

January 27-31, 2025 Edition

Following

The Year^(s) Of [^]Jesus Part 160

How Does God Give Us "Rest"

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we're going to spend looking at the concept of rest in Jesus' teaching. What is it? Why do we need it and how do we get it? But before we get to that let's look at where we are in the chronological story of Jesus' life.

At this point Jesus is about 3 years into His ministry which means He's got about 6 months before the cross. The Galilean ministry is over- He has left Capernaum and knows He won't be going back. I can imagine how painful that realization must be (but I wouldn't have known if I never got to visit Israel). When I first got to Israel we spent the first few days in Jerusalem focusing on Jesus' birth and His time spent in Jerusalem when He was 12. I loved it there but it was noisy, crowded, dirty and dangerous. The surroundings are like a lunar landscape. When we left the south of Israel and moved up north to Galilee I felt such a sense of peace and ease. I had no idea how much Jerusalem had been weighing on me. But that all changed when we got to Galilee.

Galilee is beautiful. It's green and there are flowers and trees and birds are everywhere. It's much cooler in the summer and much warmer in the winter than Jerusalem. And it was clean, safe and quiet (except for when we went to Nazareth and that place was more like Jerusalem ;o) and I asked our guides if I could take a walk (I asked a similar question in Jerusalem on our first day and they couldn't get their "No!" out quickly enough) and they smiled and said, "of course". That first night as I sat on the shore of the Sea Of Galilee with the sun setting and the waves quietly splashing on the beach I felt a calm and peace that I hadn't felt since arriving in Israel. I can remember thinking, "no wonder He chose this place as His base of operations and spent most of His time up here- I would too."

So when Jesus leaves Galilee to head for Jerusalem for the last time He's got more than just the cross on His mind- I'm sure He was grieving that He was leaving the beauty of Capernaum and the Sea of Galilee as well. And as He was on the way to Jerusalem (He took His sweet time getting there and even when He got to the south He didn't go straight to Jerusalem but spent a lot of time east of the city in the wilderness teaching there) He did quite a bit of ministry and teaching along the way. One of the things He taught about what the concept of rest:

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matthew 11:26-30 (NLT)

It is one of the most amazing promises of Jesus and it takes us right to the heart of what following Him is (supposed to be) all about. So this week we'll try to unpack and reflect upon what soul rest is and what part Jesus' "yoke" plays in our rest (sounds like more work initially but I think once we understand exactly what a yoke is things should start to make much more sense. Maybe today you and I could spend some time reflecting on just how much rest we need and how we have pursued trying to find it over the years.

Tuesday Reflection: This week we're looking at Jesus' words on rest and what He meant by taking His yoke upon us. Why is just the offer of rest so compelling? Because we all need it. Every. Single. One. Of. Us. We may not realize just how exhausted we are sometimes but Jesus knows and eventually we'll figure it out. But why is it so universal? What is it that causes this exhaustion in our souls (because it's not just from our physical activities)?

Turns out it's a lack of contentment or a lack of peace (kind of the same thing as far as Jesus is concerned). There is an insatiability in all of us that refuses to let us rest. Turns out contentment isn't something that comes naturally to us humans- we have to learn:

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. For I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. Philippians 4:12-13 (NLT)

That passage contains one of the most famous lines from the Bible- I can do all things through Christ who gives me the strength I need. You see it everywhere and most of us misinterpret what it means. I always thought it meant that I could do whatever I set my mind to do because Jesus would give me the strength to make it happen (have you seen the mug that says, "I can do all things through a verse taken completely out of context?"). But what we unlink from that beautiful promise is the verses immediately preceding it and the verse that comes afterwards. That strength that we need so badly comes with strings attached- the strings of learning how to be content no matter what circumstances I may find myself in. When we are actively engaged in the Jesus school-of-life and doing our best to follow Jesus and become more like Him then that promise comes into play. But the strength isn't to do whatever I set my mind to do- the strength is the ability to endure any circumstance no matter how trying and difficult.

