

August 19-23, 2024 Edition

Following
The Year^(s) Of ^Jesus Part 138

Death, Taxes & Jesus

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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 are going to look at three mini-narratives from the gospel of Matthew. These 3 stories occur right after Jesus heals the boy who was possessed by an evil spirit (ok the first story is really the ending of the story with the boy with the demon but we didn't get a chance to look at this part of that story so there you go...) and I think they teach us quite a bit that wasn't just an important lesson for the apostles but also pretty important for us.

If you read last week's reflections then you know we were looking at the time Jesus cast a demon out of a boy in response to the dad's plea, I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief. What sounds like an anemic prayer that could never work turns out to be the key that unlocks the power of heaven. We'd like to believe heaven is moved by our record and how well we're doing. And while God loves for us to be doing well it's not primarily what unlocks the power of heaven. So what will unlock the power of heaven to flow into our lives? Helplessness. Jesus is always moved by a person crying out to Him for help while admitting their helplessness. At any rate, after Jesus heals the boy His disciples ask Him why they couldn't cast out the evil spirit:

Afterward the disciples asked Jesus privately, "Why couldn't we cast out that demon?" Matthew 17:19 (NLT)

The apostles were understandably confused. They had been able to cast out evil spirits when they had been sent out two by two. What had changed? We got into that last week (remember Jesus telling them "this kind can only come out by prayer"?) so I don't want to get into it again but I do want to look at how Matthew tells the story because Matthew focuses on a different part of the problem the apostles were having:

"You don't have enough faith," Jesus told them. "I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible. Matthew 17:20 (NLT)

I don't know what you think of that statement that Jesus makes. It has always confused me because I have never seen a literal mountain move. But the apostles had (or at least they had heard about it being done and all of them no doubt had seen the results). What am I talking about? I'm talking about the Herodion. The Herodion was a "mountain" fortress that Herod The Great had built near Bethlehem. He had several scattered throughout ancient Israel so that no matter where he might be in his kingdom if trouble came calling Herod wouldn't have far to go to be safe. You've probably heard of Masada which was one of those fortresses built on the south western shore of the Dead Sea but that's not the fortress on the apostles' minds when Jesus talks about moving mountains- they would have thought about the Herodion.

Turns out that while Herod wanted a mountain fortress near Bethlehem there weren't any appropriate mountains on which to build it. So he made one. Kind of. Let me explain. There were two "mountains" side by side just outside of Bethlehem. But neither one was tall enough for Herod's fortress. So he lopped the top off one mountain and added it to the top of the other making it much taller than its neighbor. I can't remember exactly how long that process took but they basically did it bucket by bucket. Can you even imagine? I can't. But

when Jesus mentions moving mountains this is undoubtedly where the apostles' imagination would have gone. They had heard all about how difficult moving mountains was. But they had also heard that it was possible to move a mountain.

Now Jesus tells them that all it would take for them to move mountains is faith. But what does that mean? We'll talk about that tomorrow but for today maybe spend some time reflecting on what Jesus means by "moving mountains".

Tuesday Reflection: Yesterday we began looking at what the apostles thought about when Jesus told them this:

"You don't have enough faith," Jesus told them. "I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible. Matthew 17:20 (NLT)

I told you about the Herodion- a mountain fortress built by Herod the Great during their parents' lifetime. It was one of the most talked about projects of Herod because of the challenges associated with moving a mountain. If you don't know what I'm talking about go read Monday's reflection and we'll wait for you to get back before we continue.

Ok so we're all on the same page now? Today I want to focus in on what Jesus means when He tells them if they had "faith even as small as a mustard seed" that they could move mountains themselves. What does that even mean? Is Jesus talking about literal mountains? Maybe but I have never seen a mountain move myself much less moved a literal mountain. I mean, sure I've seen metaphorical mountains move in my life and the lives of others but never a literal one. So what does that mean? Does that mean that there's been nobody with "faith even as small as a mustard seed" over the last 2,000 years? I don't think so.

If you remember our reflections on faith and doubt over the last couple of weeks then you know that faith isn't just about what we want to see happen. Real quick for review remember that faith is a Bible word that has 4 different English possible translations: faith, belief, trust and commitment. When I used to look at this verse about faith that moves mountains I thought I had to have 100% certainty that a mountain I told to move would move or it wouldn't happen. I thought it was about the quality of my faith. But if you read the last couple of weeks worth of reflections than I hope I made it clear that the object of our faith (Jesus) is MUCH more important than the quality or certainty of our faith.

