



Notes from an Old Bible

Advent Study

Day 1

Read: Matthew 13:52

Introduction

Although we begin the introduction of this series with a verse from the New Testament, we are about to begin upon a journey through the Old Testament, looking for spiritual treasures. We will be bringing out of the storeroom of God's book—the Bible—new treasures as well as old. That is, we will be encountering passages of Scripture that may be very familiar to us as well as others that may have gone unnoticed.

The idea is to give us a composite picture of God's word, one that unifies as well as instructs. If I had set out to do this relying on my own memory or the suggestions of others, I'm doubtful of what the results would be. Instead, I was led to write this series inspired by what I found in an old Bible. The verses underlined here and there in that Bible combined to tell a fascinating story of God's plan for us all.

We sometimes forget that the Old Testament makes up the vast majority of the Bible. Of course the New Testament is more important to us as Christians, but understanding it fully requires our knowledge of what went before it. In our time together, by combining the words of the Old Testament and their inspirations in my own life, I will try to bring out of the storeroom we call Scripture new treasures as well as old.

R&D Have you underlined or otherwise noted items in your Bible from time to time? Wouldn't it be worthwhile to go back and find what had been so important to you that you noted those words?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the gift of Holy Scripture to guide our lives day by day.

Day 2

Read: Genesis 35:9-15

Growth

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of dough" (Matthew 13:33). That was the Scripture passage from a study of the Parables of Jesus in last year's middle edition of *The Journey*. Because we prepare studies well in advance of their actual publication, that passage was the reading for today as I begin this series of "Notes from an Old Bible". To me, it fit perfectly with the passage from Genesis. How?

What we will be doing in this series is somewhat different from most studies in *The Journey*. Usually the writers look at the passage of Scripture and provide commentary to help us understand it more fully. I will be doing some of that in this series, but I will also be dealing with what the passage meant to me personally...what caused me to make a note of it in my Bible years ago.

Today's reading is very important historically because it contains God's reaffirmation that He has a plan for all mankind. What I underlined in my Bible was: "And God said to him [Jacob], 'I am God almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come forth from you, and kings will come from your body. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you'" (vv.11-12). This wasn't just a promise to Jacob, it was a foretelling of what was to come. That would be a people who would worship the one, true God; and, like the yeast the woman mixed into the dough, would result in worldwide expansion through the Messiah who would come from that promise.

I marked that passage in my Bible because it reminded me of the call that God has upon every Christian. We are to be doing our part—whatever it may be—to bring the world to Christ. It caused me to look seriously at what God was calling me to do.

R&D *In what ways are you doing your part to bring the world to Christ?*

Prayer: *Lord, what is the best I can do/say/give/take on for Your kingdom and Your glory, placed as I am right now? (Finishing Our Course with Joy, J. I. Packer).*

Day 3

Read: Genesis 50:15-21

Redemption

The story of Joseph is a familiar one. He was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt. He was exposed to sexual temptation by the wife of his master and imprisoned for resisting. He served a long prison term and was forgotten by those he helped. Yet Joseph somehow maintained a positive attitude and ultimately became the second most powerful person in Egypt.

In our reading for today Joseph's brothers, now in need of his forgiveness, come to him, throw themselves at his feet expressing a willingness to become his slaves. Joseph's response, as noted in my old Bible, was: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (v.20a). Through all the hardships he had faced in life, Joseph believed God for good and it proved true.

I would never compare myself with Joseph; but, as I read that passage many years ago, I could already see God's hand in leading me out of one troubling predicament after another. What had seemed disasters at the time turned into steps forward in my life. It has undoubtedly been true in your life as well that God has redeemed bad situations and turned them into good.

We're perhaps reminded of Paul's statement in Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

R&D *Reflect on a time or times in your life when God has turned what was intended for harm into good.*

Prayer: *Father God, You have not only redeemed me, You also save me from myself time and time again.*

Day 4

Read: Exodus 14:10-22

Freedom

Our reading for today is filled with high drama. God had promised to deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and to return them to Canaan. As they marched under the leadership of Moses, however, Pharaoh and his chariots menacingly appeared. Fear strikes the Israelites and they rail against Moses. Then God fulfills His promise with miraculous acts that lead the people to freedom.

