

## *God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide*

### *Week 4*

**Monday, March 23rd**

**Haggai 2:1-9**

1 on the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: 2 "Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, 3 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? 4 But now be strong, Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD. 'Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the LORD, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the LORD Almighty. 5 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.'

6 "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. 7 I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. 8 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. 9 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty."

#### **Points of interest:**

- 'the prophet Haggai'—Haggai was a contemporary of Zechariah, the prophet from yesterday's passage. Like Zechariah, Haggai's main mission is to encourage the post-exilic leaders in Jerusalem as they re-build the temple.
- 'Does it not seem to you like nothing?'—the temple is in fact, at this point, nothing. Though they had started rebuilding about fifteen years before, they'd only gotten as far as laying the foundation. This was no grand house for God; it was a construction site.
- 'I will once more shake the heavens'—God is planning to 'shake things up.' The image here is of an earthquake, except that it shakes even the sky or heaven itself (it's unclear which Haggai is referring to). Just like in a major earthquake, some things that used to be on top will fall down, and some things that used to be on the bottom will end up on top. I don't think Haggai is talking about an actual earthquake here—it's hard to see how that would help rebuild the temple. Rather, he seems to be talking about a coming re-distribution of spiritual or political authority.
- 'what is desired by all nations will come'—this isn't just some little construction project, and it's not important to the Jews alone. Somehow, the deepest yearnings of all of the nations of the world rely on what Zerubbabel and Joshua are doing here.
- 'will be greater than the glory of the former house'—from what Zerubbabel and Joshua can see, their work is pretty pathetic. As I've mentioned, right now it's just a hole in the ground. Even if they were to complete it, the temple they have planned would be very modest in comparison with Solomon's original temple. They're trying to recapture just a little bit of the temple's previous glory, and they have every expectation that nonetheless they'll fail. Again and again in the prophets, we've seen the people of Israel look back toward some past golden age: 'Remember the good old days when David was king, when we lived in the land God had

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given us, when we worshipped at Solomon's temple? Ah, to be back there again!' Again and again, God has responded by saying, 'Far from it. The best is yet to come!'

#### Taking it home:

- *For you:* How are you feeling this Monday about the week ahead? Are you tired? Run down? Do you fear that all of your efforts this coming week will be 'like nothing'? If your forecast for the week ahead is a little grim or overwhelming, spend a moment asking God to give you the strength and courage you need to thrive.
- *For your six:* In the midst of a discouraging time, Haggai engages with his listeners through questions. What do you know about each of your six? What's their outlook on life, God, relationships, prayer, places of worship? Is there anything going on in their life that has been difficult or really discouraging recently? Next time you talk to one of your six, try asking more questions than you normally would, really inquiring about their thoughts and perspectives.
- *For America:* Ask that God would grant us his peace. Let's pray today specifically for high-crime neighborhoods in our country, where instead of God's peace, gang-violence, drugs, theft and fear are the more prominent overtones. The next story that you hear on the news about any form of violence, ask God to turn it around and to grant his peace in that situation.

#### Tuesday, March 24th

##### Matthew 2: 1-12

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

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6 " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel.' "

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

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#### **Luke 2:21-39**

21 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

22 When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

30 For my eyes have seen your salvation,

31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and the glory of your people Israel."

33 The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

36 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then had been a widow for eighty-four years. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.

#### **Points of interest:**

- 'After Jesus was born'—you've probably picked up on the fact that we're moving out of the prophets and into the gospels, the Bible's four stories of Jesus' life and ministry. Today, we'll look at two different stories surrounding Jesus' birth.
- 'Magi from the east came to Jerusalem'—these Magi are somewhat mysterious. They appear unexpectedly, and depart just as quickly; so we don't know much about them. They're most likely astrologers or magicians from Persia or Arabia. They remind me of the Queen of Sheba, who also came from far away—possibly Arabia—because of the great things she heard were

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happening in Jerusalem. They also remind me of Isaiah's prophecy, in chapter 66, that people from far away would come to Jerusalem with offerings.

