

You probably ought to know from the outset: this is an accident. I never intended to write publicly without some sort of filter on who saw the words. I certainly didn't expect to dive deeper into His Word in a public forum.



But here we are. Beginning with the book of Hosea, I have been looking up verses, reading commentary, dipping my toes in Hebrew online, and taking questions to Jesus almost every week for over two years.

Sometimes I typed, stared at the screen, and went to bed, hoping the words would come by morning. They always did because He insists on revealing Himself when we seek Him. What follows are the next two books of the Bible that captured my heart: **Ezra and Nehemiah**. I hope you enjoy the more interactive format. It is meant to be printed off and written on – or simply read on your phone while

journaling your answers elsewhere. But looking up verses, answering questions, and applying the Scripture to your real, daily life is where He seems to do the most transformational work.

Now, let's talk about Ezra.



The first thing I learned about this man was a title my NASB Study Bible gave him: **Reforming Priest**. We are an interconnected, socially aware, justice-oriented generation. Do you think it is important to keep that awareness and activism and yet stay grounded in the Bible? Why or why not?

Do you believe the Bible's ancient text is applicable to our lives in the 21st Century? If so, how?

I sincerely hope as we dig into God's Word you will find Him trustworthy and the Scriptures more than relevant to our changing times (see Hebrews 4:12). We do not get to be in charge of what is absolute Truth. Neither does our culture. God does. And His Word reveals to us what we need to know. So it seems as though we could use a little of that reforming priest's wisdom, huh? Now let's get some background.



If you know much about the beginning of the Bible, you know the Israelites began as one divided nation. (If you do not know much about all this, I wish you knew how excited I am that you're doing this with me! Stick around, His Word is a Masterpiece.)

Anyway, after Noah and the Flood, God first revealed Himself to Abraham. (You can read more about this in Genesis chapter 12). Anyway, the short story is Abraham fathered Isaac, and Isaac fathered Jacob, who was renamed Israel. He had many sons which made up the 12 tribes of Israel. When they finally made it to the Promised Land, it didn't take these tribes – the Israelites - long to ask for a king (so they could be like the other nations).



But this led to issues and eventually the kingdom split into two: the Northern Kingdom with the majority of the tribes (still called Israel), and the Southern Kingdom called Judah. God sent lots of people to speak for Him about the sin of both kingdoms, including Hosea. And what Hosea prophesied came to pass around 720 BC: Because of their disobedience, God allowed the Northern Kingdom to fall into the hands of the ruthless Assyrians. (And I mean seriously ruthless. These were bad dudes.)



So what about our Southern Kingdom, Judah? Well, they were not following Covenant Yahweh's Laws

either. Jeremiah was the main prophet to the South, preaching in Jerusalem until the foretold disaster. Judah was finally taken captive by the Babylonians some 100 years after the Northern Kingdom fell, around 605 BC.



Jeremiah foretold the captivity would last 70 years, of which his contemporary Daniel [as in Daniel in the Lion's Den] was well aware. Sure enough, at just the right time, "the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia" and around 537 BC the first round of exiles were given permission to return to their Promised Land.

And this is where Ezra begins.



It is important to remember that the first part of Ezra is recounting history. Our reforming priest himself doesn't return to Jerusalem until some 80 years later, around 458 BC. But we'll start where the author starts. Ezra chapter one. Next time. Smile.



That's enough of an intro for today. Here's to the beginning of fresh insights into the heart of One Who breathed the Word into existence.

Day Two

I've been thinking about our question from yesterday and what it looks like in our current culture to love well, have unity among our many differences as Believers, and yet, still stand on God's Word as authoritative.



As I try to reconcile the above, this quote based on Jesus' Parable of the Lost Son keeps popping in my brain:

"In [the gospel's] view, everyone is wrong, everyone is loved, and everyone is called to recognize this and change. By contrast, elder brothers divide the world in two:

'The good people (like us) are in and the bad people, who are the real problem with the world, are out.'

Younger brothers, even if they don't believe in God at all, do the same thing, saying: 'No, the open-minded and tolerant people are in and the bigoted, narrow-minded people, who are the real problem with the world, are out.'

But Jesus says:

'The humble are in and the proud are out.'

The people who profess they aren't particularly good or open-minded are moving toward God, because the prerequisite for receiving the grace of God is to know you need it." Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God*.



What thoughts came to mind as you read that Keller quote? Do you identify more with the Older Brother or Younger Brother mentality? How?

I think our marching orders in this generation will be:

Keep Truth married to Compassion.

Have Grace that never turns away from Righteousness.

In short? The pure Gospel.



Now, onto our text for today.

