Sabbath Sermon: Repent, The Kingdom of Heaven Is At Hand
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First Fruits Ministries, an affiliate of Corner Fringe Ministries
Torah Portion: Tzav (Command): Leviticus 6:8-8:36; Jeremiah 7:21-8:3; 9:22-24; Ezekiel 36:16-38; John 11:47-56; 1 John 1:5-2:2; Hebrews 9:11-28: https://tinyurl.com/mv47r9v.

Shabbat Shalom, brothers and sisters. Please turn to your neighbors with a hug or a handshake and say good morning with the love of Yeshua in your heart, for the LORD has commanded us to love one another. ——[title screen]——

Last week, largely through the story of King Saul following his battle with the Amalekites, we spoke about the LORD's desire for our obedience, and not our sacrifice and offerings. In 1 Samuel 15:22, the LORD proclaims: "to obey is better than sacrifice" and then in Hosea 6:6, a verse Yeshua quoted, in Matthew 9:13 and 12:7, we read the LORD explain, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." In the Hebrew, the word "mercy" is "chesed (חֶסֶד)," which certainly can mean "mercy" or "kindness," but also means "goodness," and this connection is relevant in this verse. In the Greek, the word is "eleos (ἔλεος)," which means "mercy," and many stop here and understand the LORD's saying differently than perhaps it may be intended. In the HELPS Word study, a resource that helps us understand words in their general and secular first-century context, our understanding is expanded by an explanation that the word "eleos" means "mercy as it is defined by loyalty to God's covenant." In other words, in all four verses of this phrase, the LORD explains that He desires obedience to His commandments, but He does not desire sacrifice, or at least that He prefers obedience to sacrifice. Considering that our Torah Portions in Leviticus chapters 1-8 are detailing a whole host of sacrifices and offerings that the LORD seems to be commanding Israel to obey in the wilderness, we have to ask, why might this be? How could the LORD desire our obedience, and not sacrifice, when it sure seems like He is also commanding Israel follow a very specific process for each particular prescribed sacrifice? What about obedience to the commandments pertaining to how to practice the sacrifices?—we might be tempted to ask. I've heard some argue that Israel was only commanded regarding the sacrifices following their sin, but this isn't entirely the case and its really an incomplete explanation. Israel sinned on both sides of the Sea of Reeds by doubting the salvational power of God and desiring to return to bondage in Egypt—and this was before God gave the Ten Words from Sinai. But before this, God told Pharaoh through Moses to let His people go so they could offer Him a sacrifice in the wilderness. They were slaves at the time and saw no hope for their own freedom—whether they were sinning or not was not even part of the discussion. That being said, God didn't even provide Israel with commandments regarding the sacrifices following the golden calf incident. They didn't come in detail until much later, and yes, He certainly gave the sacrifices, as we discussed last week, to point toward the one-time sacrifice for sin that Yeshua would make for us on the cross. They all pointed to Yeshua, from the Passover Lamb in Exodus to the sacrifices we've been reading about in Leviticus. The LORD desires obedience more than sacrifice, and so He sacrificed His perfectly obedient son as the one-time sacrifice for sin.

We're given more depth of meaning regarding God's desire for obedience rather than sacrifice in Hebrews 6:4-6, which reads: "it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify

again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame." I don't want to get too far into the weeds here. Yes, the writer is referring to confessing Christians who fall away. And yes, it is impossible for those who doubt the salvational power of Yeshua to be restored. To have faith in Messiah Yeshua, we have to follow Him, and it is in this testimony of two—faith and the resultant obedience that comes from a loving desire to know the One we Trust—that leads us into the grace of God. The point of the message here in Hebrews is simple: If we keep on sinning after we have accepted Yeshua as our savior, we are literally denying our faith, as Paul explained in Galatians 2:17. He wrote: "Messiah is not a minister of sin." Paul also warned us in Galatians 6:7-8: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life."