What I had noted in my Bible was verse 14: “The Lord will fight for you; you need only be still.” How difficult it is to be still when we are surrounded by danger, chaos, or confusion. Yet, aren’t we to have the peace of God because Christ is with us through the Holy Spirit within us to show us the way? This is the freedom we are to have in Christ. Perhaps easier said than done!

My day began with me facing a ton less drama than the Israelites in our Scripture passage. I felt I needed to write a crucial letter—one that could lead to a promising development or, in the alternative, deep disappointment. I was anxious to get it done, but I took time to pray about it. Immediately the answer I seemed to receive was to “be still”—to wait on the Lord in the situation. What will be the ultimately result? I don’t know, but I have confidence in the Lord.

R&D Recall a time when you felt that God guided you to trust Him in a difficult situation. How did it work out?

Prayer: Lord God, Your presence with me is more precious than anything in life.

Day 5

Read: Exodus 32:15-24

Blame

Aaron was the first high priest of the Israelites, Moses’ brother and his spokesman. While Moses was on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments from God, Aaron was in charge of the people. What happens? He gives in to their demands and fashions as an idol a golden calf for them to worship. This reversion to paganism so enraged Moses that he breaks the tablets on which the commandments had been written.

The portion of the passage I had underlined in my Bible, however, focuses on how quickly Aaron managed to place the blame on others. First he blames the people (vv.22-23). Then he indirectly blames God: “Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came the calf!” (v.24b).

This instance echoes Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. When God confronts them with eating the forbidden apple, Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent (Genesis 3:11-13). And thus it has ever been. Faced with sin, minor wrongdoing, or simple error, we want to blame someone else.

Perhaps my underlining this passage speaks for itself. Did it remind me of how often others blame me for things they have done? I suspect not. More likely I saw in it the Aaron in myself.

R&D How conscious are you of our tendency to blame others? What can you do about it?

Prayer: *Lord, when it's my fault help me always to admit it.*

Day 6

Read: Numbers 14:17-20

Bondage

There's a lot going on before and after our reading for today. Moses had sent scouts into the Promised Land and, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, they came back with stories of the dangers they would face upon entering it. The result was rebellion on the part of the Israelites. They wanted to stone Moses and Aaron and return to Egypt. As a result, God is angered by their failure to realize all He has done for them and is ready to destroy them.

Our reading is Moses' prayer to God asking for forgiveness on their behalf, to which God relents, with some exceptions (vv.21ff). In his prayer, Moses notes that God is patient, His love can always be counted on, He forgives us repeatedly, and He is merciful in responding to our requests. We can rely on God's patience, forgiveness, and mercy.

What I marked in my Bible deals with another issue, however. I underlined verse 18b, "Yet he [God] does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." As I have thought and prayed about these words in subsequent years, I have found it to be true that there is something to this "generational sin". People do have a tendency to adopt and display the prejudices and hatreds of their ancestors. I'm not inclined, however, to blame this on God. I think the quote is an acknowledgment that our grievous sins—as well as our faithfulness—can be passed on to our children. The choice is ours.

Also, if we note sinful tendencies in ourselves as a result of "having been carefully taught," we can ask God to break this bondage of the past and free us from it.

R&D Reflect on any unhealthy behaviors you may have inherited from your forebears and resolve to end them.

Prayer: *Lord, deliver me from any sins of my ancestors.*

Day 7

Read: Deuteronomy 8:1-5

Discipline

Chapter 8 of Deuteronomy begins by stressing the importance of discipline. Moses is reminding the Israelites of all that God has done to and for them over the forty years in the wilderness, and why. God has shown His love for them by taking care of their basic needs but, in doing so, He has demonstrated their dependence on Him with the memorable words, "Man does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (v.3b).

My underlining dealt with the *heart* message in this passage. I noted, in verse 2, that God had humbled the people "to test you in order to know what was in your heart." Discipline for its own sake can be a rather heartless exercise...something we do for our own achievement (pride) or health. God is interested in another kind of discipline, one that results from our love of God and our desire to be in His will.

