

May 20-24, 2024 Edition

Following The Year_(s) Of ^ Jesus Part 125

Blooming Where I'm Planted

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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 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:

"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)

Reflection: Don't you just love Jeremiah chapter 29? I mean, come on! God knows the plans He has for me. Plans for good in my life... plans designed to give me hope and a future. Sounds pretty awesome, doesn't it? I imagine that's why you see this verse everywhere you look when you walk into a Christian bookstore. It's on t-shirts, posters, mugs and Bible covers. You'll see it from time to time on Facebook featured in nifty memes that are designed to give us hope when we see them.

And I'm not trying to say this verse shouldn't give us hope but what do you think it really means? What is God promising? Is it to fulfill your plans and dreams or to fulfill His plans and dreams for you? To answer that question let's back up a little bit and look at the context of this amazing verse. Jeremiah is writing to a group of people who have been kidnapped and taken into exile in a country far away from their homes. Babylon destroyed the nation of Judah about 800 years before Jesus was born and dragged a huge percentage of the population off into exile. That's how they handled every nation they conquered- exile for the majority of the people. They'd drag off the majority of a nation and sprinkle them throughout other conquered nations and then take people from those other conquered nations and put them in Judah. It was their way of assimilating a culture and nation. Their idea was that if there was no dominant culture in a nation then they would never have to worry about revolution. There wouldn't be enough Israelites left to make any waves.

And their strategy worked for every single people group that they conquered in the ancient world, except the Jews. The Jews maintained their culture and identity as a distinct people group wherever they went. It's really mind boggling when you think about it. How did they survive? Why weren't they assimilated? Well there are probably many answers to that question but one is, God told them to remain distinct. He also told them to stay put. Most of the Jewish people saw the conquest of Judah as a slap on the hand by God for their disobedience. They thought God was just getting their attention and that after a few years He would bring them back to the promised land. Consequently the exiled Jews weren't really settling down. They were just sort of biding their time until God put things right again. That was their plan. That was their dream.

But it wasn't God's plan for them. What God says to these people who are impatiently awaiting His intervention is found a little earlier in Jeremiah chapter 29:

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. Jeremiah 29:1-6 (NIV)

Say what? Build houses? Plant gardens? Create families? That sounds like a long term thing, not what they had planned at all. Can you imagine why it was hard for God to find prophets to speak to the people on His behalf? They weren't terribly popular people. In fact, they were

often killed for their truthfulness, for telling people what God said that the people didn't appreciate. God comes to these people who are waiting His action and tells them- for this generation who is hearing this message, you will never return to your homes. You will live and grow old and die in exile in Babylon, but you can handle it because what you really need is not just in Jerusalem. I will be with you in your Babylon. I will be with you in exile. So I want you to bless the world in which you find yourselves. I want you to kind of be like salt and be light in a dark place. Build, plant, and marry. In other words, you can worship God in Babylon. In other words, the God of Israel is also the God of Babylon, they just don't know it yet. Babylon's plan was to assimilate the Israelites into their kingdom. But it turns out God's plan is to assimilate Babylon into God's kingdom. So with all that in mind, let's read our scripture for today again:

"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)

Now sometimes the exile we find ourselves in is geographical and we find ourselves, like the Israelites, in a place we really would rather not be in and we're waiting for God to step in and fulfill His promise in Jeremiah 29. Sometimes we are in relational exile, or emotional exile, or maybe even physical exile because of a problem we are having with our body. We see the t-shirts with Jeremiah 29 written on it. We bought the mug and post the FB memes. Why hasn't God stepped in and done what He promised yet? Is He ever going to release me from my exile? Yes... but maybe not in the way you think He should. Maybe you, like the Israelites, will find yourself in exile for the rest of your life (I know, I don't like the sound of that either) or maybe He'll step in a transplant you at some point (just about every testimony you read or listen to about God's faithfulness comes from a person who was transplanted out of their exile... we need to hear more from the people who God leaves where they are but who bloom where they've been planted). According to Jeremiah 29 our job isn't to do the transplanting- it's to bloom where we've been planted right here, right now. God's dreams for you are real and He is planning on doing something amazing in your life- but chances are you wouldn't have thought it up on your own. No miraculous story in the Bible begins, "and then some human had a really great idea and God said, 'whoa! I never thought of that... let's go with your plan!'" This is God's plan for your life. He created you. He designed you. He knows what will lead to your ultimate happiness and fulfillment.

So bloom where you're planted. How do I do that? Well, that's what the rest of this week will be all about.