- 'the one who has been born king of the Jews'—you have to wonder why these Magi cared so deeply about the birth of a foreign king. This reminds me of yesterday's passage, when the rebuilding of Jerusalem's temple fulfills the desires of all nations.
- 'When King Herod heard this he was disturbed'—it's easy to understand why Herod might be disturbed. As far as he knew, he was king of the Jews. It's a title he worked very hard to gain for himself. During the confusing period of Roman politics after the assassination of Julius Caesar, Herod expertly navigated the constantly changing political environment, insuring he stayed in the good graces of whatever Roman general happened to control the area at any given time. To put himself in line for the throne, he married a Jewish princess, and then proceeded to assassinate her entire family, eliminating any potential rivals. He even executed more than one of his own sons, when they seemed to become threats. Herod was not the kind of person to take news of this new king kindly.
- 'for this is what the prophet has written'—they're quoting Micah 5:2,4.
- 'When they saw the star, they were overjoyed'—apparently, the Magi temporarily lost track of the star that had guided them to Judea (the Roman name for what had been Judah). Maybe they stopped watching it because they assumed they'd find this young king in Jerusalem, since it was the capital. When things turn confusing in Jerusalem, the star reappears to finish its job. This star is, by the way, an unusually precise guide; Bethlehem is only six miles from Jerusalem, not a distance that a star could usually help you navigate.
- 'they bowed down and worshiped him'—the religious experts in Jerusalem know exactly where to find this prophesied king, but they don't bother to go to see him. Herod wants to know where he is, but presumably only so that he can kill him. It's only these strangers from far away who seek out the king to honor him.
- 'gold, frankincense and myrrh'—frankincense and myrrh are two aromatic oils that were imported from the East. Gold is a shiny, pliable metal often used as an expensive gift—but you probably knew that already.
- 'having been warned in a dream'—these Magi may not be familiar with the Jewish prophets, but God finds other ways to speak to them: first the star, and now a dream.
- 'when it was time to circumcise the child'—from the time of Abram, male children were circumcised to signify their inclusion in the covenant between God and Abram.
- 'a pair of doves'—this indicates that Joseph and Mary were poor. If they could afford it, they would sacrifice a lamb instead (Leviticus 12:8).
- 'before he had seen the Lord's Messiah'—by Jesus' time *Messiah* became the blanket term for the hoped-for future king we saw in our Isaiah passages: the Branch, the Root, the Servant, etc. *Messiah* essentially means, 'Chosen One.' Literally, it means, 'anointed'; a common way to commission someone for a special role (like king or priest or prophet) was to 'anoint them with oil,' pouring oil over their head as a symbol of God's Spirit resting on them. Simeon sees in the child Jesus the fulfillment of everything Isaiah and the Psalms had been looking forward to, and he's honored to be alive when it finally happens.

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- 'he went into the temple courts'—Zerubbabel and Joshua (from the last two passages) did succeed in rebuilding the temple. By a strange set of circumstances, their temple did indeed end up being grander than Solomon's. It started out quite modest, but several hundred years later, Herod lavishly remodeled it. He was trying to buy back some popularity after killing off the royal family.
- 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel'—I think in this poem Simeon is riffing off of some of our Isaiah passages. Just like in God's blessing of Abram, Simeon foresees both the Israelites and the rest of the world benefitting from what will happen through this child.
- 'a sign that will be spoken against'—Isaiah 11 (Monday, the 16<sup>th</sup>) spoke of the Messiah being a banner that rallied the nations. Simeon also sees Jesus as a very visible sign, but not necessarily a sign to which everyone will rally.
- 'looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem'—to redeem is to buy back from slavery. You've probably gotten the idea by now that Jerusalem was a really big deal for the Jews: it was part of the land God had promised to Abram; it was David's capital city; it was the site of Solomon's temple; and its glorious future was spoken of by the prophets. Jerusalem's status was basically what the Jews of the time used to measure whether or not all was right with the world. And all had not been right for a very long time. The Jews had been returned from exile, and had eventually rebuilt the temple; but they had never really been strong or free (except for a very brief time under the Maccabees) since the Babylonian conquest. They were ruled by a long string of empires: the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and now the Romans. The people of Jerusalem were still waiting for God to rescue their city from foreign domination, and to turn it into the envy of the world of which the prophets had spoken. To Anna, it seems that the time has finally come.