Ezra 1:1-4 NIV:

“In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

‘This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you – may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.’”



I love that 200 years before this decree, El Elyon, God Most High, saw it and told Isaiah about it:

“[He] who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please;

He will say of Jerusalem, ‘Let it be rebuilt,’

And of the temple, ‘Let its foundations be laid.’

This is what the LORD says to his anointed,

to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of...

For the sake of Jacob my servant,

of Israel my chosen,

I summon you by name

and bestow on you a title of honor,

though you do not acknowledge me.

I am the LORD, and there is no other;

Apart from me there is no God.

I will strengthen you,

though you have not acknowledged me,

so that from the rising of the sun

to the place of its setting

men may know there is none besides me.

I am the LORD, and there is no other.” (Isaiah 44:28-45:1a, 4-6)

Do you think God through Isaiah seems a bit harsh? Isn't Cyrus acknowledging God? Expound on your thoughts:

Unfortunately, as it turns out, the God of Israel was not the only god King Cyrus sought to appease when taking office (NASB Study Bible, pg 635, Zondervan). He seemed to be trying to cover all his bases in some sort of karma game.

Hmmm. Maybe he hadn't heard yet the God of Israel doesn't take well to His Holy Presence being treated flippantly. (See 1 Samuel 5:68)

Nonetheless, the reason Scripture provides for Cyrus allowing the exiles to return and rebuild the temple is “the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus...”



What does that do in your heart?

How often do you chalk things up only to human choice? Is it easy for you to see the hand of an all-knowing, all-powerful God in control of seconds and planets and heart beats? I really want to know:

If we ever start thinking our choices don't matter, let's run and get some wise counsel. Of course making good choices is important. But if we come to the conclusion that only broken human beings are in charge of the grand, sweeping events in all of history and the future, well, we should probably run for the hills. Because that's no good.

Think about a time when you were making poor choices and God allowed you to experience the natural, negative consequences of those choices. Tell me about it? (You can write in code if you want.)

Now think about a time when you were possibly making not great choices, or simply weren't being all that faithful, but God stepped in, gave grace, and showed up in your situation. Describe it?

Now talk to me about our current culture, news headlines, personal situations in the lives of those you know that can tempt you to think God is not in control:

Thankfully, no matter how uncertain our times may seem, we have a King Who rules all kings. And He *is* on His throne.

For He is the LORD, and there is no other.

Day Three

“Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites – everyone whose heart God had moved – prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. All their neighbors assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill offerings.” (Ezra 1:5-6)

Let’s try to get into the minds of this displaced group. Starting before the exile.



So. God has chosen your race, out of all the nations on the earth, to make His Presence known and display His glory to the whole world. This is not because you are a mighty nation or better than others. No, it’s because it is His choice.

Unlike those of us under the New Covenant, God’s Spirit did not dwell within the very being of His people. Aside from some recorded instances when the Spirit of the LORD came upon someone, He chose to manifest His Glory in the Tabernacle and then the Temple. So with this awesome responsibility of His Presence and power among you – before the eyes of all – you are to keep your part of His Covenant with you. Especially, having no other gods before Him.

However, if you're from the older generation, that is not what you experienced while still in Jerusalem. The priests, whose job is to serve the community, don't even know how to blush. Everyone clings to deceit. And Jeremiah, a prophet telling the Truth, is weeping that pride will cause the LORD's flock to be taken captive.

But wait. Was this the heart condition of every one of God's people in Judah? What do you think?

What I love about God is the reckless Hope He always gives. He makes sure to mention those who do not shift their confidence to idols:

"But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,

whose confidence is in him.

He will be like a tree planted by the water

that sends out its roots by the stream.

It does not fear when heat comes;

its leaves are always green.

It has no worries in a year of drought

and never fails to bear fruit." (Jeremiah 17:7-8)

Living in Him is the only way to live.



Nevertheless, the majority of your people are grievously sinning. And you see in your lifetime what Jeremiah predicted:

“Their land will be laid waste,

An object of lasting scorn;

All who pass by will be appalled

And will shake their heads.”

(Jer. 18:16)



Jerusalem besieged. Temple and city destroyed. Many Jews exiled.

Ever studied this time in history? Any insights to add to this devastation?

So what about daily life in your new foreign land? You are allowed to live communally and preserve many customs. In fact, Jeremiah even wrote a letter to our exiles, passing on to them that their Word from God was to build houses, settle down, plant gardens, marry & have families, and seek the prosperity of the city in which they now lived. In fact, it is in this context of encouraging the deported ones that the famous Jeremiah verse was written:

“This is what the LORD says:

‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and will bring you back from captivity.’” (Jer. 29:10-14a NIV)

Isn't He good? Even after everything, He is making sure His children know His love and hope and His desire to be the only One to whom they bow.