Even in English it would make sense if I had only paid attention. Yes faith or belief is partly about our intellectual agreement that what the Bible says about Jesus is true. But that's not nearly the whole story. Yes, if I say "I believe you" it means I think you're telling the truth but let's take the other 3 English words that are translated from the Bible word *pistos* and maybe even take another look at the 4th we've already just talked about. Yes I can say "I believe you" but is that the same meaning as "I believe in you"? No they have different meanings. How about "I have faith in you" or "I trust in you". Are those things about believing what a person says about themselves is true or are those statements more about a decision regarding who we have chosen to believe in, have faith in and put our trust in? Throw in that last definition of the Bible word for faith (commitment) and you start to see that faith isn't

just about what I want to see happen- it's about committing myself to the God who I have chosen (and committed to) believe in, put my trust in and put my faith in.

So moving mountains is not something we can just decide we're going to do and then if we believe it strongly enough it will happen. Moving mountains as it turns out is about trusting Jesus so much that we let Him set the agenda for our lives. This communication gap is found in a very popular promise from the Old Testament:

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)

I don't know about you but the way I used to interpret that promise was to reword it somewhat so that it said, For I know the plans you have for you, Ed. And I'll get right on fulfilling your plans because we all know how brilliant you are as a planner and I bow to your foresight. Ok, I may not have thought about it like that quite so blatantly but that's basically the way I looked at that promise. But that's not what that promise means. That promise is a promise that good is going to come out of a plan that we would never have chosen for ourselves. The plan is God's plan and the only decision that you and I have to make is whether we are willing to fit into God's plans or resist them. Why should I submit to God's plan rather than my own? Because it's the only way I will ever see mountains move in my life. And one thing I've learned over the course of a lifetime trying to follow Jesus (sometimes doing a much better job of it than others) is that God's plan for my life is always more beautiful, more generous and more powerful than anything I could have come up with on my own. So do you want to move mountains. Then you're going to need God's power working in your life. Maybe today we should spend some time reflecting on what that might look like rather than focusing on the mountains we've decided are the right ones to move.

Wednesday Reflection: The next mini travel-narrative that we're going to look at happens after Jesus exorcises the demon of the boy whose dad has wavering faith. He talks to the disciples about faith and then we get to the next "story" (it's not really long enough to be a story but it's still pretty important in the development of the gospel story) in Jesus' life:

After they gathered again in Galilee, Jesus told them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of his enemies. He will be killed, but on the third day he will be raised from the dead." And the disciples were filled with grief. Matthew 17:22-23 (NLT)

Ok so here's what's going on. Before this happens Jesus takes His disciples up to Caesarea-Philippi and asks who they think He is. Peter blurts out, "you are the Christ. The Son of the living God". Peter immediately gets one heck of an attaboy from Jesus. Jesus seems to think they've finally understood what's going on so He tells them what's coming. He will go to Jerusalem where He will be arrested, tried, convicted and put to death but on the third day He would rise again. I know that sounds awfully familiar considering the passage we just read but in Caesarea-Philippi it was the first time He told them clearly what was coming. And what was the response? Peter rebukes Jesus and basically says, "not on my watch!" Jesus rebukes him right back and it's pretty obvious that Peter and the rest of the apostles take that to heart because when Jesus tells them the second time they don't say anything- they're just filled with grief. Grief is an appropriate reaction to Jesus' words- rebuking isn't. Preachers

will sometimes sneer at the reaction of the apostles as a lack of faith. He told you He's coming back? Don't you believe Him? How could you dare grieve over Jesus' prediction seeing as how He says it will all work out in the end?

But if I told you that I was going to be arrested, tried, convicted, tortured over a period of up to 12 hours and then nailed to a cross where I would die- but don't worry because I will be resurrected 3 days later- I would hope that would make you sad for me. I wouldn't want to see anyone go through that much less Jesus. I think grief is a legitimate response to Jesus' prediction no matter how much faith (or lack thereof) it demonstrated. But even so it's obvious that the disciples still don't get it. And who could blame them. They've grown up being told for as long as they could remember that the Messiah would be a conquering king who would trample the enemies of God under his feet and establish God's everlasting throne in Jerusalem where he would reign for eternity. Surely Jesus knows the prophecies- how could He be so wrong?

