown begins, my stomach starts sending red alerts to my brain—alerts that inform me, in no particular order:

1. I'm thirsty.
2. I'm starving.
3. This is the end of all things.

Atonement is, of course, packed with meaning. It's a day God commands us to "humble your souls" (Leviticus 16:29, NASB)—a day we can reflect very literally on Christ's assertion that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

It's a day that reminds us (Leviticus 16:21-22) of a moment the world needs desperately—the binding of our enemy, "that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan" (Revelation 20:2). For a thousand years, he'll be powerless to deceive the world; powerless to muddy the waters and lure mankind onto a course of self-destruction.

It's also a day that reminds us again about the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and what it cost to reconcile us (and, one day, the whole world) to God the Father

(Leviticus 16:15-16).

It's a day of many meanings—but as the day of Atonement ticks onward and I will my eyes to stay open and my stomach to be silent, I think this feast of God carries another message for me, courtesy of the apostle Paul:

"I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content" (Philippians 4:11).

Content.

That's a tough one for me. I tend to *want*. No matter the subject, it's easy for me to imagine how something could be bigger, better, more exciting. Faced with the difference between reality and my own imaginings, I develop an itch that I have no means to scratch. What I have—which was fine just moments ago—becomes "not as good as it could be." What should be a blessing becomes depressing as I switch my focus from what I've gained and onto what's missing. (For those of you keeping track at home, that's pretty much the exact opposite of contentment.)

Atonement is a day I generally find myself wondering not *whether* I should eat a whole pizza after sundown, but *how many* whole pizzas I should eat after sundown. I try to study, I try to focus, but the rumblings of my stomach are a jarring and continual reminder of what's missing.

And then along comes Paul, talking about contentment, pulling the rug out from under my feet. Paul, who had been through shipwrecks and beatings, who had been stoned and imprisoned and insulted and ridiculed—that Paul told the Philippians, "I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need" (Philippians 4:12).

Contentment has nothing to do with fulfilling our needs and desires. Being content in whatever state we are means being content even when those needs and desires are decidedly *not* being met.

And that's hard.

It's hard whether those needs and desires include two extra-large pizzas or a burning desire to not be floating in the Adriatic Sea, clinging to bits of a broken ship while soldiers talk openly about killing you (Acts 27:27, 41-44). (To be fair, one of those is definitely a more trying situation than the other, but I'm sure being shipwrecked is pretty stressful too.) But Paul had a secret to his contentment:

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13), he said.

For Paul, it was never about the moment—good or bad, blessing or trial, his focus was on “the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14). When he looked at the things in his life that were missing, the things he'd lost along the way, he declared, “I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8).

The one thing in Paul's life that truly mattered was his destination. He could be content during the shipwrecks—real or metaphorical—because he knew where he was heading.

Contentment as a theme is woven into the DNA of Atonement. Of the two goats in Leviticus 16, one of them pictures a being who “said in [his] heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God ... I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High’” (Isaiah 14:13-14).

The other goat pictures a Being “who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:23-24).

Even as “the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty” (Ezekiel 28:12), Satan was not content. He saw only what He didn't have—the very throne of God. That discontentment corrupted him and shaped him into the adversary of God and His people.

Jesus, on the other hand, “made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:7-8).

When we fast, we remember who and what we are before God. We “humble our souls” as we realize how dependent we are on Him in every aspect of our lives. And as we do that, we have the perfect opportunity to practice contentment—to pause, in the middle of our hunger and discomfort, and give God thanks for who He is and what He's doing in our lives.

In whatever state we are, God's promises give us a lot to be content about.

Until next time,
Jeremy

TABERNACLES

LOOK AHEAD

OCTOBER 21, 2016

There are so many ways to lose sight of what matters. It can be the stack of bills that keeps piling up, even though you're not sure how you're going to pay them. It can be the semester of tough assignments looming ahead of you—assignments guaranteed to eat up your time and energy. It can be issues at work or issues at home. It can be issues with dear friends or issues with total strangers. It can even be things we *like*—relationships and hobbies we enjoy that begin to demand more and more of our time and attention.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus lumped all these things together under the umbrella of "the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things" (Mark 4:19). That umbrella includes things that aren't necessarily wrong in and of themselves—there's nothing wrong with seeking to do well in school or providing for our families or maintaining relationships or pursuing hobbies, but those are all things Satan can employ to shift our attention away from the bigger picture. They can all become, as Christ warned, thorns which "choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful" (Mark 4:19).

The Word of God requires our time and attention too, but it rarely feels so urgent. There's always something more pressing, always a reason to say, "I'll get to it later."

The Feast of Trumpets reminds us that there comes a point in time when "later" is no longer an option. The Feast of Tabernacles, on the other hand, shows us the bigger picture and asks, "Are the cares of this world really so important? Are they really worth losing sight of all of this?"

Because "all of this" is truly incredible. For seven days, we're commanded to rejoice before the Lord our God, setting aside "the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things" and fixing our eyes on the world that's coming—a world where

|| The desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose;
|| It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice,
|| Even with joy and singing.

|| (Isaiah 35:1-2)

The world of Christ's millennial reign will be one where

|| Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,

Neither shall they learn war anymore.
But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree,
And no one shall make them afraid.

(Micah 4:3-4)

and where, most importantly,

The earth will be filled
With the knowledge of the glory of the LORD,
As the waters cover the sea.

