

September 21-25, 2020 Edition

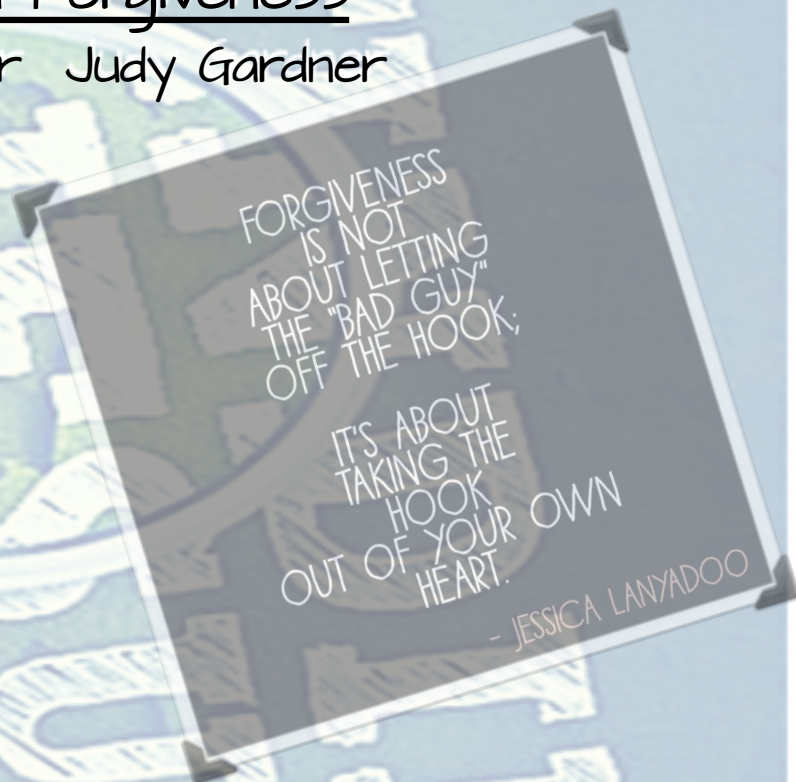
The "BIG Story" Of The Bible #17

Finding Jesus In The Old Testament

Jesus On Forgiveness

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

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

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;D) 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:

In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part. Matthew 6:14-15 (MES)

Reflection: Forgiveness does not come naturally to human beings (isn't that an understatement?). Before Jesus, this wasn't much of a problem. It simply did not occur to anyone that forgiveness had any merit anyway. It was considered noble to show kindness to your own, but to fiercely oppose enemies and outsiders. "Forgiveness as we know it did not exist in ancient Greece and Rome." (Who is This Man? page 88)

How outrageous it must have seemed to Jesus' listeners that He would teach those interested in God's kingdom to LOVE their enemies. It wouldn't just sound difficult. It would sound downright wrong. Often it still does. The concept of forgiveness just doesn't quite seem fair.

But in this new kingdom of Jesus' we are taught that love, acceptance & forgiveness is **always** the appropriate response to human beings. This isn't true only when those around us deserve it. By the new standards, love is given not based on the merit of the recipient, but on the giver's willingness to trust God that love is always the best policy, even when every fibre of our being screams that this cannot be right (do you have one of those 3 year olds inside you too?

The one who jumps up and down and screams, "this isn't **fair!!!**").

"I am called to love the repentant person who hurt me. And as if that wasn't hard enough... I am also called to love the unrepentant person who hurt me." (Who is This Man? page 89)

Through Jesus, God is calling all people to Himself, to claim them as His own. If every human being belongs to God, we can no longer afford to treat **anyone** as we would an enemy. We must take care how we treat people - the good, the bad and the... uh, unadmired (how's that for showing a little kindness to God's less than attractive children?). Jesus' good news was for us **and** for them, for friends **and** for enemies. How exceedingly inconvenient! Especially when it comes so naturally to take sides. I can still remember those long car trips where a line would need to be drawn to show my sister that she was the one who was transgressing into my territory... not the other way around like she thought.

This doesn't mean that God wants us to just let everyone do whatever they want. That isn't love. Those who aren't able to resist the impulse to harm others are better served by being given limits to their freedom. Love isn't all rainbows and butterflies and unicorns and puppydog tails. Sometimes God loves us best by saying, "no." But from God's perspective all of us come from the other side of the line. None of us are completely without blame. And yet all of us respond best to being loved.

Who do you need to forgive?

Prayer: Father, I don't know why forgiveness is so hard... but often it is. Forgive me for the times I fall short of Your likeness when it comes to judgment and forgiveness. I want to be more like You... show me the way. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Tuesday:

"Well, then," Jesus said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." His reply completely amazed them. Mark 12:17 (NLT)

Reflection: It never occurred to Jesus' listeners that the kingdom He spoke of... the kingdom that He said was coming, would not overthrow the Romans as one of its first steps. "The triumphal entry was, for the crowds, a military statement." (Who is This Man? page 102) Finally God was ready to free His people, just as He did in the time of Moses when the Egyptians lost their slave labor force. The words, "now you're gonna get it!" were on everyone's lips. And yet Jesus refused to "stick it to 'em". His unwillingness to destroy the Roman Empire turned them from words like "hosana" to "crucify him!" What kind of kingdom was this? A kingdom you surrender to rather than fight for? A kingdom like the world had never seen before.

