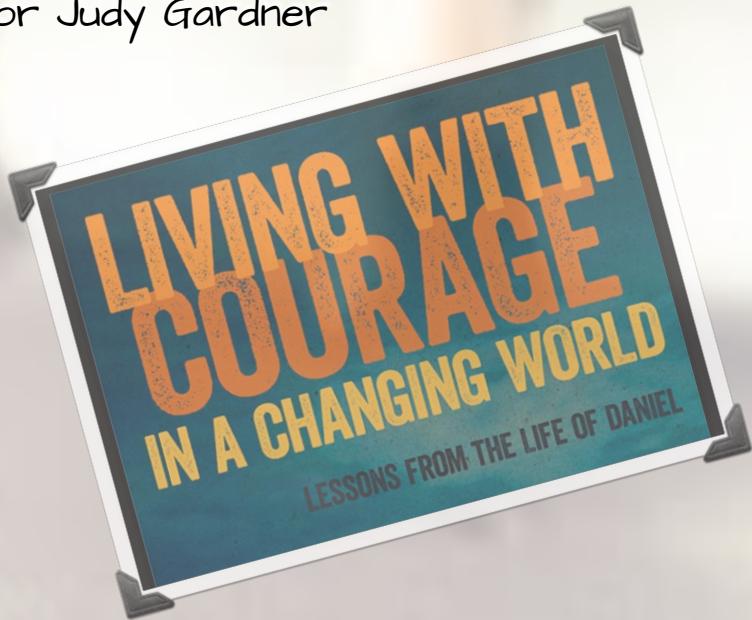


December 9-13, 2024 Edition

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The Year(s) Of Jesus Part 153

Jesus On Gratitude

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner



December 7/8, 2024

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 you 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 are looking at the book of Daniel but before we can talk about Daniel we need to look at where we are in the story of the Old Testament. Remember- it's all about God setting things up so He can send the Rescuer promised way back in Genesis chapter 3. When we left off last week with Isaiah, the people of God were still living in the land that had been promised to them by God. The prophets had warned the people of God what would happen if they wandered too far away from Him- the farther they removed themselves the less of God's power would be able to flow into their lives and the results would be disastrous. And they were. Eventually as the people abandoned God in their lives the nation was conquered by Babylon. The city was destroyed along with the Temple and many of the people of God were carried away in captivity in Babylon.

The people of God were devastated. How can we be the people of God without living in the city of God? How can we live our lives in exile? One of the Psalms deals with the way these people felt:

Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept as we thought of Jerusalem. We put away our harps, hanging them on the branches of poplar trees. For our captors demanded a song from us. Our tormentors insisted on a joyful hymn: "Sing us one of those songs of Jerusalem!" But how can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a pagan land? Psalm 137:1-4 (NLT)

Have you ever felt that way? Exiled, I mean. Have you ever felt like you were living in exile? It happens all the time. Sometimes it's a geographical exile like the Israelites were experiencing. It happens quite often in Alaska. People find themselves living in this cold, dark, frozen wasteland and would prefer to be anywhere else in the world than here. They find themselves asking, "how long, o Lord, will you leave me in exile here?"

For other people the exile may be physical in nature. Due to a chronic condition, an illness or an injury we are living in an exile of the physical kind. We cry out to God in much the same way the Israelites in Babylon did. For still others their exile is relational in nature. Maybe you want to be married and there are no prospects on the horizon. Maybe you are married but through circumstances you never dreamed of that marriage has not turned out to be what you imagined it would be. Maybe your conflict is with a friend or a sibling or a parent or a child. Relational exiles can feel every bit as real as what the Israelites were experiencing in Babylon. If you find yourself in some kind of exile today (or if not remember this verse for later when you just might find yourself in exile of one form or another) maybe these words of God written by the prophet Jeremiah and sent to the people of God living in exile in Babylon will give you some hope:

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

The book of Daniel is written to show exactly what living out the life God calls His people to live (even if we find ourselves someplace we'd rather not be) can lead to. It can lead to hope, a future and the plans of God for your life.