(Habakkuk 2:14)

That's not the world we live in today. That's so very, very far from the world we live in today. But it's coming. Slowly but surely, that impossible world is coming, and we get to *be part of it*.

So long as we don't lose our focus.

"No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

But it's so *easy* to look back. It's so easy for the cares of this world to rise up and choke the fruit of God's Word. And that's one of the messages Tabernacles spells out for us: *Look ahead*. Yes, deal with the bills. Yes, deal with the school assignments. Yes, deal with the thousand little fires that spring up daily and require our attention—but deal with them knowing what's coming. Deal with them knowing where they fit in the bigger picture. Deal with them knowing that this world and everything in it is temporary and fading, and that something so *much better* is on the horizon.

The Feast of Tabernacles doesn't encourage us to neglect our responsibilities in this life, but it does ask us to step back and reevaluate what we're allowing to dominate our time and our focus. It asks us to look at our day-to-day lives and decide what our priorities really are. The most incredible future is on its way, and you and I have been invited to be part of it.

Hand to the plow.

Eyes on the goal.

Look ahead.

Until next time,

Jeremy

HIRAETH FOR THE KINGDOM

AUGUST 14, 2015

One of my favorite things about foreign languages are the words that don't translate well. A crêpe, for instance, is not what most Americans call a pancake. It's similar, for sure, but not the same. If a flapjack house gave you a plate full of crêpes, you'd notice the difference—and there's a reason you never hear anyone raving about *Pancake Suzette*. They're different words, each with their own distinct meanings and subtleties.

"Hiraeth" is another one of those untranslatable words, this time from the Welsh. It's a concept that doesn't exist in the English language, at least not within a single word. The closest we have is "homesickness," but hiraeth isn't homesickness—not any more than a crêpe is a flapjack. In *The Paris Review*, Pamela Petro [describes it as](#) the "difference between hardwood and laminate. Homesickness is hiraeth-lite."

The long and storied culture of the Welsh made a word like hiraeth inevitable. In 1282, the burgeoning English empire conquered a people known as the Cymry, acquiring its very first colony and stripping away Cymry independence. Even the given name of "Wales" was a reminder of subjugation—roughly translated, it means "Place of the Others." The Cymry, now called "the Welsh," were to be outsiders, foreigners in their own country. There could be no returning to the country of the Cymry. They could return to their houses, but their country, their identity, was gone. All they had left was the hope that the heroes of their past would one day return and restore their country to what it once was.

Petro goes on to say,

Hiraeth is a protest. If it must be called homesickness, it's a sickness come on—in Welsh ailments come onto you, as if hopping aboard ship—because home isn't the place it should have been. It's an unattainable longing for a place, a person, a figure, even a national history that may never have actually existed. To feel hiraeth is to feel a deep incompleteness and recognize it as familiar.

What a word.

We're fond of calling Hebrews 11 the faith chapter, and rightly so. But I think it's something else, too—something we've never quite had the word for. It's filled with stories of faithful men and women who accomplished impossible things in impossible ways, who willingly sacrificed their lives when it came time

to lay them down. Why?

For what purpose?

The verses tell us, over and over. Abraham dwelt in his tents as a stranger, "for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). Moses gave up a life of royalty, "esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward" (Hebrews 11:26). Others "were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented" (Hebrews 11:35-37). Why?

Why?

Because of faith, yes, but faith in what? Where were they looking?

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

(Hebrews 11:13-16)

Hebrews 11 is the hiraeth chapter. It always has been. Faith is one thing; faith that gives you the courage to suffer and die is something else entirely. I have faith that when I go to the ATM, I can withdraw money from my bank account—but I have no desire to die because of that faith. The stories of Hebrews 11 are stories of hiraeth—stories of men and women who saw their homeland, clear as day, more real than the world around them. They saw the Kingdom.

Can you?

If there was ever a man with a good reason to lose sight of the Kingdom, it was Paul. Paul, who stood at the receiving end of a laundry list of injustices and abuses. Paul, who tells us he was "in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I

was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness" (2 Corinthians 11:23-27).

Three shipwrecks. Three shipwrecks is about two shipwrecks past the point where most people start getting uncomfortable with the idea of boats. But not Paul. Paul had the faith to see the Kingdom and the hiraeth to remind him how desperately he longed to be there. His gaze was fixed on it. He could see it. He could see it while he was floating hopelessly on the sea. He could see it while his own countrymen pummeled him with rods and whips and stones. He could see it when he was hungry, when he was exhausted, when he was cold and naked and abandoned.

Years later, writing to the Philippians, Paul said, "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need" (Philippians 4:11-12, English Standard Version).

What a strange concept. A secret to dealing not only with adversity, but with abundance as well—and Paul had learned it. He shares that secret in the very next verse: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

That's great. That's extremely encouraging. But the question we need to be asking of this verse is "Why?" Why did Paul even *want* to be doing all things through Christ who strengthened him? Why didn't Paul look back on his life and say, "You know what, three shipwrecks are three shipwrecks too many; I'm done doing all things. Let someone else worry about them"?

Hiraeth, that's why.

Paul saw it. Every day, he saw the Kingdom. Every day, he knew it was where he was headed and he knew it was where he wanted to be. The secret to dealing with abundance and adversity is understanding that both those conditions can distract a Christian from what really matters. How can we seek the Kingdom when we're struggling to feed our family? And how can we care about the Kingdom when we already have every material thing we could possibly need?

