

April 3-7, 2023 Edition

Following The Year_(s) Of Jesus Part 66

A Garden, A Cup & A Cross

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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:

Some prophets told how kind God would be to you, and they searched hard to find out more about the way you would be saved... they searched to find out exactly who Christ would be and when this would happen... and it is all so strange and wonderful that even the angels in heaven would give a great deal to know more about it. 1 Peter 1:10-12 (TLB)

Reflection: What's the deal with the cross? I don't know about you but the cross always mystified me. I mean, isn't God the One Who makes the rules? Didn't He create everything? If that's true then why was the cross necessary? We will get to all of that this week but I want to start out by talking about love.

What is "love"? Have you ever tried to define it? Paul attempts it in 1 Corinthians 13 (if you've ever been to a wedding or seen the movie "Wedding Crashers" you've heard it at least once in your life ;o)

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.... Three things will last forever--faith, hope, and love--and the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:4-13 (NLT)

Is everything clearer now? Sort of? I guess? Love is one of those things that can't be easily explained or written about. Poets and novelists have spent countless hours trying to illustrate it. But nothing says "love" like the cross. God has gotten plenty of bad press over the last couple of thousand years. Mostly through our own misunderstanding or through the misunderstanding of His people who claim to speak for Him and instead of love they end up illustrating hate and/or indifference. Yes, God has gotten some bad press, but on the cross Jesus makes God look REALLY good. But why was it necessary? Because of love. The cross had to happen because of love.

When God created the universe through Jesus He gave us humans something that no other created being was given- choice. And within that choice was the seed for all pain and suffering that has ever been experienced in this world. In Genesis 1:31 the Bible says that when God was finished creating, everything was good:

Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!

But it didn't take long for things to go from "very good" to "not very good". What catalyzed that reaction? Choice. Plain and simple. God told Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He told them that on the day they ate that fruit they would die. If the thing God was most interested in was blind obedience then He could have accomplished that by taking away their/our ability to choose for themselves/ourselves. But there was something more important to God than our blind obedience- love.

Sure, God could remove all pain and suffering from this universe simply by removing our ability to choose, but He'd also remove any chance that exists for selfless acts of loving kindness. And God's great gamble was that somehow, someday the love that humans express for each other, for themselves (not a narcissistic kind of self love but the willingness to care

for oneself so that we have the energy and health to love each other & God) and for God would overshadow the evil that selfish and hateful choices unleash on this earth. Did His gamble pay off? I guess that's a question each of us will have to ponder. There's still a TON of pain and suffering on this earth that is made possible because of the free will God has given to humans, but there is also a TON of good and beauty unleashed because of love.

And that brings us back to the cross. On the day that Jesus hung on that cross because of His love for us the most explosive expression of spiritual power this universe has ever experienced was unleashed (with the possible exception of what happened 3 days later on resurrection Sunday). Do you want to know if God loves you? Look at the cross. Do you want to know how to love others? Look at the cross. Jesus says the way to follow in His footsteps is to take up our own cross:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. Matthew 16:24 (NLT)

What exactly does that mean, to carry my own cross? I think Paul nailed it in 1 Corinthians 13- we read it at the beginning of today's reflection but maybe Paul's definition of love will take on a new light after having talked about the cross for a few minutes:

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.... Three things will last forever-faith, hope, and love-and the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:4-13 (NLT)

Prayer: Father, thank You for the cross. Thank You for giving me the ability to make my own choices. Today I pray that You would show me what taking up my own cross might look like and how choosing to do that with my free will might increase the amount of love in this world. In Jesus Name I pray, Amen.

Tuesday:

Jesus was given to you, and with the help of those who don't know the law, you put him to death by nailing him to a cross. But this was God's plan which he had made long ago; he knew all this would happen. God raised Jesus from the dead and set him free from the pain of death, because death could not hold him. Acts 2:23-24 (NCV)

Reflection: Why did Jesus have to die? I grew up asking that question and nobody seemed to know. I got lots of "well Eddie, that was God's plan" sort of answers to which I wanted to respond, "duh!!!" (I didn't but only because my Sunday school teachers terrified me ;o)

I recognize it was God's plan. I recognized that he had set this in motion thousands of years before it happened. As Max Lucado says, "as soon as Adam & Eve bit into the forbidden fruit a 'cross shaped shadow' appeared on the horizon and everything that happened from then until Jesus hung on that cross was about getting Jesus to that one moment".

