

The Context Bible

Life Group Lesson 13

March 24–30, 2014

John 6:41-7:24

Introduction to the Context Bible

Have you ever wished the Bible was easier to read through like an ordinary book – cover to cover? Because the Bible is a collection of 66 books, it makes reading like an ordinary book quite difficult. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that the later writers of the New Testament, were often quoting or referencing passages in the Old Testament. In fact, much of the New Testament makes better sense only if one also considers the Old Testament passages that place the text into its scriptural context.

You are reading a running commentary to The Context Bible. This arrangement of Scripture seeks to overcome some of these difficulties. Using a core reading of John’s gospel, the book of Acts, and the Revelation of John, the Context Bible arranges all the rest of Scripture into a contextual framework that supports the core reading. It is broken out into daily readings so that this program allows one to read the entire Bible in a year, but in a contextual format.

Here is the running commentary for week thirteen, along with the readings for week fourteen appended. Join in. It’s never too late to read the Bible in context!

Week Thirteen Readings

| | | | |
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| <p>3/24 The Jews’ “Grumbling” Response Jn 6:41-6:51</p> <p><i>Context: “Grumbling held specific emphasis to Jews familiar with the Old Testament</i></p> <p>Num 13-14 Num 16 Luk 15:1-15:10 Lev 24:1-24:9 Isa 54:11-54:17</p> <p>3/25 Jesus – Son of Father and Man Jn 6:41-6:59</p> <p>Matt 13:53-13:58 Luk 3:23-3:32 Ruth 1-4 Prov 14:1 Prov 19:14 Num 27:1-27:11</p> | <p>3/25 Cont’d</p> <p>Num 36 Luk 3:33-3:38 Gen 5 Mrk 6:1-6:6</p> <p>3/26 The Calling Jn 6:60-6:71</p> <p>Hos 6-7 Mrk 2:13-2:17 Matt 9:9-9:13 Luk 5:27-5:39 Matt 9:14-9:17 Mrk 2:18-2:22 Isa 58 Zech 6:9-6:15</p> <p>3/27 The Sending Out Jn 6:60-6:71</p> <p>Mrk 3:13-3:19 Mrk 6:7-6:13</p> | <p>3/27 Cont’d</p> <p>Matt 10:1-10:15 Gen 19 Ezek 16 Matt 10:16-10:20 Ex 4:1-4:20 Matt 10:21-10:25 Matt 10:34-10:42 Eccles 11:1-11:4 Mrk 3:31-3:35 Matt 12:46-12:50</p> <p>3/28 The Festival of Booths Jn 7:1-7:24</p> <p>Lev 23:33-23:44 Neh 5-8 Prov 8:15-8:21 Prov 10:14, 21, 23, 29, 32 Prov 12:6-12:8; 12:13 Prov 13:5-13:6 Prov 14:2 Prov 15:26</p> | <p>3/29 The teaching of Jesus Jn 7:14-7:24</p> <p>Matt 15:1-15:9 Isa 29 Matt 15:10-15:20 Mrk 7:1-7:23 Obad 1 Matt 19:1-19:17 Lev 18:1-18:5 Matt 19:18-19:19 Lev 19:1-19:11; 19:13-19:17 Matt 19:20-19:30 Jer 32</p> <p>3/30 Off</p> |
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THE JEWS' "GRUMBLING" RESPONSE (John 6:41-6:51)

Mar. 24

Jesus' discourse contrasting himself with the manna from heaven continues in this section of John. The Jews' response is one John terms "grumbling." Jesus chides the Jews telling them not to "grumble," calling himself the "bread of life." Jesus makes the direct contrast to manna adding that the Jewish fathers ate God's manna but still died, while those who partook of the life of Christ would never die.

This short section of the "Bread of life" narrative is replete with echoes of Old Testament stories, passages, and prophecy, as we see in the day's contextual readings.

Numbers 13-14, 16

Seven times in these short chapters we read of the Jews "grumbling." There is a notable loony-ness to this behavior in two ways. First, there is the simple absurdity of grumbling against God and his servants. God had rescued the Israelites from the horrors of Egyptian slavery, by a miraculous hand that brought them food, water, and all provisions and safety as they journeyed through the wilderness to the brink of Canaan. Spies were sent into Canaan and they were able to confirm it was a rich and productive land, flowing with milk, honey, crops, and all good things. Those spies into the land, however, were also afraid of the cities and people they encountered. They returned speaking fearfully of "giants" – the legendary "Nephilim" – who supposedly made the spies feel like grasshoppers. These types of excuses and exaggerations indicate a faithlessness that transformed into a manipulation of fear causing a groundswell of panic among the people.