And so back to contentment- one of the most important lessons we will ever wrestle with. It's the reason we struggle so much with exhaustion and the biggest issue is that we don't see how destructive and toxic our insatiability is. And every single one of us struggles with it whether we realize it or not. Maybe you're reading this reflection and thinking to yourself, "I'm not insatiable- money isn't all that important to me." But greed and insatiability is about much more than just finances. We can become insatiable in any number of arenas (more about that tomorrow) and whatever is driving our insatiability robs us of one of most important things that Jesus wants to give us- His peace:

I am leaving you with a gift-peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid. John 14:27 (NLT)

The Hebrew word for peace is shalom. It's kind of a catchall word much like aloha in Hawaii. Shalom is a greeting, it's a way of saying "see you later" and it's a blessing when we pronounce it on others. And the peace it refers to is multifaceted. It is a plea for peace in every area of one's life- peace with God, peace with others, peace with self and peace with the natural world around us. But how do we get it? That's tricky as it turns out. It's not an instant download. In fact it can seem kind of counterintuitive.

In 1987 I came to Alaska to meet Judy's parents. We were not engaged at that point but we were talking about marriage. One day we went to the Sears mall and there was a knickknack store that we all went into. I saw a wooden carving of the Hebrew word shalom. I was in my second semester of Biblical Hebrew classes and I recognized it right away but something was off. Then it hit me- Hebrew isn't read from left to right like English is. It's read backwards (to our way of thinking) right to left. I realized they had the carving that said shalom backwards so I walked up and spun it around. When the store clerk saw me do it they looked at me kind of quizzically and so I blessed them with my massive Biblical Hebrew knowledge (although to tell you the truth she didn't look like she felt blessed by the info but more confused and suspicious of this strange guy who took it upon himself to "fix" their error).

My in-laws were there and I was so tickled that on Christmas morning when I unwrapped my present from them it was the carving of shalom. I thought that was so awesome. Why did I tell you that silly story? Because the same way that Hebrew is read backwards (to us), God's plan can often seem backwards as well (to us). It's one of the reasons that very few people come to Jesus in victory. Hardly anyone whose life is going the way they would like it to go thinks, "you know what would make this perfect? Giving control of my life to Jesus and letting Him set the agenda and the pace of my life. That would just be the best!" That's why peace and contentment are so elusive- because God's way to achieve them seems backwards (to us). So most of us who are followers of Jesus- especially if you've done more than accepted Him as your savior and went the rest of way and made Him your Lord and Master- have stories to tell about why we got serious about turning control of lives over to Him. Stories of pain and desperation.

Sound familiar? If not you might want to spend today reflecting on what brought you to Jesus and ask yourself, have I actually turned control of my life over to Him or am I trying to live my life my own way and ignoring much of what He taught because it just doesn't fit into my life the way I'd like it to?

Shalom everybody.

Wednesday Reflection: I promised yesterday that we'd talk more about what robs us of contentment and so let's talk about insatiability and greed. Ultimately it's these two things that rob our contentment of us. The Bible talks about it over and over again- there's even one of the 10 Commandments that deals with this concept:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me. "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. Exodus 20:2-5 (NIV)

Don't see the part about greed or insatiability? Well it's there and we would need to read between the lines but the people of the ancient world wouldn't have. For them idolatry and greed went hand in hand. Now I know that when we think of idolatry we think of rustic savages dancing around a fire and bowing to carved heads. We think we're much

too sophisticated to ever fall for such superstitious nonsense. But the idols haven't gone away- they've just gotten sneaky and they hide themselves in what we would consider to be ordinary, everyday things. Things like money, pleasure, power, success, control and intelligence can become idols in our lives if we make them the central thing we build our lives around. Still skeptical?

Every day millions of people walk into temples (we call them banks and they're not temples for everyone but if money is the central driving factor in our lives we will make them into one) and worship at the altar of money. Their priests and priestesses wear business suits and carry calculators in their pockets (ok we all have calculators in our pockets now but you get the drift). Likewise every day millions of people walk into temples made of glass and steel and go to work in offices. There they will sacrifice the best of their time, energy and resources to build a life of success. The same could be said for politics and power, universities and knowledge, gyms and physical fitness and even beauty salons and external appearance.