The answer to both questions is the same: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Can you see it?

It's not about "solving" or "fixing" adversity and abundance. It's about accepting strength from Christ to look past both those trees and start paying attention to the forest. It's about fixing our eyes on the one thing that truly matters and then pushing toward it with all of our might and with all of God's might.

Can you see it?

Earlier in Philippians—an epistle Paul authored under house arrest—he explained, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ... For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better" (Philippians 1:21, 23). There wasn't a doubt in his mind—he was here on earth to do a job, to serve God and His people, but Paul's ultimate desire was to "depart and be with Christ."

Paul knew that, after his death, his next conscious moment would be with his Lord and Savior. The God he so zealously served would raise him from the dead, transformed in a way that defies imagination, and *he would be home*.

Can.

You.

See it?

For Paul, that moment is still coming, just as it's still coming for all of God's faithful servants, "God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us" (Hebrews 11:40).

Brethren, *can you see it?*

In Paul's very last epistle, written shortly before his execution, Paul left Timothy (and all of us) with these words:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.

(2 Timothy 4:6-8)

These are not the words of a man unsure of his destiny or struggling to come to terms with death. These are the words of a man of faith and zeal and hiraeth. At the moment he penned those words, Paul was the closest he had ever been to the Kingdom of God. All the beatings, the shipwrecks, the scourgings, the

persecutions—every loss he suffered, he chose to "count as rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8). He knew where he was going and he knew what mattered—and it certainly wasn't the rubbish all around him.

Paul saw his homeland, and he longed for it.

Do you?

Until next time,
Jeremy

THE CULTURE OF THE KINGDOM

OCTOBER 6, 2012

To say that the northern and southern regions of the United States have their differences is an understatement.

And the more I think about it, to call it an understatement is itself an understatement. As a Yankee expatriate having taken up residence in southern Virginia, I can confirm that the two locations are like night and day—and if you've ever done any traveling between them, you know it too.

We talk different down here. I can count on one hand the number of times I've heard someone up north say "y'all," and I'm not entirely sure I'd even need to use any fingers. We eat different, too. Ever had lunch at Bojangles? I guarantee you it wasn't in New England, because no one north of the Mason-Dixie Line has any idea what to do with a biscuit. The south even has its own food pyramid—it looks just like the one most people know, except there's another tier right below "Bread and Grains." It's called "Fried."

But I do love it in Virginia. It took some getting used to, and there was definitely a little culture shock at first. (My mother-in-law likes to tease me about the first time I saw all my in-laws-to-be and their kids in one room—evidently I just sat and stared, wide-eyed, for a good while.) There are notable differences in how people act, think, and associate with each other, and all of them took some level of self-adjustment for me to get used to.

One of the things I've learned in traveling between these two regions is that these two cultures aren't tied to state borders. People in North Carolina still say "y'all." People in Rhode Island still root for the Boston Red Sox and say "wicked awesome" and have a terrifyingly unhealthy love for Dunkin' Donuts. It's not so much a matter of being a Virginian or a Massachusettsian as it is about being a southerner or a Yankee.

It's a point worth noting—it's not where you live that determines who you are. On the contrary, it's your culture that helps shape your identity. I've lived in Virginia for a year now, but I still get called a Yankee from time to time—it's not difficult for natives to pick me out of a crowd, since I talk, think, and act differently than they're used to. They can see that my culture is different than theirs. In the same way, if someone from where I live now moved up north, they wouldn't stop being a southerner. They would still like fried chicken; they would still say "y'all"; they would still want a front porch with a rocking chair. Their culture wouldn't change just because their location did.

Merriam-Webster lists one definition of culture as "the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization." In other words, culture defines a broad group of people in terms of what they have in common.

Brothers and sisters, we have been called to take on a new culture—and it goes far beyond the sports teams we root for and the meals we enjoy. We have been called to adopt the culture of a Kingdom that the world at large is ignorant of. Beyond that, we are called to be *ambassadors* of this Kingdom, representing through our actions and words what that Kingdom is like.

What do the people who know you see you as? They'll no doubt pick up on your regional culture simply by the things you say and do. But is that all they pick up on?

The Bible describes the people of God as "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13), passing through this world on their way to what they consider their true homeland—not the place where they were born and raised or started a family, but the very Kingdom of God. So when people get to know you, do they recognize that?

I don't have to tell people in Virginia I'm not from around there. They already know. I stick out like a sore thumb because of my northern background. In a spiritual sense, are we sticking out like sore thumbs? Is it easy for the world around us to realize that we aren't from around here?

Because we shouldn't fit in. It shouldn't be difficult for someone in the world to understand that we don't fit in with the world because *our culture isn't from this world*. If a darkened world blinded by Satan's continual influence sees us as one of their own, what does that say about our culture? About *who we are*?

The Bible is clear about who the people of God are. They're the Kingdom-seekers (Matthew 6:33). They're the ones who have received God's Spirit and are keeping His judgments and statutes (Ezekiel 11:19-20). They seek to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God (Micah 6:8). They understand that the love of God and the love of others are the twin pillars on which the entire law and plan of God are built (Matthew 22:35-40).