A second level of "loony-ness" is simply from my bad pun (but one that helps you remember the Hebrew vocabulary!) The Hebrew word for "grumbling" is pronounced "loon" (*lun* - לון). The Jews who translated the Old Testament into Greek in the centuries before Christ (the "Septuagint") used the Greek word *goguzo* (γογγύζω). It means to grumble, murmur, or speak complainingly about someone.¹

So the picture we get from the Numbers readings places a special context onto John's relating Jesus' encounter with the Jews. Like their forefathers, they were murmuring against God's work on earth. Their grumblings stemmed from a faithlessness that would prevent their walking in God's strength into the true Promised Land!

¹ "γογγύζω," Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (U. of Chi. 1979), 2d Ed.

Luke 15:1-15:10

In this Luke passage, Luke notes the Jews grumbling over the actions of Jesus because Jesus was associating and helping the sinners around them. The Jews clearly thought that holiness should not associate with blatant in-your-face sin like one saw in “tax collectors and sinner” (i.e., and prostitutes). Jesus responded that his association was not one that came from a desire to mingle with sinners. It came from a desire to *save* sinners. Jesus was not dabbling with sin, nor enjoying its fruits. He was vigorously seeking the lost and bringing them home to the Father. He was rescuing the sinners from their sins, a *most holy chore!*

The correct response of the pious Jews should have been to roll up their sleeves and get to work with Jesus, transforming their town into what it should be as against what it was. It seems they found it more their style to grumble about the way things were rather than to try and fix them.

Leviticus 24:1-24:9

This day’s contextual readings also include the obligation of the Israelites to make bread and keep it before the Lord, having it consumed by the priests. This memorial food offering to the Lord is also suggestive of the language Jesus used by noting himself as the true bread of heaven. Jesus was set aside as holy and dedicated to the Lord, just as the Bread of the Presence specified in Leviticus 24. In a communal or Eucharistic sense, Jesus also was to be “consumed” or “eaten” by the people as their holy encounter and fellowship with the Father in the same manner that the priests consumed the holy Bread of the Presence.²

Isaiah 54:11-54:17

This marvelously reassuring section of Isaiah speaks to a time where there will be:

- great peace,
- righteousness,
- no fear or oppression, and
- success against enemies and vindication from the Lord.

² There is a nice Biblical pun rooted in Jesus’ acclamation that he was the “bread of life.” The Hebrew for bread in Leviticus 24 and other places is *lechem* (לֶחֶם). When combined with the Hebrew word for “house,” which is *beth*, one gets “Bethlehem.” So literally, Jesus as the bread of life came from the “house of bread” – or “bakery!”

This is the Isaiah section that Jesus quotes in the core reading of John 6:45. Jesus is explaining to the grumblers that these magnificent blessings await those who walk faithfully in fellowship with Jesus.

Mar. 25

JESUS – SON OF FATHER AND MAN (John 6:41-6:59)

The prior day's reading from John concentrated on the "grumbling" response of the Jews in Capernaum. This day's reading includes those verses but extends to the end of the chapter with an emphasis on the insights into Jesus as the special Son of the Father as well as Jesus being an actual man.

Matthew 13:53-13:58; Luke 3:23-3:38; Genesis 5; and Mark 6:1-6:6

Jesus' claims to being a Son of the Heavenly Father may sound normal to us after nearly 2,000 years of Christian history and culture, but they were quite stunning to the people of his day. Genetics were very important to the Jews for they had been assured of a special role they played in the sight of God simply as descendants of Abraham. They were the "chosen people" (Dt. 7:6; 14:12; 1 Kg 3:8; Pslm 33:12, etc.).

The people quickly reacted to the claims of Jesus with a worldly view of heritage and family. They thought of Jesus' parents as Joseph and Mary and not at all understood his claims of divinity. Luke 3:23-3:32 walked back Jesus' earthly lineage to Adam (with gaps, not claiming to include every link). This was not something that only Jesus could do. Paul would claim to be "of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5) indicating he could substantiate his genealogical record successfully back over a thousand years. This was the norm for the Jews, who kept such records not only orally, but in temple registries as well.

Ruth 1-4

The insertion of Ruth at this point provides a chance to glimpse into the heritage of Jesus demonstrating an inclusion of converted Gentile blood into his own bloodlines. It ties Jesus' descendants from Bethlehem to a Moabite woman named Ruth.



After the Israelites invaded the Promised Land, they lived as tribes, with no real central government beyond the priests who served before YHWH. In the small mountain village of Bethlehem lived Elimelech and his wife, Naomi. The couple had two sons. A stretch of famine hit Bethlehem and the family went East into the land of Moab to ride out the famine. While there, the two sons both married Moabite women. Soon, Elimelech died, as did both sons, leaving the Israelite Naomi and her two Moabite daughters. Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem, but urged both daughter-in-laws to stay and keep their culture and people. One stayed but the other, named Ruth, insisted on going with Naomi. With a stirring speech that showed her faith in YHWH, Ruth insisted, “Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the YHWH do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you” (Ruth 1:16-1:17).

