

The deepest secrets of the Kingdom of God are called “things hidden from the foundation of the world” (Matt.13:35) - especially the deep truths of Christ’s suffering on the Cross. May we realize once again how privileged we are to have the treasures of the Kingdom of God unveiled to us through a humble, Servant-Savior, and not through the vain pride of fallen men and tribes.

Monday: Read Matthew 13:34-35 & Matt. 16:21-24

The Shadow of the Cross

Jesus laid bare the deepest secret of the Kingdom of God, the necessity that He be the divine sin-bearer, embracing the calling to suffer and die in order to impute to us His saving righteousness. Pastor William Still said Christ came into this world not to rule as an earthly King, but to be “God’s dustman” (garbage collector in American English), coming to take away our dirt, sin, guilt, and shame (Isaiah 53).

This was a difficult secret to accept at first. When Jesus began in a systematic way to teach the necessity of the Cross, His disciples failed to grasp what He was saying and opposed it when they did understand. See Peter’s opposition to the Cross, which elicited Jesus’ rebuke, “You have in mind the things of men, not of God” (Matthew 16:23).

Meditate and Pray: Lord, give us courage to submit to the glorious message of the Cross. It is foolishness to the world. Lord, in our day when our culture and society seem intent on opposing every public practice of Christian faith and life, give us the courage to take our stand in the shadow of the Cross, come what may. Amen.

Tues/Weds: Read Mt. 13:34-35; Ps. 78:9-11 & 78:67-72

With Upright Heart He Shepherded Them

Jesus came to reveal God’s determination to use the small things of the world to overturn the proud and powerful. God is able to use the smallest beginnings of Gospel proclamation, like the tiny mustard seed, to grow up to be a huge plant in the garden. Such is the growth of the Kingdom from the lowliest place to the greatest.

We see the same amazing ability of God to use small things for His glory in the trajectory of the lowly tribe of Judah. He exalted this tribe to replace the most powerful tribe, Ephraim. Consider the meaning of the following Old Testament verses, and see how they paint a picture of Ephraim’s pride and Judah’s lowliness: “The Ephraimites, armed with the bow, turned back on the day of battle. They did not keep God’s covenant, but refused to walk according to his law...” (Ps. 78:9-10)

Here we see something of Ephraim’s rebellious self-centeredness. They would only enter into the work of defending God’s people if it elevated their status. If a conflict against wickedness was costly, they withdrew to their own comfortable homes and lands. In fact, as we will see in tomorrow’s notes, Ephraim let God’s lowly servants like Gideon and Jephthah do the dirty work of going to battle in God’s name – only to swoop in at the last minute to get the credit for themselves. The result of their proud self-interest and desire for their own glory instead of God’s is spelled out in Psalm 78: “God did not choose the tribe of Ephraim, but he chose the tribe of Judah, He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people.” (Ps 78:67-68, 70-71)

Throughout much of its history, Ephraim, along with its counterpart Manasseh, claimed the pre-eminent place of leadership over the other tribes of Israel. But they abused their place of prominence. Psalm 78 was written, in

fact, to announce the surprising verdict against Ephraim and for Judah! God turned the tables! The first became last, and the last, the lowly shepherd boy of Jesse named David, became the new king!

Meditate and Pray: Lord, you can see and evaluate all our pride and hidden self-interest. Please search us, humble us, and lay us low now, in order that your grace might then carry us forward in the footsteps of gentle Jesus, meek and mild. Do not allow us to coddle our own egos now, only to be shocked when the tables are reversed in our lives. Help us to lay claim to the promise of Peter in 1 Peter 5:6, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may lift you up in due time.” Amen.

Thurs/Fri/Sat: Read Ps. 78:67-72, Judges 8:1-3 & 12:1-6

Hear Him, Ye Deaf

Beginning in Psalm 78:1-9, the great parable which Asaph reveals is the transfer of leadership from the great Northern tribes of Israel, Ephraim and Manasseh, to the lowly tribe of Judah and the shepherd-king David. If we fail to see how shocking this transfer was in the eyes of the whole nation of Israel, consider the high regard in which Ephraim and Manasseh were held in Israel for many years.

For example, remember that their father Joseph was the object of the longest blessing given by Jacob (Genesis 49:22-26). Jacob adopted Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, giving them what amounted to a double portion of the inheritance - a portion which normally went to the eldest son? It is true that the blessing of rule was given to Judah from the start by Jacob’s prophecy. But that was overlooked by Israel, since Ephraim and Manasseh grew to be the most numerous among the twelve tribes, as the census in Numbers 26 shows: 85,000 from the tribes belonging to Joseph (Numbers 26:34-37), outnumbering all other tribes!

Because of this pre-eminence, Joshua, who was himself from Ephraim, gave the sons of Joseph the most challenging of lots in the Promised Land, full of Canaanites and their chariots, (Joshua 17:14-16) and increased their portion to two (Joshua 17:17-18). Yet, such privilege turned to arrogance as they rebuke God’s chosen leaders, Gideon and Jephthah, out of jealousy that God used them to claim victory over the Lord’s foes instead of their own tribe! Through the punishing hand of Jephthah, the Ephraimites are finally dealt with in Judges 12:6, when 42,000 of their troops perish.

Such is the downfall of the proud Ephraimites in the Book of Judges! But this is only a prelude to their downfall and final rejection in Psalm 78. No wonder Hosea concludes in his book that, in human terms, nothing could be done with this tribe. He describes Ephraim’s lack of commitment to the only true God in the following verses:

Hosea 7:11: “Ephraim is like a dove, easily deceived and senseless – now calling to Egypt, now turning to Assyria...”

Hosea 7:14: “They do not cry out to me from their hearts but wail upon their beds...”

Hosea 8:11-12: “Though Ephraim built many altars for sin offerings, these have become altars for sinning. I wrote for them the many things of my law, but they regarded them as something alien. They offer sacrifices given to me and they eat the meat, but the LORD is not pleased with them.”

Most sadly of all, the prophet exclaims in Hosea 6:4: “What can be done with you, Ephraim... your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.”

Meditate and Pray: Can anything be done with this wicked, proud tribe? Well, Rejoice that, because Judah was chosen *in their place* (Psalm 78), a true Savior, descended from David, was found who could save even the most reprobate of God's people. Because of the "Lion of the Tribe of Judah," God's compassion towards Ephraim can overcome their sin. What good news it is to hear God say:

"How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? ... My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not man – the Holy One among you." (Hosea 11:8-9)

May God give us hope and fruitful answers to our long-term prayers, as we cry out for the lost, even as Asaph, Hosea and even our Lord Jesus cry out for sinners in the Scriptures.

What a skillful teacher was Asaph, opening his mouth in parables! What an even more skillful Savior we have, whose teaching opens deaf ears and gives life to the dead. May God bring lost ones like Ephraim into our church family to hear and believe the good news of the Kingdom of God. Amen.