And so the conclusion of the matter is that even the one-time sacrifice of Yeshua on the cross is not enough to save a man or woman who refuses to turn toward Him in obedience—no sacrifice can save the person who insists on walking after the dictates of his or her own heart. We must turn toward God to live eternally with Him, and to do this we have to repent and hear and obey the WORD of our LORD. Yeshua said Himself in Matthew 7:21-23 that even those who say "LORD, LORD," but practice lawlessness, even those praising "Jesus" will be ordered to depart from Him forever, because He never knew them. The LORD will not remember the confession of a man or woman who turns from their righteous calling to practice sin. How then is the sacrifice of bulls and goats or rams going to even come close to the sacrifice of our LORD? I don't want you to mishear me, so let me assure you: Yeshua's sacrifice is all sufficient, meaning that if we truly accept the LORD's death on the cross for us and because of it follow after Him all the way into new life, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. Nothing! We are saved by grace through faith and not by works (Ephesians 2:8-10). But we better practice that faith by doing the will of God, "for" Paul wrote in Romans 2:13, "not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified." The LORD desires obedience, not sacrifice, and He proved this by sending His son to die on the cross as the one-time sacrifice to forever take away sins when we confess them and repent, which means to go and sin no more. We have to pick up our cross and follow Him, to walk the way He walked, to be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect. Because we love Him and desire to know Him, we ought to obey God's commandments, and He will send His Holy Spirit to help us love God and love one another according to the Way He showed us (John 14:15-18).

Our reading this week from Jeremiah really hammers home this underlying theme from last week's message and it also does a great job launching us into this week's message. We read in Jeremiah 7:21-23: 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: “Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat meat. For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices. But this is what I commanded them, saying, ‘Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you.'" In each of these cases, the word commanded is "tzavah (צָוָה)," which means to command, to order, or to lay charge. A commandment is not a demand or a dictate from a heavy-handed authoritarian ruler; rather it's something that is presented to a people who can choose to obey it or not. Those who choose to obey the command will receive the good intended by it from the loving and dutiful Commander, while those who refuse to obey it will suffer the consequences of being cut out of the people group under the Commander. How can any unit with a common goal survive among a rebellious people? So what is the LORD saying here in Jeremiah and all these other

verses? He's saying that His desire is not for His people to focus on the sacrifices or the burnt offerings, for they are performed in light of lawlessness, and He desires our hearts of obedience. We aren't even meant to focus on the sacrifice of Yeshua, because it is accomplished; it is finished. Our God is not dead. He's surely alive. He's living on the inside, roaring like a lion—if we let Him. He rose from the dead and sits on the throne in Heaven, and He has asked us to follow Him there. He wants us to follow Him, His Way, thereby developing a relationship with Him through our obedience to Him. He desires this living, growing, deepening, and ever-more fulfilling relationship with us, much like that relationship between a husband and a wife that grows more intimate by every passing day as they care for one another and look to fulfill one another's needs and desires, because they want to, not because they have to. It's a conscious choice for a husband and wife, and so it is with Yeshua. Have we made a god out of our belly? Is our Christian walk all about eating and drinking, or is it about coming to know the LORD better—not just who He is in each of us, but also who He is in one another? What can I learn about Yeshua from your relationship with Him, and what can you learn about Yeshua from my relationship with Him, and how can we both grow closer to Him together so that one day we are One, just as He promised we would be? The LORD doesn't want us falling away so we can bring another offering before His altar for sin, He wants us to come with clean hands and pure hearts before Him so we can join Him in a feast of unleavened bread and new wine, which is the spiritual food of truth and sincerity (1 Corinthians 5) that brings us ever closer to Him and all of His ways. When we walk in all the ways He has commanded us, it will be well with us. We will no longer need to dwell on sacrifices and offerings, for we will offer up ourselves to Him and He will come to take us home. With Passover approaching on April 22, we truly need to search ourselves and all of our ways and make sure we are not bringing any sin into His throne room, for He is inviting us to come near. Let us cast of malice, wickedness, idolatry and all other leaven in our lives and return to Him. In this introspection, we prepare for the feast.