Naomi and Ruth returned at the time of the barley harvest. Ruth worked hard to support her mother-in-law, and she soon caught the eye of a well-to-do landowner named Boaz. Boaz was related to Naomi’s deceased husband Elimelech. Impressed with Ruth’s hard work, loyalty, sense of right and wrong, and humility, Boaz worked through the legalities and married her. From this union came a son, the father of Jesse and grandfather of King David. This relationship forged an important love story and link in the chain of God’s coming promise. From this relationship descended the King of Kings!

Proverbs 14:1; 19:14

These two proverbs speak to the wisdom of women who build their families through loving care as a gift from the Lord. Women like Ruth model faithfulness and family, traits that are special and rare.

Numbers 27:1-27:11 and 36

The laws that governed Boaz's marriage to Ruth are not clear to scholars. If the marriage is a "levirite³ marriage," as many scholars believe, it is governed by Deuteronomy 25:5-10. The passages we have set out from Numbers 27 and 36 illustrate the key Israelite imperative to try and keep inheritance lines solidly within each clan.

These passages have lost much to time, and scholars have difficulty determining the precise rules for understanding how these rules integrate. The laws of inheritance of Israel were set out to protect the rights of the various clans to their properties. While normal inheritance laws directed property to sons, when those sons predecease any other offspring, the nearest kinsman would step in and redeem the property. Good discussions can be found in many commentaries.⁴

Mar. 26

THE CALLING (John 6:60-6:71)

Among the grumblers at Jesus' teaching on the bread of life, were some of his own disciples. Jesus pointed out the faithlessness of the grumblers, and many of them left him as their rabbi and teacher, choosing to separate. The twelve known as the apostles stayed. When asked why, Peter spoke out that there was no other place they could go. Jesus was the Holy One, the Messiah, and he had the words of life. Jesus pointed out the twelve were chosen specially, adding that one of them was "a devil" (*diabolos* - διάβολος) or adversary.⁵

The idea of God calling people to purposes and places is found throughout Scripture. What one does with that calling – following Jesus or becoming an adversary – is the choice each person faces.

³ From the Latin *levir* meaning "husband's brother."

⁴ Budd, Philip, *Word Bible Commentary, Numbers*, (Thomas Nelson 1984), at 301; Christensen, Duane, *Word Bible Commentary, Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12*, (Thomas Nelson 2002), at 606.

⁵ This same word is used for *the* devil (see, 1 Tim 3:6-7; 1 Pt. 5:8, etc.), but Jesus is not calling Judas the actual devil here. He is using the term in the sense that he calls Peter Satan in Mark 8:33. There will be a point where Satan enters Judas

Hosea 6-7

This section comes at a point in Hosea where God's chosen people carried indictment for turning from God's instructions and living in pride, idolatry, and corruption. Hosea was a prophet called by God to active duty during the reign of Jereboam II in the Northern Kingdom. This time in the Northern Kingdom was marked by prosperity. The rich were getting richer, but the poor were getting poorer. There was little to no social justice in the country. The rich corruptly owned the courts. The poor were mistreated and abused to further enrich the coffers of those with abundance. There was a growing storm on the horizon as Assyria was growing to what would eventually become the world's superpower for the next century. The Northern Kingdom was on its last legs, drawing near to its destruction and exile in 722 B.C.

These were a people chosen by God who turned the gift of calling into an opportunity for selfishness and sin. They were not answering the call with faithful service, and their end was not a good one!

Mark 2:13-2:22; Matthew 9:9-9:17; and Luke 5:27-5:39

The other gospel writers all record Jesus calling out specific individuals into his ministry. This was an important concept in Biblical times. It is no less important today. God calls each person very specifically, not simply to be a believer, but to be put into service. Paul would later write to the Ephesians that we are saved in Christ Jesus, "for the purpose of good works that God prepared beforehand" for us to walk in (Eph. 2:10). This is something all believers share – a unique calling for each person.

Isaiah 58

In this chapter, Isaiah explained the calling of God to his listeners as something beyond mere rule following. The calling of God was to a holiness that started in the heart; caring for the things God cares for. Fasting was not a time to show one's self holy. It was a time to care for those who were hungry and in need of a meal. Money normally spent on food could go to help clothe those in need.

The people thought that by following God's rules, they should have had God's blessings. Isaiah pointed out their need to follow God's heart, producing the desire to follow God's rules.

Zechariah 6:9-15

This final passage speaks of another instance of God issuing specific calls. It happens on multiple levels. First, the call is to the prophet Zechariah. He is told to call out Heldai, Tobijah, and Jedaiah, taking their time and resources to make a crown. He is

then to call out Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest for the purpose of building the temple.

