

The Context Bible

Life Group Lesson 31

July 28 – August 3, 2014

Acts 15:1 – 15:35

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 thirty-one, along with the readings for week thirty-two appended. Join in. It's never too late to read the Bible in context!

Week Thirty-One Readings

<p>7/28 Paul to the Galatians Christ sets Free Gal 5:1-5:15</p> <p>Walk by the Spirit Gal 5:16-5:26</p> <p>Luk 17:1-17:10 Pslm 62 Rom 8:26-8:39 Isa 41:5-41:29 Ex 23:1-23:9 Prov 12:9-12:10, 12, 14-16, 18, 23, 26 Prov 23:29-35 Prov 25:19</p> <p>7/29 Paul to the Galatians Living by the Spirit Gal 5:25-5:26</p> <p>Job 13-14 Job 20 Job 22</p>	<p>7/30 Paul to the Galatians Bearing Burdens Gal 6:1-6:5</p> <p>Job 6-9</p> <p>7/31 Paul to the Galatians Bearing Burdens Cont'd Gal 6:1-6:5</p> <p>Job 10-11</p> <p>Paul to the Galatians Reap as Sown Gal 6:6-6:18</p> <p>Deut 30 Micah 1:1-4:5</p>	<p>8/1 Paul to the Galatians Reap as Sown Cont'd Gal 6:6-6:18</p> <p>Eccles 11:6-12:14 Prov 22:3-22:5 Prov 27:12 2 Chron 32:27-33:25 Isa 39</p> <p>8/2 The Jerusalem Council Acts 15:1-15:21</p> <p>Prov 11:14 Prov 15:28 Amos 8-9 Prov 20:18</p> <p>Letter to Gentiles Acts 15:22-15:35</p> <p>Prov 15:21-15:24</p> <p>8/3 Off</p>
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READING PURPOSE: This week’s core reading continues to be from the early missionary efforts of Paul and Barnabas. As they missionized the towns of Galatia, Paul followed up soon with his letter to those churches we call “Galatians.”

We are using Galatians along with supplemental passages to flesh-out more fully the context of Paul’s activities in his missionary churches. For Paul, the work didn’t end with his time in the towns. He continued to care for and nurture the Christian communities he helped form.

In Paul’s letters, he frequently employed a technique of writing more theologically centered, doctrinal material in the first section of his letters. The second section would then turn to more practical instructions and advice about living. We see that as we move into Galatians 5 and 6 this week. This week’s context readings center on Christian living among the fellowship of believers. How do we live before God? And how do we live together in beneficial community?

Walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:1-5:26)

Christ sets Free (Galatians 5:1-5:15)

In 1981, I was a new law student introduced to many new terms not in my customary day-to-day usage. One of the new terms was “chattel,” often in its plural form, “chattels.” Chattel references an article of personal property excluding real estate.¹ Examples of chattel would include a car, a washing machine, a stamp collection, glasses, or most any item owned and used as opposed to a home or an interest in an oil well.

Of course, in the 21st century in Western countries, people are not chattel. I do not “own” someone as my personal property. My children are people I am charged with taking care of, but they are not my property. There are people who work at my firm, but they are not my property.

It has not, however, always been so. As recently as the 19th century, certain people in America were considered legal “chattel.” We call them “slaves.” Slaves were people that were not accorded the rights of humans, but were considered under the law, “possessions” or “chattel.” This was not a novel American atrocity, but was something that had existed through many centuries in many civilizations. It existed in New Testament times as well. We see an allegorical reference to slavery in our contextual reading from Galatians 5.

¹ “Chattel,” *Black’s Law Dictionary*, (Thompson West 2014).