And it's true that the prophecies seem to suggest that the Messiah would be a conquering king- so many of the Old Testament prophecies painted a picture of this victorious warrior king. But the warrior king prophecies weren't the only prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament. There were also these prophecies of a mysterious suffering servant whose sacrificial death would bring about the healing of the nations. The Rabbis in the first century were so confused by these (seemingly) contradictory prophecies that they concluded that there must be more than one Messiah figure coming to rescue Israel. One who would be the conquering king and one who would be the suffering servant. But at Jesus' baptism and then again at the Transfiguration God makes it clear to anyone paying attention that Jesus would fulfill both prophecies at the same time:

But even as he spoke, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him."
Matthew 17:5 (NLT)

Like I say- scholars will tell you that God's words at Jesus' baptism (exactly the same words as at the Transfiguration but at the Transfiguration God adds, "listen to Him") make it clear that Jesus will be both the conquering king and the suffering servant. How do they do that? Because God's words are a "mashup" of two different Old Testament prophecies- one from Psalm chapter 2 and one from Isaiah chapter 43. Psalm chapter 2 is a conquering king prophecy and Isaiah 43 is a suffering servant prophecy. God is making it clear that Jesus will somehow fulfill both categories- no matter how unlikely that may seem to us humans. The disciples inability to understand this seeming paradox is understandable but it doesn't stop Jesus from continuing to try to help them understand. Maybe you've heard the saying, you missed the forest for the trees. Well the disciples missed the suffering servant for the conquering king. All they (or really anyone in first century Israel) focused on was the conquering king. But Jesus keeps trying to help them see that the two cannot be separated. Yes it may seem like the prophecies are suggesting that these have to be two different people but the Old Testament paints a different picture for anyone willing to see it:

It was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he

was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.

Isaiah 53:4-6 (NIV)

This is one of the more famous prophecies of the suffering servant. It seems to suggest that the suffering servant will die for the healing of the nations and that is indeed what it foretells. But that's not the whole story (and that's what Jesus is trying to help the disciples see). Because death doesn't get to have the last word with this suffering servant. Let's look at what Isaiah says next about this mysterious figure (and as you read I hope you'll think about who this sounds like):

He was oppressed and treated harshly yet he never said a word. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. Unjustly condemned, he was led away. No one cared that... his life was cut short in midstream. But he was struck down for the rebellion of my people. He had done no wrong and had never deceived anyone. But he was buried like a criminal; he was put in a rich man's grave. But it was the Lord's good plan to crush him and cause him grief. Yet when his life is made an offering for sin, he will have many descendants. He will enjoy a long life, and the Lord's good plan will prosper in his hands. When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied. And because of his experience, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins.

Isaiah 53:7-11 (NLT)

It's very strange isn't it? This suffering servant will die for the sins of the people but (and as a friend of mine likes to say, this is a REALLY big but!) death won't get the last word with this mysterious figure. This figure will have "many descendants" and he will "enjoy a long life". How is that possible? Because we just don't see the big picture the way God does. Yes Jesus would die on the cross (as the suffering servant) but in so doing He would crush the head of the serpent and destroy the power of hell and death, and in so doing He would trample the enemies of God under His feet. He would pick His life back up again and then He'd reign on God's throne for all eternity.

And that's just how it happened. But here's the truly amazing thing to me about the suffering servant/conquering king- when all is said and done and He's gone through all the suffering, the torture and the pain He will look back over all that happened (once He's taken His life back from death itself) we are told that "when he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied". Do you know what that means? That means that after all the pain and suffering, despite what He went through, that Jesus looked back on it all and said, it was totally worth it. How can He say that? Why would He say that? Because this has never been about Him- it's always been about you and me. Without the sacrificial death of the suffering servant Jesus could never redeem and save us. So even though He dreaded what He was going to have to go through He did so that He could spend eternity with Him and so that death would never have the last word in our lives (anymore than it did in His). Today let's spend some time reflecting on that sacrifice Jesus made so that we could share in the life that He brings everywhere He goes.

Thursday Reflection: When last we left our story through the Bible Moses and the Israelites were encamped around Mt. Sinai- a detour God took them through on their way to inhabit the land promised to Abraham by God. When they leave Sinai they went straight toward the promised land and camped just west of the Jordan river. Moses sent 12 scouts across the Jordan to scope out what they could expect when they crossed over into their inheritance. When the scouts came back they told about a land "flowing with milk and honey." A sentence that since has become synonymous with wealth and fertility. But there was a problem:

Caleb said, "Let's go now and take possession of the land. We should be more than able to conquer it." But the men who had gone with him said, "We can't attack those people! They're too strong for us!" So they began to spread lies among the Israelites about the land they had explored. Numbers 13:30-32 (NLT)

The problem was, the Israelites almost as a single unit decided to listen to the 10 scouts' lies and refused to move into the promised land- even with God on their side. Why? Did they not believe that God could give them victory? Probably not- but what the Israelites learned over the years was that sometimes even though there was a victory there was still sacrifice involved and they didn't want to sacrifice at that point.