But even with this permission to settle down and preserve some customs, it is difficult in a decadent, ungodly society to stay true to the heart of God. Just ask [Daniel](#).

So here you are. If you were young-ish when the deportation began, you are now at least 75 years old. In fact, Daniel himself was over 80 years old when he was thrown into [the lions' den](#). (That's different than all those pictures in kids' books, huh?) Many of your older family members and maybe even some of your peers have died.

Then you hear the news in 539 BC: Babylon has fallen to the Persians.

Next thing you know: The new king, King Cyrus, is proclaiming you can return home!

But...where is home?



Home for your children is this foreign land. They've heard stories of Jerusalem, but have never lived there. Your grandchildren probably know even less and have heard fewer stories. Even thinking about making a long, 4 month journey could sound daunting.

How would you feel? If you had been part of those exiled from Jerusalem, would you want to make the trip back? Why or why not?

What about if you'd never lived there? If you'd only heard about Temple and Jerusalem from those ahead of you. Would you want to go?

I think this is where we should remember that God always preserves a remnant of faithfulness among His people. Likely many were satisfied with their comfortable situation in a foreign land. But there were

others who listened to the Prophets. Who learned to become Scribes to keep the Law accurate. Who still observed the Sabbath and circumcision.

And who, most of all, desired to once again worship Covenant Yahweh as He designed: with sacrifices in the Temple.



Have you ever felt like that kind of a minority? Even though your current situation was comfortable, you

were restless for something more? Tell me about it?



In all likelihood, it was some from that group, “everyone whose heart God had moved,” who began to pack their bags, say their goodbyes, and start the journey Home.

Day Four

“Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god. Cyrus king of Persia had them brought by Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

This was the inventory:

gold dishes 30

silver dishes 1000

silver pans 29

gold bowls 30

matching silver bowls 410

other articles 1000

In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and of silver. Sheshbazzar brought all these along when the exiles came up from Babylon to Jerusalem.” (Ezra 1:7-11)



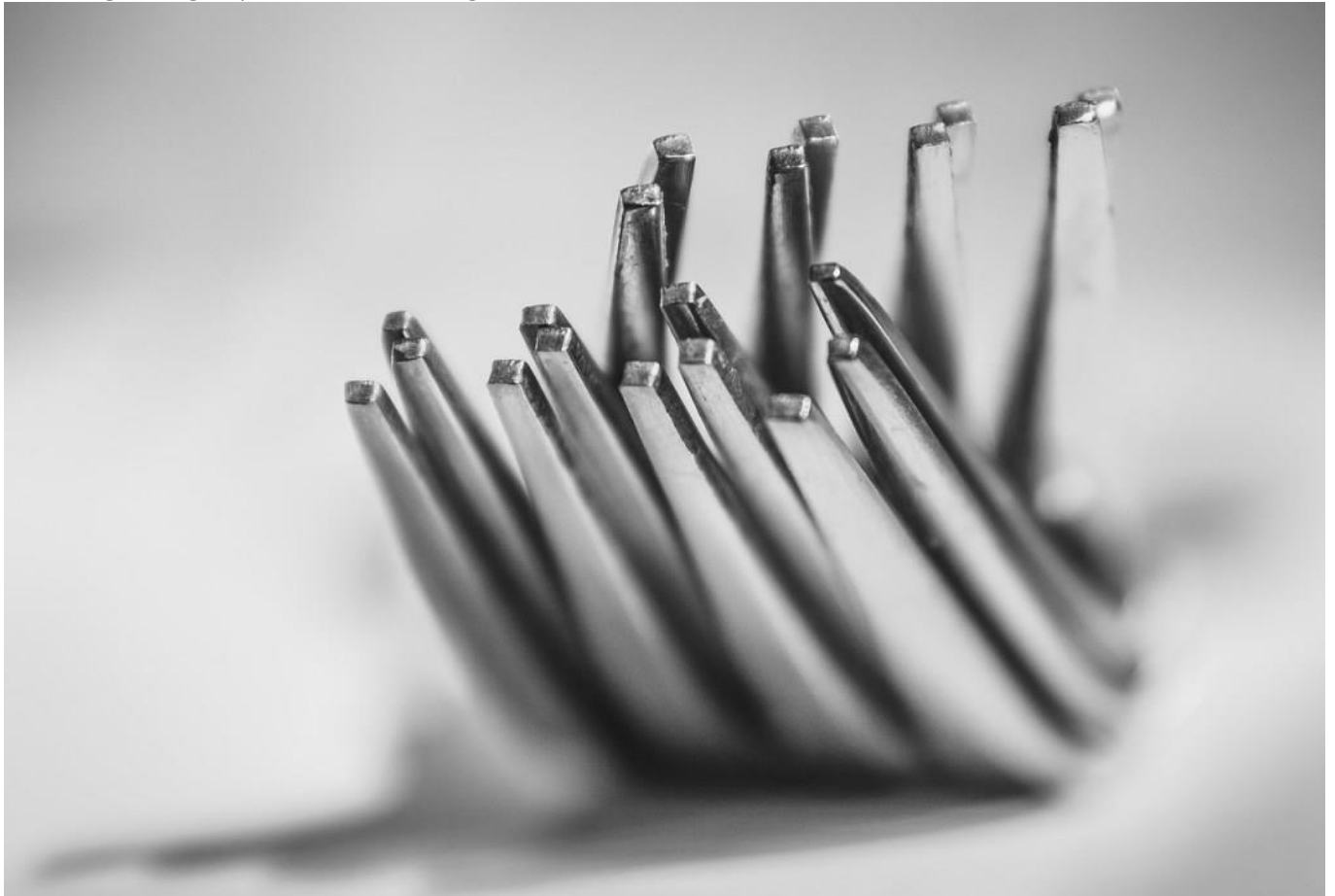
Sometimes it's easy to forget what exactly temple sacrifices were under the Old Covenant. So let's chat about it. It was the acting out of [Hebrews 9:22](#): Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins.