John will later record Jesus explaining that he knows his sheep by name (Jn 10:3). It is a constant theme in the Bible:

- Isaiah 43:1 “But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.’”
- Isaiah 49:1-26 “Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name.”
- Jeremiah 1:5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”
- Revelation 20:15 “And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

God calls his people, the question is always the same: What will God’s people do in response to the call?

Mar. 27

THE SENDING OUT (John 6:60-6:71)

Following Jesus when he is feeding the masses, healing the sick, and teaching marvelous lofty thoughts of loving the world is easy. It thrills, exhilarates, entertains, and is downright fun. But there is another side to following Jesus. We live in a world that is fallen, and among those at war with the Lord, his ways, and his truth. That gives life an edge. At times, a very sharp edge. Jesus made that clear in John 6, explaining that only by maintaining intimacy with Jesus, does one navigate the difficulties of the world on God’s side.

Jesus chose his twelve not simply for the good times, but for a mission. The twelve had purpose. The other gospel writers emphasized Jesus sending out the twelve with that purpose, and we set that into this reading program at this point, in part, because it is based on the faith that kept the apostles close to Jesus when so many fell away at Jesus’ seemingly offensive teaching.

Mark 3:13-3:19; 6:7-6:13; Matthew 10:1-10:15

Mark 3:13-3:19 and Matthew 10:1-10:15 indicate Jesus selected his twelve and named them “apostles” (Mk. 3:14). An “apostle” is an Anglicized word from the Greek

apostolos (ἀπόστολος). The word refers to a “messenger” or one dispatched for a purpose. In the New Testament, we see it used in a general sense (e.g., Phil. 2:25), but usually in a more particular sense for the select twelve or for others set aside for taking the gospel forth into the world (Paul – Rom. 1:1; Barnabas – Acts 14:14; Andronicus – Rom. 16:7, etc.).

In one verse, these twelve were given a special authority to cast out demons and were charged with being sent out to preach (Mark 3:14). Taking the word among the lost and casting out demons are two sides of the same coin. The delivery of God’s word and truth removes the kingdom of darkness and brings for God’s kingdom of light. It is living on the battleground. We see Jesus giving battle type instructions in the Mark 6 passage. When the apostles went, they went on faith, trusting God for their provisions. Those who received them received God’s message. For those who didn’t, the apostles were to dust their feet “as a testimony against them” (Mark 6:11). The dust is where the serpent in the garden was cursed to live and eat (Gen 3:14). It is a strong testimony about where people who refuse the Lord and those he sent chose to live and get their food! Matthew 10:15 adds Jesus’ admonition that Sodom and Gomorrah will have a better judgment day than those who refuse the Lord’s message of those sent by Jesus.

Genesis 19

Genesis 19 gives us the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. We can readily see why it fits Jesus’ point in Matthew. Jesus sent his messengers (“apostles”) in two’s, to teach people to turn from the world of destruction to follow God’s truth. For those who followed, there was eternal life. For those that didn’t it was worse than the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. Importantly, those cities were set for destruction for their choice of living in rebellion to God and his truth, but *not everyone was to be destroyed*. Here it diverges from those who refuse Jesus and the message of his truth brought from those delivering the word. Just as Jesus sent his apostles out in twos, just as we read in the Sodom story of God sending his messengers in twos. Two angels (“messengers”) came to rescue Lot and his family from the impending destruction.

The destruction came upon the cities, but not before Lot, his wife and two daughters were spared. The Genesis passage uses language later echoed by the gospel writers and Jesus noting that God “sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow” (Gen 19:29).

Ezekiel 16

Here we see God’s prophets using Sodom as part of their allegory exposing the faithlessness of Jerusalem at an Old Testament time of judgment. We are reminded Ezekiel was a prophet during the time when Judah had gone into captivity in Babylon. He was on the heels of Jeremiah.

The faithlessness of Jerusalem was equated to that of Sodom. In very visual images, Jerusalem was described as a cast off newborn rescued by God and raised to become an intimate wife. Instead of thriving in that most loved and special position, the “chosen people” chased after others, “offering yourself to any passerby and multiplying your whoring” (Ezek 16:26).

Those are people, though, that God would still pursue. In actuality, they are those to whom God was sending the apostles and to whom God send out the word today. For those who receive it, there is redemption and restoration. For those who don’t the lesson of Sodom becomes even more real.

Matthew 10:16-10:20

The Matthew narrative of the sending out continued to note the treacherous audiences that would be at the receiving end of the apostles’ work. The apostles were likely very worried about such a future, especially if you consider the idea of simple fishermen speaking to hostile kings and rulers. Jesus added an encouraging promise. The apostles were never alone. God would empower them and provide them what they needed. For a nice interlude to the Matthew narrative we inserted an Exodus passage that drives home the point.

