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The Story: The Beginning of the End
2 Kings 17:6-18; Deuteronomy 30:15-20

This past week I was shooting the breeze with a couple of staff members. We were looking out the windows and someone commented on how nice it was that the rain had stopped briefly. I looked at them and said, "About that, I've only been here a little over three years, so I don't know, but is this volume of rain normal?" And these two looked at me with pity in their eyes. Or maybe incredulity. And they shook their heads and said, "Of course this is normal." Then Barb said, "But the worst is the fog." I said, "Oh, I love fog!" She said, "Not when it's lasts for a month. Every day, the same thing, just fog. I told my husband he had to get me out of here." And I have to admit, there is something disheartening about fog when it's the only thing you see, day after day.

This part of The Story is kind of like a fog, in many ways than one. For those who loved God, this part of the history of Israel must have seemed bleak. King after king who were failures, a people who turned away from God like it was a national pastime. They must have wondered, has God forsaken us? They couldn't see through the mist of time. And for us too, this can be a hard part of The Story to digest. It's hard to keep track of King this and King that, battles with this country or that country. Prophets haranguing and nobody listening. A few of you might be wondering, why is this in here? Can't we just get to the point? Oh, we will get to the point. The sun will rise, and the fog will burn off, but we have to go through the fog first. And we will learn that The Lord helps those who are helpless. So hang on, let's read more about The Story.

Pastor Mark shared last week about the work of prophets. Prophets, by the way, are their own Scarlet Thread. Who was the greatest prophet to have ever lived? (Jesus!) Yes, and even the Muslims will acknowledge this. The ministry of the prophets in the time of the kings foreshadows the ministry of Jesus. Their miracles, and their concerns for justice and the poor, but especially the way they were ignored, or worse, killed. And boy where they ignored, or worse. Time and time again, the prophets speak to the people about their need to turn away from their sins and turn back to their God, who loves them! But the people will not listen.

Eventually, God does hold back his judgment any longer, which brings us to the beginning of the end for the nation of Israel, the northern half of the split kingdom. Read with me in 2 Kings 17:6-18.

In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, in Gozan on the Habor River and in the towns of the Medes. [Listen to this summary of the history of the Northern Kingdom].

⁷All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshiped other gods ⁸and followed the practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before them, as well as the practices that the kings of Israel had introduced.

⁹The Israelites secretly did things against the Lord their God that were not right. From watchtower to fortified city they built themselves high places in all their towns. ¹⁰They set up sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree. ¹¹At every high place they burned incense, as the nations whom the Lord had driven out before them had done. They did wicked things that aroused the Lord's anger. ¹²They worshiped idols, though the Lord had said, "You shall not do this."

¹³The Lord warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: "Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your ancestors to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets." ¹⁴But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their ancestors, who did not trust in the Lord their God. ¹⁵They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their ancestors and the statutes he had warned them to keep. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the Lord had ordered them, "Do not do as they do."

¹⁶They forsook all the commands of the Lord their God and made for themselves two idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah pole. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal. ¹⁷They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sought omens and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger. ¹⁸So the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left...

So it finally comes to this: exile. And the Southern Kingdom, Judah, is not too far behind. How did they get to this point? Let's retrace our steps really briefly, and look at the big picture here. All the way back at the beginning, our ancestors Adam and Eve forsake God and bring about the original crisis, the reason why The Story exists... God's quest to reunite mankind to himself. Well, along comes Abraham and God tells him, from you I will make a great nation, and your seed will bless the whole world. We begin to see God's plan taking shape. Years later, Abraham has many sons, God rescues them from Egypt, and he makes an agreement with them about how they will live in the Promised Land. You might not know this part of The

Story, but right on the verge of their entry into the Promised Land, God instructs the people of Israel to stand on two mountains. On one mountain the people are to recite the blessings of obeying God's commandments. On the other mountain they are to recite all the curses of disobeying God's commandments, and after every curse they say, "Amen." So here it is, God's laying it all out before them. He's actually told them that if they disobey God and forsake him, there will be famine, there will be exile, and much worse. He lays it all out before them, years before it takes place.

And then Moses gives them this speech, here in Deuteronomy 30:15-20.

¹⁵See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁶For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. ¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

¹⁹This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Now, you would think this is an easy choice to make: life or death, prosperity or failure. But what does Israel choose? Yes, they choose death, and from our perspective that seems incredibly stupid. Sometimes we read The Story, and we wonder, what is up with these people? How could they be so stupid?