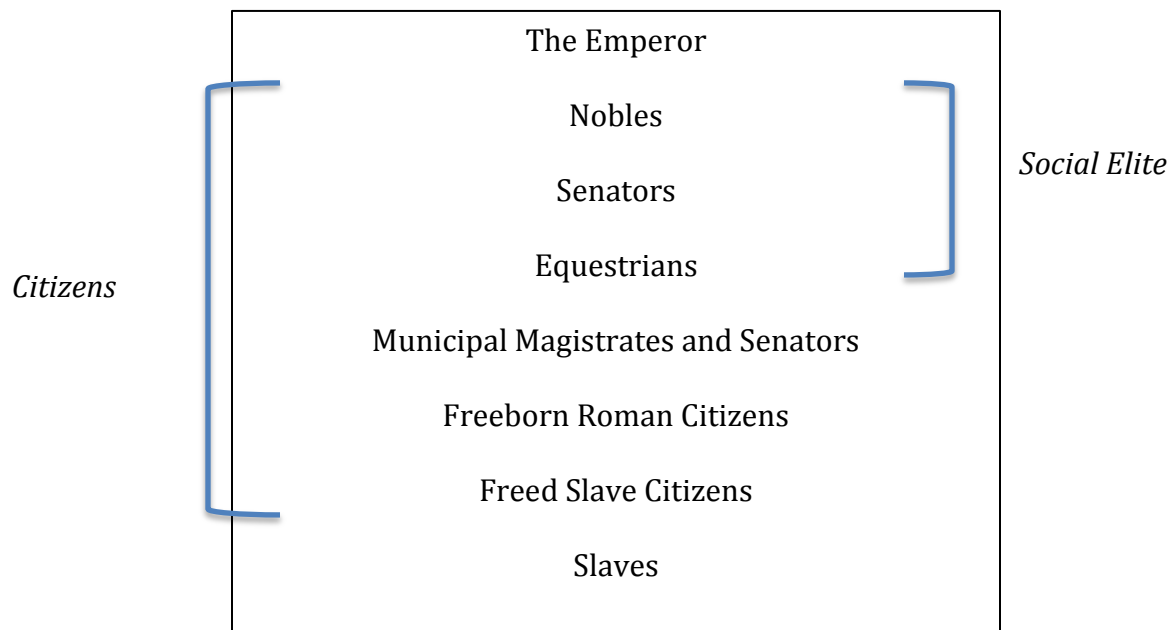
Paul had an interesting usage of the idea of slavery. Because of the horrendous history of the last several centuries, our 21st century view of slavery does not necessarily reflect the institution in the first century. This is important because Paul begins his discussion of walking in the Spirit found in Galatians 5 with a discourse on how Christ set the believer free from “a yoke of slavery.”

The context of Galatians 5 informs us of Paul’s concern over the believer not submitting again to aspects of the Jewish Law, notably circumcision. Instead the believer is encouraged to live up to that summation of the Law found in Christ’s emphasized summary of the law from Leviticus 19:18, to love one’s neighbor as one’s self. As Paul used the metaphor, however, we get additional context for his lessons by considering slavery at the time Paul wrote.

Rome was a slave society, plain and simple. A Roman lawyer known simply as Gaius, wrote a textbook of Roman law in the mid-second century that serves as one source of our information on Roman slavery. He wrote,

The principal division of the law of persons is the following, namely, that all men are either free or slaves.²

Slavery was an unquestioned part of the law. Slaves were – period. Historian Sandra Joshel charted the Roman social order as follows, putting slaves at the bottom³:



² Gaius, *The Institutes*, III (9).

³ Joshel, Sandra, *Slavery in the Roman World*, (Cambridge 2010), at 31.

Slaves were chattel or property, owned by their masters. The masters, at the time of Paul, had absolute right over their slaves. It was not until the Emperor Antoninus (138-161AD) that owners were restricted in the severity with which they treated slaves.⁴

Because of this status of slaves, Roman writers (satirists, poets, philosophers, historians, etc.) often labeled a person or a behavior as slave-like when they wanted to disparage that person or behavior. Slavery was often used as a metaphor and a put-down. In Galatians five, Paul did the exact same thing, disparaging those who would blindly follow the Law as a regulation.

