

The Context Bible

Life Group Lesson 23

June 2-8, 2014

Acts 7:45

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 twenty-three, along with the readings for week twenty-four appended. Join in. It's never too late to read the Bible in context!

Week Twenty-three Readings

<p>6/2 Stephen's Speech Acts 7:45</p> <p>Judg 5,6 Num 31</p>	<p>6/4 Stephen's Speech Acts 7:45</p> <p>Judg 10-13 Num 6:1-6:21 Prov 30:18-30:19</p>	<p>6/6 Stephen's Speech Acts 7:45</p> <p>Judg 18-20</p>
<p>6/3 Stephen's Speech Acts 7:45</p> <p>Judg 7-9</p>	<p>6/5 Stephen's Speech Acts 7:45</p> <p>Judg 14-17</p>	<p>6/7 Stephen's Speech Acts 7:45</p> <p>Judg 21 1 Sam 1,2 Prov 20:11</p>
		<p><i>6/8 Off</i></p>

STEPHEN'S SPEECH (Acts 7:45)

We continue several weeks of reading in support of Stephen's speech to the authorities where Stephen defended his message that proclaimed a resurrected Jesus as both Lord and Messiah. Stephen told Old Testament stories to the authorities, and Luke gave a synopsis in Acts. We give the greater storyline through the contextual readings.

Because Stephen's narrative followed the Old Testament historical story of God and Israel, we have changed the format of these lessons a bit to cover the same storyline from the Old Testament texts, rather than working to break out the Scriptures on a daily basis. Those Scriptures that go beyond the narrative will be segregated out as relevant.

READING PURPOSE: For Stephen and the early church, Jesus and Christianity were not divorced from the Old Testament. Jesus was not the Son of a new God. God had not changed with the incarnation. God was working toward Jesus' transforming moment for humanity from the very beginning. We will see this as we continue to explore the fuller narratives behind Stephen's speech.

Judges 5

Judges 5 ends the reading from last week where the Judge Deborah and Barak sang of God's victory over the local "king" (maybe "chieftain" would better suit our concept of his "rulership"), a man named Jabin who ruled from the nearby city of Hazor. Israel had chosen to follow the gods of the Canaanites, and then suffered under the reign of the king who served those gods (Judg 4:1-2). The idolatry ended when the people sought Yahweh ("the LORD") for deliverance and help. God gave them victory through troops marshaled by Deborah and led by Barak. Jabin was soundly defeated, and Israel freed from his yoke. Deborah and Barak responded with a song of praise declaring the deliverance that came from "the LORD against the mighty" (Judg 5:23).

Judges 6-8

On the heels of the story of Deborah, came that of Gideon and the Midianite's oppression of the Israelites. These stories stayed linked by the common thread of Yahweh's victorious hand in the affairs of his people who *sought and needed his help*.

Judges 6 begins with the all-too-often background statement that the "people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (Judg. 6:1). This evil came from a faithless people who, contrary to instruction and common sense, "fear[ed] the gods of the Amorites," a local people in the land (Judg. 6:10). As a result, the Midianites and other tribes that would come from the east regularly plundered each year's harvest, devouring the Israelites' crops. Each time, the Israelites simply cowered in fear in caves and other hiding places.

The story of God's redemption shifts to a man named Gideon who was visited by a messenger of Yahweh. The messenger told Gideon that God was with him, terming Gideon a "mighty man of valor" (Judg 6:12). This sets Gideon in contrast to the cowering, fearful Israelites who feared the local tribes and their gods. Gideon replies politely that if God is indeed with him, then why is life such a wreck! After all, the God who rescued the people from Pharaoh and Egyptian bondage should not be allowing the people to suffer from the local gods and their people.

Gideon is then instructed to go save the people, and the "man of valor" suddenly begins him-hawing about how he doesn't really have a big enough family/clan to do such. And even if he did, he added, he was not significant enough among his father's house to lead his people. God then pointed out that God was going to be the strength of the rescue effort for the people; he was simply going to be using Gideon. So Gideon's own strength was really irrelevant.