As it turns out, Jesus had to die because of a little, 3 letter word- sin. We don't like to use that word much in our culture. We would much rather blame somebody else for the problems in

the world but when it comes to the question of why Jesus had to die there is a very simple answer- because of me. Yes, Jesus died for the world and not just for me, but even if I was the only one who had ever sinned in the history of the world (which was sort of the way my fourth grade homeroom teacher Mr. Kohlsteadt seemed to feel about me but I digress ;o) Jesus would have still had to die for me in order to redeem me. Would He have? I like to think so. I'm not perfect but neither were the apostles and He seemed pretty patient with them.

Sin is a terrible thing. Why? Because it's open rebellion. We don't like to think of it that way but that's what it is. Sin in it's most basic definition is when I decide I know better than God how to live my life. God told Adam & Eve not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When they ate that fruit what they were saying was, "I think I know a little bit better than my Father what will make me happy!" And so they ate it and since that very moment, all of their descendants have been carrying on the family tradition. Paul puts it this way in Romans chapter 3:

All have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard... and all need to be made right with God. Romans 3:23-24 (NLT)

I don't know about you, but I am a little uncomfortable with how often Paul uses the word, "all" in that sentence. How does it feel to be included? Not good, right? Nobody likes it and so we try to rationalize or minimize our "sin". We say things like, "I'm not that bad." and "I've never killed anyone or anything like that, have I?" or maybe "I'm not Hitler!!!"

The problem is, Hitler isn't the standard we have to live up to (or maybe it would be down to?). It's not our parent's standard or our teacher's standards or the pastor's standards... it's not even my own standards that I have to live up to.

It's God's glorious standard.

And nobody, with the exception of one Guy, has ever lived up to that standard. That's the only hope you'll find in Romans 3:23. Yes, we've all sinned (hi... I'm Ed and I'm a sinner.) and, yes, we have all fallen short of God's glorious standard and yes, we all have to be made right with God but if you had been reading Romans from the beginning you'd already know, while the fact that we've all sinned is bad news it isn't fatal news. Because as it turns out there is Someone Who has the ability and the willingness to make us right with God. The one Guy Who has ever been able to live up to God's glorious standard. His Name is Jesus and if you let Him He will be your Savior, your Redeemer and your Friend. Thank God for that!

Prayer: Father, I confess that I have sinned. I confess that I have fallen short of Your glorious standard. And I confess that I need to be made right with You on a daily, hourly and even moment by moment basis. So show me how to live like Jesus did. Thank You for sending Him to make a way for me to be made right with You. In His Name I pray, amen.

Wednesday:

For the wages of sin is death. Romans 6:23 (NLT)

Reflection: So we've established that there is some bad news- that we all sin, that we all fall short of God's glorious standard and that we all need to be made right with God. But just

wait... it gets worse! What could be worse? Romans 6:23 which tells us what the penalty or result of my sin is- death.

That is worse. If all of us sin and if the penalty for sin is death then I'm in big trouble (so are you by the way... I'm grateful not to be alone in this ;o) When preachers pull these verses out of context and quote them to unsuspecting unbelievers they can really cause a lot of stress. One of my favorite preachers in the world is a man named Joe Beam. Joe was an adventurous teenager. He got in every kind of trouble you can imagine and even thought up a few ways you never dreamed of. When he was 19 he had a conversion experience and gave his life to Jesus. He went away to preacher college and when he graduated he came home to his tiny home town in Alabama and was going to put on a gospel meeting at the small church his parents attended and that he grew up going to.

It was the only subject of conversation in the small town for weeks before Joe came home. Is that the same kid that (fill in the blank... he did almost everything at one point or another growing up)??? Is he really a preacher now??? We HAVE to go hear what he's got to say!!! Consequently every person in town, whether they belonged to Joe's family's church or not, showed up on the night he was going to preach. There were people from every church in town and quite a few who were usually too scared to step through the doors of a church for fear they might be struck by lightning. One of those who hadn't been in church in years came a little late and the only seat left for him was in the front row. He sat down, nervous as all get out but refusing to miss the most exciting thing that had happened in their little town in years. Joe got up to preach and quoted Romans 6:23- the wages of sin is death. He paused and looked around the room. "DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS?!?!?!", Joe screamed at

the top of his lungs. "THAT MEANS YOU'RE GOING TO **HELL**!!!!!!", and as Joe screamed it he arbitrarily pointed out in front of him, unintentionally right at the guy in the front row who hadn't been in church in years and was nervous enough before he was told he was going to Hell. The guy forgot where he was he was so nervous, and pulled out a cigarette and lit up right there on the front row of that church. Nobody in the back could see the guy clearly so they didn't know he had lit a cigarette- they just saw Joe point at the guy and tell him he was going to Hell and then they saw smoke rising from the front row. And all those southerners who love a good Hellfire and brimstone sermon thought, "this guy is GOOD!"