Tuesday Reflection: So what exactly does the book of Daniel teach us? Well, if I was going to summarize the entire book with the "big picture" of Daniel I'd say it starts off teaching us what our lives as followers of Jesus living in a culture that is fairly hostile to that way of life should look like. The book of Daniel is pretty much the primer on how to live a believing life in an unbelieving world. When Jerusalem was captured Daniel and his friends were among those captured and carried away. We know what happened- there were two schools of thought among the exiled Israelites. One group led by a false prophet named Hananiah urged the people to isolate themselves from the Babylonians. They settled down south of the city of Babylon and created a sort of enclave where they could lessen the influence of a foreign culture. Hananiah told the people to pray against the city and government and people of Babylon. To never mix with them in any way. So many of them did exactly that. But Daniel and his friends, Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego didn't. They ended up entering into public life in Babylon. They became part of the governmental structures of that pagan city. In fact- they moved up the ladder of those structures pretty rapidly:

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were four of the young men chosen... The chief of staff renamed them with these Babylonian names: Daniel was called Belteshazzar. Hananiah was called Shadrach. Mishael was called Meshach. Azariah was called Abednego.

Daniel 1:6-7 (NLT)

This verse maybe more than any other in Daniel sort of illustrates what the rest of the book is about- Daniel and his friends each had two names. They had their Jewish names given to them at birth by their parents and they had Babylonian names given to them by the king's chief of staff. The four boys all had Jewish names that described their devotion to their God. Daniel means, "God is my judge." Hananiah means, "Yaweh is gracious." Mishael means, "Who is like God?", and Azariah means, "Yaweh has helped me." These names would have been deeply meaningful to the boys but the Babylonian names they were given must have been like a slap in the face. Belteshazzar means, "Bel is my god." Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego likewise were references to the gods of the Babylonians. Each one had two names which is interesting because each one also lived in dual realities.

In other words, they lived in the kingdom in which they found themselves but they lived for the kingdom of God. They were trained as priests of Babylon. They became part of the civil service of Babylon- a function performed by the priesthood. Not only did the Babylonian priesthood administrate the religious functions of the nation- they were the ones who administrated the governmental structures as well. The priests were the ones who made sure the trains ran on time (so to speak ;o) And Daniel and his friends eventually rose up through the ranks of the Babylonian priesthood to such a height that Daniel was eventually made the high priest of Babylon:

Then the king appointed Daniel to a high position and gave him many valuable gifts. He made Daniel ruler over the whole province of Babylon, as well as chief over all his wise men.

Daniel 2:48 (NLT)

So what does that mean for me and you? Basically the same thing. God has a plan for your life. That plan revolves around you and me living within the kingdom in which we currently

find ourselves but living for His Kingdom. In other words, if we are business men/women then we should be asking ourselves what doing business in America would look like while we live in the dual reality of the USA and God's Kingdom here on earth. What products would God want me to sell and not sell. Are there any accepted business practices that God wouldn't want me to engage in? How would God want me to treat my employees? How would He want me to handle my finances?

There isn't a rule book for this stuff. There are guidelines. You see Daniel and his friends navigating with them. They will not do anything that dishonors the Name of God and they will not do anything that would tarnish their integrity. The things they did do probably made some of the Israelites in Babylon shake their heads. Daniel and his friends were collaborators with Babylon? How could they do that? More on that tomorrow but for today maybe spend some time thinking about how well the two cultures you and I live in (America and God's Kingdom) blend and how badly they clash.

Wednesday Reflection: The second lesson we learn from the book of Daniel is revealed in the second chapter of the book but is a theme that is repeated throughout the rest of the book and really, all of the Old Testament. This lesson revolves around the concept of the importance of foundations. King Nebuchadnezzar has this dream that REALLY freaks him out. He tries to find someone that can interpret the dream for him and finally brings Daniel- the Jewish captive that has been forced into Babylon's civil service and priesthood-before him to decipher the dream:

In your vision, Your Majesty, you saw standing before you a huge, shining statue of a man. It was a frightening sight. The head of the statue was made of fine gold. Its chest and arms were silver, its belly and thighs were bronze, its legs were iron, and its feet were a combination of iron and baked clay. As you watched, a rock was cut from a mountain, but not by human hands. It struck the feet of iron and clay, smashing them to bits. The whole statue was crushed into small pieces of iron, clay, bronze, silver, and gold. Then the wind blew them away without a trace, like chaff on a threshing floor. But the rock that knocked the statue down became a great mountain that covered the whole earth.