#### **Taking it home:**

- *For you:* Upon encountering Jesus, the Magi respond by presenting him with their treasures. Consider if there are any talents, resources, skills, or connections you have that could in some way be used for what God is doing in the world. Pick one of those things, and tell God that you're willing to offer it up to him.
- *For your six:* Simeon was not satisfied until he got what he had been waiting for all of those years—the opportunity to personally see Jesus. Ask God that he would give your six whatever it is they are most looking for in life—a sense of purpose, joy, intimacy, security—and that he would sustain them in their journey as they search for it.
- *For America:* Pray today for those who feel threatened, angry and on-edge about Jesus. Ask God to bless them and to loosen their sense of offense. Pray that they would have experiences that more closely resemble the Magi's than Herod's.

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**Wednesday, March 25th**

**Matthew 8:5-13**

5 When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. 6 "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly."

7 Jesus said to him, "Shall I come and heal him?"

8 The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. 9 For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

10 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. 11 I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. 12 But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

13 Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.

#### **Points of interest:**

- 'a centurion came to him'— the centurion was an official in the Roman military; thus he was definitely not a Jew (they were exempt from military service), and even more he represented the unwelcome foreign empire that had taken control over Israel. His position in the Roman army would equate roughly to a captain in the modern army. Most likely the centurion was not running in the same circle as Jesus and his crowd of followers; but possibly in his patrolling duties he caught wind that there was a rising celebrity of sorts who could help him. Like the Magi from the East in Matthew 2, this outsider intentionally makes his way to Jesus. Both in his infancy and his adulthood, Jesus draws people from far away to himself.
- 'do not deserve to have you come under my roof'—This could just be a polite formality, like the customary, 'No no, you really shouldn't bother.' Saying, 'yes,' to such an offer could really become quite a responsibility for both of them. Middle Easterners take giving and receiving hospitality quite seriously; so it's doubtful that Jesus could just quickly 'drop by' the centurion's home—it would more likely be an all afternoon and possibly evening affair. Or it could be that the centurion is showing an admirable amount of sensitivity to Jesus' status as a Jewish teacher: religious Jews avoided the homes of Gentiles, because of the higher likelihood that they'd encounter something prohibited by the kosher laws. However, it is also quite possible that the centurion really does recognize something powerful about Jesus. According to the social strata of the day, it would actually be the reverse of what the centurion is saying: this lower-class, roaming teacher figure, Jesus, wouldn't deserve to go to the home of an established army official. But the centurion feels like he is actually unworthy of the honor of having this man in his home. Anyway it seems like Jesus' response to the centurion's statement would be something like "Okay, well, if you're here with me, and your servant is

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sick at home, and you don't want me to come to your house, what then would you like me to do?"

- 'a man under authority'— the centurion shows humility and surprising awareness of his rank and how the hierarchy of the system operates. Instead of trying to sound good and point out his position in his organization, he actually does just the opposite. He is serving the mission of something much larger than himself and recognizes that any power or decision-making ability that he may have results from him being under the authority of the Roman Empire. The centurion recognizes equally that Jesus is serving a larger mission and has been given power under those parameters to do things like heal people. There's somewhat of a play on the word 'under'—not only is the centurion unworthy to have Jesus under his roof, he is also under authority. What is more, he is coming to Jesus on behalf of a man who is also under him; he's asking Jesus' help in making good use of the authority he's been given.
- 'not found anyone in Israel with such great faith'—all of Israel? This centurion gets quite the recognition from Jesus. And what is it that he is recognized for?—his incredible faith! While this is big compliment to the centurion, it's also quite the knock to everyone in Israel. Jesus is saying 'Look, here is this outsider who is showing all of you up.' He makes the point to his fellow Jews that it's not their endless striving to perfectly follow every law that matters; it's believing, trusting and wholeheartedly recognizing who Jesus is that counts in the end.
- 'many will come from the east and the west'—Again we get the picture of people coming from just about everywhere to join in on the good stuff that God is doing. Jesus seems to use the centurion's coming as a way to point out that many others will come. It also reminds me of what we read last week in Isaiah 56 and 66 about one day God gathering people from every tongue and nation.
- 'at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'—Here we have this same great image also mentioned in earlier readings. We see that what God is preparing and what people from everywhere are gathering together for is some type of huge celebratory feast (insert cheers...who doesn't like feasts?). Jesus refers to this feast in a somewhat matter of fact fashion—"THE" feast'—as if everyone know exactly to what he is referring. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are known as the patriarchs --i.e. the fathers of the Jewish faith who were incredibly revered and of utmost importance to devout Jews in Jesus' day. It's almost as if Jesus is name dropping a bit—kind of like mentioning Babe Ruth, Hank Aaron, or Ted Williams to a bunch of arrogant baseball players in order to grab their attention.
- 'But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside'—It's kind of a bummer and seems a little unfair that the subjects—the ones who are actually part of the kingdom—are the ones who miss the feast and instead end up in a pretty darn grim place. This is a warning to the Jewish followers who are technically sons of the kingdom, being able to directly trace their bloodline back to Abraham. In theory they more than anyone else should have an automatic 'in' at this feast. Jesus is reminding them of the true terms of God's covenant (they had skewed these terms quite a bit over the years): that faith, not being part of a specific ethnic or cultural group, is the essential quality of the people of God. It's a wake-up call to the Jews: "Hey! You're missing the point"