If you were an Israelite, you resented the Romans. They had the power to kill you, the might to demand taxes, the ability to keep you from living the way God had designed you to live. Surely the greatest threat to a life with God was the Romans, but Jesus didn't seem to agree. In an effort to trap Jesus, they asked Him if they should have to pay taxes (show submission) to the Romans. If Jesus said, "Forget the Romans. Don't show allegiance to them. You are God's people," it would get Him killed for treason by the Empire. And yet no rabbi wanted to be teacher's pet to the Romans. His answer was shockingly profound- nothing like they expected.

Jesus had them pull out a Roman coin, it would have had Caesar's head on it. He looked at the piece of metal made by the Romans and told them that they were welcome to give to Caesar what belonged to him – just as they were to give to God what belonged to Him. In other words, Caesar may have authority over how you spend your money... But there are things that answer only to the highest authority – there are things that belong only to God. Give the Romans back their coins. But give God your hearts and lives. It's as if Jesus was saying that what keeps us from direct access to the life God has designed for us is something much less tangible than politics and rights.

Jesus refused to overthrow Caesar just as enthusiastically as He refused to worship Caesar. After Jesus' death, as Christianity attracted followers by the thousands, Rome didn't know what to make of this new religion. It was like nothing ever seen before. Its practitioners claimed to be of a kingdom that had more authority than all the powers of this world. And yet they submitted themselves to this world's laws almost cheerfully. They moved through the world like foreigners, blessing those who believed like they did AND blessing those who didn't. In Jesus they had found a way to be free in this life regardless of their political standing.

How about you? Are you free? It seems like there are an awful lot of people out there (just take a short trip through your Facebook wall and you'll find them) who are upset about what our government is giving to God without ever giving a second thought to what they are giving God (not that FB posts are wrong... But don't become one of "those" people who complain loudly about the unfair treatment God is getting these days all the while living your life without much thought to how God wants you to live it). Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar... But please... Give to God what belongs to Him. Have you done that?

Prayer: Father, today I want to ask the question, "what do you want to do today?" Show me

how to give You what belongs to You. Teach me to be the kind of person whose words line up with my actions. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Wednesday:

A thief comes only to steal and to kill and to destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance. John 10:10 (NLT)

Reflection: Jesus told His followers that He came to bring us true life. The purpose of life has always been the question for us humans. Why am I here? What is a good life? To what extent should we try to be good? The Israelite word for having a good life was "blessed." It was based on the understanding that Solomon wrote about in Ecclesiastes, that this world cannot deliver on a satisfying or meaningful life. Some lives seem to be better than others, but no one can attain meaning and satisfaction apart from their creator, even someone with all the wealth of Solomon. The bottom line – a good life is a gift from God. And before Jesus came, few people lived lives of true blessing.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus taught that God is poised to unleash blessings on the most unlikely of people – the sad, the discontent, the lowly. Suddenly a life of meaning and satisfaction isn't just a pursuit for those with power and resources. God through Jesus was seeking to bless everyone, regardless of their circumstances or abilities. This came as quite a shock to those religious leaders who believed that it was up to them who was worthy of God's blessings.

Just like their Roman neighbors, the Pharisees judged a person's worth by their outward behavior and circumstances. Those who had the right answers, who could pass for civilized in their behavior, were the righteous. Unlike the common man who toiled building or fishing or farming, the Pharisees specialized in religion. And what is religion if it isn't the means to show ourselves worthy of God's blessing?

The New Testament would tell us that the purpose of religion is the help bear the load of the heavily burdened – the widow, the orphan, the poor. Those who used religion to merit righteousness and blessings from God, Jesus called performers. He borrowed the Greek word used for those who acted out the tragedies and comedies of the play-writes on the stage. It's almost as if Jesus was saying that outer compliance was more likely to be used for selfish purposes, and was of little value (or downright damaging) without inner devotion to God's perspective.

This is the truth that Jesus brought to give humans freedom: You can forget trying to be good enough, do good enough, or have it good enough to experience real meaning and satisfaction. It's an inside job. One that only God can do. But that bad news is the foundation for the good news that God is eager to move into our hearts and lives to redeem us from the inside out. Only God knows what will truly bless us. Only God knows what is truly good. We want to know who's in and who's out, who deserves blessings and who we can look down our noses at, but God says that only He can see into the human heart.

So stop wasting your time trying to figure out who's part of the in crowd and who's not. Instead live the life God has created you to live. Because until you do the abundant life Jesus dreamed of for you when He dreamed you up will always be just outside of your reach.

