

The Bible Challenge

Meditations Week 10 (March 10-16)

Day 65: Deuteronomy 4-6, Psalm 54, Luke 12

by Peter Enns

No one likes to be wronged or falsely accused. No one likes to be treated unjustly or be taken advantage of. Many psalms, like Psalm 54, deal with this theme.

Psalm 54 is a psalm of David. According to the psalm's "superscription" (that bit just before the psalm begins that was added at a later point in time), this psalm reflects on a specific moment in David's life when he was in a tense relationship with King Saul, whom he would soon replace as king. David's life is being threatened (v. 3) and he is being slandered (v. 5). Rather than take matters into his own hands, he looks to God to vindicate him (v. 1). Then he will give thanks to God for his deliverance (vv. 6-7).

But this psalm is not part of the Psalter to give us a glimpse into David's life. The Psalter was collected and meant for Israel's benefit. Whatever personal issue might have driven David or other psalm writers to pen their words, these psalms were brought into a collection that was meant to apply to other readers. That is why you never see specific names and incidents in the psalms themselves. Readers are supposed to see the psalms as a "mirror of the soul" as John Calvin put it, not an account of one past person's experiences.

The fact is that feeling wronged is part of everyday life, and certainly for those who are trying to follow the path of the gospel. No one really relishes such experiences, and no one would go out of their way to choose threats and slander to be a part of their lives.

Yet, this is precisely what Jesus did. Threats and slander were not

thrust upon him. He took on willingly a life of slander, being misunderstood, and threats to his own life. Jesus did this for us. And, as David prays in this psalm, Jesus was also vindicated by God, for even though he died, he was raised to life.

QUESTIONS

- Have you ever been unjustly wronged by others? Have you brought this matter to the Lord in prayer or tried to manage the situation on your own? How did you feel when you handle things this way?
- Have you ever considered that, during times of such intense struggle, you may be more like Jesus than when times are going well? Have you ever seen your suffering as something that connects you to Jesus?

PRAYER

Lord, my protector and comforter, I lay before you my fear, my anger, and my desire to get even with others. Vindicate me, in your time and place; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Day 66: Deuteronomy 7-9, Psalm 55, Luke 13

by Peter Enns

Jesus speaks a lot about the kingdom of heaven (or of God). This has nothing to do with “going to heaven,” as we today sometimes think of it, but a here-and-now kingdom that has come down *from* heaven. Neither was Jesus thinking what many of his day expected of the kingdom of God: a new kingdom ushered in by a military king, a messiah (anointed one), who would defeat the Romans and assume the throne in Jerusalem. Jesus’ kingdom was about inner transformation by God.

A kingdom like that might be hard to see, and the parable we find on Luke 13:18-21 talks about the inconspicuous beginnings of such a kingdom—but one that will have a big effect in time. The mustard seed was considered the smallest seed in Jesus day

(2 mm, or about .08 inches), but it grew into a large tree several feet high. Likewise, the kingdom of heaven begins with one person, Jesus, who, like a seed, is placed in the ground (in death), but the result is an immense people of God. People from all nations will come and “perch” in the “branches” of the kingdom. So, the kingdom starts small but grows beyond measure.

A small amount of yeast makes dough rise, as we all know. Just as the mustard seed is small, the yeast is inconspicuous. A pinch is mixed in thoroughly with the flour and the dough rises. Without yeast, there dough remains flat. So, the Gospel begins inconspicuously, but has a permeating influence wherever it is found.

The kingdom of heaven began in an unassuming way and exceeded all expectations that the people in Jesus’ time may have had. This is also true for us today. What God is doing in our lives and through us often seems tiny and unimportant, but over time the results are much bigger and more astounding than one might have guessed.

QUESTIONS

- Is there an incident in your life you can look back on that didn’t seem like much at first, but had a big impact on your spiritual life years later?
- Why do you think God works this way, making something grand out of the small and inconspicuous?