Gideon was considering doing what was asked, but really needed convincing God was there and God would perform. So Gideon asked for a "sign." The messenger performed one immediately before disappearing, and Gideon was moved – but not fully convinced!

That night, the LORD appeared to Gideon again, this time telling Gideon to pull down his father's idols and build instead an altar to Yahweh. Gideon did as instructed, but did so in the night "because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day" (Judg 6:27). This, of course, from the man God termed a "mighty man of valor." The next morning, the local Israelites were set to kill Gideon for taking down the altar to Baal, but Gideon's father, Joash, stepped in to stop the lynch mob. Joash said if Baal was upset over losing the altar, Baal should strike down Gideon. If any of the people tried to do what Baal couldn't, then it would be over Joash's dead body!

That day Gideon earned a new name – Jerubbaal. It meant, "Let Baal contend against him." It is not apparent whether the term was meant derisively, as in, "Leave him to Baal to punish" or victoriously.

Meanwhile, the marauding tribes of Midianites and others from the east came across the Jordan on their annual plundering raids. Gideon was suddenly "clothed" in "the Spirit of the LORD," and he sounded the trumpet for the Israelites to rally and defend their land. Gideon was still nervous and sought multiple signs from God that God was indeed behind the fight. God not only answered the sign requests, but he started working more carefully with Gideon's assembled forces.

God told Gideon that the people Gideon had gathered were too numerous for what God had planned. So all the "fearful" people were told to go home. 22,000 of 32,000 assembled fighters left! Of the 10,000 remaining, they were further winnowed down by how they drank water from a nearby watering hole. The 10,000 were whittled down to only 300. Now God had the number he wanted!

At God's instructions, Gideon divided the 300 into three groups, and set up an attack that fooled the enemies into thinking there were many more than there actually were. In confusion, the enemies fled the scene, and the many willing fighters that Gideon had sent back home now came in quite handy. Gideon called them forth from the hills and their homes and they gave pursuit as the foreigners were fleeing. Gideon also called out for help from the Ephraimites, an Israelite tribe that had not contributed to the original battle troop. These were offended over their initial exclusion, but they also fought and gathered in key men from among the enemies.

Gideon, the "mighty man of valor," overcame his own fears and doubts to serve the call of the LORD. In the process, he won God's victories and continued to serve God's people as a judge throughout the days of his life. Upon Gideon's death; however, things changed again.

Numbers 31

As we read in Numbers 31, the Midianites were not new adversaries for the Israelites. In the later days of Moses, the Midianites were enemies Israel battled. One wonders if Gideon's historical knowledge of God's amazing defeat of the Midians from the days of Moses encouraged him in his own fights on behalf of Yahweh.

Judges 9

Gideon had lots of sons, 70 by many different wives. One of his sons through his concubine was Abimelech, whose name meant, "My father is king" or "leader." After Gideon (aka Jerubbaal) died, Abimelech gathered a few ruffians to his side and convinced the leaders of Shechem (a major town) to join in proclaiming Abimelech king.

Abimelech's first order of business was to kill all his brothers, although the youngest (named Jotham) did escape. Judges 9 makes clear that the actions of Abimelech were sinful and not following Yahweh, Israel's and Gideon's God. Of course, God had already instructed the Israelites on government, and it did *not* involve a king.

Jotham found an opportunity to make a public denouncement of Abimelech and those of Shechem who followed him. Jotham proclaimed blessing if indeed Abimelech acted with integrity and in good faith, but a curse if not.

The narrative continues to unfold; but in the end, Abimelech meets an untimely end when a woman threw a millstone down on his head, mortally wounding him. Abimelech had his armor-bearer end his life by running him through with a sword under the reasoning Abimelech did not want to go down in history as one killed by a woman. Of

course, the irony reading the history of Judges 9 is that the historical remembrance of him is far worse than simply a man killed by a woman.