So God had to get the Israelites to a point where they could/would inhabit the land He had promised them. He turned them around and left them in the wilderness wandering around for 40 years- until everyone who was an adult when they stood at the banks of the Jordan river and refused to enter had died except for the two scouts who had faith enough to trust God and urged Israel to trust God as well. Even Moses doesn't make it into the promised land (that's another story for another day). And so Joshua and Caleb are the only ones from that generation to enter the promised land. And God chooses Joshua to be the new leader of Israel.

Moses my servant is dead. Therefore, the time has come for you to lead these people, the Israelites, across the Jordan River into the land I am giving them.... No one will be able to stand against you as long as you live. For I will be with you as I was with Moses. I will not fail you or abandon you. Joshua 1:2-5 (NLT)

Now Joshua had been Moses' second in command for 40 years in the wilderness. He was a mighty warrior and his bravery was unquestioned. And yet in Joshua chapter one what we read is the pep talk to end all pep talks. Take a look at part of what God said to Joshua:

Be strong and courageous, for you are the one who will lead these people to possess all the land I swore to their ancestors I would give them... Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you. Joshua 1:6-7 (NLT)

Twice in just two verses God tells Joshua to be "strong and courageous". It must not have been sinking in because God finally resorts to military-speak- something Joshua would have understood:

I command you- be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:9 (NLT)

Why is Joshua so nervous? Well, I'll give you a hint- it wasn't the battles with the enemy that he knew were ahead that had him shaking in his boots. I think what was making Joshua nervous was the fact that God was asking him to do something even Moses could never do- wrangle the Israelites. The people of God were stubborn, stiff necked and did more than their share of grumbling and murmuring (isn't that a great word? It even sounds like what it is- murmur-murmur...) and complaining. Now God was asking Joshua to try to do what Moses- the greatest leader in the history of God's people- could never do. And I can imagine it made him nervous.

But Joshua took God's pep talk to heart. He would live a life of courage that is not rivaled by very many who have ever walked with God. He had success where Moses did not and a big part of that may have been that Moses' biggest trouble makers died in the wilderness but still... how did Joshua manage to become one of the most courageous leaders the Bible has ever seen?

It's in that last verse we read- did you catch it? God said to be strong and courageous because He would go everywhere with Joshua. The secret to courage is to keep our eyes focused squarely on God and what He has done for us and His people over the years. Only by doing that will you and I ever move into whatever future God has planned for us. Because make no mistake- God's plan for your future will require courage on your part. So... be strong and courageous. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.

Friday Reflection: Before Joshua ever takes the reins of Israel to lead them into their inheritance God makes sure to tell him what the secret to success is. Aren't you excited that God spells this out clearly? There are thousands of books (at least if not millions) where somebody claims to have discovered the secret of success. The problem with that is it's no secret. The Bible tells us over and over how to succeed and we'll start by looking at what God tells Joshua:

Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do.
Joshua 1:7-8 (NLT)

What book of instruction? Well, at this point the Bible consisted of 5 books- Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy. The collective works of Moses. God tells Joshua to study His instructions given through Moses. To meditate on them day and night and God promises that if he does that then he will "prosper and succeed" in everything he does. How simple is that? Maybe not easy but simple. So why do we have such a struggle when it comes to success? Maybe Psalm chapter one will shed some light:

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 (NCV)

Did you catch it? King David lists three things that often keep us from being successful. These three things often lure us away not only from studying and meditating on God's instruction but also lure us into breaking those instructions. Have you ever been unsuccessful at making changes in your life? Yeah, me too. If you've ever struggled with addiction maybe you will recognize this pattern. When I decided I had to stop abusing drugs and alcohol because I realized they were now abusing me I tried lots of times to stop. Over and over I failed. Why? I wasn't sure but I finally decided if I was going to recover my life I had to go all in because what I had been doing wasn't working. I kept hanging out with the same people, going the same places I'd always gone, listening to the same people and things I'd always listened to and doing most of the same things I had always done.

So when I finally found "success" in recovery it was because I did what Psalm one told me to- I changed who I listened to, where I went and what I did. I also poured my life into God's instructions for life. I really thought about them for the first time. And do you know what happened? SUCCESS!!!! GOD WAS RIGHT! GO FIGURE! Now I don't say that to make fun of God but to point out how silly I had been. Thinking I knew better than God what would lead to success in my life.

How about you? Have you been unsuccessful at making changes in your own life? There could be many factors why but maybe it's time to perform the "Psalm One Test" on your life. Do you need to change who/what you listen to, where you go and what you do? It's funny how doing what God says will lead to success. Go figure.