Daniel 2:31-35 (NLT)

We could spend all day talking about prophecy and what we can learn from this dream and the rest of the book of Daniel. But I'll be brutally honest- I don't get prophecy at all. I mean, I get the stuff that is interpreted for us in the Bible like this dream was by Daniel but the Bible has meaning on so many different levels it's not even funny. God has never given me the ability to understand or interpret the deeper levels of prophecy in the Bible. In fact, even when someone else claims to have an interpretation of one of these mysterious prophecies from the Bible I still have a tough time seeing what they do- especially since an awful lot of these interpretations have not happened in the past. Not because the prophecies were wrong- our interpretation of the prophecies was wrong. So I generally stick with the much more surface interpretations and feel pretty safe doing so.

So what's the meaning of this dream/prophecy? Well, Daniel tells us one level of the meaning. The different levels of the statue represent different kingdoms. The top was

Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom. Judging by what I know of history that means the silver represented the Persian empire, the bronze represented the Greeks and Alexander the Great and the Iron represented the Romans who were in power when Jesus (the Rescuer) was born. But if Nebuchadnezzar didn't understand the meaning of his dream then why did he get so freaked out? Because we know (if we read ahead to Daniel chapter 3) that he was intending to build just such a statue of himself to erect in his capital city. Now he's having dreams that this statue is going to be knocked down by a small rock and it will bring everything crashing to the ground and eventually blow it away until there is nothing left of it but memories.

At its most basic I think this dream is showing us the importance of foundations. The feet of the statue are feet of clay. The statue itself is dazzling and brilliant but it just doesn't matter when the foundation is shaky. God is continuing to hammer home the importance of foundations. When we build our lives (or our "kingdoms") on anything other than the rock of God's foundation we leave ourselves in a precarious situation. In the Old Testament this was called idolatry. The first two of the God's top ten list (the 10 Commandments) dealt with this concept. The first was "no other gods except Me" and the second was "don't worship idols". We don't really think about idols much anymore. When we do we picture ancient savages dancing around a fire and bowing down before carved statues. We would never do such a thing. We are much too sophisticated for such nonsense. And yet we do fall for it. Every day. We may not sacrifice to a carved statue but every day we sacrifice the best of our time, energy, resources, relationships and even our health on the altars of more money, more stuff, more power, more success, more pleasure and more relational conquests. The gods haven't gone away- they've just gotten sneaky.

They will get you to sacrifice the best you have to them without even realizing you're doing it. And there's nothing wrong with any of the things I've mentioned. In fact, money, success, pleasure and relationships are a big part of what making life worth living. They just make a lousy foundation for your life. A very shaky foundation. If you make anything other than God the foundation of your life you will have sleep patterns very similar to Nebuchadnezzar- you will wake up in the middle of the night filled with anxiety and worry and it will slowly destroy your life. But if you make God the foundation of your life then not only will your life be infused with stability and peace- but the things that make life sweeter will come to you in ways you never dreamed was possible. So let me ask you- what foundation is your life built upon?

Thursday Reflection: Then third lesson we learn from the book of Daniel is the power of the Rescuer. Remember in Nebuchadnezzar's dream that the thing that took down the statue representing the Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman empires was a rock cut from a mountain but not by human hands:

As you watched, a rock was cut from a mountain, but not by human hands. It struck the feet of iron and clay, smashing them to bits. The whole statue was crushed into small pieces of iron, clay, bronze, silver, and gold. Then the wind blew them away without a trace, like chaff on a threshing floor. But the rock that knocked the statue down became a great mountain that covered the whole earth. Daniel 2:31-35 (NLT)

What is this rock that does such damage when it's so small but then grows to eventually fill the whole earth? It's the King/Kingdom of God. It's the one Kingdom that will never end and eventually it will outlast every other kingdom of man that has ever existed. It's already outlasted every kingdom of man that has ever existed since it began. Who would have guessed that a kingdom with no army, no money, no politicians and no education begun by fishermen, peasants and slaves would outlast the mighty Roman empire? Yet here we are 2,000 years later and Jesus' Kingdom continues to grow. It will never stop growing until the day when the King returns and His Kingdom will finally fill the entire earth.