Moses makes the point clear in the last verse of our reading: "Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you." Why do we discipline our children? Because we love them so much. Our primary goal is that, by showing them a better way, they may grow in the knowledge and the love of God. We do that, for instance, by protect-

ing them. One of my most cherished memories is of our older daughter saying, “I always resented the restrictions you placed on me when I was growing up, but now I see them as walls of protection you were providing me and I am grateful.”

R&D *In what ways has God disciplined you in order to know what is in your heart?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to see—when things aren’t going my way—what You may be trying to show me.*

Day 8

Read: Deuteronomy 8:6-20

Remembering

Moses continues, in Chapter 8 of Deuteronomy, to remind the Israelites of all God has done for them. God is about to allow them to enter the Promised Land and Moses spells out the wonderful things they will find there. The people will be able to avail themselves of the streams and pools of water, the wheat, barley, olive oil, and honey as well as the iron and copper. It is a land of plenty and the people will prosper.

There is a problem, however. As the people prosper it will be easy for them to forget the God who made all of this possible for them. When people are in need they are much more likely to look to their Creator for help. Once affluence sets in, however, there is a tendency for people to think it is their own ingenuity and hard work that have brought the results. Does that sound like our nation today?

The portion of this passage I underlined in my old Bible was verse 14 where it says, “then your heart will become proud and you will forget.” One of the most powerful sermons I have heard was about *remembering*. Its whole point was how easy it is to forget what God has done for us and to stop looking to Him for our needs and being grateful to Him for His love.

Faith is built on remembering. Whenever our faith wanes, it is time to recall all God has done and is doing for us.

R&D *How often do you thank God for His love and care for you? How about doing it now?*

Prayer: *Lord, there is no limit to Your concern for us and Your mercy shown to us. With a grateful heart, I thank You.*

Day 9

Read: Joshua 1:1-9

Courage

It is now time for Joshua to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. God is speaking to Joshua, giving him specific instructions about what he is to do. Three times He tells Joshua to be strong and courageous. Many challenges lie ahead, and God wanted Joshua to be well prepared for them. In my old Bible I had underlined the last sentence in our passage: “Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you everywhere you go.” And He was.

The pioneers who settled our country did so long ago, and now we live in our own land of “milk and honey”—having in the United States many more blessings than the Israelites expe-

rienced in the Promised Land. Yet that would not be so even today if there had not been those strong and courageous ones who have fought to preserve what we so often take for granted.

Yesterday I received an email that told the story of an elderly man who has having car trouble. A young Marine stopped to help him. The problem, however, was more than the young man could handle, so he drove to a nearby service station and got the mechanic to return with him to the elderly man in distress. When the problem with the car had been corrected the old man said, "I was also a Marine," and gave the young man his card. It wasn't until later that the young Marine looked more closely at the card and found that the elderly man in need of help had been a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor—the highest honor paid to those who serve our country. The young Marine had had the privilege of helping a man who had truly been strong and courageous for the benefit of us all.

R&D Have you ever been strong and courageous for the benefit of others?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for those who have courageously defended our faith and our freedom.

Day 10

Read: Joshua 24:14-15

Legacy

Joshua is in the process of his farewell to the people he had led into the Promised Land. In the verses that precede our reading for today, he has reminded them of the obstacles that, by the grace of God, they have overcome. Looking to the future there is only one conclusion to this, stated by Joshua in verse 14: "Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness."

There is a choice to be made, however. The Israelites can follow the Lord who had proven His trustworthiness over and over again or they can follow self-made gods. Furthermore, they can follow no gods at all, but look with pride to what they believe to be their own accomplishments. It is very easy to fall into rebellion against God, going about life in our own way. The time comes, however, when we have to make a choice of who or what will control our life. Will it be God, our own selfish will, or some other substitute? Joshua makes clear what choice he has made.

Joshua's declaration, at the end of our passage, is what I underlined in my old Bible. "But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Whether early in our married life or as we reach old age, it is always appropriate to think of the legacy we want to leave behind. We want to know that those who are dependent on us will be provided for when we are no longer around. But a bequest of property or money only speaks to the temporal needs of our dependents. Meeting their spiritual needs has eternal significance. When Joshua makes reference to "my household" in his statement about serving the Lord, he is showing confidence that it is a spiritual legacy he has in mind. So it should be with each of us.