In Jeremiah 9:23-24, the LORD explains what He desires from us: 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty man glory in his might, Nor let the rich man glory in his riches; But let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,' says the Lord." This verse reminds me of Micah 6:8, where the prophet writes, "He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" In the first verse, the LORD explains that He desires that we know Him, who He is and what He represents. And remember, He made us in His image, and so His desire is that in coming to know His character more and more that we desire to emulate Him and lean into Him even more. The second verse explains that God wants us to represent the same things that He does in our own words and deeds. Just like a married couple becomes more like one another as they grow together over the years, so too does God desire that we become more like Him all the way into eternity. He has already become like one of us, but He did this not so we could dwell on His sacrifice and never move beyond this milk of the Word, but so we could learn more about Him and what He desires from us and then do it because we are delighted to please Him. The LORD exercises chesed (חֶסֶד), which is loving-kindness, mercy or goodness; He practices tzidakah (צְדָקָה), which is righteousness, and He is just and uses impartiality to judge between those who are growing closer to Him and those who are growing further apart. His style of mishpot (מִשְׁפָּט), or justice, rewards those who diligently seek Him. And in diligently seeking Him, we ought to practice tzana (צנַע), which is the requisite humility needed to understand and know the One who created the heavens and the earth and everything in them, the One who redeemed us by His blood,

and the One who rose on High to intercede for those who desire Him before all else. As He is impartial, rendering to each of us the justice due on account of our deeds (Romans 2:6), He likewise desires our impartiality toward others, that we do good to Him and to others according to His commandments, and that we present ourselves with a humility that understands that walking in His commandments is good for each of us as well as one another. While God certainly wants us to acknowledge all of the wonderful things He has done, He doesn't want us to dwell on His sacrifice, but the victory that came after it, and this ought to be the focus of our gratitude and praise. He wants our obedience and our loyalty to His covenant because of what He has done. He wants us to know Him intimately, and to seek to understand Him. We cannot do this if we are following after our own hearts. We can only do this when we seek after His heart. We ought to be like David, who was "a man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22).

Even though we all fall short of God's glory, we ought to delight in His glory, for in it He offers grace to the humble. We read in James 4:5-8: "Do you think that the Scripture says in vain, 'The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously'? But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded." James has a scathing rebuke in the surrounding text here to those he labels double-minded, stating that we cannot have any love for the things the world cherishes, but instead we must turn our hearts to the ways of God. He ponders in verses 1-3, where do wars and fights come from, do they not come from a desire for pleasure? Murder and adultery come from covetousness and lust, and desires for wealth come from an idolatrous heart.

In Jeremiah, the prophet writes, "let not the wise man glory in his wisdom." The apostle Paul hit on this same point, saying, "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent'" (1 Corinthians 1:18-19). The message of the cross is not the death of the LORD, but His resurrection from death, for this act showcased the power of God over sin and death. What's more, Yeshua didn't rise up for his own glory alone, but He came to share His glory with all who love Him and desire to follow after Him. And so our glory is not in our wisdom, and not in the foolish doubters of the present age, and not even in death on a cross, but in the glory of the risen Messiah, in coming to understand Him and know Him intimately. In Jeremiah, the prophet writes, "let not the mighty man glory in his might." Yeshua in the flesh explained, "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). We're to walk humbly before our God, because He created all things. How could we possibly then look to any of His creations in a way that misdirects our thanksgiving or praise. All the glory belongs to God, and He desires to share it with His humble servants. Finally, Jeremiah writes, "Nor let the rich man glory in his riches." The rich young ruler in Matthew 19 had kept all of the commandments of God since his youth, He explained to Yeshua, but apparently he did not know his own heart as well as the LORD, for in verse 23 the LORD said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.'" We ought to be willing to give the LORD whatever He asks of us, for wealth in this life is refuse compared to the knowledge and understanding of God and the eternity He has promised us. There is no greater treasure than knowing Yeshua into eternity, and to love the LORD in this way is the greatest commandment of them all. I didn't put this in my slides, but consider what Solomon wrote in Proverbs 8:17-21: "I love those who love me, and those who seek me