Tuesday:

If you embrace this kingdom life and don't doubt God, you'll not only do minor feats... but also triumph over huge obstacles. Matthew 21:21 (MES)

Reflection: When I was 20 years old I found myself enslaved by a lifestyle and mentality that I realized was going to lead me into a very real place called Hell. Whatever you believe about the concepts presented in the Bible about eternal destinations like Heaven and Hell, I don't think there's anyone who would argue that we have a unique ability to unleash a sort of "Hell on earth" in our own lives and it often spills over into other people's lives as well-

people who are close to us. I realized that where I had gotten myself to was a direct result of my best thinking and wisdom so it wasn't a very big leap to realize I need someone else to tell me how life should be lived. I checked out all kinds of different ideas/paths and ended up back where I had begun, with Jesus. I had no idea if He was really "real" or not (I had my doubts) but I had heard so much about His ability to transform human lives past the point of no return that I figured I had to give Him a try. I remember laying in bed one night and praying this prayer:

"I'm not sure if You're really there or not. But if You are there and You really do want my life for some unimaginable reason, then You can have it. I don't really know what that means, but I will start doing what I think I'm supposed to do and I will start studying the Bible to see what I need to do that I don't know yet. And I know I'm supposed to have all these feelings and say things like, "I love You," but I don't really know You so I guess for me to say that now would be a lie and if You are Who You claim to be You'd know I was lying so that would probably be a bad start for us. So I'll start living my life the way You want me to and if we're ever going to get to that "I love You" stage that's going to have to be something You do because I can't manufacture it."

That was my prayer. I wish I could tell you that the heavens parted and light shone down into my room and that angels descended and I got those "feelings" we all so desperately want, but I can't tell you that. It was like nothing happened. It made me wonder if He was really there. It made me wonder if I shouldn't figure that I tried but Jesus wasn't the answer to on to the next folly. But I didn't know where else to go. There was nobody else that I had ever heard of whose resume was as filled with people who claimed He had saved their lives. So I woke up the next morning and started doing what I thought I was supposed to do and started reading through the Bible to see what it said about how I should be living. I focused on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters five through seven) and the book of James (the wisdom book of the New Testament written to give a practical framework to brand new Christians who wanted to know what following Jesus would look like in their everyday lives).

As I read through these passages of scripture I kept a notebook close by and wrote down any instruction I found about how life should be lived. As I wrote down these instructions I started to see a pattern. All of the instructions in the Sermon on the Mount and in the book of James could pretty much be divided into four distinct categories: Bible reflection, practicing community, investing my life in something other than myself & practicing generosity (and generosity is about WAY more than just \$\$). As I started pouring my life into these categories I noticed something truly miraculous- Jesus was RIGHT! Who knew, right? I mean, the Jesus "way" seems so counter intuitive and so counter cultural. What do you mean the way to find my life is to lose it? What do you mean the way up is down? What do you mean that way to greatness is through service? That's just crazy talk, isn't it?

Turns out, it's not. Jesus knows what He's talking about. His Kingdom is truly upside down when we compare it to our own human ideas, but just look at the results. I did in my own life and the answer was undeniable for me. Jesus' way saved my life. And I'll tell you this too- as I started to see His power unleashed in my life and as I started to see my anemic prayers answered in ways that go WAY beyond coincidence those feelings I didn't have for Him

started to organically work themselves into my heart. It didn't take long to be able to say, "I love You Jesus" and be able to genuinely mean it. Years later I read about a study that was done to identify what makes a strong, healthy follower of Jesus. Researchers would go into a church and ask the people there who they most admired for their ability to follow Jesus. Who do you know who's a strong man/woman of faith? Then the researchers asked those identified in each church what they did on a regular basis. Five common characteristics came out over and over again. These five characteristics could be called the 5 habits of highly effective followers (at least that's what I call them with a tip of the hat to Stephen Covey). Now I know what you're thinking- "wait a minute, Pastor Ed. Didn't you say you had identified four categories that every instruction in the Bible could be boiled down to?" Yes. But I'm not (and I'm sure you'll all be shocked to hear this) perfect. There was one very important concept I missed- although to be fair that fifth concept isn't really an instruction but a way of looking at life so maybe to say I'm not perfect is a bit of a misnomer (ok... it's not a misnomer... I'm not perfect. There. Are you happy now?)

Over the next several days we'll look at the four categories I saw and the fifth concept I had missed. But for today I hope you'll ask yourself if you've ever really dedicated yourself to living a life based on the instructions of Jesus, and if not, are you ready to?