R&D What spiritual legacy do you want to leave for your loved ones? What have you done, or what can you do, to assure that?

Prayer: Lord, help us to be good spiritual examples to all.

Day 11

Read: 1 Samuel 16:1-7

Judging

As God's story moves along in the Old Testament, the Israelites have conquered the Promised Land, Judges have ruled ineffectively, and the people have asked for a king and have gotten the ineffective and unfaithful Saul as a result. Now Samuel is being sent by God to find Saul's successor. In the verses that follow our reading for today we learn that Samuel, after considering all of Jesse's other sons, chooses David, the one God had in mind all along.

Our focus today, however, is on Eliab, Jesse's oldest son. Samuel apparently saw in him someone who looked like Saul, a tall and handsome man. In Samuel's mind, Eliab looked like a king. God, however, is not interested in our physical features. The underlined words in my old Bible are, "The Lord does not look at things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (v.7b).

Judging by outward appearances is a risky practice. Appearance doesn't reveal what a person is really like. Even a welcoming smile and a friendly countenance can conceal hidden motives. If we are dealing with a serious decision concerning a person—and what could have been more serious for Samuel than choosing a king?—we have to be able to look beyond a good first impression. That's how God guided Samuel.

On a more personal level we might use this teaching to think about how much time we spend on our personal appearance as against the time we spend on our inner self...our *heart*. Isn't God telling us that the much more important thing than looking good is to be in a right relationship with Him?

R&D Reflect on the amount of time you spend trying to look your best versus—from God's point of view—being your best.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to grow daily in your love and service.

Day 12

Read: 1 Chronicles 4:9-10

Prayer

Today's reading is an odd one, but it was marked in my old Bible for a special reason. What is called "The Prayer of Jabez" is found amid one of the genealogies in the Bible. A footnote tells us that the practice of inserting historical notes in the midst of genealogical records occurred in non-Biblical genealogical texts in the ancient Near East as well as in other Biblical genealogies. Why is this insert so special?

According to the *Life Application Bible*, "Jabez is remembered for a prayer request rather than a heroic act. In his prayer, he asked God to (1) bless him, (2) help him in his work, (3) be with him in all he did, and (4) keep him from evil and harm. Jabez acknowledged God as the true center of his life. When we pray for God's blessing, we should also pray that He will take His rightful position as Lord over our work, our family time, and our recreation. Obeying Him in daily responsibilities *is* heroic living."

Why I underlined—and sometimes pray—The Prayer of Jabez was for an additional reason. It is because he specifically asked God to expand his territory. To me, that means wanting to see beyond my limited vision, my preconceived notions, my prejudices, my "blind spots", that I may more clearly know what plans God has for me. God wants the abundant life for us (John

10:10), but we so often limit ourselves by sticking to the familiar, the comfortable. We should want to get out of our comfort zones and about whatever God has in mind for us. That is also a heroic act. And, remember, we are a part of the genealogy.

R&D Reflect on praying Jabez's prayer to expand your own horizons.

Prayer: Bless me, Lord, and enlarge my territory for Your sake.

Day 13

Read: Esther 4:5-17

Timing

Esther was a young Jewish girl who became queen of Persia. Mordecai, Esther's older cousin, had, in the meantime, become a high official in the government of King Xerxes. The second-in-command in the government, however, was a pompous man named Haman. When, on one occasion, Mordecai refused to bow in reverence to him, Haman became furious and determined to destroy Mordecai and all the Jews in the land. To accomplish this evil plan, Haman persuaded the king to issue an edict condemning the Jews to death.

It is about this situation that Mordecai is in grief in our reading for today. Mordecai realizes that the only hope for the Jews is for Esther to convince the king to withdraw the edict. Esther, however, knows that she is risking her own life to go before the king without being summoned. She makes the decision to do so and the story has a happy ending in the remainder of the book. Not only are the Jews spared, but Haman is hanged on the gallows he had prepared for the hanging of Mordecai.

