

MARCH 05

Exodus 8; Luke 11; Job 25—26; 1 Corinthians 12

ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING PICTURES of what might be called a “partial conversion” is found in Luke 11:24-26. Jesus teaches that when an evil spirit comes out of someone, it “goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it”—apparently looking for some new person in whom to take up residence. Then the spirit contemplates returning to its previous abode. A reconnoiter finds the former residence surprisingly vacant. The spirit rounds up seven cronies who are even more vile, “and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first.”

Apparently the man who has been exorcised of the evil spirit never replaced that spirit with anything else. The Holy Spirit did not take up residence in his life; the man simply remained vacant, as it were.

There are three lessons to learn.

First, “partial conversions” are all too common. A person gets partially cleaned up. He or she is drawn close enough to the Gospel and to the people of God that there is some sort of turning away from godlessness, a preliminary infatuation with holiness, an attraction toward righteousness. But like the person represented by rocky soil in the parable of the sower and the soils (8:4-15), this person may initially seem to be the best of the crop, and yet not endure. There has never been the kind of conversion that spells the takeover of an individual by the living God, a reorientation tied to genuine repentance and enduring faith.

The second lesson follows: a little Gospel is a dangerous thing. It gets people to think well of themselves, to sigh with relief that the worst evils have been dissipated, to enjoy a nice sense of belonging. But if a person is not truly justified, regenerated, and transferred from the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of God’s dear Son, the dollop of religion may serve as little more than an inoculation against the real thing.

The third lesson is inferential. This passage is thematically tied to another large strand of Scripture. Evil cannot simply be opposed—that is, it is never enough simply to fight evil, to cast out a demon. Evil must be replaced by good, the evil spirit by the Holy Spirit. We must “overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). For instance, it is difficult to overcome bitterness against someone by simply resolving to stop being bitter; one must replace bitterness by genuine forgiveness and love for that person. It is difficult to overcome greed by simply resolving not to be quite so materialistic; one must fasten one’s affections on better treasure (cf. Luke 12:13-21) and learn to be wonderfully and self-sacrificially generous. Overcome evil with good.

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(a need to confess a sin, a person or people in your life who need prayer, something to be thankful for)

MARCH 06

Exodus 9; Luke 12; Job 27; 1 Corinthians 13



YOU'VE SEEN THE BUMPER STICKER: "The person with the most toys wins." Wins what? The person with the most toys takes out of this life exactly what everyone else does. A billion years or so into eternity, how many toys we accumulated during our seventy years in this life will not seem too terribly important.

Yet in a materialistic culture, it is horrifying to begin to recognize just how endemic greed is, how it seeps into all kinds of priorities and relationships. In Luke 12:13-21, Jesus is confronted by someone who begs him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." We do not know whether this individual had a just complaint or not. From Jesus' perspective, it did not matter, for a more fundamental issue was at stake. For this individual, a share of the inheritance was more important than a godly relationship with his brother. Not only does Jesus insist he did not come to be an arbiter of such minor matters (12:14), he warns, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (12:15). Perhaps the person with the most toys does not win after all.

This precipitates the parable of the rich farmer whose rising stores of grain prompt him to build bigger and bigger barns (12:16-20). In our culture, we might easily substitute *builder* or *software producer* or *real estate agent* for *farmer*. In a culture that fixates on present possessions, it is distressingly easy for believers to get sucked into the same vortex of greed. What starts as an entirely proper commitment to do one's best for Christ's sake degenerates into a selfish competitiveness and a bottomless acquisitiveness. You busily plan your retirement; after all, you tell yourself, you have "plenty of good things laid up for many years" (12:19). Because everyone is telling you how well you are doing, you do not hear the voice of God: "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (12:20).

The problem is not wealth itself. The Bible bears witness to some rich people who used their wealth for God, people who were not so attached to their wealth that it became a surrogate god. Yet one hesitates to point out this fact, for most of us are so good at deceiving ourselves we inevitably think this concession lets us off the hook. Others are greedy or miserly; I am hard working and frugal. Others are materialistic and hedonistic; I am realistic and believe that a merry heart does good like medicine. So meditate on Luke 12:21.