Romans 6:23 would be a terrifying statement if you hadn't read the rest of Romans- or if you stopped mid verse and didn't read the rest of that verse. Paul doesn't leave his readers hanging (no pun intended). He doesn't even draw a breath before he tells us that the fact that we deserve to go to Hell isn't the final word:

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23 (NLT)

Thank God (and Jesus) for that! But if you're like me, you still have questions. Ok... so now I know why Jesus had to die- to save me from this thing called sin that all of us have done and all of us need to be saved from... but why is it that the wages of sin is death? I mean, didn't God create everything? Didn't He make the rules? Why couldn't He have made the wages of

sin be something like ice cream? When people sin they must eat ice cream! Couldn't He have done that?

Turns out even God couldn't do that. I can't explain exactly why to you but it all has something to do with His eternal nature. There are certain things even God can't do. He can't lie. He can't deny Himself. And He won't force you or me to do anything we don't choose to do of our own free will. The Bible is kind of vague about a lot of it and I'm not exactly sure why. Joe Beam (the guy from Alabama?) thinks it's because if God wrote out the rules in clearly stated and understood terms then the enemy would know His plans and if that were the case then the devil would never have worked so hard to get the people of Israel to kill Jesus on the cross. Maybe that's it... all I know is that in order to understand it all we have to read as much in to what the Bible doesn't say as in what it does.

When God created the universe He wove universal laws or principles into the very fabric of His creation. We see the physical laws woven into creation all the time and take them for granted. Gravity, for instance. We all know that what goes up must come down. You don't have to be Sir Isaac Newton to know that if you fall you're going to get hurt, and that the higher up you are when you fall the more damage is going to be done. But how does it all work? Does God sit up in Heaven watching for anyone foolish enough to not take the universal law of gravity seriously and when they fall does He say, "you didn't take gravity seriously enough so now I'm going to break your arm!"? No... nobody would say that. A broken arm is just a natural consequence of falling. Nobody blames God for it... it's just part of the way things work.

Alongside the physical laws that we all take for granted are spiritual laws, also woven into the fabric of our universe. One of those spiritual laws states that when people sin, the result is death. There's no getting around it. There's another spiritual law that comes into play with the cross. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way:

Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. Hebrews 9:22 (NLT)

Why? Why is there no forgiveness apart from the shedding of blood? To show us the cost? To demonstrate the severity of sin? Maybe. Whatever the reason, it's a universal law that even God had to abide by. CS Lewis describes this concept in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* as the "deep magic". The magic that governs all of the events and interactions in Narnia. If you've never seen the movie or read the book, do it. It is a fascinating look into the mind of a genius who spent the better part of his life trying to explain the concept I'm doing a terrible job explaining right now. Here's what Lewis says about this concept- when Edmund betrays his friends and family he (by right of the deep magic) belongs to the White Witch. She has the right to kill him. But Aslan, the King of Narnia volunteers Himself to be killed in Edmund's place. The White Witch jumps at the chance. They torture and humiliate Aslan and finally kill him. They lay His dead body on the stone table and leave him to rot. Two of Aslan's disciples, Susan and Lucy stay the night watching over Aslan and in the morning as they are leaving there's an earthquake and they hear the stone table crack. As they try to figure out what is going on and where Aslan's body went they see Him and while filled with joy they don't understand what happened. Here's Aslan's explanation:

LUCY. Oh, Aslan!

SUSAN. Are you not dead, dear Aslan?

ASLAN. Not now.

LUCY. You're not a gho-ghost?

ASLAN. Do I look like one?

(LUCY and SUSAN rush to him, laughing and crying simultaneously. They embrace ASLAN.)

LUCY. Oh, you're real, you're .real! Oh, Aslan. (After a few moments they calm down.)

SUSAN. But what does it all mean?

ASLAN. It means there is an even Deeper Magic than the witch knew. Before time began, there was another law written. It says that when a willing victim who has committed no treachery-

LUCY. like you?

ASLAN ...like me- is killed in the place of a traitor -

SUSAN. like Edmund?