The portion of this Scripture I had underlined in my old Bible were the words, "For if you remain silent at this time...you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (v.14). Why did those words speak to me so clearly? Because I saw them as a call to all Christians for all time. Christ has called us to a royal position as children of God. You can't have a more royal position than that! And we are here, at this moment in time, to be Christ's people to the world around us. What we do today may not have the dramatic effect that Esther's action did, but that does not make it less essential.

R&D What action would God have you take today to help bring the world to Christ?

Prayer: Lord, help me not to forget 2 Corinthians 5:20, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us."

Day 14

Read: Proverbs 18:21

Words

As with so many of the Proverbs, today's little gem is set among an array of wise sayings. Most of the writings in Proverbs are attributed to Solomon, the son of David. The purpose of the book is to teach people how to attain wisdom and discipline, and to know what is right, just, and fair; in other words, to show people how to apply wisdom to everyday life.

Today's verse is a good example. It parallels verses I have also underlined in New Testament passages in my old Bible. In Matthew 12:36-37, Jesus says, "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by

your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” And James 3 is the familiar passage about taming the tongue. My underlining is at verse 8, “but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

Perhaps it is an over-simplification to conclude that we should just be careful what we say. Our Proverb tells us that the tongue has the power of life and death!

Now, in my older years, I find that I often say something other than what I mean; my words aren't always in synch with my mind. Further, my failing memory prevents me from coming up with the name or the place I am about to talk about. Regardless of all that, I still want always to say the kind thing and not the mean one. We can have a powerful effect on others—for good or ill—by virtue of what we say to or about them. We owe it to the Lord we serve to realize that our words can have eternal consequences for ourselves and for those to whom we speak them, and to be guided accordingly.

R&D Reflect on words you wish you had not spoken and others you have been glad you did.

Prayer: Lord, tame my tongue.

Day 15

Read: Isaiah 5:8-20

Excuses

Our reading for today is a “Woe unto the Israelites” from God through the prophet Isaiah. Because of its sins, God had punished Israel (the northern kingdom) with destruction by Assyria (told of in vv.25-30). A similar fate awaits Judah (the southern kingdom) if they do not turn from their sinful ways.

In my old Bible, the verse underlined was 20, “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.” Failure to distinguish good from evil is a pathway to destruction. If we decide we can do what is right in our own eyes without reference to what Scripture teaches us, we are headed for disaster...as were the people of Judah. When we make excuses for our actions, we break down the distinction between right and wrong. If God's word is not our standard, our moral choices become fuzzy and we lose our way.

To me, the underlined verse of Scripture speaks clearly to *our* day as well as theirs. Referring to Paul's teaching in Romans 1, someone recently said, “Human beings lust after the autonomy to sin as they see fit, which is a shared inclination of all people.” Left to our own devices, we will do what we want to do just because we want to do it. Furthermore, in today's secular world, it seems right to stand up for the rights of others to do whatever they will. In this post-Christian world, there is no measuring stick to distinguish good from evil.

We can't prevent others for making the choices and excuses they do, but we can show them a better way. We can live by the measuring stick we call Scripture.

R&D What instances can you think of that show the disregard of Scripture by people who are making decisions around you in the course of the day?

Prayer: Lord, help me not to be seduced by worldly ways but ever diligent in following Your word.

Day 16

Read: Isaiah 40:1-5

Calling

After the stern warnings by Isaiah in our last study, today we have words of comfort. At this point in history Judah still had 100 years of trouble ahead before Jerusalem would fall. There would then be 70 years of exile. As a prelude to today's passage, Hezekiah, one of Judah's most faithful kings, had worked hard to stamp out idol worship and to purify the worship of God in the temple in Jerusalem (39:8). Thus, while trouble lay ahead, God—through Isaiah—presented a message of encouragement.

In my old Bible I had underlined verses 3-5. There is powerful symbolism here. The desert represents a place of hardship and challenge. That is what lay ahead for Judah. But the Lord had prepared a highway in the wilderness for those who follow Him. John the Baptist would use these words to challenge the Israelites to prepare for the Messiah (Matthew 3:3).