Prayer: Father, sometimes I get a little mixed up about what part I'm supposed to be playing in Your plan. Please show me my part and give me the wisdom to stop looking around and judging how others are doing their part. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Thursday

Jesus answered, "If I want him to live until I come back, that is not your business. You follow me." John 21:22 (NCV)

Reflection: One day Jesus told Peter how he (Peter) was going to die. Peter seemed to take this pretty well, but then he turned around and looked at John... what about him, Lord? When will he die? I love what Jesus said, "none of your beeswax, Peter... you just follow the path I've laid out for you (ok... I may be paraphrasing a little but that's basically what He said). The Christianity that spread out from the middle east after Jesus' death proved to have roots both deep and tenacious. The more it was persecuted, the further it spread. For many of us it is difficult to comprehend a historical movement like the one that inspired early Christians to rearrange their whole lives to meet together daily, sell their possessions to provide for each other, and reach out to the sick and the poor.

To a world in which human rights had no meaning, Jesus' teachings introduced a morality and power superior to all governments and cultures. In this new kingdom, members went from the downtrodden to the cherished ones of God. In response they devoted their lives to spreading and embodying Jesus' teachings. Within a few hundred years, the concept of human worth, and the rights of the individual to his have his own convictions, had seeped into the world's philosophy of government. "Jesus helped create a state where people could choose not to follow Jesus. In this way Jesus is present even in his absence." (Who is This Man? page 114)

In the fourth century, having thrived for hundred of years despite persecution and suffering, the church met its biggest challenge: prosperity. Christianity went from being illegal, to not just legal, but mandatory. With the increase in social status and power, authenticity and inner connection to God's power became less and less central. Where Christianity became the new law it often brought back the attitudes of the Pharisees to the old law (if that isn't jaw dropping I don't know what is... but it is human nature). Charity became less meaningful when prosperity became the new normal. Jesus' followers became more dangerous to His cause than His enemies.

Church leaders fought for power with themselves and with Kings in response to the emerging new world order. The vulnerability of the cross that had kept Jesus' followers tender and compassionate was easily neglected, and as a result hearts became hardened. Christianity became the path of least resistance... It was the path to power.

"People began to find it easier to be nominal Christian than to be nominal pagans. So some of the followers of Jesus began to make their way into the desert to find a way of life where self-examination and transparent confession were once again practiced." (Who is This Man? page 125)

The same Christianity that had thrived among the poor and the displaced, atrophied with the prosperous and the powerful. No wonder things got so messed up. It's interesting, isn't it? The church has handled persecution and hardship with tremendous amounts of grace... but the one

thing the church has proved itself incapable of handling is worldly power. We spend a lot of time bemoaning the fate of America with the slippage of Christian power in the government and the rise of secular liberalism... but is this really going to be a bad thing? Maybe for America... I guess that remains to be seen. But for the church and God's cause I think this is going to be a good thing (of course I could be wrong... I'm kind of a glass half full kind of person).

So what can you do today to move the message of Jesus (not religion but relationship) forward in this world? How can you make your heart more compassionate and tender... even to those who are the hardest to be compassionate and tender towards?

Prayer: Father, show me how to follow in Your Son's footsteps. Open my eyes to the beauty of what is happening all around me in spite of the darkness I see. In Jesus Name, amen.

Friday:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. Matthew 7:24 (NLT)

Reflection: I've been hinting at this all week... but Jesus' teaching was not intended to simply change the way you think. We spend an awful lot of energy these days deciding who has the right way of thinking about Jesus. Churches divide themselves up into different denominations based on what we think about God and the Bible. I think that's ok with God as long as we don't let our differences turn ugly. Church wars are the absolute worst (in my humble opinion).

At Riverside we say, We do church different... not necessarily better... just different. We don't claim to have the only way of doing church and we certainly wouldn't even say it's the best way. It's just the way we think God is asking us to do church.

I think that's a pretty good philosophy to go through life with. Instead of focusing on what other people are doing why not turn the painful mirror of truth around and take a look at yourself. How are you doing at what Jesus said in Matthew 7:24 (hearing His words AND putting them into practice)? Are you less angry than you were a year ago? Less judgmental? Less greedy?

I know... it can be painful to look into the mirror of truth and ask how I'm doing. But it's the path of blessing. And Jesus cares more about your motivation in life than He does your theological accuracy. As I look back at my life and see how much God has blessed me even in my ignorance when I take the smallest, faltering steps in the direction that He points me in I'm blown away. He really can do much more than we could ever ask or even imagine.

So today take a look at the mirror of truth. Turn it's focus inward and ask God how you're doing. Let's spend today saying, Let Your kingdom come, and let it begin with me.

Prayer: Father, show me how I'm doing at following You. Open my eyes to areas where I've stopped moving forward with You. Teach me to judge my life on what I'm becoming & doing for You instead of simply what I think. In Jesus' Name, amen.