The people of God stand out from the world, because by definition they must. They seek to take on the culture of the Kingdom of their God because *that is their homeland*. As I write this, God's followers around the world are observing the Feast of Tabernacles, days that picture the time when the whole world will be living God's way under His perfect leadership.

If we want to be part of that Kingdom, then we, the called and chosen, ought

to define ourselves first and foremost by the culture of that Kingdom. And we ought to stick out like Yankees in the south.

Until next time,

Jeremy

JUST PASSING THROUGH

SEPTEMBER 25, 2015

The Feast of Tabernacles is almost here.

Are you excited?

Of course you are. That was a silly question. I don't know that I've ever met someone *not* excited about the Feast. So here's a better question:

Why are you excited?

Is it because of the site you'll be attending? The hotel where you'll be staying? The people you'll see or the things you'll do or the gifts you'll buy?

Or is it because of *what the Feast pictures*?

Don't get me wrong. The other things are fantastic, and God designed the Feast so that we could enjoy them in a special way for one week. The mindset prescribed for God's feast days is, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared" (Nehemiah 8:10). We're told to take our second tithe and spend it on "whatever your heart desires" (Deuteronomy 14:26). We're told, in no uncertain terms, to "*rejoice* before the LORD your God for seven days" (Leviticus 23:40, emphasis added). The Feast of Tabernacles is to be a feast of gladness, of rejoicing and celebrating as we enjoy the things we could never afford to do the rest of the year.

But it's not *just* that. If the Feast is only those things to us, then it's just a vacation—a very nice vacation, but a vacation all the same.

The Feast of Tabernacles, like all God's other holy days, serves as a reminder, pointing our focus back to God's plan for us. God told Israel that the temporary dwellings of this feast would remind all who kept it "that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 23:43).

Israel had been brought out of slavery from a land where they had absolutely nothing and led into a Promised Land where God gave them absolutely *everything*—"large and beautiful cities which you did not build, houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant" (Deuteronomy 16:10-11). The booths of Tabernacles were to serve as a reminder of where God had taken the Israelites *from* and where He had taken them *to*.

For us, Tabernacles is a little different. You and I, we're still in the wilderness. God rescued us from bondage to sin (John 8:34-36), but we're not in the Promised Land yet. That's still ahead of us. That's in the future. So when you

check into your hotel room or your campsite (maybe you already have!), remember where God is directing our attention. This life—this world that seems so real to us—is temporary. We're just passing through; strangers and pilgrims on our way to something better. For a week—one glorious, fleeting week—we're getting a taste of that "something better." Then it's back to the pilgrimage. Back to the temporary, the ephemeral, the trudge through the wilderness.

The Feast of Tabernacles gives us hope. A vision. A reminder of where we are and where we're going and why it matters. So yes, enjoy the Feast! Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet. Spend your second tithe on the things your heart desires. *Rejoice* before the Lord your God—but remember *why* you're doing all these things. God doesn't command us to keep this feast because His plan hinges on us having a week-long vacation every year. He gives us the Feast of Tabernacles to keep us focused on the prize: an age, at long last, of peace. An age where the resurrected saints (that's us) will reign with Christ a thousand years (Revelation 20:4), where the human race will have Godly teachers (us again) who cannot be ignored (Isaiah 30:20-21), where the streets will be filled with boys and girls playing without fear (Zechariah 8:5), where the wolf and the lamb will peacefully coexist while a whole contingent of formerly dangerous animals will follow harmlessly behind a little child (Isaiah 11:6-9).

That's the world the Feast of Tabernacles pictures, and it's a world we need more desperately with every passing day. We're awash in news stories that add to a growing list of tragedies, depravities, perversities, and problems that mankind remains unable to solve.

Tabernacles is a promise. As the world grows darker, God's truth shines that much brighter. Tabernacles fixes our gaze on the light instead of the darkness, on the hope instead of the despair, and on the eternal instead of the ephemeral.

The Feast of Tabernacles is almost here.

Are you excited?

Until next time,
Jeremy

LESS TIME THAN YOU THINK

OCTOBER 6, 2017

Every year, I think I have more time. Pentecost ends, and the Feast of Trumpets seems an impossibly long way away. The days tick on, slowly at first, one after the other, not a single holy day in sight. Ahead of us is an endless expanse of average, everyday life.

Then something happens. I don't know what, but *something*. The fall festivals start heading toward us at full speed, like a torpedo launched at an unsuspecting frigate. Days move faster, the clock doesn't wait as long before clicking over to the next second, and then...

And then we're here. Trumpets has come and gone. Atonement is over, too. We're in the middle of the Feast of Tabernacles, and even that's starting to pick up momentum. The Last Great Day will be here soon, and then we'll be back to the waiting, back to the feeling of "forever away."

I guess that's part of the lesson. We think we have time. We think it's a million miles away.

And then it's here.

I'm a big proponent of not getting overambitious when it comes to anticipating Christ's return. I think the Church has a long history (all the way back to Paul) of announcing it as right around the corner, only to find ourselves a few decades (or centuries) (or millennia) premature.

But I also think that if the holy day season that pictures the return of Christ to earth keeps cycling around faster than we expect it to, maybe there's something to that. Maybe there's a message we're supposed to be hearing:

You have less time than you think.

The future pictured by these fall festivals is going to hit the world like a whirlwind. The Son of Man will come like lightning, Satan will be bound, and we'll be reigning with Christ for a thousand years. So much packed into a handful of moments that seem impossibly far away...