diligently will find me. Riches and honor are with me, enduring riches and righteousness. My fruit is better than gold, yes, than fine gold, and my revenue than choice silver. I traverse the way of righteousness, in the midst of the paths of justice, that I may cause those who love me to inherit wealth, that I may fill their treasuries." Yes, let us glory indeed in the riches of wisdom and knowledge of God, a treasure we ought to be building up in Heaven every day of our lives. For He is good, and His mercy endures forever.

I want to turn back a few chapters in Jeremiah and revisit the verses we covered a few moments ago, for after God explained through the prophet what He desires from us, He also explained the many ways in which His very own people that He called to be set apart to Him had gone astray. Though the LORD had attempted to direct His people toward obedience, not sacrifice, so they could build a relationship with Him and one another, the people did not listen. In fact, the more the LORD pursued His people and attempted to redirect them toward His Kingdom, the more they wandered off. We read in Jeremiah 7:24-34, "Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but followed the counsels and the dictates of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward. Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have even sent to you all My servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them. Yet they did not obey Me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers. Therefore you[, He said, speaking to Jeremiah here,] shall speak all these words to them, but they will not obey you. You shall also call to them, but they will not answer you. So you shall say to them, ‘This is a nation that does not obey the voice of the Lord their God nor receive correction. Truth has perished and has been cut off from their mouth. Cut off your hair and cast it away, and take up a lamentation on the desolate heights; for the Lord has rejected and forsaken the generation of His wrath.’ For the children of Judah have done evil in My sight,' says the Lord. 'They have set their abominations in the house which is called by My name, to pollute it. And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into My heart. 'Therefore behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord, 'when it will no more be called Tophet, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter; for they will bury in Tophet until there is no room. The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the heaven and for the beasts of the earth. And no one will frighten them away. Then I will cause to cease from the cities of Judah and from the streets of Jerusalem the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride. For the land shall be desolate.'" In reading this, we first ought to think of the Last Battle, when all the sons of disobedience will lie slain in the field for the birds of the heavens to devour. I also know the prophet Jeremiah had the Nation of Judah in mind prior to the people's captivity in Babylon here, but at the same time, I can't help but think about the modern day we're living in, especially within our own country.

When did the American people stop listening to the voice of the LORD? Perhaps it began in earnest on June 25, 1962, when the U.S. Supreme Court decided in Engel v. Vitale that a prayer approved by the New York Board of Regents for use in schools violated the First Amendment by constituting an establishment of religion. The following year, in Abington School District v. Schempp, the Court disallowed Bible readings in public schools for similar reasons." Prior to this, not only was prayer a regular occurrence in public schools, but Bible-based morals were taught to students as part of their public school education, which otherwise centered on reading, writing and arithmetic. Society was not without its problems, but people in general did not stray far from God's commandments, and if they did so, it was in the shadowy corners of society. From that point of departure from God at the hands of the

Supreme Court, each successive generation did worse than their fathers, just like we read in Jeremiah's writing. Even though preachers fought back and steadied the culture for years to come by teaching God's commandments at church, the enemy began to tear away this glue that held society together. According to a Gallup Poll published in 2019, "U.S. church membership was 70 percent or higher from 1937 through 1976, falling modestly to an average of 68 percent in the 1970s through the 1990s. The past 20 years have seen an acceleration in the drop-off, with a 20-percentage-point decline since 1999 and more than half of that change occurring since the start of the current decade." (https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx). Unfortunately, things have gotten worse since the pandemic, and a more recent Gallup poll last June found that "In the four years before the pandemic, 2016 through 2019, an average of 34 percent of U.S. adults said they had attended church, synagogue, mosque or temple in the past seven days. From 2020 to the present, the average has been 30 percent, including a 31 percent reading in a May survey." (https://news.gallup.com/poll/507692/church-attendance-lower-pre-pandemic.aspx).