I underlined the words because I saw them as a calling to all of us who are disciples of Christ. *Physically speaking*, we are privileged to live in a land that is far from being a desert or a wilderness. We live in the most bountiful place on earth. Yet, as noted earlier in this series, our prosperity can easily lead to complacency. Self-satisfaction draws people away from realizing our dependency on God. *Spiritually speaking*, there is a desert/wilderness around us, and God is calling all Christians to do something about it...to point others to the highway that leads to Christ and to help them along it each step of the way.

R&D *How might you help someone along Christ's highway today?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, awaken in me the desire to reach others for you.*

Day 17

Read: Jeremiah 31:23-34

Promise

Jeremiah prophesied during the time period leading up to the fall of Judah (with its capital city of Jerusalem) to Babylon in 586 BC. His purpose was to urge the people to turn from their sins and back to God. The vision that leads to our reading today is of the day when all Israel will be free of captivity. For Christians, it is a prophecy that finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

My old Bible was underlined at verses 33-34. Here God, speaking through Jeremiah, tells of the new covenant He will have with His people. At the core of God's promise is that we can have a personal relationship with Him (see 29:11; 32:38-40). His laws will be written on our hearts. Jeremiah was envisioning a day when the Messiah would come to establish this covenant. For us, that day is here.

What we have today that Jeremiah did not have consists of several things. We know of Christ, who he is, and what he did for us while here on earth. We have the Bible to tell us all about that and its benefit to those who accept Christ as their Savior and Lord. We have the inheritance of faithful Christians down through the ages who have lived by Scripture and have passed their knowledge and wisdom on to us. And, of course, we have the Holy Spirit within us to guide us throughout our lives. The combination of these factors certainly leads to God's laws being written in our hearts and the ability to have a personal relationship with Him.

R&D *In what ways do you maintain your personal relationship with God?*

Prayer: *You are my love, Lord God; You are my all.*

Day 18

Read: Daniel 2:17-23

Mission

Daniel was among the Jewish captives in Babylon and became a counselor to King Nebuchadnezzar. That included interpreting the king's dreams as the king's astrologers also did. In leading up to today's reading, the king had asked not only for the interpretation of his dream but what the dream itself was. If his advisors could not tell him his dream and its interpretation, they were to be executed.

Thus we find Daniel recounting the situation to his friends. He urged them to pray for mercy from God concerning the mystery that they not be killed. The result was a vision in which the dream and its interpretation were revealed to Daniel. That is followed with the prayer of verses 20-23. Before rushing forward with the news of his discovery, Daniel takes the time to thank and praise God for the mercy and guidance shown to him.

The focus of my underlining was on verse 20: "He [God] reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, *and light dwells within him.*" It struck me, when I read this, that the message speaks to us Christians about God and about ourselves. The Holy Spirit of God is within us to reveal "deep and hidden things," to know "what lies in darkness," and to reflect the light of Christ to the world around us.

In a sense, Daniel was a missionary to the pagan people among whom he was a captive. In our day we have a tendency to pray for the protection of missionaries in foreign lands. But, as one of those missionaries said, "Please pray for our wisdom and guidance, not our protection. Instead, pray that the light of Christ will shine through us to those who oppose and would harm us."

R&D *How will you now pray for missionaries and missionary organizations?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, bless those on mission in your name. May your light shine through them for the benefit of all whom they encounter.*

Day 19

Read: Joel 2:12-18

Repentance

The prophet Joel is another God called to warn the people of Judah (the southern kingdom) of their impending doom. In our reading for today Joel is specific in his instructions about what they are to do. In my old Bible I underlined verses 12-13a: "Even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend you heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate...."

Time was running out on these people. God, through Joel, was looking for signs of true repentance from them. In Old Testament times, deep remorse was often shown by tearing one's clothes. God, however, did not want outward displays of penitence without true repentance (1 Samuel 16:7; Matthew 23:1-36). Fasting, weeping, and mourning would be better signs of heartfelt repentance than outward tokens.

As I read this passage, what came to my mind was 2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” Why did that come to my mind? Because it calls for prayer—much in the nature of Joel’s warning—and is something my wife and I read regularly in prayer form. Why? Because it speaks to Christ’s people today. We may not be facing the impending doom of Judah, but we, as a people, need to rend our hearts and pray that God will heal our land.