So what is my part in this Kingdom? To help usher it into existence here on this earth. We often think of God's kingdom as some far away geographical place (even if that place is located in some other realm or dimension) that we'll go to after we die (at least we hope we get to go ;o) But that's not the way Jesus talked about it. He'd say things like this:

"Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!" Matthew 3:2

Some of the Pharisees asked Jesus, "When will the kingdom of God come?" Jesus answered, "God's kingdom is coming, but not in a way that you will be able to see with your eyes. People will not say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' because God's kingdom is within you" Luke 17:20-21

Basically what Jesus teaches us about God's kingdom is that it's something that moves around. In the Lord's Prayer Jesus asks us to pray that the kingdom would "come". And that God's "will" (what He wants to be done) would be done here on earth just as it's done in Heaven. So I have a question for you. How is God's will done in Heaven? Perfectly, right? What God wants... that's what happens. Ok so question number two is, how well is God's will done here on earth? Not too good, huh? Sin by it's very definition is when we as human beings do things that are outside of God's will. Even if all we did was look at our own individual lives (which is really what Jesus is asking us to do here) God's will is done pretty pitifully down here on earth. So what is Jesus asking us to pray for? I think this part of the prayer could be summed up by saying, Let Your kingdom come, and let it begin with me.

The only place you have any control over whether or not God's will is done on this earth is in your own life. You can't force anyone else to live according to God's will. You only have limited control over yourself... what hope is there of controlling someone else. So Jesus asks us to pray, every day, for surrender. Our own surrender. What a terrifying thought. Surrender to God's plan? Give up my own agenda? How can I possibly do that? How can I trust that God will do what's best for me? That's why Jesus' model prayer starts with immersing ourselves in how good a Father God is to us. How He wants nothing but the best for us. That He can be trusted. So that when we get to this REALLY scary part of the prayer we will have the basis and foundation of trust that is required to surrender your plans to God. Is it easy? Nope. Not even when you think you've surrendered you will constantly find areas that you have held back and God let you remain blissfully unaware until you were ready to face them.

Remember, The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him. For he knows how weak we are; he remembers we are only dust.

Psalm 103

This is the next part of your prayer list. Spend a few minutes thinking about what areas of your life you are having a tough time surrendering. God's not looking for you to be perfect at this right away. Be honest with Him. Tell Him what things you're scared of letting go of. Instead of saying, "I WILL NEVER SURRENDER (fill in the blank)! say something like, "Lord, I have no idea how I'm going to surrender this... can you show me the way? Remember that as you learn how to be more and more like Jesus, God will open your life up to more and more of His power. And when that happens you will start to be able to do things you never thought you could do. Things you never could do.

I don't know what will be hard for you to let go of at this point in the prayer. Maybe it's a habit, a behavior, an emotion. Whatever it is, talk to God about what it might take to surrender that to Him. Ask for His help.

Friday Reflection:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." Matthew 2:1-2 (NLT)

There is a man in your kingdom who has within him the spirit of the holy gods... this man was found to have insight, understanding, and wisdom like that of the gods... King Nebuchadnezzar- made him chief over all the magicians, enchanters, astrologers, and fortune-tellers of Babylon. Daniel 5:11 (NLT)

This week we are looking at the story of Christmas from the perspective of the Wise Men who came to Israel in search of the newborn King of the Jews. What led to their journey? Why did they think a King had been born?