This story fits well with the Old Testament themes that fit Stephen's message: You make choices in life and those that align against God do not bear good fruit. Or as Proverbs 14:12 puts it, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death."

Judges 10-12

These chapters contain the tragedy of Jephthah. They begin with the same refrain we find over and over in Judges. Israel pursues fake gods who have no real saving or protecting power to keep the people safe. As a result, the Israelites repeatedly fall into the hands of their enemies. At one low point, the people decide to put away their idols and pursue Yahweh and his deliverance (Judg 10:10-16). Enter Jephthah.

Jephthah was the son of a prostitute, sent from his hometown in shame to live in exile. While in exile, Jephthah became known for leading a band of "worthless fellows," what we might call "brigands." When the Ammonites were threatening Jephthah's hometown, the elders sent for Jephthah to come back and fight for them. Jephthah did so with the promise that if he was victorious, he would be the local leader.

Jephthah first tried diplomacy with the Ammonite king, but that failed. Faced then with battle, Jephthah made a rash vow to the Lord. Jephthah promised that if God gave him victory, Jephthah would give a burnt offering of "whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return" (Judg 11:31). The best that can be said of this vow is that it was idiotic. It would be tragic for Jephthah to sacrifice *anyone* that came out of his house to greet him.

God gave Israel the victory through Jephthah, saving the many Israelites. Jephthah went home victorious only to be greeted by his only child, his daughter who came out celebrating her father's victory and safe return. In the next move of idiocy, Jephthah doesn't seek wisdom from others, doesn't repent before the Lord for a rash vow, doesn't do much of anything other than give his daughter two months to prepare for her death at his hands.

This story is so tragic. Rather than truly reflect the nature of our loving God, it shows how wrong people can be as they ignorantly try to be right before God. It does remind one a bit of not only the Sanhedrin that will punish Stephen by stoning him, but also of Paul, the one who in clear conscience at the time, will hold the clothes of those doing the stoning. A lack of familiarity with God, his nature, and his work, leads people to do all sorts of stupid things in the name of religion. It is another reason to seek God and learn *his ways*.

Judges 13-16; Num 6:1-6:21; Prov 30:18-30:19

At another stage of Israel's faithlessness before Yahweh God, we have the story of Samson. Samson was born to devout parents who pledged to raise him as a "Nazarite" from birth. The Nazarite vow is explained a good deal in Numbers 6:1-21. Nazarites were to avoid wine, strong drink, and grapes in any form. They were not to cut their hair for the period of time of their vow. Numbers also gives the information for those who take the vow for a limited time, explaining how the vow was to be completed (something referenced in Acts 21:23-21:24).

The story of Samson is well known. While Samson honored the Lord and his vows, God used Samson to defeat the Philistine, enemies of the Israelites.¹ But Samson didn't treasure his vows and failed to guard his walk with Yahweh God. The story of Samson is peppered with instances of his infatuation with women trumping his godly decisions and common sense. Samson chose to marry a Philistine, rather than an Israelite. God used this to allow Samson to execute judgment on some Philistines, but it still foretells a continuing problem with Samson (Judg 14:1-4).

After Samson's wife betrays him to the Philistines, Samson gives her away to a friend. We next read of Samson getting trapped because of time spent with a prostitute in Gaza (one of the five core Philistinian cities). Again, though, God works through Samson's mighty strength to foil the trap.

The final betrayal comes with Delilah, a woman who, if not an actual Philistine, is friendly toward the Philistine rulers.² In this entrapment of Samson, the story has a different ending. Samson succumbs to the seductive charms of Delilah and gives away his secret devotion to the Lord. Betraying his vow to God, Samson is no longer protected by God. All of his potential, all of his saving power, is lost by his indiscretion of the moment. Samson looks for love in the wrong place, and finds emptiness. To the reader today, it makes no sense. We want to shout out to Samson, "*Don't do it!!! Don't*

¹ The Philistines are well-known in Biblical and non-biblical writings. Scholars debate their origination (Greece? Greek Isles? Italy?), but there is a consensus that they were "sea peoples" that attempted to settle the coast from as far as northern Syria to the Nile delta. The Egyptian Pharaoh fought a massive sea battle against these people beating them back, and precluding their settlement among the Egyptian holdings. The settlements that caused Israel so much trouble happened principally around coastal or flatland cities including Gath (home of Goliath), Ekron, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Gaza.