One might say that 30 percent of the population attending church still provides a solid remnant who can help rebuild a moral foundation for society, but sadly the data does not back up this idea. A report, called, "American Worldview Inventory 2022" from the Cultural Research Center at the Arizona Christian University found that only 37 percent of Christian pastors held a Biblical worldview in that year, while most employed "syncretism, a hybrid mixture of disparate worldview elements blended into a customized philosophy of life." In other words, only about 11 percent of the population attended a church in 2022 where the Bible was taught with some accuracy, and this is just in America (https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2022/08/30/basic-biblical-beliefs-lacking-among-most-pastors-in-all-u-s-denominations/). Unfortunately, teaching the Bible with accuracy does not mean that everyone in attendance is actually understanding and internalizing what is being taught and adopting it as their own world view. A February 2024 study from the same institute, called "America Needs Spiritual Renewal More than a Political Majority," found that only 4 percent of the U.S. population now holds a Biblical worldview, while 92 percent of American adults embrace syncretism and the rest embrace Mormonism, Secular Humanism, Nihilism or Postmodernism (https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CRC-Release-AWVI-1-February-19-2024.pdf). To me, Jeremiah's words are ringing true, "they did not obey or incline their ear, but followed the counsels and the dictates of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward." God made it very clear that we were not to mix the holy with the profane throughout Torah, and even Paul noted in 1 Corinthians 10:21 that "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons." This concept from Paul, coincidentally, is directly related to Passover and the other spring feasts that pagans keep, but it has the broader meaning that God intends in Ezekiel 44:23, where He commands His priests: "And they shall teach My people the difference between the holy and the unholy, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean." Syncretism is an offense to the LORD and puts other gods before Him.

Look around at our society and consider whether the Bible is having any effect at all on the way people live besides the 4 percent that I pray we can count ourselves among. If anything, the Bible has become a tool used by the enemy in American society to determine what to oppress. People stiffen their necks, Jeremiah wrote in Chapter 7, and even the prophets teach falsely, not wanting to offend. The words of the Apostle Paul to Timothy are as true today as they were in the first century, and we ought to consider this as a warning to our nation right now. We read in 2 Timothy 4:1-5, "But know this, that in the last

days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!" I repeat: "From such people turn away," Paul wrote, particularly if they call themselves Christians. Without a working knowledge of God's commandments and a desire to know Yeshua and walk in obedience with Him, it is impossible to please the LORD and to become more like Him. We need that foundation in a world and a country that is falling away from God. As more and more preachers turn to worldly sources to inform their opinions and discard the Bible, fewer churchgoers are actually getting fed by the Word of the LORD that provides all people who obey it with everlasting life. The LORD instructed Jeremiah to give the following warning to Judah, and I believe this same warning applies today in America. We read: "This is a nation that does not obey the voice of the Lord their God nor receive correction. Truth has perished and has been cut off from their mouth." Because of this, the people of Judah did evil leading to their destruction, and so too do the people of America do evil today. They bring abominations into their houses of worship beyond our wildest nightmares. I could preach for hours on mere examples of this one thing. We can see churchgoers kissing statues or crying out for God as if he's a genie in a bottle ready to grant them with fame or fortune. They worship a god who condones their abortions, stating that somehow murdering innocent human beings is an act of love that brings the good life. They permit their sons or daughters to physically alter their bodies or the natural use of them and remain silent, worried about their children's feelings instead of the wrath of God. They remain unaccountable as two out of every five girls on American Indian reservations are sold into sex slavery, and this very trade is happening all around us in every populous town of our nation, and many girls are caught up in it. And worst of all, those who are concerned about some or all of these things do not look to God, or perhaps they give Him lip service, but they look to human "saviors" at the ballot box to make everything right again as if passing a civil law or making a decree from on high is going to fix society's total depravity against God's commandments that He has set forth for our own good.