Now is the time to prepare.

Not later. Not tomorrow. Now.

How far away does next year's Feast of Tabernacles feel right now? A small eternity, right? We're still not even done with *this* year's.

But it's coming. Around this time next year, you'll be looking back again, wondering where all the time went and how the holy days got here so quickly again.

Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

(Matthew 24:45-51)

The future is coming, and it's heading toward us like a torpedo. We might be alive when Christ returns; we might not. Either way, we have less time than we think—and either way, we need to be getting ready: "And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:11-12).

Have a fantastic rest of your Feast of Tabernacles. Enjoy it the way God meant for it to be enjoyed—as a picture of the beautiful future that's coming faster than we realize. And if we have less time than we think, then let's use it wisely.

Until next time,

Jeremy

LAST GREAT DAY

ONWARD

OCTOBER 23, 2016

And just like that, it's over.

Again.

Seven days of rejoicing before God—a thousand years of peace and prosperity under the loving reign of Jesus Christ and His saints—finished in what feels like the blink of an eye. For seven days, we stood before God with our brethren, singing songs of worship and taking in spiritual nourishment, rejoicing before our Creator and fixing our mind's eye on a world free of Satan and full of God.

But that's not the main point, is it? As wonderful as the past seven days have been, the Feast of Tabernacles is not the reason for God's holy day plan.

The reason is today.

I think that's easy to forget. Tabernacles is huge and fantastic and such an unmistakable, unforgettable fixture of God's calendar that it so often feels as if every holy day is just one checkmark closer to leaving for "*the Feast.*" And that's good! I think God *wants* us to be excited for Tabernacles; I think He *wants* us to be anticipating one of the most incredible milestones of His plan for the entire human race.

But it's still a milestone. The millennial reign of Jesus Christ is not the culmination of God's plan. It's hard to imagine, but at some distance into eternity, even the Millennium we spent this week celebrating will be a distant blip on our timelines. The time pictured by the Feast of Tabernacles, however wonderful, is not the ultimate reason you and I were called to this way of life.

Today is. The Eighth Day, which so often feels like a passing afterthought tacked onto the end of Tabernacles, is the reason for all of it. It's the reason you were born. It's the reason the human race exists. It's the reason God fashioned an entire universe out of nothing. *God is building a family*, and today, the Last Great Day, pictures the time that family will finally be complete.

As Christians, it's easy to stop the train at Tabernacles. During Trumpets, we're transformed into full-fledged members of the God family. During Atonement, our enemy is bound and his influence is removed from the world. And during Tabernacles, we reign alongside our older Brother as we help to rebuild a broken world into what it always had the potential to become—all while guiding the human race into the knowledge of God and His way.

But God isn't content to stop there, and we shouldn't be either. The Last Great Day pictures the period of time when eternity is offered to the billions and

billions who have existed throughout history. It pictures the time when the family of God grows by an order of magnitude we can only begin to imagine right now.

And then? And then comes eternity. Then comes *forever*, filled with things "eye has not seen, nor ear heard" (1 Corinthians 2:9). And maybe that's why Tabernacles so often feels like the star of the show: We relate to the physical. We latch onto the things we can see and hear, and the Feast of Tabernacles is full of those things. The Last Great Day points our focus just beyond the physical and into a realm where, for now, "we see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). It's harder to see. The picture is fuzzier. And yet...

And yet we know that the God of all creation set the Eighth Day at the end of the holy days for a reason. Since the beginning of time itself, this Last Great Day was designed to be the crowning moment of God's plan—the moment that's required before, at long last, that loud voice from heaven can finally shout, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4).

That's the moment you and I were created for. It's the moment the entire universe was created for, and *it is coming*. And that, I think, is the message of the Last Great Day:

Onward.

Soon, another holy day cycle will be over, and we'll turn our attention back to Passover and the lessons it has for us. But we're not starting over. We're not forgetting everything we've learned this year or the year before. This isn't some endless loop we're traveling, but a spiral staircase, with each iteration bringing us one step closer to the future these days envision. We're marching ever upward, taking the old lessons with us and learning new ones as we go.

Begin. Keep going. Do the work. The King is coming. Remember your Creator. Look ahead. The holy days have had so many lessons to teach us this year, just as they'll have so many to teach us next year and every year after that. Ahead of us is an eternity too great for our minds to truly comprehend—an eternity the plan of God has been slowly marching toward since the dawn of time itself. And now, at the end of this holy day cycle, the Last Great Day points us toward it, fixes our eyes upon it, and hands us our marching orders for the year to come:

Onward, Christian soldier.

Until next time,

Jeremy

WHAT IS YOUR REPORT?

OCTOBER 13, 2012

Israel had seen one of the world's mightiest nations broken like a twig under the mighty hand of God. They had walked through a sea that gave way at His command. They had followed Him through the wilderness—a pillar of cloud by day; a pillar of fire by night. They were filled with water He brought forth from rocks and with bread he caused to fall from the skies. No obstacle could stand before the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as He led His chosen people to the land promised to their fathers.

And now, at long last, Israel had reached the edge of that Promised Land—a land flowing with milk and honey, to be given to them and their descendants forever. How long they had waited for this day! How often they had cried out for deliverance under the cruel yoke of Egyptian slavery! The air must have been aquiver with anticipation as the people waited for the return of the twelve spies sent to survey the land.