Paul taught that after Christ, the Law took a different position in the life of one following God. The Law should lead one to see the need for Christ. The Law should serve as a tutor and manner teacher (the “pedagogue” or “guardian” in Galatians 3:24). But a blind adherence to Law after Christ Paul equated to a yoke of slavery. It was the lowest form of life. Paul ridiculed it as something not right in the life of a believer.

Paul used strong language in Galatians 5:4 explaining that those who are trying to find justification or righteousness before God based on their adherence to the Law of Moses have “fallen away from grace.” This is an important image. “Fallen away” is the same Greek word Luke used to describe the chains falling from Peter’s wrists in Acts 12:7 (*ekripto* - ἐκπίπτω). As Paul wrote it, he spoke of “grace” (which means “gift”) as a reference to the death of Christ – God’s “gift” to the world that brings true righteousness. If one tries to find righteousness before God by many personal means, one is falling from the gift of God by replacing the righteousness of Christ with attempted self-righteousness.

That is not where the believer finds his or her motivation for right conduct. Right conduct is a product of a believer’s “faith working through love,” not self-achievement.

Paul then ends his slavery metaphor by emphasizing that the believer is not to use the freedom from slavery as an opportunity for self-gratification. This is not about a freedom to sin. It is about removing the bondage of Law in favor of the greater challenge of living in love and service one to another. The challenge is to learn to walk by the Spirit, not by the flesh!

Walk by the Spirit (Galatians. 5:16-5:26; Luke 17:1-17:10; Psalm 62; Romans 8:26-8:39; Isaiah 41:5-41:29; Exodus 23:1-23:9; Proverbs 12:9-12:10, 12, 14-16, 18, 23, 26; 23:29-23:35; 25:19)

In contrast to walking by the Law, a walk of bondage and slavery, Paul spoke of the importance of walking by the Spirit. The Spirit works in a way the Law never could.

⁴ Gaius, *The Institutes*, VII (53).

The Law regulates behavior, i.e., do this, do that, don't do this, etc. But this behavior can exist even with the worst of motives and thoughts. I might not steal from my brother, but that doesn't stop me from wishing him ill will or hating him. The Spirit, on the other hand, produces good works, but not with an ignoring of the attitudes and heart-felt thinking that is itself good. Paul uses the helpful analogy of fruit. Walking by the Spirit produces the Spirit's fruit in the believer. One reason fruit is a marvelous analogy is because it grows from the inside out. Another is that it is a right and proper result of a tree that is made for the purpose of producing the fruit. This is the way of following or walking by the Spirit. It produces in the believer,

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22-5:23).

Paul was emphatic that the believer who is set free from the Law is not suddenly finding the morality upheld by the Law irrelevant in life. Like Jesus, Paul was serious about sin.

In Luke 17:1-17:10, Jesus gave a serious charge to his disciples about teaching others in ways that lead to sin. Paul was not transgressing the teachings of Jesus – far from it! There is a life Paul speaks of as one “of the flesh” that has its own agenda and pursuits. These are opposite to those of the Spirit. The believer is to repudiate these actions in pursuit of the holy ones of God's Spirit. They are not to be fed in the believer; they are to be fled!

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-5:21).

Psalms 62 provides an interesting contrasting framework for Paul's Galatian teaching. The Psalmist affirms his trust in God, knowing that God is the one that brings rescue from the difficulties of life. The Psalmist refuses to trust people (whether big shots or nobodies), money (his or others) or anything other than God. In his steadfast love, God is reliable to his own, but also a judge against those who set themselves against him.

In Romans 8:26-8:39, Paul goes into greater detail in how the Spirit works in the believer. The Spirit not only produces fruit, but also helps the believer in much the same way that Psalm 62 recounts. The Spirit intercedes with God, works life into God's will and the ultimate good of the believer. The Spirit stands up for the believer and keeps the believer safe in the arms and love of Christ. Nothing is strong enough to break that love.

Isaiah 41:5-41:29 recounts the futility of putting one's trust in anything other than God. Everything else fails because anything in place of God is basically just an idol. And if there is any lesson constant in the Old Testament, it is that idols are of no effect. They are fake, and any "good" they do is fake.