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- ‘Let it be done just as you believed it would’—Jesus responds to the centurion’s exact request and honors his faith by making his faith a reality. In the beginning, it is the centurion who is responding and submitting to Jesus, and in the end it is Jesus who is responding and submitting to the wish of the centurion. Jesus had the power to do things however he pleased, but instead he did it the way the centurion had proposed. It seems like the trait of a great friend who will let you have things the way you want, as long as they get the joy of just spending time with you. The great miracle that happens results from some combination of faith and real interaction with Jesus.

#### **Taking it home:**

- *For you:* Are you as admiring as I am of the centurion’s faith? As curious as I am about how he had so much of it? Having faith can be pretty complicated. Sometimes, it seems like something only God can give; other times, it seems like something we have to exercise ourselves. Let’s work on both aspects of faith today. First, pick something big—your personal 40-days prayer request perhaps—and ask God to give you more faith to believe for that thing. Then, pick something a smaller that you do in fact have faith for—maybe its faith that God listens to you, or faith that he can calm your nerves, help you meet that deadline or find a parking spot downtown—and pray for that thing with boldness and confidence.
- *For your six:* It seems noteworthy that while it was the centurion who had the faith, it was his servant who was actually healed. Ask God to heal any of your six or their family of any sickness, pain or illness they might be experiencing. Next time you see one of your six and they mention that they are sick, offer to pray for them, believing that God will heal them.
- *For America:* The centurion in this passage was a fairly powerful man, but that didn’t make him too proud to admit when he needed someone else’s help. In fact, his own experience of authority actually helped him to recognize and respect authority in others. Pray that, like the centurion, our country and all of its citizens would be humble enough to admit our need, and to show respect for others’ authority.

#### **Thursday, March 26th**

##### **Mark 5:1-20**

1 They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. 2 When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. 3 This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. 4 For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. 5 Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

6 When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. 7 He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!" 8 For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!"

9 Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

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"My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." 10 And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

11 A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. 12 The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." 13 He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

14 Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. 15 When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. 16 Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. 17 Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

18 As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. 19 Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." 20 So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

#### **Points of interest:**

- 'the region of the Gerasenes'—this Gentile area, across a small sea from the Jewish region of Galilee, is known by several different names in the gospels: the Gerasenes, the Gadarenes, the Gergasenes. It's like the Jews can't quite keep the names of their neighbors straight: "You know, the nice couple next door. Their name starts with a 'g.'"
- 'a man with an evil spirit'—the people of the ancient Near East—and, in fact, almost all human cultures throughout history and around the world today—believed that the spiritual realm was a normal part of everyday life, and that some, though not all, problems we face have a spiritual explanation. This man's very significant problems are caused by the direct influence of a group of malevolent spiritual beings.
- 'This man lived in the tombs'—cemeteries, besides being spooky, were considered taboo in both Greek and Jewish cultures. They were always built outside of the city limits. So, this man is living apart from everyone else, in a taboo place, surrounded only by dead people.
- 'For Jesus had said'—Mark tells us the story a bit out of chronological order, to communicate just how confusing the interaction was.
- 'Come out of this man'—Isaiah told us in chapter 42 (Wednesday of last week) that it was the Messiah's mission to free prisoners. Jesus frees this man from his imprisonment to the evil spirits.
- 'begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area'—we get a rare glimpse into the organization and psychology of evil spirits. Apparently, they're assigned to particular areas, and it's a great shame to be kicked out of their district.
- 'He gave them permission'—even more surprising than the evil spirits begging is that Jesus actually grants their request. I don't know exactly why Jesus would do so. Maybe, he's willing

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to listen to anyone, even a demon, who recognizes his authority. One thing is clear: Jesus would rather have these demons bother two thousand pigs than one human being.