Yeshua is not a minister of sin. He will not save the ones who practice lawlessness and nor will He save those who stand idly by and watch while the world falls apart around them, according to Paul in Romans 1:32. He will have even stricter judgment against the teachers who teach falsely, according to James 3:1. Accordingly, Isaiah wrote, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter" (Isaiah 5:20)! This isn't merely a saying; it is a judgment of God, a judgment that he delights in, according to what we read earlier in Jeremiah 7. And while I say this, do not hear me say that the LORD desires destruction, or even that He desires that sinners perish, because that is simply not the case.

In 2 Peter 3, the apostle writes about the coming judgment of God against the wicked—how the flood in Noah's day took out all but eight men, and on the Last Day fire will rain down destroying the ungodly—but He also explains why we have not yet seen this judgment come. In verses 9-11, we read "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness..." The LORD desires our repentance. He desires that we turn from our wicked ways. And if we are grounded in

Truth and reading Scripture and living it out in our own lives, He desires that we go out and bring His Truth to others, to pull them up out of the fire. This is a moral imperative, and an urgent one at that, for no one knows the day or the hour, but we certainly know the season.

In Ezekiel 18, the LORD explains that the righteous man who turns from his righteousness and does wickedness will die in his sins, and his righteous deeds will not be remembered, while He also explains that the wicked man who turns from his wickedness will be justified by his faith and none of his wicked deeds will be remembered. In closing out a lengthy section that explains all of these things in great detail, the LORD says this in Ezekiel 18:30-32: “Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord God. “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!” How can anyone turn toward the LORD if only 37 percent of Pastors are teaching 11 percent of the population about Biblical Truth? There is truly a famine of the Word of God in the land, and you and I have been given an opportunity to change that.

Outside the stern warning Paul gave to Timothy about the Last Days, he also explained to him what he ought to do about it. In 2 Timothy 4:1-5, he wrote: "I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Messiah Yeshua, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." Brothers and sisters, we are equipped and are—God-willing—becoming even more equipped to go out into the world, in our daily lives and preach the Word of God and the hope we have in Yeshua to everyone who has ears to hear. I understand we have jobs and families, but we also have an eternal calling from the LORD to reach everyone who is reachable, for “The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray [for] the LORD of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest" (Luke 10:2).

I wasn't sure whether I was going to talk about the Solar Eclipse coming up here on April 8. I'm sure you've all seen the hypotheses and conjecture online. I'm not going to add to it with any thoughts of my own, but I do want to share a few facts with you that I've observed because I do think they're relevant to today's sermon. There is no question that three solar eclipses will have traveled solely over the United States between August 21, 2017 and April 8, 2024, and nothing like this is going to happen again in our lifetimes. It's also true that the total eclipse coming up on April 8 begins near a city called Jonah, Texas and then proceeds to travel over seven cities called Nineveh. It's also true that the shape of the three eclipses over the United States form the Hebrew letter Aleph, and some people have said that the previous eclipses have formed the Hebrew letter Tav, and together that symbolizes the end and the beginning, or the beginning and the end, which Yeshua Himself says about Himself in Revelation 22:13. Is the series of American solar eclipses a warning message from God? Is Yeshua coming to judge us? I don't know the answer to these questions and will let you judge that for yourself, but I do know this: Scientists have determined that on June 15, 763 BC, ancient Nineveh witnessed a full solar eclipse (M.B. Rowton, The Cambridge Ancient History, 1.1.(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970),

pp. 202–204), and this is supposed to be around the time that Jonah preached repentance to that city. What's also known is around this time, Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was suffering from plagues and famines that left the empire impoverished and in total disorder, according to Old Testament scholar, Dr. Eugene H. Merrill (Eugene H. Merrill, Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p.388). Based on some evidence available in this resource and on the website Epic Archaeology from which I'm citing it (https://epicarchaeology.org/2017/08/17/jonah-archaeo-astronomy-the-eclipse-of-ancient-nineveh/), the eclipse and/or these other calamities could have happened around the time that Jonah took up his mission to the pagan city. Were these perceived judgments of God the reason why the king and the whole city put on sackcloth and ashes and repented of their pagan ways upon the urging of the reluctant prophet? How else might we explain one prophet of God having the effect that he did?