Now none of these things are bad in and of themselves. In fact they can all be part of what makes for a beautiful life. No they're not inherently bad but they make a terrible foundation for your life. And if you build your life on any foundation other than God you will constantly feel unstable and unsafe. You'll worry about what happens if you lose whatever it is you've built your life around. And yes I know we are all concerned about losing our money, our jobs, our mental acuity and lots of other things but if your life is built on the foundation of Jesus then you will be able to survive the loss of anything else. It won't be a picnic and all of us have experienced loss to one extent or another. This isn't about not being bothered at all by the prospect of loss- it's about what sits on the throne of our hearts:

They have set up idols in their hearts. They have embraced things that will make them fall into sin. Ezekiel 14:3 (NLT)

And there's the rub- embracing the idols in our lives leads us to fall into sin. We talked a few weeks back about the Greek word for "sin" in the Bible. It wasn't originally a religious term- it was a sporting term. If an archer missed the target they were said to have "sinned". Literally they missed-the-mark. I saw a reel the other day with Rainn Wilson (think Dwight from The Office) where he was talking about this. He was poopooing the idea that the Bible's concept of sin was bad. He brought up the literal meaning of missing-the-mark and said something to the effect of, "so sin isn't some horrible wrong you've committed that makes you a horrible person- it's just missing the target."

He's right about what it means. He's wrong about it not being a big deal. It's a huge deal. When we miss-the-mark in our lives it leads us away from God. That might not seem like a huge deal to some of us but it is. It robs us of our purpose in life and it starts leading us in completely the wrong direction. It causes us to miss what God designed and created us to do and it robs us of something really important:

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. Jonah 2:8 (NIV)

Just like the word for sin isn't talking about something horrific (although an awful lot of our "sins" are horrific, aren't they?) the word "grace" isn't always just talking about eternal salvation- God's grace is what powers us through this life. It brings strength, courage and blessings (among other things). And idols steer us away from that grace. Are you starting to see why this was such a big deal to God and why He made it the first two points in His Top 10 List that He handed down to Moses on that mountain all those many years ago?

God's grace guides us into freedom and away from slavery- and if you have an idol that you are embracing in your life then that is leading you right back into slavery. When I was 20 years old I found myself enslaved by the idol of pleasure and numbness. Modern people refer to that as a chemical addiction but the Bible calls it greed and idolatry. We can see how idols work most clearly in addictions. At first we are enticed to worship at the altar of pleasure by consuming a drug. It promises everything and at first it seems to deliver (otherwise it would never become an addiction). But over time it takes more and more of the same drug to deliver the same level of pleasure and after a time you are no longer capable of achieving that original level of pleasure but now you're trapped and if you don't worship at the altar of pleasure you will feel miserable. It takes more and more and gives less and less until in the end it's taken everything and left you with nothing.

God's commands are there to show us the way to freedom. They lead us to freedom and then keep us from becoming enslaved by an idol. King David understood this:

I run in the path of your commands. For you have set my heart free. Psalm 119:32 (WEB)

Growing up I never would have put the concepts of freedom and commands in the same sentence- but I would now. Now I get it. It was leaving that path and running on my own path that led to the slavery I experienced in my late teens. I never want to go back there and I know that as long as I run in the path of God's commands/instructions I never will.

Thursday Reflection: This week we are looking at Paul's first missionary journey- an event that changed the course of human history as much as any I can think of. If you have been with us throughout this series then you may remember the last time we heard from Paul he was still named Saul. He had been the foremost persecutor of the brand new church and had been responsible for the deaths of Christians (Stephen's death is the only one we know of specifically but Paul claimed later in the book of Acts that he was responsible for "deaths" plural so I think we can safely assume Stephen wasn't the only Christian Paul had a hand in killing). Saul was on his way to Damascus to arrest more Christians when Jesus appeared to him and Saul was converted to Christianity. He immediately began preaching in the synagogue in Damascus that Jesus was the Messiah (which confused everybody) and did such a good job the Jews planned to kill him. So Saul was sent south to Jerusalem where he attempted to meet up with Peter and the other apostles but found that his past was haunting him- the apostles didn't want to have anything to do with Saul.