ASLAN. ...like Edmund. The table will crack, and Death itself will start working backward.

That's what happened at the cross. Jesus, Who had committed no treachery gave Himself for a traitor (like me) and much to the devil's chagrin, the keys to hell and death were taken from him and death itself started working backward. I don't know exactly how or why... but I'm not the one who has to know. For me, even if I am a nosy, curious and irritatingly questioning individual, it is enough to thank the One Who knew enough to put the language of sacrifice and redemption in the "deep magic" knowing that one day someone like me would come along and need Him to save me. Maybe you need His ability to save in your own life? If so then cheer up. The bad news is, we've all sinned. The worse news is the wages of sin is death. But the GREAT NEWS is that the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Prayer: Father, it's almost like you saw me coming. How did you know I, along with every other human on the face of the planet would need that "deep magic" loophole that the devil could never understand. Today I thank You again for that loophole and ask for the courage and the grace to live the rest of today in a way that makes You proud to be my Father. In Jesus Name, amen.

Thursday:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. Genesis 1:1-2 (NLT)

When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. Romans 5:12 (NLT)

Through Jesus he created the universe. The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything. Hebrews 1:2-3 (NLT)

Reflection: I want to take today to talk just a little bit about what Jesus experienced on the cross. I don't like to linger on the things in the Bible that might make us feel bad but since tomorrow is Good Friday I thought it might help to know just how much He was

willing to go through for you and me because it's WAY more than I used to think it was. Growing up I always focused on the physical pain and torture. It's what just about every movie ever made about His death is about because it's the only thing we can relate to, but I think His suffering, what REALLY worried Him was about a lot more than the physical pain. To get a handle on what that was let's go back to the beginning.

If you read the story of creation in Genesis chapter 1 you'll see words that describe what the universe was like before God got busy organizing and creating order. Words like "darkness" and "formless" and "chaos" describe what it was like before His brilliant and beautiful and amazing creative power brought about the beauty we now see all around us. Things went from nothing to everything with nothing more than spoken sentences to bring it all about. What kind of power is that??? And for a while, everything remained perfect. It was perfect until sin entered the world and immediately a brand new process started up- the process of un-creation. If you remember much from your high school physics course then you might recall the second law of thermodynamics- entropy. Entropy is the tendency for things to go from order to disorder (I had a '78 Toyota Landcruiser that was the very living embodiment of entropy). In other words, things fall apart if left alone. That "law" was foreign to this universe until Adam & Eve sinned. It began the process that will eventually finish it's work on judgment day. We see it at work in our cars, our homes, our clothes and especially in our human bodies. We are falling apart.

Judgement day is the final step in that "falling apart". Jeremiah described that day like this:

I looked at the earth, and it was empty and had no shape. I looked at the sky, and its light was gone. Jeremiah 4:23 (NLT)

The earth went from orderly to "empty" and formless. The lights that God spoke into creation had gone out. I don't think it's a big stretch to say that judgment day is nothing more than the day of un-creation. The formed going back to formless. The orderly going back to disorder. The created going back to un-created. We are currently on a wild ride plunging headlong towards that moment in time. For now there is something (or more accurately Someone) who is holding the forces of entropy at bay and slowing their march. That Someone's Name is Jesus:

Through Jesus he created the universe. The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything. Hebrews 1:2-3 (NLT)

Until that day (the Old Testament writers called it the "Great And Terrible Day Of The Lord") Jesus is holding everything together so that we don't have to fully experience the formlessness and emptiness and unravelling that we deserve. But on the cross, Jesus Himself experienced it.

Have you ever read the story of Jesus' death? I mean really read it. Like I mentioned earlier, I used to read it and almost exclusively think about the physical pain but now when I read it I notice He never complains about any of that (with the exception of being thirsty). Jesus experiences in the hours leading up to His death every form of injustice and betrayal that a person can experience. His friends either betray or desert Him. His people/government unjustly sentence Him to death. The Romans torture Him and kill Him even through they

believe Him to be innocent. Relational betrayal, injustice and physical torture and yet He never says anything about any of those things. What does He finally cry out about?