² The text does not say Delilah is a Philistine. Her name is cited by some as Semitic (the family of languages including Hebrew) meaning, "devotee." These scholars suggest she was a temple prostitute. See, Samson, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Accordance electronic ed. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), n.p. The name itself sounds very similar to the Hebrew word for "night." ("night" is *lilah* – לילה; compared to *d-lilah* - דלילה). Delilah certainly comes off as a woman of the night!

tell that woman ANYTHING!” But of course, history is not rewritten. Suffice it to say that Samson’s senseless actions well illustrate the negative side of Proverbs 30:18-19.

Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a virgin.

There is a measure of redemption for Samson at the end when in humility he repents and turns back to God, bringing judgment on the Philistines and a final victory for God in an episode that also brought about his own death.

In one sense, Samson’s downfall was Delilah, a woman close to the Philistine enemies of Samson and Israel. His true downfall, however, was failing to live his role in God’s work. Samson was caught up in his moment, and was not seeking first God’s work and kingdom. This is an important lesson not only for those judging Stephen in the first century, but also for us reading these stories trying to live right in the 21st century.

Judges 17-18

These two chapters of Judges set up an interesting story about an unnamed Levite. The Levites were the tribes of priests, and not surprisingly, simply being a genetic offspring of Levi, did not make each one holy and righteous in their calling. Even as he functioned as a priest, his actions were not ones faithful to God’s calling.

Because Luke does not give us the full details of which stories Stephen spoke of when recounting the time of the judges, we cannot be certain that this story was included; however, it sure should have sent alarm bells to Stephen’s audience who thought themselves in God’s service, even as they were persecuting God’s movement.

In the story, the unnamed Levite meets a man named Micah (not to be confused with the Old Testament prophet Micah who comes along centuries later). Micah uses some family silver to have an idol made, which he added to his household shrine of idols. Micah offers the unnamed Levite a chance to be his “household priest,” paying him with food, board, cash (silver) and a clothing allowance.



This idol dates from the 8th century BC and was found in modern Israel. It is 4 inches tall and is a typical household idol from the time.

Micah figured that this would endear himself to Yahweh, one of the gods he worshipped.³

After setting up the Levite as private priest for Micah and his pantheon of gods, the story shifts slightly. The Levite who was priest to one becomes priest to many. A group of descendants from the tribe of Dan (“Danites”) came and stole the gods from Micah and also convinced the Levite to leave and become their priest. The argument was simple, “Is it better for you to be priest of the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel?” (Judg 18:19). Micah tried to stop the Danites, but realized he was outnumbered and would not survive the confrontation. From this story, the Levite and his descendants were priests to the Danites who worshipped the idols until the time of captivity.

Judges 19-21

Judges closed with stories of confrontations among various Israelites. Judges 19 has a story reminiscent of Lot and his visitors where a woman is accosted to satiate the sexual desires of deviants after a certain man. The gang rape and abuse killed the woman, and the man cut her into pieces sending her body parts throughout the country as a declaration of the sin that had occurred and the utter debasement of the people involved.

A number from all of Israel rose up in war against those involved. The battles took three days before it was won, but those involved were destroyed.

Judges ends with a reference to the actions of the people as basic anarchy without a single ruler over the people. This sets up the history that follows in 1 Samuel.

1 Samuel 1-2 and Proverbs 20:11

³ In academia, there are a number of scholars (perhaps even the majority) who think the Bible and Old Testament fail to properly recount history. These scholars often point to archaeology as proof that the Old Testament ideas of Yahweh worship is a reconstructed panacea that never existed. There are many, many household idols that are excavated showing a plethora of worship in ways that directly violate the teachings of the Ten Commandments. These ideas frequently make it into the public domain in write-ups like Discovery News’ March 18, 2011 article entitled, “God’s Wife Edited Out of the Bible – Almost.”