The distance between our Holy God and our sin is so great, something *has* to die. For every sin.



If you're like me and have never slaughtered an animal before, it can be hard to picture. But this is bloody work. And not just for little lambs, but depending on the sin, also bulls and rams and goats.

This slaughtering required utensils. Things like knives and forks and meat hooks.



But also things like bowls and pans and dishes. Some bowls were used to sprinkle blood on the altar before the LORD. This, these sacrifices, were the only way God had provided for the people to be made right with Him.

And this is not just at the tabernacle before the People of God had a city. The same held true in Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. King David desired to build a house for God, a place where the Ark of the Covenant could rest. Rather than being the one to build it, he got the privilege of passing that honor on to his son, Solomon.



Before the whole assembly, King David handed Solomon the plans for the temple, including the weight of pure gold for the forks, sprinkling bowls and pitchers, and dishes (1 Chronicles 28:17). David himself gave from his treasury some of the precious metal for the Temple and its articles, and encouraged the assembled Israelites to do the same. They gave generously and David dedicated their offerings to God, saying:

“O LORD our God, as for all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name, it comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you...So they all praised the LORD, the God of their fathers; they bowed low and fell prostrate before the LORD and the king.” (1 Chronicles 29:16,20b)

And all this? These treasures dedicated to God and used to daily bridge that gap between Divine and Human?

Nebuchadnezzar simply carried off.



God is zealous for His Name. And for anything that has been set apart and made holy unto Him. God used [this study](#) to teach me more about King Neb. I truly would like to believe that after some [run-ins with Daniel's God](#), he was no longer flippant with sacred things.

But how about us? Do we treat what is sacred as sacred? What are some things you believe to be sacred in your ordinary life? (Don't jump only to church-y stuff. Talk to me about daily practices, relationships, things):

Did you include yourself in the above sacredness?

It really does include us, Believers. If our trust is in Jesus alone, the One Sacrifice to end all sacrifices, we are set apart as holy for Him. Not only that, but under the New Covenant, we are living sacrifices. It's how we are to worship Him. Die every morning. Then stand up and walk with Him in His power.