- 'The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank'—I don't know if this is exactly what the evil spirits had in mind. Were they just trying to go out with a bang, or were they unable to control the pigs?
- 'dressed and in his right mind'—casting out the evil spirits does, in fact, solve the man's problems.
- 'and they were afraid'—it's curious that their fear comes from seeing the man in his right mind, rather than from hearing about the pigs.
- 'Go home to your own people'—understandably, the freed man wants to go with the person who gave him his life back. Perhaps surprisingly, Jesus says, 'No.' It's the first time in the gospels Jesus does so. I think he has in mind something that will benefit both this man and his people. The man will be reunited with the friends and family he lost during his time of madness; and his friends and family will hear about the man who has the power to bring spiritual freedom. I think this man is the first of the people Isaiah talked about in chapter 66 (March 21<sup>st</sup>): he's an exile, but not a Jewish one, sent out to gather more exiles.

#### **Taking it home:**

- *For you:* Ask God today that he would give you sensitivity to the spiritual world around you. Jesus was able to look beyond what he saw right before him—a man with some pretty severe problems—and know that something was happening at a spiritual level. Pray that like Jesus with Legion, you would have eyes to see beyond the physical, that you would have the ability to discern what God and other spiritual forces are doing around you.
- *For your six:* Ask God to give you insight as to how he is at work in your six. Pray that if there is anything spiritual going on that is not from God that it would leave them and go somewhere else (maybe to some pigs...or just to Jesus so that he can decide what to do with them).
- *For America:* God seems to be in the business of doing things that get him lots of attention. Let's ask that God would somehow equally get the attention of our nation. While I'm sure it would get all of our attention if Channel 7 reported on the nightly news that 2,000 pigs went rushing headfirst into the Charles, let's pray instead for an industry that does already get all sorts of attention, all the time, from all sorts of people: the film industry. Pray God's blessing over the film industry that is booming in Massachusetts. Ask that God would use film as a way to focus our attention on things that are important to him.

#### **Friday, March 27th**

##### **Matthew 15**

21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. 22 A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

23 Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

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24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

25 The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

26 He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

27 "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

28 Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

29 Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. 30 Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. 31 The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

32 Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."

33 His disciples answered, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?"

34 "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked.

"Seven," they replied, "and a few small fish."

35 He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. 36 Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. 37 They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. 38 The number of those who ate was four thousand men, besides women and children. 39 After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan.

#### **Points of interest:**

- 'the region of Tyre and Sidon'—like the region of the Gerasenes from yesterday's passage, Tyre and Sidon are nearby Gentile cities.
- 'A Canaanite woman from that vicinity'—you may remember that the Canaanites were the nation the Israelites destroyed and drove out to take possession of the Promised Land.
- 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me'—this is a strange thing for the woman to call Jesus. I don't think David would have been a king the Canaanites usually remembered fondly. Somehow, though, this Canaanite woman sees Jesus as Isaiah's 'shoot from Jesse,' and she celebrates this second coming of David.
- 'take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs'—'dogs' was a common ethnic slur the Jews of Jesus' time used for Gentiles. To put it mildly, it's disturbing to hear Jesus using a racial slur. It may have something to do with Jesus' intriguing practice of speaking in riddles (called 'parables') to test people's trust and interest. Perhaps Jesus is giving this woman a—very difficult, I must say—parable.

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- 'Even the dogs eat the crumbs'—the woman passes the test with flying colors. She takes Jesus' parable, and makes it her own.
- 'you have great faith!'—she does indeed have great faith; she's willing to take the crumbs from Jesus, because she knows that just the crumbs will be enough. Jesus' opinion of her—or at least the words he uses about her—radically change. His attention is shifted from her ethnicity to something he finds far more important: her faith.
- 'Great crowds came to him'—from Mark's version of this same story, we know that Jesus is still in a Gentile area. Apparently, the Canaanite woman is not alone. Many of these 'foreigners' want what Jesus has to offer.
- 'they praised the God of Israel'—they may not be the 'lost sheep of Israel' but they recognize and honor Israel's God.
- 'I do not want to send them away hungry'—Jesus' tune has radically changed. He goes from saying, 'It is not right to take the children's bread,' to, 'I do not want to send them away hungry.' The Canaanite woman's faith not only leads to her daughter's healing, but to a huge outpouring of generosity toward her entire people.
- 'They all ate and were satisfied'—this reminds me of the 'feast of rich foods for all peoples' from Isaiah 25 (March 17<sup>th</sup>).
- 'the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over'—indeed, just as the Canaanite woman said, the crumbs are more than enough.