The article follows the recent work of University of Exeter’s Francesca Stavrakopoulou who, in lectures and journal papers discusses the “uncomfortable conclusion that God had a wife” (Interview at <http://news.discovery.com/history/god-wife-yahweh-asherah-110318.html#mkcpgn=hknws1>). She then cites the pottery inscription dated to the 8th century B.C., which asks for a blessing from “Yahweh and his Asherah.” Contrary to the assertions of Stavrakopoulou and others (see, e.g., Dever, William, *Did God have a Wife?* (Eerdmans 2005), this is hardly novel, new, or an “uncomfortable conclusion.” God’s wife was not “edited out of the Bible.” The Bible presents the story that is born out by these findings. This is precisely what the Bible teaches. As we read in this passage, the people were constantly worshipping other gods even while worshipping Yahweh.

The books of Samuel begin the story of the kings of Israel. It begins with Hannah, an earnest and godly woman who is not able to bear children. Hannah was one of two wives to Elkanah, a man who carefully worshipped God with annual pilgrimages to the shrine at Shiloh. Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, constantly provoked Hannah because of Hannah's inability to bear children.

On one of the pilgrimages, Hannah was silently praying for God to give her a son, promising to raise the son dedicated to the Lord. The presiding priest Eli saw Hannah's lips moving and thought she was drunk, scolding her and instructing her to put away the wine. When Hannah explained her deep distress and prayer, Eli blessed her that God would give her the son she sought.

That year, Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to Samuel. Once weaned, Hannah took Samuel and placed him in the service of Eli, as she had promised to the Lord. Hannah was most grateful, and she prayed a song that praised God for all he had done.

Samuel brought something to Eli that he did not have with his own sons. In the sense of Proverbs 20:11, Samuel made his godly character known through his own pure and upright conduct. Not so the sons of Eli. Even though his sons were priests, they were not living righteously. Instead they were abusing their position for selfish gain. God rejected Eli's household as priests, setting the stage for the readings of Samuel next week.

QUESTIONS FOR WEEK 23

These lessons open up many areas for discussion. We list a few questions to start the discussions.

1. How do we mesh Gideon as a man of valor with his repeated fearfulness in the face of others? Does God see traits within us that we fail to see on our own? By God's grace, can we become more than we are on our own in such fundamental ways?
2. Over and over Israel sets up idols to worship, and over and over Israel suffers in ways that demonstrate the worthlessness of the gods. Today, idols are generally not clay figurines, but are anything else we worship or see as more meritorious than God. In what sense do we have idols today that disappoint us in their ability to bring us happiness, peace, security, and joy?
3. Over and over in the stories, we read of God's "people by position or birth" who do not exhibit a personal and transforming relationship with God. Where is your life in this? Do you have a relationship you have inherited or do you have an independent and thriving personal walk in service to the Lord?

Week Twenty-four Readings

<p>6/9 Stephen's Speech Acts 7:45</p> <p>1 Sam 4-7:2 1 Sam 7:5-7:17</p>	<p>6/11 Stephen's Speech Acts 7:45</p> <p>1 Sam 15-17</p>	<p>6/13 Stephen's Speech Acts 7:45</p> <p>1 Sam 23-25</p>
<p>6/10 Stephen's Speech Acts 7:45</p> <p>1 Sam 10:17-14:52 Prov 21:27 Prov 19:19</p>	<p>6/12 Stephen's Speech Acts 7:45</p> <p>1 Sam 18 Prov 21:1-21:2 Prov 27:19-27:20 1 Sam 19 1 Sam 22 Prov 19:12, 23 Prov 20:19</p>	<p>6/14 Stephen's Speech Acts 7:45</p> <p>1 Sam 26-30</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>6/15 Off</i></p>