Exodus 4:1-4:20

This story of Moses’ calling is inserted as a reminder that no one, NO ONE, is qualified, competent, or capable of taking God’s message of deliverance. Moses certainly felt his own limitations. The key is that *no one is doing this as the source or driver of the message*. God is the source. God is the driver. God ensures the whole process. Moses, the apostles, and believers today, are *chosen* by God to be messengers or the hands, feet, and mouth of God in taking the message to the world. Those whom God calls, he equips. God would not choose someone that could not, by his empowerment, achieve what God called her or him to do.

Moses felt inadequate because *Moses* was inadequate. But Moses in the hands of God, was fully adequate! As Moses lamented his inadequacy, God had Moses take the staff in his hand and throw it on the ground. It became a snake. Moses then picked the serpent up and it became a staff again. God was saying to Moses, “Okay, you may not think you are up to the job, but you have a stick. With my power, the stick alone can handle this. So I will use the stick!” And Moses left and put the stick in the Nile, spread the stick throughout the land, and more. If God can call and empower a stick, he can certainly adequately empower those whom he calls.

Matthew 10:21-10:25; 10:34-10:42

Resuming the Matthew narrative we read Jesus' preparation to his apostles about the difficulties that come with war. As the apostles contemplate and plan their missions, they needed to be aware of the difficulties that would arise. It seems almost ludicrous from one perspective to think that people in the world would be unreceptive, much less destructive, toward those who bring words of life. Yet it is the nature of rebellion and darkened thinking. There will be those who receive the light and those who seek to put it out. It should come as no surprise in light of what those in darkness did to the Son of God, the source of light! But this journey is the highest calling, and the greatest purpose to which a life can be given. It is not only a life well-spent; it is the life *best* spent.

Ecclesiastes 11:1-11:4

His Old Testament wisdom passage urges one to spend their time and energy in providing for others. We always live in uncertain times not knowing what may or may not be. But we can all chose the moment in which we are alive to use that moment in God's service to others.

Mark 3:31-3:35 and Matthew 12:46-12:50

Our readings end with a passage where Jesus elevated to great status those who choose the path following him. This is not a path of simple service. It is a path of family. Jesus does not send his followers out as pawns to be sacrificed in the chess game called life. Jesus' followers are his brothers, sisters, children, family. This is a family mission or project. We are chosen, adopted, and sent, with a promise to be returned home when the mission is over.

Mar. 28

THE FESTIVAL OF BOOTHS (John 7:1-7:24)

As the Feast of Booths (better translation is "lean-to's") approached, Jesus' earthly brothers (some ancient versions include "sisters") almost mockingly suggested Jesus head to the big city of Jerusalem (comparatively speaking – it was big compared to the villages where Jesus was ministering, but it was still a small back-water town in the hills compared to Rome and the Empire). Jesus went to Jerusalem and people were amazed at his teaching. It was hard to believe a carpenter had such a grasp of God and his word!

Leviticus 23:33-23:44

Leviticus 23 sets out the feasts God designated for the Israelites to follow. We focused the day's reading on verses 33 through 44, which describe the Feast of Lean-to's! It commemorated the way the Israelites lived when God brought them out of Egypt. It was

both a time of celebration and a holy solemn time. Both of those elements are involved in the life of believers still today. There is first and foremost a time of solemn acknowledgment of the Lord, and his lordship over our lives. Then there is a time of rejoicing over his provision and love. The feast then ended with another solemn day of reflection of God's provision and love.

Nehemiah 5-8

Nehemiah is a narrative of God's people rebuilding the collapsed walls generations later when many of the Jews returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity. At this point in the narrative (chapter 5), there is an insertion of "non-wall events." Scholars debate whether this story is placed into the narrative here because it happened during the wall building, or whether it happened later and was inserted at this point for other reasons of the author. Chapter five centers on the poor people's suffering from the oppression of richer Jews. The poorer Jews had borrowed from the rich to buy food during a famine and to pay the king's taxes. Because the poor could not pay the exorbitant interest rates, they were forced to give their sons and daughters to the Jewish lenders as slaves.

This abuse angered Nehemiah, and he set about to stop it. He called together the rich lenders and upbraided them for their wrong behavior to their fellow Jews. After intense dialogue, the rich honored Nehemiah's admonitions and agreed to stop. The rich agreed to waive the outstanding interest and even agreed to repay a portion already collected. Nehemiah required an oath from the lenders that they would do as they promised, and he then "shook out the fold of his garment" saying,

So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied (Neh 5:13).⁶

Nehemiah then adds that he was careful to practice what he preached. At some point not identified, the king appointed Nehemiah as governor of Judah for a twelve-year stretch. During those twelve years, Nehemiah was entitled to collect taxes to sustain himself, his family, and his administration. Nehemiah did not collect as the law allowed, but chose instead to live on his income, even as he worked on the wall for the good of all the people.⁷

⁶ The action of shaking out his garment, and calling God to appropriate action sees itself again in the missionary life of Paul. As Acts 18:6ff recounted Paul's story, he was in Corinth speaking to Jews and Gentiles about Jesus Messiah. Some Jews "opposed and reviled him" so he "shook out his garments and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads!'"