And what excitement must have shot like electricity through the assembly when the first of the Israelite spies was seen descending the mountains of Canaan, bringing with him a report, a glimpse, into their treasured inheritance. What silence must have fallen as the twelve spies gathered before the whole congregation and prepared to speak.

"We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit" (Numbers 13:27), they said, showing a cluster of grapes so large that two men were needed to carry it on a branch. After so long in servitude, such a description no doubt exceeded the Israelites' wildest dreams. But the spies weren't finished. "Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there" (Numbers 13:28).

Israel's heart sank. Fortified cities. Mighty warriors. *Giants*. What chance did a ragtag band of escaped slaves have against the trained militaries of such expansive cities? The spies' words only confirmed their fears: "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we. ... The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature ... we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight" (Numbers 13:31-33).

In a moment, the mood swung from ecstasy to terror. It was a trap! Clearly God had led them miraculously out of slavery and sustained them through the

wilderness only to shatter them against the war machine that now waited before them.

Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, took a stand to oppose the shameful fear of their colleagues. They tore their clothes and pleaded with the people: "The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, 'a land which flows with milk and honey.' Only do not rebel against the LORD, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the LORD is with us. Do not fear them" (Numbers 14:7-9). Israel responded with its usual careful balance of reason and thoughtfulness and called for the two spies to be stoned to death immediately while they prepared to return to slavery in Egypt.

And that's when God stepped in. At the end of His patience with a people determined to undermine and reject Him at even the slightest whisper of hardship, He proposed destroying the entire nation and starting over with patient, patient Moses. At Moses' plea, however, God agreed to spare Israel—although still refusing to allow the current generation in. For their complete and total lack of faith in the face of countless miracles direct from the hand of God, their carcasses would litter the wilderness. The Promised Land would go to a generation of Israelites who could trust the God who brought them into it. Only Caleb and Joshua would be allowed to outlive their faithless peers and enter that promise.

Fast forward to today. Not even a week ago, we were at the Feast of Tabernacles, observing God's commanded convocations, being reminded of the plan and the promises our Father has for us—a plan stretching far beyond this present evil age and into a "better, that is, a heavenly country" (Hebrews 11:16) to be established on a new Earth.

You were spying out the Promised Land. You caught a glimpse, a brief picture, of the vastness of the inheritance God has promised you. Like those twelve men from so long ago, you've seen firsthand that it is truly a land flowing with milk and honey—a future of countless blessings.

You also, no doubt, caught a glimpse of something a little less welcoming while you were there: our enemy. The Israelites faced giants and skillful men of war; we face "a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). He is an enemy who has existed for longer than the earth itself, fiercer than any giant, more cunning than the craftiest general, and deadlier than the sharpest weapon.

So. Welcome back, spies. What is your report?

Because at this point, you have two choices. You've seen the land. You've seen the enemy. And now it's time to decide: Are you able to go up and take the land? Or is the enemy standing in your way too strong?

I don't know your conversion story. I have no idea what life God called you from or how He made it clear to you that He alone is God and that "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6), but I do know what He's done in my life. I know He's made that abundantly clear to me there is nothing—NOTHING—on this Earth or in this universe that can stand between Him and His purpose for me and the rest of humanity.

When the Israelite spies gave their report, no one argued over how wonderful the Promised Land was. That was clear to every single one of them. No one doubted that it was flowing with milk and honey.

What they doubted was God.

Asaph was inspired to record of Israel in the Psalms, "How often they provoked Him in the wilderness, and grieved Him in the desert! Yes, again and again they tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember His power: The day when He redeemed them from the enemy" (Psalm 78:40-42). In spite of witnessing with their own eyes the fantastic wonders God was capable of performing—in spite of watching Him break kingdoms before them and shake food from the heavens for them, Israel *doubted* God. In their minds, they limited Him. And when it came to entering the Promised Land, they felt a handful of giants were bigger than God.

What about *our* enemy? Do you and I doubt God's ability to handle Satan—a rogue cherub, a *created being*? Do we ever start to believe the lie that our enemy is too powerful for us when we stand under the wings of the Creator of the universe?

Or are we convinced, like the apostle Paul was so many years ago, that "neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39)?

Brothers and sisters, if we truly believe that no enemy is too great for God—if we truly believe that the Promised Land is worth entering and that God has promised to lead us there, then what could possibly hold us back from developing the Godly character and mindset we need to be there?

The children of Israel were given by God the opportunity to lay hold of their

Promised Land, but they wasted it through doubt and fear. Today, Christ tells us that "from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matthew 11:12). We must be willing to spiritually fight our way to the crown laid up for us.

Our Promised Land—our *homeland*—is waiting. With God, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it" (Numbers 13:30).

Until next time,

Jeremy

THE REAL WORLD

SEPTEMBER 28, 2013

So the fall holy days are over again.

There's never any way around it—the Feast of Tabernacles that we wait for with such eager anticipation ends so much quicker than we would like, and as we reminisce fondly over the past week's memories, we tell ourselves the lie.

We mean it innocently. I've said it. You've probably said it. I imagine all of God's children have at some point looked at the bleak prospect of returning to an unforgiving daily grind and uttered a variation of the phrase: "Oh well. Time to get back to the real world."

The *real* world. Is that what we come back to?