#### **Taking it home:**

- *For you:* Is there an area of your life in which you feel particularly under-resourced? Where what you have doesn't seem to line up anywhere close with what is needed, like the disciples when they realized all they had to work with was 7 loaves of bread and 2 fish? Take a moment to take stock of what you do have and ask God to multiply it—whether it be your time, energy, sleep, patience, creativity or financial resources. Ask that what you have would, by God's power, turn out to be more than enough.
- *For your six:* While it definitely took some persistence on the Canaanite woman's part, it's noteworthy that in the end her request is granted. Let's embrace the persistent spirit of the Canaanite woman, sending some extra prayers God's way on behalf of our six. Let's ask that God would in fact grant our six any of their smallest requests, and that he would respond to any hopes or words that they have ever lifted up to him.
- *For America:* If feeding several thousand people is just a nonchalant afternoon activity for Jesus, what's to stop us from believing that over 40 days God could move miraculously among several hundreds of thousands of people in America? Ask God that lots and lots (and lots) of people in America would come to him—that they would form crowds around him and all feel like they 'ate and were satisfied'.

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**Saturday, March 28th**

**John 4:4-26**

4 Now he had to go through Samaria. 5 So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

7 When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" 8 (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

11 "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

13 Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

16 He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

17 "I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. 18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

19 "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

21 "Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

25 The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

26 Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

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#### Points of interest:

- 'he had to go through Samaria'—Samaria is the Roman-era name of the area Isaiah called 'Ephraim.'. The tensions that always existed between the people of Ephraim and of Judah became far worse in the aftermath of the exile. First of all, Samaritan opposition was to a large extent responsible for the post-exilic delays in rebuilding the Jerusalem temple. Secondly, the two people were drastically affected by the different exile strategies used by the Babylonians and the Assyrians. The Babylonians exiled their conquered people, like the Jews, in homogeneous groups; but the Assyrians scattered their conquered people, like the Ephraimites, in small groups around their empire. The Ephraimites therefore did much more intermarrying with other people; and many other people were brought to Ephraim to mix with the remaining Ephraimites. So, while the Jews remained relatively distinct ethnically and pure religiously, the Samaritans were a very mixed group. The Jews looked at the Samaritans as heretical mutts, and the Samaritans resented it.
- 'How can you ask me for a drink?'—as you might be able to guess from my previous note, Jews and Samaritans didn't associate. A Jew would never ask a Samaritan for anything, and a Samaritan wouldn't be inclined to give it.
- 'If you knew the gift of God'—Jesus is not only willing to ask something of this Samaritan woman, he's even willing to give her something far more valuable.
- 'Are you greater than our father Jacob'—Jacob is the common ancestor of the Jews and the Samaritans. The woman is giving Jesus a little dig by pointing out that her people's history is just as ancient, and just as connected to Abraham's blessings, as the Jews' history.
- 'you have had five husbands'—this would have been very rare, and quite scandalous.
- 'I can see that you are a prophet'—the woman steers the attention away from her personal life and toward a theological dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans.
- 'neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem'—given the centrality of Jerusalem, even in the prophecies about the nations we've been reading, this is quite a radical thing for Jesus to say.
- 'salvation is from the Jews'—'from the Jews' but not necessarily only 'for the Jews.' Jerusalem and the house of David play a unique role in God's plan, but as God had told Abraham it's a plan meant to bless the whole world.
- 'in the Spirit and in truth'—it's not where you worship, or what rules you follow, that will ultimately be important. Jesus is about to do something that empowers anyone, anywhere to connect truly with God in a new way.