Wednesday:

Happy are those who don't listen to the wicked, who don't go where sinners go, who don't do what evil people do. They love the LORD'S teachings, and they think about those teachings day and night. They are strong, like a tree planted by a river. The tree produces fruit in season, and its leaves don't die. Everything they do will succeed. Psalm 1:1-3 (NLT)

But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. James 1:22-25 (NLT)

Reflection: Ok... so what are the five habits of highly effective followers? Well the first one is Bible reflection. I won't spend an entire day on each of these 5 categories but this one seems very important to me because it will inform all the rest of the habits. What is Bible reflection? Well, it's more than just reading or even studying the Bible. The Pharisees knew the Bible better than anyone in their day but it didn't incline their hearts towards God. They had more knowledge than anyone and yet Jesus repeatedly told them they were farther away from God than prostitutes and tax collectors. So then what different about reflection?

Reflection isn't just about study- it's about recognition. As I read the Bible I look to see if I seem something God wants me to see/hear. There are moments as I read that I won't notice much (probably more about my inability to focus on a regular basis than anything else) but then there will be moments when it's like a jolt of electricity goes through me. I'll never forget one day when I was pretty new to this whole thing and I was reading through the book of Colossians. I got almost to the end of the first chapter when I read this:

So we continue to preach Christ to each person, using all wisdom to warn and to teach everyone, in order to bring each one into God's presence as a mature person in Christ. To do this, I work and struggle, using Christ's great strength that works so powerfully in me. Colossians 1:28-29 (NCV)

When I read that it was like that jolt of electricity I was talking about. It's like something in my soul was trying to make me aware of something truly important that I had just read. I started to realize how meaningful bringing people into the presence of Jesus would be for me. I made sure to remember that particular passage of scripture. I reflected on it and thought about it as I went about my day and week and month and year and life. That's one scripture that means a lot to me and I never would have found it if it wasn't for the fact that I actually opened God's Book and read it like He was writing to me. But reflection isn't just about thinking on or meditating over what I've read. It's also about looking for my "reflection" in the Bible. When James talks about a man who sees his reflection in a mirror and then after walking away immediately forgets what he looks like, what is he talking about? I think James is talking about reading without asking myself if maybe it's something I should be reflecting on. The Bible is meant to be a mirror that shows us the beauty inside of us and the ugliness. We often miss both. We miss the beauty of who we are and we miss the areas God wants us to improve in. Both are deadly when it comes to living a strong life of faith.

When I had been at this "following Jesus" business for a year or two I started to think I was getting pretty good at it. I had a ton of Bible knowledge and I was pretty good at debating with people who were "wrong" and putting them in their "place". We don't have time for the whole story so in the spirit of brevity I'll just say, I had become a Pharisee. I knew I had been a "disreputable sinner" before I came to Jesus but it never occurred to me that as Jesus cleaned me up I would become like the people to whom He had more negative things to say than anyone else when He walked this earth. One day I was listening to a sermon (believe it or not it is possible to see myself reflected in the scriptures even when someone else is reading them) and I saw clearly (more clearly than I would have liked) that I had become a Pharisee.

I. Was. Devastated.

I wasn't sure what to do, but I knew I had seen myself clearly reflected as a Pharisee as the scriptures were read. After seeing my "reflection" in the scriptures I spent the next few days "reflecting" on what the Bible had shown me. I knew I had to change... I just didn't know what change would look like. I didn't know how to proceed. Do you know what I figured out? That the Bible would guide me. When my ideas where changed by the Bible it was like the kaleidoscope I was looking through had been turned and consequently everything I looked at after that- even stuff I was very familiar with in the Bible- was changed. By looking for my reflection in the scriptures (do I see something God is wanting to say to me here?) and then reflecting on what I heard God saying to me, God was able to move me forward as I followed His Son. I took one more step closer to being "more and more like Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). Do you see why this category isn't just called, "reading your Bible", or "studying your Bible"? There is SO much more to it than that. But if you do this, the promise is amazing. James tells us if we do it then God will bless us for it and Psalm chapter 1 tells us that Bible reflection will make us happy, strong & successful. What more could a person ask for? Want

to be blessed, happy, strong and successful? Reflect on your Bible and look for your reflection in your Bible so that you can reflect the image of God's Son in your life. Makes perfect sense, doesn't it?