The accompanying proverbs for this section are all based on true holiness, finding it in the heart as well as the actions.

Living By the Spirit (Galatians 5:25-5:26; Job 13-14; 20; and 22) and Bearing Burdens (Galatians 6:1-6:5; Job 6-9; and 10-11)

For Paul, the believer's life is not one of isolation, but one lived in the fellowship of saints. God's work is among his people as a whole, as well as individually. So we see in Paul an emphasis not only in how we live before God, but also how we live together.

We are not to provoke one another, envy one another, or think ourselves better than another ("conceit"). Instead, we are to look out for each other with compassion and gentleness. We are to bear each other's burdens in love (Gal. 5:25-6:5).

We contrast this writing of Paul with the passages from Job. Job's world had crumbled. He had lost his children, his health, and his possessions. Job had friends who came to him in his agony. They invested their time with him, sitting and keeping him company for days on end. But the counsel of his friends comes across as salt on an open wound. They spend their time debating the fruit of wickedness in a way that points to Job as basically getting what he deserves. There is no real compassion or empathy. Their comments stem from a level of conceit that God is visiting his judgment justly upon Job, even as the "friends" continue in their own happy life. Consider these passages where his friends speak to Job:

- How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind? (Job 8:1)
- Should your babble silence men, and when you mock, shall no one shame you? ... Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves (Job 11:2, 11:6).

These friends would have done well to hear and heed Paul's advice!

Reap as Sown (Galatians 6:6-6:18; Deuteronomy 30; Micah 1:1-4:5; Ecclesiastes 11:6-12:14; Proverbs 22:3-22:5; 27:12; 2 Chronicles 32:27-33:25; and Isaiah 39)

I was working in a rose bed yesterday clearing out some weeds that seemed to think they belonged there. Three times I impaled various parts of my appendages on nasty rose thorns. I ripped open my left thumb, tore up one of my right knuckles, and

scratched the whey out of my arm. Why? Because the thorns are sharp and I jabbed against them the wrong way.

After the first time, I thought, "I ought to put on some gloves." Then I thought, "Nah, I just need to be more careful." Then I did it again, followed immediately by the thought, "OWWW! This is STUPID of me! I need PROTECTION!" But then I reconsidered thinking, "Oh, I don't have too much more to do. I have probably done as much damage as I will. I am surely okay finishing this up." Of course, along came Blood Event number 3, and I just quit!

This is the way of the world. If you impale yourself on a sharp thorn, it will do some damage. If you put your finger in the fire, you are going to get burned. If you jump off a 100-story building, you are going to smash yourself up. Now you may be able to shout out to the crowd of onlookers as you pass the tenth floor, "So far, so good!", but that last floor is the one that counts, and the pavement will win in the end.

God did not make a magical world where actions come without predictable consequences. This is Paul's point at the end of Galatians. We can set aside the issue of whether abiding by the Law will earn one a righteousness. Paul already put that to bed. But we do need to know and remember, as Paul wrote bluntly to the Galatians, you reap what you sow!

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up (Gal. 6:7-6:9).

This concept is not new. God taught the Israelites, as recorded in Deuteronomy 30, that life has choices. Those choices come with consequences.

"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess (Deut. 30:15-30:18).

In 2 Chronicles 32:27-33:25 we read of the invasion of Assyria that was unsuccessful because Hezekiah sought the Lord and trusted in him. Yet in pride, Hezekiah then

“showed off” his kingdom and his chattels to his own detriment and that of his kingdom (Isa. 39). The Babylonian envoys saw the goodies in the mountain kingdom, and registered Jerusalem as a place worthy of invasion, an event that came as assuredly as burns come from flames.

The Old Testament prophet Micah set up the paradigm in Micah 1:1ff promising a coming destruction because of the choices made by the house of Israel.

Why the destruction?

All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel (Mic. 1:5).

Yet even in the face of this prophetic proclamation there was the promise of the salvation that would ultimately come from the hand of Jesus. This salvation would extend out beyond ethnic Israel or Judah as people learn to walk in the name of God.