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Mark 15:33-34 (ESV)

He doesn't cry out, "my friends, my friends, why have you abandoned me?" He doesn't cry out, "my government, my government, why have you oppressed me?" He doesn't even cry out in response to the unbelievable physical pain inflicted on Him by the Romans. No, the only thing He cries out about is when the Father has to turn away and separate Himself from His Son. If the consequence of sin is separation from God then Jesus had to experience it in order to save us. That's when He cries out. That's when He can no longer hold it in. The other stuff He took in stride but as soon as He experiences being cut off from the Father, that He can no longer keep quiet about. He is experiencing the end result of sin. Not just separation but un-creation. He is experiencing judgment day so that we won't have to. The Creator being un-created. The One Who sustains everything and holds it all together is unravelling.

When Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane and begs His Father three times to take away His cup of suffering it wasn't the physical pain that was causing Him to sweat drops like blood. It wasn't the whip and the nails and the spear and the crown of thorns and the beatings. It was the spiritual stuff that was causing the Creator of the Universe untold anxiety. It turns out it was this moment right here. Jesus is coming undone. For me and you. Jesus is experiencing un-creation. Jesus is experiencing judgment day. Jesus is experiencing what it's like to have God leave you alone... totally.

And it's crushing Him.

Jesus decides that rather than inflicting the horrors of un-creation on the human beings who asked for it... He would rather take it upon himself. For 6 hours one Friday He went to Hell for eternity. Why did He do it? Well, He thought you were worth it. No, I don't get it either. But I thank Him for it every day.

Prayer: Father, I will never understand why You chose to go to Hell for me rather than spend eternity without me. But I will try to live my life everyday in a way that says, "thank You." In Jesus Name, amen.

Friday:

Then Jesus uttered another loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. When the Roman officer who stood facing him saw how he had died, he exclaimed, "This man truly was the Son of God!" Mark 15:37-39 (NLT)

Reflection: So, Jesus went through the worst imaginable experience (physically and spiritually) to "save" me from my sin. And because of the blood He spilled on the cross a couple of things happened. After Jesus died the Bible says that the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two but what's so important about that?

The Temple was separated into sections that determined how close a person could get to God. The furthest section was called the court of the gentiles. It was as close as someone who wasn't Jewish could get to the section of the Temple known as the "Holy of Holies" or the "Most Holy Place" (more on that section in a minute). Next came the court of the women. A Jewish woman could enter that court but go no further. Beyond that was the court of the Israelites and any Jewish man could get that far. Beyond that was the "Holy Place". At that point a person had entered into the doors of the Temple and only priests and Temple workers (Levites is what they were called) could enter that part of the Temple.

But beyond that "Holy Place" was what was called the "Most Holy Place". It was separated from the "Holy Place" by a curtain and only the High Priest could go in there and then only once a year on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar- Yom Kippur. The day of atonement. On that day the High Priest would sacrifice a lamb and take the blood into the Temple and pass through the curtain into the "Most Holy Place" where he would sprinkle the blood on the altar to atone for the sins of the people of Israel. The curtain that separated the "Most Holy Place" from the rest of the Temple was a reminder that God couldn't be approached by just anybody and not just anytime. The people needed someone to mediate between them and God.

When Jesus died that curtain was torn from top to bottom. I never really gave it much thought before, but why do you suppose Mark is so careful to make sure we know from which direction it ripped? Maybe because Mark wanted to make sure there was no doubt about Who it was Who did the tearing? Jesus' sacrifice didn't just provide for the forgiveness of our sins- He also opened the way for me and you to enter into the very presence of God. It's not like we don't still need a mediator. We do. His Name is Jesus. And because of His death on the cross we can now walk confidently into the true and better "Most Holy Place" in Heaven itself that the area behind the curtain in the Temple was only a poor representation of. Now whenever I bow my head Jesus ushers me into the presence of His Father in the "Most Holy Place" and gives me access to all the benefits that affords. All because of the cross. And I never noticed this before but it's almost as though Mark wants us to see exactly what is going on, to make sure we don't miss this moment and so he tells us about the first guy to take advantage of that. And it's a Roman centurion who goes in. When the Centurion (who would have been in charge of Jesus' execution) sees everything that happens and how Jesus handles it he says, "truly, this man was the son of God."

It's fascinating that all through the book of Mark there is this question that keeps getting asked- Who is this Guy? His disciples ask it. The people that see his miracles ask it. The Pharisees ask it. Everybody is asking this question. And here at the very end of the book of Mark is the most unlikely candidate you can possibly imagine and yet he's the only guy to say I see who this guy is. I wonder if this is Mark's way of saying, "if this guy could connect with God because of what Jesus did on the cross, then anyone can connect with God because of what Jesus did on the cross." Even me. Even you. Jesus gave His life so that you could connect with His Father. Will you?