Satan would love nothing more than for us to believe in our hearts that the world around us is the real one—that an entire planet drenched in corruption and wickedness is the world to which we must inevitably return. He wants us convinced that God's holy days are only temporary breathers from the damage Satan has done and continues to do. If that's the case, then all God can really do is provide us with fleeting breaks from Satan's world.

But I don't think you and I really believe that. I don't think we believe that God's promises are imaginary or fantastical and only good for a temporary escape from Satan's influence. But if we don't think that, then why do we think of the world around us as the "real" world—as the world we are bound to return to? Will our duties at our places of employment somehow be preserved beyond the rise and fall of empires? Do we believe that our utility bills will somehow transcend the depths of time and space?

Have we convinced ourselves that any physical component of this life is in any way permanent?

Peter warned, "the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up" (2 Peter 3:10). This world, led by Satan the devil, our adversary and the accuser of our brethren, will one day find itself consumed into nothingness to make room for something far greater—the *real* real world.

Everything—*everything*—you and I know about this physical world will one day be disintegrated in a universally engulfing flame. And yet, for some reason, we default to calling it the "real" world. Granted, we can touch and see and hear it. Our limited human senses allow us to interact with and observe it, so it certainly

appears the most real to us. But God's Word makes it clear that mankind's disobedience and Satan's influence have corrupted life as we know it to the point where God will establish "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1) after putting an end to the corruption and imperfection to which we have become accustomed.

When we went our separate ways after the close of the Last Great Day, we didn't come back to the real world. The picture God helped us paint of His millennial reign and His plan for all humanity is a divine glimpse into the realest of worlds. What we've returned to is a deception and a lie perpetrated by a being that wants desperately to destroy our hope and calling. We can't afford to think of it as the real world *because it isn't*. It is temporary; it is fleeting. It is a training ground God is using to prepare us for the real world to come.

This past Feast of Tabernacles wasn't a break, and it wasn't a vacation. It was a reminder of what the real world will be like, and perhaps most importantly, a reminder that we are not heading *back* to it, but *toward* it. Don't let go of that vision. Don't let it fade into the back of your mind. Grasp it like you would grasp a rope lowered down to rescue you from the darkest of pits, and keep it always beside you to remind yourself of who we are, why we're here, and what we're fighting for.

Until next time,
Jeremy

THE VIOLENT TAKE IT

OCTOBER 24, 2014

Did anyone else have a hard time leaving the Feast this year? Because I sure did.

Maybe it was the way the ocean greeted us every morning as we looked out from the balcony of our high-rise. Maybe it was ordering a steak for dinner without the nagging worry that I should save the money for more practical needs. Maybe it was spending eight days rejoicing with dear friends, or the meaty and inspiring messages we received on a daily basis, or the incredible sense of togetherness that comes when God places His name somewhere.

Or maybe it was what all these individual facets compose as a whole: the briefest of glimpses into the soon-coming Kingdom of God. Our annual sneak-peak of the Millennium and everything it pictures in God's plan. This year, I felt as if I could almost reach out and touch it—as if that far-off promise was a tangible thing I could wrap my arms around and hold onto forever. Having to pack our suitcases and load up our car and leave all our temporary dwelling in the rearview mirror was almost torture... especially knowing what we would find at the end of our trip.

Satan's world. The contrast between this present evil age and God's Kingdom has been painfully stark this year. I'm seeing commercials pop up for this awful *Ouija* movie, Hollywood's latest attempt to make the demonic realm a platform for entertainment. *Bayonetta 2*, a video game sequel about a witch who can summon demons and kill angels, was released today to critical acclaim. Some of the most popular songs on the radio right now are about demonic possession ("Demons" by Imagine Dragons), a school shooting ("Pumped Up Kicks" by Foster the People), and outright, shameless blasphemy ("Take Me to Church" by Hozier). Oh, and right around the corner lurks All Hallows' Eve, mainstream Christianity's horrifically failed attempt to sanitize yet another pagan ritual, this one involving parading door-to-door as ghouls, witches, spirits, and even the devil himself in a bid to fill up sacks of candy.

It's everywhere. It's hitting me from every angle and I can't seem to shut it out. Almost as if Satan were trying to say with a snarl, "Welcome back. I missed you."

So what now? We've had our annual glimpse of the Promised Land and now we're back to being bombarded by the combined forces of Satan and his demons. What do we do? What *can* we do? Is it time to hunker down and wait patiently for God to bring the Kingdom to us? To keep our heads down and wait

until the nasty conditions of this present life settle down a bit?

Unless we're eager to follow in the footsteps of the servant who buried his master's money, that's not going to cut it. Jesus Christ prescribed a radically different approach to His disciples: "the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, *and the violent take it by force*" (Matthew 11:12, emphasis added).

What's that? The *violent* take the Kingdom by force? What about the peacemakers? What about those who suffer for doing good? What about those who turn the other cheek? Surely the violent have no place in God's utopia—and yet, there's no mistaking the wording. It's the violent who take the Kingdom.

The key to the matter is what we need to be violent *about*. The Greek word translated "violent," *biastēs*, implies a sense of forcefulness. "Violence" or *biazō* likewise means "to use force." The meaning becomes a little clearer when we consider Christ's words in Luke's account, where we read that "the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it" (Luke 16:16). The word "pressing" here is also *biazō*—using force. People are violently pressing toward God's Kingdom.