The two always go hand-in-hand, a salvation from God that flows from his mercy, and the natural consequences of sin that bring darkness in this life. Ecclesiastes 11:6-12:14 use many of the same images. The writer urges the young man to walk carefully, cognizant of God’s judgment.

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity (Eccles. 11:9-11:10).

The wise life is one that acknowledges the instructions of God as the GOOD and right way to live in this life. The one who has set the universe into motion, and set it upon its foundations has given us his clear insight into what works and doesn’t. God’s eternal forgiveness should never be confused for alleviating the judgments of life’s choices. Cleaning rose beds can leave its marks, regardless of my eternal destiny!

Ecclesiastes ends with this recognition:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil (Eccles. 12:13-12:14).

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-15:24; Proverbs 11:14; 15:28; 20:18; 15:21-15:24; and Amos 8-9)

Scripture is *amazing!* God has managed to use the minds and pens of people, often writing into real problems or perplexing circumstances of life, to record His message for all mankind throughout the ages.

The collection of Scriptures was never a production of God done in isolation from humanity. In our automated age, we are prone to expecting God to run a universe where he dispenses all matters the way computers output information. If we were God, then we might have simply produced a Table of Contents out of thin air and told everyone to make sure his or her Bible followed it precisely. Perhaps we expect that God should have taken a person, possessed him or her in such a way that the person wrote out a Table of Contents while in some trance. (In fact, we often seek God to act in that way in many aspects of life, not only in the production of Scripture. We often want a God who treats people like puppets, who pulls strings and produces results where the person has no choice in the matter.)

But that is not God, and that is not our world. Both Scripture and experience teach that, as a general rule, God does not work that way! That might seem like what we would do, but God is much greater than we are, his thoughts are beyond ours, and his ways are not our ways. One aspect of God's greatness is the way he is able to work through us, through our actions, and through our minds to effectuate his will, even as he lets us make choices. In this sense, Paul wrote of God at work in the "renewal of your mind" where *we*, by "testing," are able to "discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). He doesn't turn us into machines; he turns us into mature and thoughtful *believers* who trust him to work in us and through us for his good pleasure *while we* are working out our salvation:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-2:13).

This is the human and divine working in tandem.

Even with the Old Testament prophets, what we frequently see is a situation like Amos 8-9. There God *showed* Amos a vision and interacted with Amos to convey his message, which Amos then wrote up as the prophetic word for the people to hear. This was not then the words of Amos. It *was* quite literally "the word of the Lord." But it was not written without Amos and his interaction and recollection.

Jesus promised that as this was done, it would be done with the Spirit's assistance (Jn. 14:26). The Spirit ensured the memories and conveyed and taught the important

information. But it was then the apostles that wrote that information down, dealing with different needs as they arose.

A gold star example of this is the church's recognition of the canon, those writings that are not mere musings of man, not a collection of fairy tales or writings that support a power structure or economic agenda, but those writings that are divine revelation. These are the writings that convey God's will, which God has worked through humans to produce for the direction and edification of the church. While at times they are "hard to understand" and some who are "ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction," these are the Holy Writings that are able to make those who believe, "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:16-3:18).

Consider the challenge facing the early church over whether Gentiles had to first become Jews in order to become Christians. This was no small matter; it was a monumental issue. The implications were deep and long lasting. They would determine whether Christianity was limited to a sect of Judaism or whether it was beyond that, whether it was a kingdom available to all peoples. This was an issue of great importance that God could have resolved with a little handwriting on the wall. God could have miraculously arranged the letters in a bowl of alphabet soup to produce the answer (granted, they may not have had alphabet soup at the time, but the point is the same!). However, God did not. Luke recorded the arduous decision-making process in Acts 15.