Enter one of my favorite people in the entire Bible (other than Jesus ;o)- a guy named Barnabas. This is totally a rabbit trail but the name Barnabas means, "son of encouragement" and I wanted to name my son Barnabas because if he was the son of encouragement then you know what that would make me, right? Well, my wife wasn't having any of it so he got

the name Jonathan which means “gift from God” in case you were wondering. The more you know, huh? Anyways, Barnabas lives up to his name and finds Saul and brings him to Peter who gives Saul the apostles stamp of approval. Saul starts preaching in Jerusalem and again does such a great job of convincing people that Jesus is the messiah that the Jews decide they need to kill him (do you see a theme developing here?). So Saul is sent home to a town called Tarsus (across the mediterranean sea in what is modern day Turkey) where he grew up. How long Saul was in Tarsus is not exactly clear but this much we know- from the time that Saul met Jesus until the time that he would begin his “ministry” was about 13 years. 13 YEARS?!?! Yes.

So let’s take just a moment and talk about us for a minute, ok? Have you ever felt like God was taking too long to move you into whatever future He has in mind for you? Have you ever wondered why God seemed to be taking His sweet time and maybe He forgot about you or decided you were unworthy to do “great things” (whatever those are- I’ve noticed God’s definition and my definition are generally vastly different)? I think Saul/Paul can feel your pain. We have no idea what exactly he was doing in Tarsus all those years but bubbling with impatience would be my guess. Maybe that was what Jesus needed him to learn during that time. And time is the key here. Remember last week we looked at Isaiah chapter 40:

Even youths will become weak and tired, and young men will fall in exhaustion. But those who trust in (wait on) the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint. Isaiah 40:30-31 (NLT)

Sometimes there is no substitute for time. God wants to use us but we’re just not ready yet. So He asks us to “wait” on Him. His timing. His plan. But it’s not easy, is it? Paul has to wait but he’s not just twiddling his thumbs doing nothing until God can unveil His plan for Paul’s life. He’s learning to apply what he already knows about God to his own life. He’s learning to know Jesus more and then attempting to become more like Him. Until we reach that point Jesus will continually ask us to “wait on” Him.

Well 13 years later Paul’s time had come. While he was in Tarsus learning to be more like Jesus and learning to let Him set the pace, the direction and the destination of his life things were happening in the middle eastern church (pretty much the only place the church existed up until this point). Peter was doing some amazing things (which must have driven Paul crazy- have you ever wanted to do great things for God but felt like nothing was happening and meanwhile somebody else is doing all the stuff your heart would explode with gratitude to be able to get to do? Paul can feel your pain) and the church was growing. Especially in a town called Antioch, in Syria. It was in Antioch that the church first began to seriously reach out to gentiles (non Jewish people) and God was blessing their efforts amazingly. The church in Jerusalem hears about it and sends a guy named Barnabas (remember him?) to check it out. At this point in time Jerusalem was the power base of Christianity. James (the brother of Jesus Himself) was the pastor of the church. Peter and John and other apostles were movers and shakers there. A tremendous amount of power and influence was exerted by the Jerusalem church in the first years of the church.

Anyways, Barnabas gets to Syria and looks around. He loves what is happening in Antioch but senses there’s something missing. What could it be? I know! Saul! Saul is what’s missing

from this equation. So Barnabas goes to Tarsus to find Saul and bring him to Antioch. Can you even imagine Saul's relief when Barnabas finds him (once again Barnabas' gift of reconciliation changes not just one human's life but changes the world which is really how God does His world changing thing)? Finally God is ready to use Saul and unleash the gifts, talent and personality that He had blessed Saul with as well as the lessons and experiences that Saul had learned over the last 13 years. Tomorrow we'll begin looking at the actual first missionary journey that Paul and Barnabas take but for today maybe spend some time thinking about:

1. What is God's definition of "great things" and how might your definition differ from His?
2. Why do you think God might be asking you to "wait on" His timing plan and how are you doing while you're waiting?