⁷ In this way, Nehemiah served as an example even to the Apostle Paul. Paul used the same reasoning for his lifestyle as a missionary. In I Corinthians 9:3ff, Paul explained he had a right to collect

Return to the narrative of the wall

After discussing the oppression of the poor, the narrative resumes to finish the story about the wall. Sanballat and Tobiah (along with a new character in the narrative, “Geshem the Arab”) heard that the wall was completed. The gates were not yet set, but the stonework was done. Sanballat, having tried words, as well as brute force, now tried deception. Sanballat appeared to offer up a truce, asking Nehemiah to join him and others on the seemingly neutral plane of Ono to discuss things. Nehemiah knew their evil intent behind the meeting, and RSVP’d “No” saying,

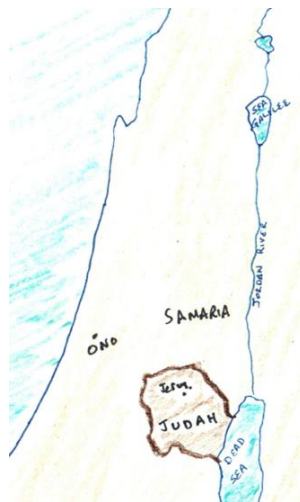
I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you? (Neh 6:3).

Sanballat sent the request repeatedly, and each time Nehemiah refused to meet. Finally Sanballat sent a personal note threatening to report Nehemiah for treason:

It is reported among the nations, and Geshem also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king. And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, ‘There is a king in Judah.’ And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together (Neh 6:6-7).

Nehemiah, who clearly had a close relationship with the king, was not so easily cowered. He responded simply, “You’re making this stuff up!” (Literally Neh 6:8 reads, “No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind!”).

Sanballat then worked to taint Nehemiah as a sinner, discrediting him to the Jews. Sanballat even managed to get a Jew to do his dirty work. The Jew, named Shemaiah, urged Nehemiah to meet him in the temple, citing the importance of the temple for protecting Nehemiah. (He claimed that Sanballat was sending people to kill him.) Nehemiah refused to go into the temple, something God did not allow for a non-priest, and averted yet another plan of Sanballat’s.



missionary payments rather than working as a tentmaker to support himself. Paul gave up his right to such things, however, to avoid any obstacle to the gospel.

Fifty-two days after construction started, the wall and gates were finished. It was obvious to all, including the adversaries, that God's protection had made this possible. It caused a ripple of fear to work through the people.

With the walls rebuilt, Nehemiah moved on to his next chores. He noted that "God put it into" his "heart" to enroll the people by genealogies, and so he did. Nehemiah 7 sets out the list of returning families from exile, basically re-listing those already referenced in Ezra 2. With the walls now completed, and the people registered, the next stage of the narrative begins. With this stage, the people of Judah become the people of the Law.

The Law narrative

The first section of narrative provided for the construction of walls, setting the people of God *physically* apart and protecting them and their worship from the threats and intimidations of others. Nehemiah then set out the role the Law played in setting the Jews *spiritually* apart and protecting their lives and their worship from the threats and influences of the pagan world. In this section, Ezra the scribe re-entered the picture.

After completing the wall, all the people gathered together into the square inside the city and Ezra the scribe brought out the Book of the Law of Moses. Rising up on a wooden platform built specifically for that purpose, Ezra read from the scrolls from early morning until mid-day. As he began the reading, Ezra offered a blessing to the Lord, and all the people responded "Amen," bowing their heads in worship. Ezra was not the only Jew reading the law. A number of men joined Ezra both in reading from the Law and in explaining it to the people.

The effect on the people was profound. They were moved by guilt and began weeping. Seeing the obvious grief and repentance, Nehemiah, Ezra, and other leaders urged the people to appreciate the holiness of the moment and the day. As leaders, they then worked to move the people from tears to a place of rejoicing and appreciation for the work of the Lord in their midst. The day of weeping became a day of joy and celebration, as the people saw the joy of the Lord as their strength.

As the people were learning the Law, they found out that the following day began an important festival, the Feast of Booths. This family-oriented festival celebrated God's protection and provision of the Israelites when they lived in lean-to's (tents) during the exodus. The Jews celebrated the festival as it had not been done since the days of Joshua. Each day of the festival (it lasted for seven days of feasting followed by a solemn day), the festivities were accompanied by reading of more of the Law.