R&D Consider whether you should regularly include prayers for repentance in the nature of what we have discussed above.

Prayer: Lord, humble us and turn us from our waywardness that our sin may be forgiven and our land may be healed.

Day 20

Read: Amos 5:18-27

Justice

The purpose of the Book of Amos was to proclaim God’s judgment on Israel (the northern kingdom) for its complacency, idolatry, and oppression of the poor. These Israelites were enjoying peace and prosperity while the poor suffered, some even being sold into slavery. Soon, however, they would be conquered by Assyria, and the rich would themselves become slaves.

Our reading for today speaks of “the day of the Lord.” The term had the dual meaning of destruction by the Assyrians as well as a future day of God’s judgment. For the faithful, the day of the Lord would be a glorious occasion. For the unfaithful, it would be a day of darkness and gloom. The people, in looking forward to the day of the Lord, thought it would be the end of their troubles; but just the opposite was about to happen.

The verse I had underlined in my old Bible was, “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-ending stream” (v.24). *Justice*. How often do we seek justice for ourselves, feeling we have not gotten what was due us? Perhaps, instead of that kind of justice, we need to seek mercy. That is what the Israelites needed to do.

God, through Amos, is talking about justice not for ourselves but for those who have been downtrodden and need help. Do we become complacent in our worship and unmindful of the needs of others? It was verse 24 that Martin Luther King quoted to call for justice for Blacks in our country. For whom does justice need to roll down in our day?

R&D Reflect on those who, in our day, are in need of justice. What are you doing to meet their needs?

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us always to be aware of and responsive to the needs of others.

Day 21

Read: Micah 6:1-8

Humility

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah and Hosea. Like them, he was writing to warn the people—both those of Israel (the north kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom)—of the coming judgment; but he was also offering pardon to those who would repent. In the midst of an

overwhelming prediction of destruction, Micah gives hope and consolation because he also describes God's love.

In our reading for today Micah pictures a courtroom. God, as judge, reminds the people of all that has been done for them—recounting the great acts of mercy shown to them over the centuries. With all they have received from God, what should He expect of them? He makes it clear that trying to appease Him with sacrifices will not work. He is looking for something more.

The verse I had underlined in my Bible was, "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (v.8). Those words spoke to me (and still do) as so simple yet so profound. Considering all that God has done for us, are these things too much to expect of us? In this series we've just looked at our need for repentance, the showing of mercy, and letting justice roll. Here we add humility. As Christians, if we are honest with ourselves, it is easy enough to realize that what we are accomplishing in life is solely due to the grace of God, and that is a solid base for humility.

R&D The three big questions Micah is asking us: Are you fair in your dealings with others? Do you show mercy to those who wrong you? Are you learning humility?

Prayer: Wherein I lack them, teach me, dear Lord, justice, mercy, and humility.

Day 22

Read: Nahum 1:1-11

Refuge

After looking at prophecies against the Israelites, today we have Nahum's prophecy against Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, on behalf of the people of Judah. That Nineveh would be destroyed was a comfort to Judah which had been under subjugation to the Assyrians. Judah would no longer be required to pay tribute as insurance against the invaders. God was still in control.

Nahum, like Jonah, prophesied against the Assyrian empire between 663 and 612 BC. Jonah had seen Nineveh repent a century earlier, but the city had fallen back into wickedness. An oracle (v.1) is a message from God. Nahum begins our reading by describing—in various ways—God's anger against such wickedness. No one can safely defy God, the creator of the universe who controls all things.

The underlined portion of this text in my Bible, however, dealt with verse 7: "The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him." Although that message was for the people of Judah at the time, it is also a message for us for all time. It is a huge comfort to know that God is with us in the midst of the difficulties we face in life. As an online missionary for Global Media Outreach, I am daily in contact with people all over the world who need refuge of one kind or another. What a joy it is to share with these Christians the promises of God in which they can take refuge.

R&D To whom might you be able to share a message of God's refuge today?

Prayer: Lord, You are our refuge in times of trouble; our sure defense in times of need.