PRAYER

Lord, I am part of the kingdom you have built that started small and grew large. Thank you for letting me rest in your branches. Give me eyes to see and ears to hear the inconspicuous ways you are moving in my life now; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 67: Deuteronomy 10-12; Psalm 56; Luke 14

by The Rt. Rev. Shannon Sherwood Johnston

Chapters 10 and 11 of Deuteronomy stand at the very heart of the story of Israel's journey of faith. Here is the telling of the restoration of the Covenant between God and the people God has chosen for a special relationship. This is established by the replacement of the original tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were written and the construction of the wooden Ark of the Covenant. God has heard Moses' intercession on behalf of the offending people and will restore the Covenant, bringing Israel into the promised land after all. What is required of the people is their complete faithfulness. The description of the bounteous land they are to occupy provides ample motivation for them to keep their part of the covenant with God. Israel has before it the choice of a blessing for faithfulness and a curse for turning away. The rewards for obedience are great, but presupposing these is not self-interest but a total devotion to the Lord God: a "circumcision of the heart" (10:16). Chapter 12 is important for being a key section in Deuteronomy's prescription of law, beginning with the definitive new principle of a single established place for Israel's worship; there will be one, central sanctuary. Finally, there is stern warning against idolatry. Israel must not be enticed into following foreign gods or imitating the practices associated with them. There is but one God who seeks our heart, and but the one God for our heart.

Psalm 56 is a "lament." The psalmist describes a desperate situation against many foes who perpetrate all manner of injury and evil. There seems to be no escape from their bone-chilling presence and their life-threatening intent. Yet this text is notable for repeated expressions of confidence and trust in God. One is struck by the realism of the psalmist—the dangers are real and many— but courage and faith win the day. Only God can offer true protection and deliverance. Come what may, we may offer thanksgiving.

Luke 14 has two sections. Verses 1-24 contain four stories, quite

distinct from each other in their message. What unifies them is a meal. This cannot be overlooked. In Jesus' world, meals were occasions of great meaning, giving the subject matter of conversation real, "extra" weight. Healing on the Sabbath, humility (2 stories; one about guests, one about hosts) and responsiveness to God's invitation (along with God's provision for the outcast) are all addressed to show what God's openness to fellowship in God's Kingdom looks like. Verses 25-35 ask us to consider that discipleship has costs and consequences. The final, urgent plea to "listen!" should make us take note and wonder if we really do.

QUESTIONS

- What are the specific ways in which you act upon your devotion to God?
- How do you take the time and effort to examine your life of faith?

PRAYER

O Lord my God, give me a heart that longs for you at any cost, in Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

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Day 68: Deuteronomy 13-15; Psalm 57; Luke 15

by The Rt. Rev. Shannon Sherwood Johnston

Deuteronomy 13 is concerned entirely with the exclusive sovereignty of the God of Israel. This chapter continues the grave subject of idolatry that was taken up in Chapter 12 and details three situations of threat to the faith of Israel. The overarching message here is that any source, regardless of the manifestation, affection or scope it commands, that seeks to lead the people into the ways of following other gods must be put to death or, in the case of entire communities, utterly destroyed and burned so that the people are completely purged of the evil that threatens

Israel's pure faith and devotion. The severity of these penalties is counterbalanced by the compassion that God will show to the faithful people, in which they will multiply and prosper. Chapter 14 begins with detail of the dietary laws that mark a people who are separated to be a holy people, that is, a people who live in the nearest possible relationship to God. Some of this may seem esoteric or removed from us, but we must remember that the world of ancient Israel was absolutely defined by "sacred" vs. "profane," clean and unclean, and to take part in the sacred and clean was a question of nothing less than knowing God or not. Next, the same is true with regard to stewardship of all possessions, and so the first fruits and the tithes are strictly holy and dedicated to God. Being inheritors and owners of a rich land, we must make rich offerings, both for our own enjoyment and for the relief of the poor. Chapter 15 in effect poses the premise that there would be no chronic poverty if God's will is always fulfilled and then provides a scheme for the remission of debts (note the psychological realism of vs. 9-10!). To be sure, it is acknowledged that there will always be poverty among the people, but the point here is our own ungrudging imitation of God's grace toward those indebted. If only we were indeed so divinely disposed! Psalm 57 is a combination of supplication in time of trouble and statements of steadfast trust (how often do we hold such trust when we are hard-pressed?). In the face of difficulty and even terror, affirmation of the life of the human spirit that knows God's presence is beautifully expressed: God's loving kindness is greater than all else.