Let's briefly consider the relevant part of the story of Jonah before considering whether there is any application for us today. We know that God commanded Jonah to go to "Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness" had risen up so that the LORD noticed it. Jonah, who was of Israel, did not want to preach to the gentile city, especially because the Assyrians were regular enemies of his nation, and so he went the other direction. We all know he was swallowed by a large sea creature, he was subsequently spat up on land, and he was given another chance by God to obey Him. Let's read chapter three, which provides us with a great narrative for what happened next. We read: "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.' Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.' The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.' When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened" (Jonah 3). I find this section incredibly powerful, and have preached on the whole story at length before. What's remarkable from a historical standpoint is that a pagan nation that worshipped its own set of gods responded positively to one man from Israel who called on the 120,000-plus citizens to repent, and they listened to him and repented before God, and God spared them from destruction. Is there hope for us?

Surely this was a sign for the future, and so it would be. Consider this mysterious account from Matthew 12:38-41, where Yeshua Himself mentioned Jonah. We read: "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.' But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here." Surely, the LORD prophesied His own death and resurrection here, noting Jonah's time in the belly of the whale would be akin to the time He spent in the grave

before resurrecting unto new life, but there's more to the story. You see, the men of Nineveh who repented would rise up on the Last Day, in the resurrection from the dead, according to Yeshua, and would judge the men of Judea who rejected Yeshua as the Messiah. These men were truly saved, according to Yeshua. Will these same men of Nineveh rise up and judge us? That is the question I want us to ponder.

As Jonah preached to a Gentile city that repented of great evil and turned their hearts toward the LORD, so too did Yeshua's message of repentance reach the entire Gentile world up to the modern day. From the very beginning of His ministry, Yeshua came out and said to all with ears to hear, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” That message is still valid today, for the Kingdom is indeed at hand, alive in us as we go out in the Spirit of God into this dark world, to bring the light of Yeshua. We were called to be the light in the darkness, the city on a hill. In fact, when Yeshua gave His last instructions to His disciples, He said, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20). This reminds me of the mission Paul gave to Timothy, and arguably, all of us who have already decided to follow after Yeshua. He said for us to be ready to convince, rebuke, and exhort, with all long-suffering and teaching, following the very successful model that our LORD showed us. He didn't just show us in the flesh, though. He also showed us through the words of Jeremiah, who faced an uphill, losing battle that would ultimately end in Jerusalem's destruction and Judah's captivity, but Jeremiah preached the Truth anyway, and He certainly was rewarded for it in God's Kingdom. The LORD also showed us through Jonah's story, though Jonah had to be spat out of a giant fish's belly to get Him to preach repentance, but his effort was successful. Outside of the many other witnesses in Scripture, the Apostles also showed us what it looks like to preach the Truth to people who didn't necessarily want to heart it, and they even gave up their lives for the cause. I'm going to come back to this point, for there is some sound advice from the Apostle Paul that relates to our reading in Leviticus that I'm going to leave you with, but first I want to share an important word from King Solomon.

Now, we all may be tempted to consider the statistics that I mentioned earlier as well as our culture's rapid decline into total depravity and say, "woe is me," and fail to act on account of this. If this becomes our response, I'm telling you right now that it is sin. Our day is no worse than previous periods when the Word of God was out of season, but as Paul told Timothy, we must preach the Word "in season and out of season," "redeeming the time, for the days are evil." But I also want to point out that all times, no matter how the culture might have looked on the surface, have had their challenges, and those who trust Yeshua and keep His commandments have struggled against the tides of time to keep the faith alive that we celebrate today, and we are called to do the same thing, for we cannot allow the light of Messiah Yeshua to die with us. As Mordecai said to Esther in Esther 4:1, "if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” Esther rose to the occasion during her time and helped save her brethren from total disaster. We too are called to rise to the occasion for the people of God, looking forward to the hope we have in Yeshua and His promised Kingdom to come. As I noted, Solomon has some words that are highly relevant to the present state of things, and I believe they will help us remain humble and reliant on the LORD in the face of the obstacles before us. In Ecclesiastes 7:8-14, we read: "The end of a thing is better than its beginning;