Here's the thing, though. I know I've made a stupid decision before. Not just one, but I've done many stupid things before. As a matter of fact, by show of hands, how many of you have ever made a stupid decision, even just one? I see a few of you are robots. The fact is, if you're a human being, you've made a dumb choice in your life at some point; it's part of what it means to be a human being. We make poor choices, because we are human. It's no mistake that Scripture calls us sheep. We can be as stubborn, and as stupid as sheep.

I came across an article recently, about a herd of sheep in Turkey. The article is a little vague, but apparently sheep were moving from one place to another when one of them decided to pitch itself off of a cliff. Then, to the shepherd's horror, others followed, until it was a veritable avalanche of sheep flying off this cliff. All told, 1,500 sheep ended up careening off of a cliff, but only 450 of them died because once there were enough dead sheep at the bottom of the cliff it was like the other

ones were landing on pillows. Kind of a morbid tale, but I wanted to tell it to you because I want you to see that sheep choose death. Sheep choose death.

Given the chance, you and I choose death. Because given the chance, you and I choose ourselves instead of God. We want to do it our way! That is our inclination... how our hearts are inclined. This is the legacy of Adam and Eve, that we would make the same choice that they would make over and over and over again. We choose death, because we do not choose God. With God there is life, away from God there is only death. And when you survey the whole of human history, you can see that this is true.

And the sooner we come to grips with this—that we are inclined to choose death—the better for us, because for some reason in our culture we don't believe that. Have you ever been to a movie, when there's a crisis and the main character is trying to figure out what to do, someone inevitably says, "Listen to your heart?" What does that even mean? I'll tell you what it means. It means that for some reason, we think there's some hidden, deep part of ourselves that's truly wise and truly good, that will tell us all the answers if we just knuckle down and figure it out. I don't know why anybody would really think that. I would never listen to my heart. Never! That's insane! Jeremiah 17:9 says **that the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick.** When I listen to my heart, what I hear is selfishness, pride, envy. "Listening to our heart" is one reason why I think we have so many more divorces. I've heard people give that reason for why they got a divorce, they "listened to their heart"... well no wonder things didn't work out! Your heart's not going to tell you to stick it out, to love the unloveable, to sacrifice yourself. Your heart's going to say, "Look out for number one." And so we choose death, again and again. And the worst part of it is that we can't get ourselves out of this mess, because we are the problem. No amount of self-help, no amount of discipline, because the problem can't fix the problem.

This is the fog. It's the fog of our lives, the fog of being human. And it's the fog that the nation of Israel finds itself in. And if we had to live in this fog, it would be bleak indeed. If this were the end of The Story, it would be the worst kind of tragedy. But, it's not the end. Remember the prophets. Beat up, shunned, thrown in jail... but also hopeful. Because, around this time in the history of Israel and Judah, the prophets began to talk about what was next. They began to talk about when the fog would lift.

Megan and I have been reading bedtime stories to Reed. I know, he probably doesn't get what's going on, but it's one of those things you're supposed to do as good parents, brain development, all that. This past week, we were reading to him from the Jesus Storybook Bible, and we came upon the story of Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet. His name means "God is salvation"... or as the Storybook puts it, "God to the rescue!" The Storybook does an incredible job of summarizing the entire book of Isaiah as a letter from God to his people. It's worth reading. Here we go:

Dear Little Flock,

You're all wandering away from me, like sheep in an open field. You have always been running away from me. And now you're lost. You can't find your way back. But I can't stop loving you. I will come to find you. So I am sending you a Shepherd to look after you and love you. To carry you home to me. You've been stumbling around, like people in a dark room. But into the darkness, a bright Light will shine! It will chase away all the shadows, like sunshine.

A little baby will be born. A Royal Son. His mommy will be a young girl who doesn't have a husband. His name will be Emmanuel, which means, "God has come to live with us." He is one of King David's children's children's children. The Prince of Peace. Yes, Someone is going to come and rescue you! But he won't be who anyone expects. He will be a King! But he won't live in a palace. And he won't have lots of money. He will be poor. And he will be a Servant. But this King will heal the whole world. He will be a Hero! He will fight for his people, and rescue them from their enemies. But he won't have big armies, and he won't fight with swords.