Thursday:

God's intent is that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known. Ephesians 3:10 (NIV)

Two people are better than one... If one falls down, the other can help him up. But it is bad for the person who is alone and falls, because no one is there to help. Ecclesiastes 4:10 (NCV)

God has given each of you some special abilities; be sure to use them to help each other, passing on to others God's many kinds of blessings. 1 Peter 4:10 (TLB)

Just as there are many parts to our bodies, so it is with Christ's body. We are all parts of it, and it takes every one of us to make it complete, for we each have different work to do. So we belong to each other, and each needs all the others. Romans 12:4-5 (TLB)

Reflection: Today we're going to look at two more of the habits of highly effective followers- practicing community and investing in others. They are very similar categories in a way which is why we're pairing them together today. One is about a word the Bible calls "fellowship" and the other is about something the Bible calls "service".

We don't use the word "fellowship" very often in the 21st century unless we're in church. If you're a Lord Of The Rings fan then you might think of the "Fellowship Of The Ring". Nine companions who would work together to complete a very important task- the destruction of the One Ring in order to save the world. Their fellowship brought together many different skills and abilities but it also brought together many different weaknesses. But as the fellowship worked toward the same goal they overcame their differences and celebrated their strengths and eventually completed the task they had undertaken.

Did you know that if you're a follower of Jesus then you have been given a task? A task you cannot complete on your own. Jesus has given us a community- a "fellowship" of companions whose goal is (supposed to be) the same as yours. To save the world. Not by yourself- but with your companions- one of whom is a man named Jesus. You cannot complete your mission by yourself. You many think you can. You may wish that you could. But you can't. It's all part of Jesus' plan. And even if you think you don't need any help (which is another lesson for another day... everyone will need help at some point on their journey whether you believe it right now or not), what makes you think this is just about you? This is not just about you. Yes, Jesus' plan is for you to go through life in community so that if/when you fall there is someone there to help you up. But His plan is also in place so that when someone else falls, sometimes you will be the one He tasks with the job of helping that person up. It is not just about you. His plan will never succeed if we try to be a bunch of "Lone Ranger" Christians.

Not only that, but you will never move forward in this whole "becoming more and more like Jesus" unless you invest your life in others. This is what the Bible calls service. Jesus says over and over that if you want to find your life you have to lose it. If you want to move up you

have to move down. That the greatest will be the servant of all. Your progress will be retarded if you don't make your life about more than yourself. You see it all the time in recovery programs. The people that have recovered their lives and are seen as strong and powerful are almost always those who are helping others. The sponsors try to help those who are not as far down the road to recovery as they are. Often times newcomers will look at these strong people and think, "they're just stronger than I am. I could never be that strong." But they'd be wrong about that. They could be. How? By investing their lives in someone else. By making their life about more than just themselves.

The "strong" people are nothing more than folks who have discovered this secret of fellowship and service. Choosing to belong to a group and do their best to help others on the same road they are walking down. Very much like the Fellowship of the Ring. Are you struggling right now? Do you wonder why you're able to move forward? There could be other reasons but maybe you should ask yourself if you're trying to move forward alone. It never works no matter how badly we want it to. Practice community and invest in others. It's the only way.

Friday:

Give, and you will receive. You will be given much. Pressed down, shaken together, and running over, it will spill into your lap. The way you give to others is the way God will give to you. Luke 6:38 (NCV)

The good man does not escape all troubles- he has them too. But the Lord helps him in each and every one. Psalm 34:19 (TLB)

Whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything. James 1:2-4 (NLT)

Reflection: The last two habits of highly effective followers are practicing generosity and developing sensitive callouses. Yes... I said sensitive callouses and I'll explain what I mean but first, generosity.

The Bible says over and over again that the way we give is directly related to the way we receive. Some cultures call it Karma or maybe you've heard the term, "what goes around comes around?" This is the universal law of planting and harvesting. It works in the physical realm with crops and it works in the metaphysical realm with emotions, habits, feelings & actions. How you give to/treat others will come back to you. When Jesus talks about how the way we give to yoghurts is the way God will give to us He's not just talking about money. Generally that's all you hear if you go to church- money money money money. But generosity is about SO much more than just finances. We can (and should be) generous with our time, energy, thoughts, words, actions and so much more. I always try to remember that the way I "give" to others is the same way God will "give back" to me. I'm not always successful at living up to my values but I have something I'm aiming at.

People who live generous lives end up living amazing lives of faith. They live lives that when others who know them are asked, "who do you admire for their ability to follow Jesus?", their