Day 23

Read: Habakkuk 3:1-10

Renewal

The brief book of Habakkuk is of a somewhat different nature than the other prophecies we have recently considered. The first two chapters involve Habakkuk's complaints and God's answers. The third chapter is Habakkuk's prayer. The book was written sometime between 612 and 588 BC and was addressed to the people of Judah (the southern kingdom). During that time Babylon was becoming the world power and Judah would soon suffer as a result.

Habakkuk's purpose was to show that God was still in control of the world despite the apparent triumph of evil. Other than verse 2, our reading for today is a description of God's mighty power. As we have seen in the earlier prophecies, there are references to the glorious works of God (His praise filling the earth, the splendor of the sunrise) but also of His power. The reference to Cushan and Midian in verse 7 is tied to what happened to these people as the Israelites came into the Promised Land. The references in verse 8 are apparently to the escape from Egypt.

In my old Bible, it was verse 2 that was underlined: "Lord, I have heard of your fame, I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy." Here, again, the verse spoke to me of our day. We are living in what is called a Post-Christian time. This nation's moral compass seems to have been lost, and Christianity declines in its influence on our culture. Unless there is a great movement of the Holy Spirit across our land and across the world, I fear for the future. At such times in the past there have been great spiritual awakenings. We are in desperate need of spiritual renewal in our day.

R&D Reflect on the state of our nation, of your church. How might you do your part to encourage spiritual renewal within your realm of influence?

Prayer: Lord, revive Your Church, beginning with me.

Day 24

Read: Zephaniah 2:1-3

Seek

Although Zephaniah also warns of the "Day of the Lord," his prophecy contains a note of promise. He was also trying to shake the people of Judah out of their complacency, urging them to return to the Lord. But, during the time of his ministry (640-621 BC), there was no dominant power in the world from whom the people were in fear. Assyria's strength was declining rapidly.

Judah had, however, been under two evil kings—Manasseh and Amon—and King Josiah was attempting to return the people to faith in God. Josiah's great reforms (2 Kings 23:1-30) brought a brief time of faithfulness and Zephaniah's prophecy may have been a motivating factor.

In my Bible I had underlined verse 3 of our reading for today: "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger." Seeking the Lord is a common theme in Scripture. Moses, for instance, tells the people to seek the Lord and they will find Him if they look for Him with all their heart and soul (Deuteronomy 4:29). There is nothing casual about the word *seek*. It implies determination and perseverance.

In a day in which our lives are filled with a multitude of distractions, seeking the Lord—as well as seeking righteousness and humility—needs seriousness of intent. Aren't we all, like the people of the Old Testament, prone to wander from our relationship with God? Zephaniah's message is as relevant today as it was in his time.

R&D In what ways, or on what issues, do you need to seek the Lord today?

Prayer: O Lord, I seek You. Nothing is as important to me as my relationship with You, but I am prone to wander. Forgive me, Lord, and bring me back into Your all-encompassing embrace.

Day 25

Read: Zechariah 9:9-13

Coming

Zechariah is considered the most apocalyptic and Messianic of all the Minor Prophets. It was written to give hope to the Israelites by revealing God's future deliverance through the Messiah. The Jews had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple but the work had been interrupted and delayed. Zechariah (and his contemporary, Haggai) confronted the people with their task and encouraged them to complete it.

In my old Bible I had underlined verses 9 and 10. Verse 9 foretells the coming of the Messiah. The Triumphant Entry of Jesus (Matthew 21:1-11), riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, is here predicted 500 years before it happened. The two verses together, however, foretell both the first and second coming of Christ. Verse 10 refers to a time when all nations will be subject to Christ. His rule will encompass the entire earth, a time when every knee will bow to Christ and every tongue confess him as Lord (Philippians 2:9-10).

When I am discouraged about our world today, and especially about what seems to be the decline of Christianity in the western world, a passage like today's is helpful to me. It reminds me, as the saying goes, that we know how the book ends.

Likewise, the passages of Scripture we have been covering in this series show how God—despite the waywardness of His people—never gives up on us. When we fail Him, if we are repentant, He picks us up, dusts us off, and sends us on our way once again. That is Good News indeed!

R&D Reflect on what you have learned about God through this series.

Prayer: O God, You are our refuge and our strength, as You have been through all time and will be for all time to come.

by Harry C. Griffith

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