Well to get a grip on that we have to go back several hundred years before this newborn King was sent to our world. About 500 years before Jesus was born a man named Daniel was taken by the nation of Babylon as plunder after they had destroyed the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdoms of Israel had fallen a couple hundred years earlier, destroyed by the Assyrians. In both instances the strategy of the conquerors was very similar- remove about 80% of the people from the defeated country and move them to other places in the empire. Then replace those 80% with people from other conquered nations. Why did they do this? To try to get rid of any kind of nationalism that might lead to rebellion over time. If there were very few Jews left in Israel how could they ever rebel and drive the invaders out? And just to chase this little rabbit trail a bit further... it worked perfectly in every case with one exception- the Jews. They are the only people group who did not become assimilated into a massive repopulation campaign. You will never hear about Polish Philistines, or Spanish Edomites, or Russian Midianites. But in every corner of the earth there are still pockets of Jews retaining their distinctive culture and traditions.

Anyways... Daniel was taken to Babylon along with many of the other most promising young men from Judah. Some of the most amazing stories in the Bible are about Daniel and his friends, but one small but very important fact gets overlooked often- that Daniel does so well working for the King of Babylon (and then Persia) that he becomes the High Priest of the

Magi. The Magi were the wise men and magicians who advised the King. Since Daniel was able to interpret dreams and since he obviously had the favor of God the King put Daniel in charge of an organization that had, up until that point, been a family affair. It was a hereditary appointment and now these Babylonian Magi were told to follow someone who not only wasn't part of the priestly family, he wasn't even Babylonian!

Well, the Magi didn't like that one bit. They did everything they could to get rid of Daniel which is what leads to the story of Daniel in the lions den (but that's another story for another time). The main point of this story for understanding where these Wise Men (or Magi) from the east got their information about a coming King in Israel is that Daniel ends up living out the rest of his life in Babylon (and then Persian when they conquer the Babylonians) as the High Priest of the Magi.

Fast forward about 500 years. A star appears in the heavens and this signifies to the Magi (direct descendants of the priesthood that Daniel oversaw until his death) that the King of the Jews has been born. Why? Well, there are a couple of possibilities. One is that the book of Daniel, found in the Old Testament of the Bible is a book of prophecy. Prophecy isn't easy to follow or decode but if the Magi had been trained to understand the prophecies that Daniel wrote about then it's probable that having read passages like this one they knew about the time when the King would be sent from Heaven:

After this period of sixty-two sets of seven, the Anointed One will be killed, appearing to have accomplished nothing, and a ruler will arise whose armies will destroy the city and the Temple. Daniel 9:26 (NLT)

Sixty-two sets of seven? What does that mean? Well I'm not sure but these guys apparently understood what I don't (and probably a WHOLE lot more than just that) and because of that they were waiting expectantly for something to occur. There is speculation that Daniel wrote another book that isn't found in the Old Testament scriptures. A book for the Magi of the East. A book that quite possibly talked of a star that would appear on the night that, while a nation slept, God stepped into our world and became a Baby. Is that a lot of speculation? Maybe. But why else would the star signify to these guys that the King had come?

And it wasn't just the people in the East who were looking to Judah for the birth of a great leader. There was a rumor that was circulating around the Roman world that was very well known that a mighty ruler would come out of Judea. Virgil, a Roman poet and historian wrote about it. Suetonius, another Roman historian wrote about it. Josephus, a Jewish historian wrote about it. In fact, Vespasian, a Roman general who went to Judea when there was a Jewish uprising in 70 AD... those of you who love that kind of history will have heard of Masada, and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Vespasian was the general who destroyed Jerusalem and conquered the nation of Israel. Later when Vespasian was campaigning to become the next Roman emperor he referenced that well known prophecy and said that the great ruler to come out of Judea wasn't a Jew at all... it was him. Vespasian. And it worked... he became emperor. But where did that prophecy come from?

Probably from the book of Daniel. Not the one in the Old Testament, but the one that the Magi dedicated their lives to. That's who came to search for Jesus. They didn't have all the

information they would need to find this baby. a baby that slipped into the world without an entire nation who had been waiting on Him to come for thousands of years realizing it. How did they end up finding Him? They were wise... they asked for directions. Tomorrow we'll learn more.