The story started when Paul and Barnabas "had no small dissension and debate" with missionaries who were teaching the necessity of Jewish conversion before Christian conversion. Paul, Barnabas, and others went to Jerusalem to take the question to the church's elders and apostles. The church was excited to greet Paul and the others, but when some Pharisees in the church heard the stories and issues, they sided with those who required circumcision and adherence to the law for the Gentiles. The apostles and elders gathered together "*to consider this matter*" (Acts 15:6). As important as this was and as high as the tension ran on the issue, it was still not something where the answer was dispensed in a magic manner from on high. Instead, there was "much debate" (Acts 15:7). The church engaged their mind, no doubt prayerfully, and did very much what Paul would later write to the Romans to do, "by testing determine what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect," as referenced above.

At the Jerusalem conference, Peter ended the debate by reminding everyone what God had indicated through his prior work in the church. Paul and Barnabas added their experiences in the mission field, and James then turned to Scripture to add the "words of the prophets" (Acts 15:15). From this debate, discussion, examination of experience, and Scripture, James then announced his conclusion, that there were a few things that

were important for the Gentiles, but not the requirement of becoming Jewish in circumcision and following all Jewish ceremonial law.

At this point, the Scripture is most illuminating in how God worked with his apostles in the early church to ensure that his word was properly set out for the church to follow. The process continued with the “renewed” minds at work! Luke tells us that “it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church” to choose certain people to send with Paul and Barnabas back to the mission field. The Jerusalem conference also produced a letter for the church, setting out their position. The letter was from “the brothers, both the apostles and the elders” of the Jerusalem church. In the letter, the church did not run from the active involvement and united decision of the individuals. Neither did they see the individual dissension, debate, and ultimate conclusions something done merely by human effort. The letter makes the bold affirmation that the conclusions were those that “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). This is God at work in man. Not “divine or human” but “divine *and* human!”

There are marvelous proverbs that speak of the power that comes from thinking carefully before answering (Prov. 15:28), and taking counsel from others before making decisions (Prov. 15:21-15:24). These no doubt served as guidance for the early believers as part of divine Scripture that was useful in making life decisions.

Questions for Discussion

Consider building questions around these passages:

1. How does a works-based relationship with God put one under “bondage” or in “slavery”? Does that affect one’s ability to live right?
2. How do you handle the tug-of-war between walking by the flesh or the Spirit?
3. In what ways do you find God’s Spirit growing in you? In what areas do you need more spiritual growth? What is your role in that?
4. Are you in fellowship with other believers such that you are able to show God’s love and compassion? In what ways could you do so better?
5. What are the differences in the earthly and the eternal consequences of sin?

Week Thirty-Two Readings

<p>8/4 Paul and Barnabas Separate Acts 15:36-15:41</p> <p>Prov 27:17</p> <p>Timothy Joins Paul and Silas Acts 16:1-16:5</p> <p>The Macedonian Call Acts 16:6-16:10</p> <p>Lydia's Conversion Acts 16:11-16:15</p> <p>Pslm 113</p> <p>Paul and Silas in Prison Acts 16:16-16:24</p> <p>Pslm 56 Pslm 59 Pslm 112</p>	<p>8/5 Jailer Converted Acts 16:25-16:40</p> <p>Pslm 138 Pslm 145 Pslm 149</p> <p>Thessalonica Acts 17:1-17:9</p> <p>Paul and Silas in Berea Acts 17:10-17:15</p> <p>8/6 Paul in Athens Acts 17:16-17:34</p> <p>Gen 9:1-9:7 Gen 9:18-9:29 Gen 11:10-11:32</p> <p>8/7 Paul in Athens Acts 17:16-17:34 Cont'd</p> <p>Num 1-2</p>	<p>8/8 Paul writes the Thessalonians - Faith 1 Thes 1</p> <p>Jer 4</p> <p>8/9 Paul writes the Thessalonians - Faith Cont'd 1 Thes 1</p> <p>Pslm 134 Prov 10:22-10:28 Prov 17:22</p> <p>Paul to Thessalonians - Ministry and Reports 1 Thes 2:1-3:13</p> <p>Prov 4:4 Prov 7:2-7:3 Prov 22:17-22:18 Prov 25:20</p> <p>8/10 Off</p>
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