The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry, for anger rests in the bosom of fools. Do not say, 'Why were the former days better than these?' For you do not inquire wisely concerning this. Wisdom is good with an inheritance, And profitable to those who see the sun. For wisdom is a defense as money is a defense, But the excellence of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to those who have it. Consider the work of God; For who can make straight what He has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, But in the day of adversity consider: Surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, so that man can find out nothing that will come after him." In other words, without our knowledge of God, our understanding of who He is and what He has promised to us, we are all as good as dead. Whether our times are easy or difficult, it is our duty to fear God and keep His commandments, for that is man's all, as Solomon later concludes in Ecclesiastes 12:14. If our time is fraught with chaos, sin and depravity, then it is our duty to call for our brethren to repent, and let God sort out the details. If our time is easy, then we had better not lose track of who has blessed us with the lives we have and give Him all glory and praise and honor. Indeed, we ought to praise Him and rejoice even in the midst of our current reality, for the end of all of this is better than the beginning. If we endure until the end, we will dwell with God forever in His Kingdom.

And so, regardless of whether this coming eclipse is of any prophetic significance, I believe it is incumbent on each of us to go out and preach the Word of God to our countrymen. We're not all preachers, I understand this, but we are indeed, every one of us, ministers of reconciliation for our LORD Yeshua. There isn't a single one of us who He has let off the hook from preaching the Gospel and teaching the commandments of God, even baptizing those who confess that Yeshua is their LORD, God and Savior. We read in 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences. We are not again commending ourselves to you but are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, so that you will have an answer for those who take pride in appearance and not in heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you. For the love of Messiah controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Messiah according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Messiah and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Messiah reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the Word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Messiah, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Messiah, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

To help us with our ministry of reconciliation, we do indeed need to put on the full armor of God as my son Jacob so wonderfully observed during our homeschooling classes this week. First consider 1 Peter 2:5, which states that as followers of Yeshua, we are living stones of God's Holy Temple and part of a holy priesthood offering up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Yeshua the Messiah. I believe these truths define the very ministry of reconciliation itself. When Jacob read about Aaron's tunic, his sash, his robe, his ephod, his woven band of the ephod, his breastplate, his Urim and Thummin, and his turban, with its golden plate and holy crown, he pointed out how we ought to put on these garments also

in the spiritual realm, and I believe he's exactly correct. And so, I want to conclude today's message with Paul's words specifically about how we ought to gird ourselves before we go out to engage in this ministry.

Here's Ephesians 6:10-18: "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—" We go out to battle already understanding the Truth of God's Word and applying to our lives, for we do not want to be counted as hypocrites. But since we all fall short, we also must be prepared with the Gospel that makes peace between us and God through Messiah, for without His grace the law condemns us to death, and everyone else. We are prepared with our faith that shields us from any attacks of the enemy, being able to stand firm in Yeshua who is the source of our life and any power He gives us in battle. Our salvation crowns our head, for without a trust in Yeshua and His Word and the desire to change hearts and minds, we may lose our heads, and we may still anyway. Therefore, with faith in our LORD, we go out wielding the sword of Truth, which is the Word of God, praying always with confidence that the Spirit of God desires that all will come to repentance, but we must remain humble before our God. When the sun sets on Shabbat this evening, brothers and sisters, it is time for us to go forth and make disciples, with urgency, for we are at a late hour indeed and God's judgment against our wicked nation is as sure to come as the righteousness of God, and His long-suffering goodness is sure to stand. Shabbat shalom.