In three of the best known and most loved of all parables, Luke 15 examines the question "Does God care about those who have lost their way?" In the most vivid examples, Jesus leaves no doubt: not only does God care about the lost but also seeks, finds, and embraces them (us). No matter if we experience ourselves to be the hearers of Jesus' parables or the objects of them, the redemptive lesson could not be more clear: joy in heaven trumps judgment when the lost are found and restored.

QUESTIONS

- In what ways do Deuteronomy's rules about purity and stewardship still matter?
- Why are these parables about "the lost" in Luke so enduring and popular?

PRAYER

Be my strength, O God, and find me when I cannot find my way.
Amen.

Day 69: Deuteronomy 16-18; Psalm 58; Luke 16

by The Rt. Rev. Shannon Sherwood Johnston

Deuteronomy 16 sets forth the observance of three festival times: (1) Passover; (2) Weeks; and (3) Booths [Tents, Tabernacles]. Passover, held during March-April, is distinguished by the requirement that it be celebrated at the central sanctuary; therefore, it is a pilgrimage time. The sacrificial meal must not contain leaven, so as to recall forever Israel's hasty departure from slavery in Egypt. The Feast of [seven] Weeks was a wheat harvest festival held culminating in our month of June. By New Testament times it was known as Pentecost ("50th Day"), and it was richly celebrated. Booths was an ingathering festival held in the autumn. It was what we may term the New Year and was the most popular of the feast times. From these three feasts, we see that it was most important for the common life of Israel to be regulated by the regular and rhythmic—indeed, sanctified—cycles of the annual calendar. There follows (16:18-17:20) a section of laws dealing with the administration of justice, with warnings against corruption so that justice and only justice is pursued. The severity of the crime of idolatry is once again emphasized by the death penalty. Provision is also made for the priests to exercise absolute judicial authority. Disobedience of the priestly ruling is also punishable by death. This is said to prevent the people from acting presumptuously over and against God-chosen authority.

Interestingly, from 17:14 a weak vision of kingship is described, because at this time a strong monarchy is still alien to their current practice of theocracy. Chapter 18 begins with the rights of the Levitical priests; these priests may not hold or inherit wealth and so are entitled to support. The chapter closes with warnings against the practices of pagan religions and their rites as well as discussion of proper and authoritative prophecy. Clearly, such matters are very much a concern for Israel's religious life.

How does one address the problem of unjust, unrighteous rulers? The author of Psalm 58 composed what is technically a "lament" and yet reads as a condemnation and contains ancient elements of curse (v.6-9). The just desserts of such rulers are seen as the vindication of the sovereignty of God and the life of the righteous.

Luke 16 has two parables, both dealing with questions relating to personal wealth that become translated into spiritual terms and realities. The dishonest manager proved to be shrewd in securing his future; believers must be prudent in living so as to obtain eternal life. Material things have eternal consequences! The haunting parable of the rich man and the beggar, Lazarus, strikes at us much more personally, if only because it seems more straightforwardly understandable. Though our personal details may be much less dramatic, we might easily worry if we're in this parable and on the wrong side.

QUESTIONS

- What kind of authority does the Christian liturgical calendar have in your life?
- Are you generous with your wealth? How do you provide for the poor?

PRAYER

O Lord, may your grace shape me into the person you created me to be. Amen.