The people continued to focus on life as a holy and separate people immediately following the festival. The Israelites assembled again with fasting, not allowing any

foreign pagans present.⁸ They read from the Law and began confessing their sins. In Nehemiah 9, we read the parts of the prayer that were written down. It is striking for the way it incorporates so much of the Law. Clearly all the reading of the Law over the month was making quite an impression. The prayer began with Genesis, praising God as the creator, who “made the heavens” as well as “the earth,” the “sea,” and all things in each. It then recounted God’s call of Abram, how God called him out of “Ur of the Chaldeans” (which was deep in the Babylonian areas of exiled Jews) and renamed him Abraham. This must have reverberated with the Jews who themselves had left Babylon, which included the area of Ur, to return to the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. From there, the prayer moved through Exodus, recounting the Egyptian bondage and God’s miraculous delivery of the Israelites from Pharaoh. The Laws of Sinai, given in Exodus and recounted in the remaining books of the Law, were prayed over as “right rules,” “true laws,” and “good statutes and commandments” (Neh 9:13). The Israelite’s wilderness rebellion was prayerfully recited, as was the time spent in the wilderness.

The prayer continued to recount Israel’s history from the Law, with the recognition of God handing over the kingdoms memorialized in Deuteronomy. The prayer lamented that in spite of God’s great deliverance and gifts, the people sinned and rebelled against God. God warned them, and God showed great patience, but finally God gave the Israelites over to their enemies for discipline. Even as the people acted wickedly and were punished accordingly, the prayer recited God’s mercy, as he rescued them and brought them back into the land.

After this prayer, the people thought it important to recommit to God’s covenant, putting their agreement in writing on a sealed document. They took

...an oath to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and his rules and his statutes (Neh 10:29).

Meanwhile, the walls that Nehemiah had built encompassed much more of the city than was populated by the returned exiles, most of whom were living on farm or pastoral land. This was a problem, and the city needed more people living inside the walls. Lots were drawn to increase the inhabitants of the city, and a number moved into Jerusalem.

A ceremony was held specifically to dedicate the walls to the LORD. The ceremony included singing with full instrumentation as well as purifying of the priests and Levites for service. There were great sacrifices and still more public reading from the Book of

⁸ This becomes a significant backdrop for Acts 15 and the entire New Testament. It was hard for the Christian Jews to accept and understand that God had opened his to all peoples of all races and religious backgrounds. One did not have to first become Jewish before becoming a Christian.

Moses. This reading included the story of Balaam and the instruction to exclude Ammonites and Moabites from the assembly of God, (found in Deuteronomy 23). In an interesting turn, the narrative tells that one of Tobiah's relatives set up quarters for Tobiah adjoining the temple (something Nehemiah plainly states was done while he was out of town.) As Tobiah was an Ammonite, this action directly contravened God's word, in addition to being insulting in light of the adversity Tobiah had brought on the people while building the wall. When Nehemiah got back and discovered it, he threw out all of Tobiah's belongings, and removed him from the dwelling.

The narrative closes with Nehemiah showing focused vigilance toward Jews who were transgressing the various laws. Nehemiah taught and reinforced the laws of Sabbath, the setting of portions for the Levites, and the prohibition on intermarriage with pagans. The last sentence in the book is Nehemiah's plea that God remember him for good.

Proverbs 8:15-8:21; 10:14, 21, 23, 29, 32; 12:6-12:8; 12:13; 13:5-13:6; 14:2; 15:26

This day's reading closes with a number of proverbs centered on how wise people speak and live their lives versus the words and choices of fools. Life is full of choices. We have the big choices of what to do, where to live, whether and who to marry, etc. But each word is a choice. Each action is a choice. We can choose to live moment by moment in wisdom or not.

Mar. 29

THE TEACHING OF JESUS (John 7:14-7:24)

Jesus' teaching was startling. He was blunt and clear, explaining his role in delivering God's message. This was not bragging. It was the simple and blunt truth. Those who believed they had cornered the market on God and his message, and perhaps some who thought no one could or should speak so bluntly about truth, were offended. Our day's background readings provide context for this.

Matthew 15:1-15:9; Isaiah 29; Matthew 15:10-15:20; Mark 7:1-7:23

Many who heard God were more stuck on their traditions in teaching and practice than they were on their relationship that should be the driving force to the teaching. God's message has consistently been one of *relationship* not simple religion. Our religion is an expression of our relationship, but it is no replacement for the relationship. Jesus referenced Isaiah 29's comment on those who vainly honor God with their words, but not with their heart.

Isaiah explained that those who were doing such were turning things upside down! It was as if the clay was claiming self-generation, disavowing the potter (Is. 29:16). This is not how it should be. We are not to take our teachings about God and make them

God. We need to understand and relate to God as God, teaching and following him as is right by his words and instructions.