He will make the blind see, he will make the lame leap like deer! He will make everything the way it was always meant to be. But people will hate him, and they won't listen to him. He will be like a Lamb - he will suffer and die. It's the Secret Rescue Plan we made—from before the beginning of the world! It's the only way to get you back. But he won't stay dead—I will make him alive again! And, one day, when he comes back to rule forever, the mountains and trees will dance and sing for joy! The earth will shout out loud! His fame will fill the whole earth—as the waters cover the sea! Everything sad will come untrue. Even death is going to die!
And he will wipe away every tear from every eye. Yes, the Rescuer will come. Look for him. Watch for him. Wait for him. He will come! I promise.

Here, in the midst of one of the bleakest parts of The Story, the Scarlet Thread glimmers brightly. The answer for Israel was not "try harder!" or even "try again!" The answer was, wait for a Rescuer. If our inclination is to choose death, then we cannot do anything else but wait for a savior. **God helps those who are helpless.** Some people actually believe the phrase, "God helps those who help themselves" is in Scripture, but it's not. Benjamin Franklin helped make that phrase popular, but that's not what Scripture says. It's nowhere in Scripture. Instead, The Story tells us that God helps those who are helpless.

And that is what we are, helpless. If you've ever struggled with addiction, you'll know that. If you've ever shouted at your spouse and wondered why you did that, you'll know that. If you've ever hated when you wanted to love, been silent when you wanted to speak, if you've ever truly listened to your heart, you'll know that you are helpless. But that is why we have a Savior.

The answer to the sickness of our hearts is not self-help, it is rescue. And the wonderful news of The Story is that rescue has come, and we experience rescue by the power of his Spirit. There may be some of you, even as Christians, who think that Jesus' death on the cross, his rescue, is only fire insurance. It's only about the eternal consequences, about escaping the flames of hell.

And consequently many Christians live hell on earth until they can get to heaven. But Jesus' intention was not only that we should have life eternal, but life abundantly now.

You see, the life of faith in Jesus is not about doing your best. It is not about gritting your teeth and pulling yourself up from your bootstraps. If that were the case, what's the point of the cross? Why did Jesus come to rescue us, if now we're doing all the rescuing of ourselves? That would be like the Coast Guard flying out a helicopter to a drowning person, throwing out a lifesaver, and then yelling down, "All right, the shore's 200 miles that way, good luck!" We need a rescuer for our eternal destiny, and we need a rescuer for our day to day.

What does this look like? When you encounter those moments in your life, where it seems like you are choosing death once again, you simply pray. You ask for God's help, moment by moment. You cry out for a rescuer, for his Holy Spirit to be with you. Instead of listening to our hearts, we can hear the Shepherd's voice. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. In my life, it has been the simplest prayers that have evidenced this for me. The Jesus prayer, "Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner." Or even, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

This past week has been a particularly busy one for me, which has made life harder for Megan, to be honest. I've been out a few nights on church business, which has meant sometimes an entire day away from my family. And of course, Megan is also working part time, so on a week like this it's challenging for her to take care of our child without me, while doing work, while taking care of our house, food, etc. This Thursday, she was at the end of her rope. But, she insisted that I go out to POPS, our ministry to young dads. I did, with the promise that I would come home early to help her out, to clean up the house for a retreat she was hosting Saturday. Well, I'm hanging out with some dads when I get a text from her that says, "Everything is okay, no rush to get home."

When I got home, she told me about her night. We all have ways that we cope when things aren't going well, and Megan went for her usual ways of coping. I wasn't there to be a calming presence. She called some friends, but that night nobody was available. She considered drinking a glass of wine to calm her nerves, but realized that this was not a healthy way of coping with a hard week. So all the ways she would normally deal with stress, she didn't have available to her. Then, Reed had a blowout, his diaper overflows, and it is the last straw for Megan. She's broken down, crying her eyes out, finding no respite, angry and tired. After she

gave Reed a bath, tears streaming from her face, she begins to sing, "Jesus loves me, this I know." That song turns into a prayer for her, and she got to the part of the song that says, "They were weak but he is strong" and she realized the truth of that statement. And in that moment, she experienced rescue. In that moment, she felt peace, she felt love, and she realized that she didn't need me, she didn't need a friend, she didn't need wine, she needed Jesus to rescue her. And through his Spirit, he did. I came home to a wife who was no longer stressed out, no longer broken down, no longer angry, because the Spirit of Jesus comforted her.

God helps the helpless. If you recognize you are helpless, I challenge you to call on the Spirit to rescue. Draw near to him. Pray simple prayers of desperation. I believe you'll find that he will answer your call.