This isn't the violence of a man with no self-control who flies into a rage at the drop of a hat, nor is it the violence of a heartless gunman who mows down innocent lives in a drive-by. Christ is speaking of the focused, concentrated effort of individuals who see a treasure of incalculable value and who refuse to be halted in their pursuit of it. These are the people who "take it by force"—the Greek work *harpazō* literally meaning "to seize on, claim for one's self eagerly." It's the same word, interestingly, used to describe Satan's desire to snatch God's Word from us (cf. Matthew 13:19). Our adversary is eager for any chance to rip away what God has given us; we must be even more eager to lay hold of it—to take it with force.

I should pause here to clarify: Entering God's Kingdom isn't something we do on our own. It is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and *only* the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that makes that pathway possible through the forgiveness of our sins upon repentance. That being said, though, *the pathway has been opened*. What we do with it is up to us. We don't get into the Kingdom by not caring, and *being patient is not the same as doing nothing*. Christ didn't say, "The apathetic take it by indifference." He said, "The violent take it by force."

All the spies who came back from scouting out the Promised Land thought it looked fantastic. They all saw a land of rich abundance and plentiful harvests—but they also all saw the fierce inhabitants who called it home (Numbers 13:27-29). Only two of the spies were willing to trust God's promises and seize the land

—the other ten bemoaned, "we saw the giants ... and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight" (Numbers 13:33).

The Feast was our opportunity to spy out the land. I doubt there were any of us who caught a glimpse of God's Kingdom and couldn't heartily agree that it "truly flows with milk and honey" (Numbers 13:27). But now we're back on the battlefield, and we're getting a better look at the swarms of enemies who stand between us and that Kingdom. Just like the ancient Israelites, we have some fearsome giants to face down. Giants of sinful attitudes. Giants of poor choices. Giants of addictions, giants of wrong desires, and giants of pride. These foes and more stand as captains in the army of our adversary, and *these are the foes we must fight if we wish to enter the Kingdom of God. These are the foes we must face with violence.*

We're not without the tools we need to do the job. Paul reminds us, "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled" (2 Corinthians 10:3-6).

Do you value the glimpse of the Kingdom you saw this year? Then seize it. Lay hold of it. Put on the whole armor of God and bring into captivity everything that exalts itself above God. *This is a fight.* It has been since the day you were called, and it will be until the day your human body breathes its last.

The Kingdom of God is real. It is an absolute certainty, where "the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4).

If that sounds like something we want to be part of, we need to do more than just gawk at it. We need to fasten our armor securely. We need to take up the weapons of our warfare.

And we need to get violent.

Until next time,
Jeremy

SELAH

OCTOBER 13, 2017

"Selah."

That word shows up 71 times in the book of Psalms, but *we don't know for sure* what it means. It appears to be some sort of musical instruction, and one theory suggests it indicates a lyrical pause in the psalm—an invitation to stop and reflect on what's been said so far.

Kind of like the sunset after the Last Great Day.

After Pentecost this year, I wrote about "*the gap*"—that span of time in between God's festivals that serves as an opportunity to get busy doing what God put us here to do. I think the span of time between the Last Great Day and next year's Passover serves a similar function, but I think both those gaps offer a second invitation as well:

Selah.

Pause. Reflect.

We just finished singing a stanza of God's masterful plan. We've been reminded of the future that's waiting for us and for the entire human race—and now, we pause. Before we launch into the next verse (a verse about what Christ did and how He made our future possible), we have an opportunity to reflect on everything we've just learned. After all the messages, all the conversations—everything you heard and saw in this most recent holy day season—what are you walking away with?

What have you gained? What do you see now that you didn't see before? What things in your life are you determined to change or to strengthen, and how will you go about it?

If we just started singing again, we couldn't answer those questions. But now we have this pause, this *selah*, to look inward and reevaluate where we are and where we're going. And soon—very soon—it will be time to start singing the next stanza.

Until then, *selah*.

Until next time,

Jeremy

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've said it before, and I'll say it until the end of time: I couldn't do this without the support of my wife, Mary. Sabbath Thoughts requires a lot of time and energy, but I'm not the only one who has to pay that cost. Writing these posts cuts into time we could be sharing together, which is hard on both of us—but that hasn't stopped her from staying in my corner, encouraging me and cheering me on.

But she's not just a cheerleader. She's my sounding board, my proofreader, and a source of constant inspiration. Having her in my life encourages me to be the best version of myself I can be, and I think that inevitably spills over into what I write.

I don't know how I'd do this without her.

Sabbaththoughts.com wouldn't exist if my brother-in-law, Drewski, hadn't gone out of his way to buy the domain and host the blog for me. It wouldn't still be up and running without his continual willingness to dive into the terrifying guts of the server and fix things (usually after I break them).

There are a thousand other people I would thank if I had the space—so many Sabbath Thoughts find their seeds in sermons I've listened to and friends I've talked with. I'm blessed to have wonderful readers who take the time to write me messages of encouragement (and let me know when I've made a typo).

It goes without saying that the biggest acknowledgment here belongs to God. Anything good that's ever come from Sabbath Thoughts is because of His guidance and inspiration. I'm grateful that He's used me to serve His people in this way, and I'll keep doing it as long as He lets me.

Until next time,

Jeremy

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* It's worth noting that the Byzantine manuscripts mention the angel and the stirring of the water, but the Alexandrian manuscripts do not. They agree on the rest of the story, however.

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