Matthew 15 shows how the people in Jesus' day had a severe problem with this. Religion had become formality, a rigorous system of do's and don'ts. The idea of a relationship with the Almighty God was lost on the masses. As a result, the rules themselves became distorted. It was no longer about getting one's heart right with God, it was simply about the outward rules. They were more worried about what they ate than what they thought or said. Mark 7:1-23 echoes the same teachings.

Obadiah 1

In this short one-chapter Old Testament prophetic book, we read of God's judgment on the Edomites who were reveling in the loss of God's people of their holy lands. The fall of anyone should never be a cause of rejoicing. The prophet assures that all wicked will meet their end of death, and there will ultimately be salvation for the righteous. God is serious about sin, and a day of judgment is assuredly coming. The issue for everyone should be whether they choose rebellion against God and his purposes, or faithful following.

Matthew 19; Leviticus 18:1-18:5; 19:1-19:11; 19:13-19:17; and Jeremiah 32

In Matthew 19, we have Jesus teaching directly on relationships. It begins with teachings on divorce, followed by Jesus' admonition on the importance of loving and giving attention to children. The chapter ends with a rich young man coming to Jesus and boldly asking what he as an individual could do to ensure eternal life. This was about the most important relationship – that of the man with Jesus and God.

Jesus responded to the man plainly, "Live perfectly!" (Jesus worded it, "Keep the commandments" – Matt 19:17). This should not have been news to the man. God had told Moses,

You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD (Lev 18:5).

The man should have cried, "God help me! I can't!" but instead pressed the issue by asking *which* commandments he needed to keep. Jesus gave him a few starting with some easier ones, but ending with the impossible! "Don't murder, commit adultery, or steal," Jesus said, followed by some more difficult about lying, honoring parents, and then the impossible, "love your neighbor as yourself." The fellow actually thought he had kept all of those commandments! Jesus pointed out his failure by instructing him to go sell all he had and give it away to his poorer neighbors. These commandments are found in the Leviticus readings interspersed.

The man then had another chance to cry out for some measure of mercy, but instead he left Jesus and the conversation with the sad commentary that “he went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions” (Matt 19:22).

There is much to be said about those who are so consumed by their possessions that they leave the presence of Jesus rather than continue to engage him by finding his holiness in the midst of their life.

We finished the reading for this day with Jeremiah 32. In this passage, Jeremiah is not told to sell everything and give it away. To the contrary, Jeremiah is told to *buy* a field from his uncle. God had a message for the people that there would come a time of redemption where people would again hold and possess the land.

QUESTIONS FOR WEEK 13

1. “There are giants in the land!” Or maybe you relate better to the Chicken Little line, “The sky is falling!” How is fear akin to faithlessness? How do the lessons on grumbling speak to these fears we have?
2. Culture has changed and the laws have changed since the time of Ruth. How in today’s culture, how do the values and ideas found in ancient Israel, and in the story of Ruth specifically, find a godly expression?
3. Do you sense God’s call on your life? What does he call you to do for him? How does he equip you for the call? What in life is more valuable?
4. Few of us would truly sell everything we had and give it to the poor. Is that what God requires of everyone? Of course not. How do we mesh the idea of God calling us into obedience with the charge of good stewardship?

Week Fourteen Readings

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| <p style="text-align: center;">3/31 Jesus the Messiah Jn 7:25-7:36</p> <p>Luk 8:1-8:15 Luk 8:19-8:21 Luk 9:18-9:62</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Jesus and the Pharisees Jn 7:45-7:52</p> <p>Isa 57:1-57:13 Matt 23:1-23:12 Prov 29:23;18:12 Prov 11:2; 15:33 Prov 30:10-30:14 Luk 14:7-14:11 Prov 25:1-25:7 Dan 10</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4/1 Jesus and the Pharisees (Cont'd) Jn 7:51-7:52</p> <p>Matt 23:13 Zech 11 Matt 23:14—23:24 Prov 18:5 Num 15:1-15:31 Deut 26 Deut 14</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">4/2 Jesus and the Pharisees (Cont'd) Jn 7:45-7:52</p> <p>Matt 23:25-23:36 Mic 6 Prov 24:23-24:25 Pslm 33</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The Woman in Adultery Jn 7:53-8:11</p> <p>Num 5:11-5:31 Deut 10:1-10:11</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4/3 Jesus on Jesus Jn 8:12-8:59</p> <p>Matt 17:22-17:23 Lev 24:10-24:16 Hos 10 Hos 13-14</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">4/4 Jesus on Jesus Jn 8:39-8:47</p> <p>Gen 17:9-18:2 Heb 13:2 Gen 18:3-18:33 Gen 20 Rom 4 Matt 13:1-13:9; 13:18-13:30; 13:36-13:43 Prov 29:12</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4/5 Jesus on Jesus Jn 8:48-8:59</p> <p>Gen 21:1-25:18 Prov 20:7 Ex 3:7-3:22</p> <p>4/6 Off</p> |
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