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Friday Reflection: Ok- so Saul is now in Antioch (a city quickly becoming well known for its "Everybody's Welcome" attitude when it comes to gentile or non Jewish Christians) with Barnabas and they are preaching to large crowds and making a HUGE difference in the life of the church there in Syria:

Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul. When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching large crowds of people. (It was at Antioch that the believers[g] were first called Christians.) Acts 11:25-26 (NLT)

So what do you think God decides to do with these guys? He sends them away:

One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Appoint Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them." So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way. So Barnabas and Saul were sent out by the Holy Spirit. Acts 13:2-4 (NLT)

It happens all the time here at Riverside. People come and get plugged in to the life of the church. They start to thrive and do great things for God and they are a tremendous force for Jesus in our community and guess what happens? Often God sends them out. And I think to myself, "great... thanks Lord... I really appreciate it." But hey- it's Jesus' church- not mine or yours or the leaders at Antioch. He marshals His followers much the way a general marshals his troops. And God sends out Saul and Barnabas.

They go from Antioch over to the island of Cyprus. A man named John Mark comes with them (he'll play into the story of God himself in a HUGE way himself and will eventually write the gospel of Mark). They spend some time in Cyprus and eventually move over to Cilicia (modern day Turkey and the area where Paul grew up and had spent the last few years before going to Antioch). They went from town to town preaching and teaching and proclaiming the message of Jesus. It was during this time that something really important happened:

The following week almost the entire city turned out to hear them preach the word of the Lord. But when some of the Jews saw the crowds, they were jealous; so they slandered Paul and argued against whatever he said. Then Paul and Barnabas spoke out

boldly and declared, "It was necessary that we first preach the word of God to you Jews. But since you have rejected it and judged yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we will offer it to the Gentiles. For the Lord gave us this command when he said, 'I have made you a light to the Gentiles, to bring salvation to the farthest corners of the earth.'" When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad and thanked the Lord for his message. Acts 13:44-48 (NLT)

And so we see another step forward in fulfilling Jesus' final instructions to His followers to preach the gospel to "every nation" and to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the outer most parts of the world. Eventually Paul & Barnabas end up in a town called Lystra. While they are preaching Paul heals a man who was crippled and the crowd decided that they were the gods Zeus and Hermes. They sent word to the temple of Zeus and the priest brought bulls to sacrifice to Paul & Barnabas:

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard what was happening, they tore their clothing in dismay and ran out among the people, shouting, "Friends, why are you doing this? We are merely human beings—just like you! We have come to bring you the Good News that you should turn from these worthless things and turn to the living God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them. In the past he permitted all the nations to go their own ways, but he never left them without evidence of himself and his goodness. For instance, he sends you rain and good crops and gives you food and joyful hearts." But even with these words, Paul and Barnabas could scarcely restrain the people from sacrificing to them. Acts 14:14-18 (NLT)

Eventually the people of Lystra went from adoring petitioners of Paul & Barnabas to angry and violent. They stoned them to (what they thought was) death and left them outside of town but when the believers gathered around them Paul and Barnabas got up and went back into the city. Was Paul dead and then revived? I don't know- but it makes you wonder. He would later talk about a time when he was taken up into Heaven and witnessed what was coming for all followers of Jesus and how it was tough to come back from that and live out his days on this earth waiting for the day when he'd get to go back. Was this a "near death" experience or a "real death but then resurrected temporarily" experience? We will never know this side of our own "real death experience" and it doesn't really matter. What matters is just how messed up the concept of idolatry can get us. The Lystrians saw Paul and Barnabas as gods and their idolatry led them to first want to worship them and later want to kill them. Idolatry is a dangerous game that all humans end up playing and is what we will be looking at the rest of this week.