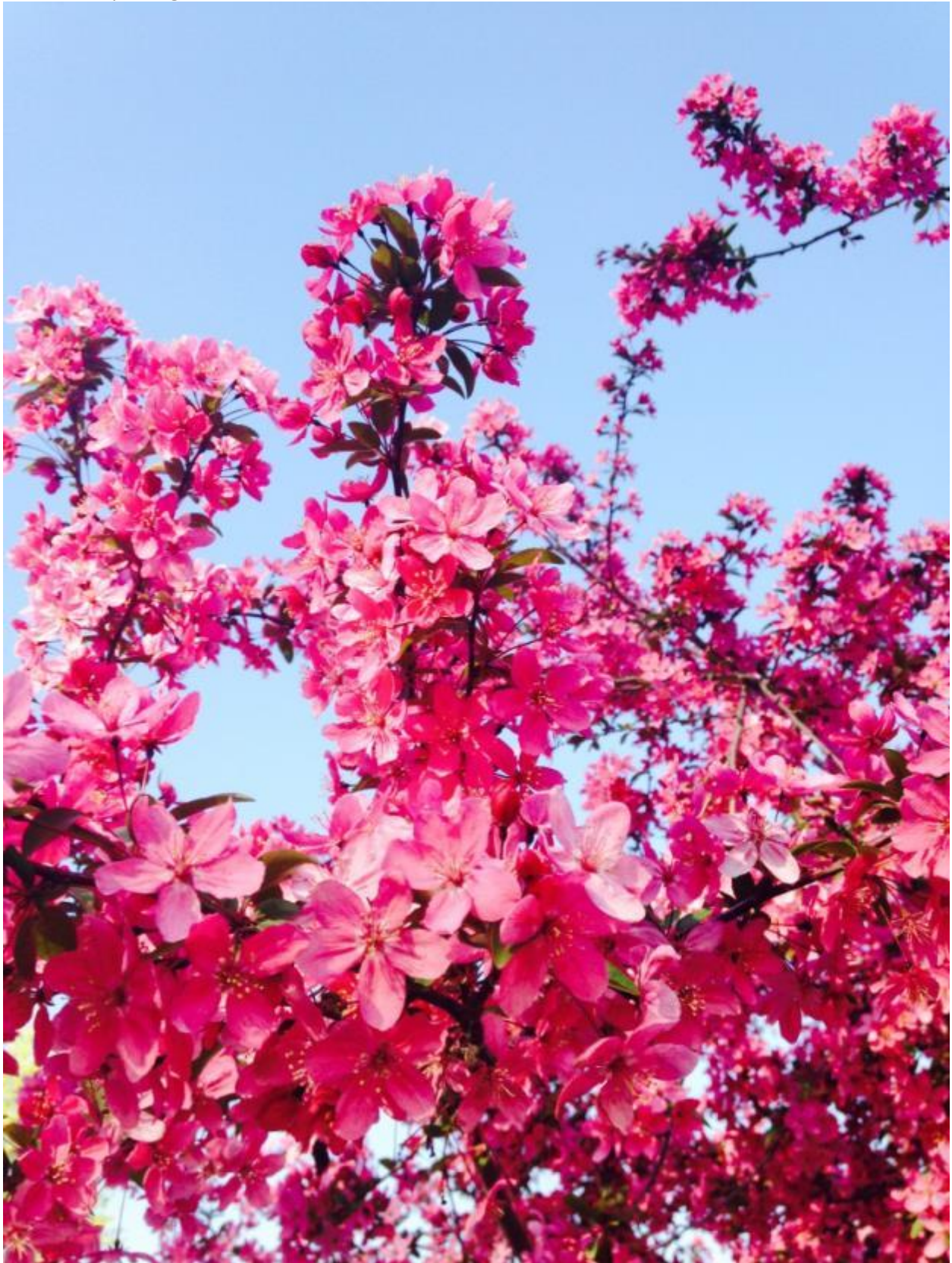
Living sacrifices.

Day Five

“Cyrus king of Persia had them brought by Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah...Sheshbazzar brought all these along when the exiles came up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Now these are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive to Babylon (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town, in company with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai,

Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah)..." Ezra 1:8, 11b, 2:1&2



Thought we could get to know some of the leaders of our returning exiles. It's interesting how Sheshbazzar is called "the prince of Judah." The Study Bible said this was probably a Babylonian name for a Jewish official who served as deputy governor of Judah (pg. 635). Zerubbabel (verse 2) was another, younger governor of Judah who presided over the second foundation of the Temple in Jerusalem (3:8-11). We'll get to know them better later.



Jeshua, verse 2, is the son of the high priest Jehozadak (1 Chronicles 6:15) and served as priest for the exiles. Do you know about this beautiful name, Jeshua? It is the Aramaic form of the Hebrew name Joshua. And in Greek?

Jesus.

It means "the LORD saves."

I love that. Over five hundred years before our Savior walked on this earth, God ordained that another whose name means "the LORD saves" would serve as an intermediary between the people and God.

Jesus is our Great High Priest. Have you ever contemplated how He intercedes for us? How He is talking to God on our behalf?

Think about it now. What comes to your mind when you picture this Biblical truth?



Everything in our lives is for our good. Everything. When the One Who poured out His blood is the One taking up for us, we can rest secure. He won't manipulate us. He lets even hard things that happen to us *matter*. He covers all our shame.

Tell me about the hardest area for you to rest in that truth? Code words work for me.

Walking in freedom is learning to walk under the authority of the One Who sets captives free. We are all creatures, created by Another. We did not create ourselves. And we will be mastered by something.

Let's choose the Master Who washes feet, loves perfectly, and ensures we will never be condemned.