#### Taking it home:

- *For you:* The Samaritan woman came to Jesus with a pretty clear and defined picture of how she could interact with him and what he could do for her. I wonder if it's ever the same for us—that maybe we come to God with some rigid unspoken limitations about what he will and will not do in our lives. Are there things in life that you just expect will always go the same, your lot in life that God could never change: 'I will always fail'; 'I'll always be single'; 'I can't ever break that habit'; 'I can never trust people'; 'God won't ever speak to me'? Consider that Jesus, just like with the Samaritan woman, might want to exceed what you expect he can do in your life.

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- *For your six:* Are any of your six in some complicated relationship situations—with spouses, ex-spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends, etc? The Samaritan woman demonstrates that relationship difficulties are anything but new. Pray that their relationships would go well and that God would heal any consistent destructive patterns or wounds that have resulted from relationships gone bad.
- *For America:* Jesus didn't get hung up on the myriad of details—the life-circumstances, religious preferences, socio-cultural-gender specificities—regarding the Samaritan woman; he simply cared about people who would worship him in Spirit and in truth. Pray today that we wouldn't get hung up on details (even really important-seeming ones), but that we as a nation would find ways of pointing ourselves simply toward Jesus.

### Sunday, March 29th

#### John 12:20-33

20 Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Festival. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." 22 Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

23 Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. 25 Those who love their life will lose it, while those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

27 "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name!"

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." 29 The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

30 Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. 31 Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." 33 He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

#### Points of interest:

- 'there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship'—these Greeks may or may not have been precisely from Greece. Greek was the dominant culture of the eastern half of the Roman Empire, and anyone heavily influenced by that culture might be called 'Greek.' It was used by the Jews as a (probably more culturally sensitive) synonym for 'Gentile.' Nonetheless, these Greeks seem like a small down-payment on Isaiah's promise (66:19-20) that someday Libyans, Lydians, Tubalians, and Greeks would stream to Jerusalem.
- 'They came to Philip'—I guess Philip is acting as Jesus' handler, or his bouncer.
- 'who was from Bethsaida in Galilee'—unlike most of the disciples, Philip—while a Jew—has a Greek name; his hometown is also near some primarily Gentile towns (*IVP Bible Background*)

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*Commentary: New Testament*). So, perhaps he's a bit more accessible to these Greeks than the other disciples.

- 'Philip went to tell Andrew'—apparently, Philip doesn't quite know what to do with these Greeks' request; so he consults with another of Jesus' disciples.
- 'if it dies, it produces many seeds'—apparently, their understanding of how seeds work is a little different from ours, but I think we get the point: a seed is only one seed, until it's planted; then it produces many seeds. Jesus' life is just the small start to something big.
- 'the prince of this world will be driven out'—in the Psalms, David spoke of the nations' deep longing for justice and good government. To bring that good rule, Jesus must get rid of an ill-intentioned prince who currently controls the world.
- 'when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself'—this is a surprise twist on Isaiah's banner (11:12). The banner is actually Jesus' body hanging from the cross.

#### **Taking it home:**

- *For you:* Do ever feel insecure? Maybe that pressing sense that if you just had this or that—that promotion, that sense of calling, that dissertation, that new car, that perfect group of friends, that smaller-sized waistline—then everything would be okay, and you could finally rest assured? When Jesus recommends hating our lives, I don't think he has walking around in misery in mind. Rather, I think he's talking about saying a firm, 'No' to that restless pursuit of security through some particular plan. Somehow, 'Loving this life' can quickly become 'trusting this life' and getting our security from there. Confess to God the specific things about which you feel insecure (I know I know, no fun...who wants to get in touch with their insecurity?) and ask him that, in spite of that feeling, you would come to know his security.
- *For your six:* Have any of your six experienced a recent death of any sort? It may be a literal death of a friend or family member, but could also be a closed door to a dream they had, an ending to a career endeavor, the failure of a particular goal, etc. Pray for God's comfort in the pain and disappointment of that death and that somehow through and out of the loss new life, possibilities and open doors would emerge?
- *For America:* The Greeks coming to Philip, Philip coming to Andrew and then them both going to Jesus demonstrates an interdependence in spiritual pursuits and shows the power of diverse people groups interacting in the same place. Pray today for more common ground—for more spaces where diverse groups of people mingle, interact and can come to the table on common terms and pursue God together. Specifically pray for friendships, open doors and dialogues between followers of Jesus and both atheists and Muslims.