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MARCH 07

Exodus 10; Luke 13; Job 28; 1 Corinthians 14

PILATE WAS A WEAK, wicked man. Thus the account in **Luke 13:1-5** is entirely credible. The details may be obscure, but the general picture is clear enough. Some Galileans had offered sacrifices; if they were Jews, they must have done so at the temple in Jerusalem. Perhaps they were involved, or were perceived to be involved, in some wing of the nationalistic Zealot movement, and Pilate saw them as a threat. He had them slaughtered, and their blood mingled with the blood of the sacrificial animals they themselves had brought. If the mingling of blood is literal, this means that Pilate had them slaughtered in the temple courts—sacrilege mingling with slaughter.

When this incident is brought up to Jesus for his comment, he launches out in a direction that must have astonished his interlocutors. Perhaps some expected him to denounce Pilate; perhaps others wanted him to comment on the Zealot movement; a few may have hoped he would offer a few waggish denunciations about these rebels getting what they deserved. Jesus opts for none of those paths. “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish” (13:2-3).

The point he was making might well have been lost in the political sensitivities of this tragedy, so Jesus promptly refers to another disaster, this one stripped of Galileans. Pilate, the temple, sacrifices, and mingled blood. Eighteen people died when a tower collapsed. Jesus insists that they were no more wicked than anyone else in Jerusalem. Rather, the same lesson is to be learned: “unless you repent, you too will all perish” (13:5).

Jesus’ surprising analysis makes sense only if three things are true: (a) All of us deserve to perish. If we are spared, that is an act of grace. What *should* surprise us is that so many of us are spared so long. (b) Death comes to all of us. Our world often argues that the worst disaster is for someone to die young. Not so. The real disaster is that we all stand under this sentence of death, and we all die. The age at which we die is only *relatively* better or worse. (c) Death has the last word for all of us—unless we repent, which alone leads us beyond death to the life of the consummated kingdom.

Have you heard of the millions massacred under Pol Pot? Have you heard of the savage butchery in southern Sudan? Have you seen the massed graves in Bosnia? Or the pictures of the Florida swamp where ValuJet Flight 592 crashed? I tell you the truth: unless you repent, you too will all perish.

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MARCH 08

Exodus 11:1—12:20; Luke 14; Job 29; 1 Corinthians 15

THE CRUSHING PLAGUES have followed their ordained sequence. Repeatedly, Pharaoh hardened his heart; yet, however culpable this man was, God sovereignly moved behind the scenes, actually warning Pharaoh, implicitly inviting repentance. For instance, through Moses God had already said to Pharaoh, “I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. You still set yourself against my people and will not let them go” (9:16-17). Yet now Pharaoh’s patience entirely collapses. He warns Moses that he is not to appear in the court again: “The day you see my face you will die” (10:28).

So the stage is set for the last plague, the greatest and worst of all. After the previous nine disasters, one would think that Moses’ description of what would happen (Ex. 11) would prompt Pharaoh to hesitate. But he refuses to listen (11:9); and all this occurs, God says, “so that my wonders may be multiplied in Egypt” (11:9).

In Exodus 11—12 there is yet another almost incidental description of God’s sovereign provision. Exodus 11 tells us, almost parenthetically, that “the LORD made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people” (11:3). This is followed in Exodus 12 by the description of the Egyptians urging the Israelites to leave the country (12:33). One can understand the rationale: how many more plagues like this last one could they endure? At the same time, the Israelites ask for clothing and silver and gold. “The LORD had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians” (12:36).

Psychologically, it is easy enough, after the event, to explain all this. In addition to the fear the Israelites now incited among the Egyptians, perhaps guilt was also operating; who knows? “We owe them something.” Psychologically, of course, one could have concocted a quite different scenario: in a fit of rage, the Egyptians massacre the people whose leader and whose God have brought such devastating slaughter among them.

In reality, however, the ultimate reason why things turn out this way is because of the powerful hand of God: the Lord himself made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people.

This is the element that is often overlooked by sociologists and others who treat all of culture like a closed system. They forget that God may intervene, and turn the hearts and minds of the people. Massive revival that transforms the value systems of the West is now virtually inconceivable to those enamored with closed systems. But if God graciously intervenes and makes the people “favorably disposed” to the preaching of the Gospel. . . .

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MARCH 09

Exodus 12:21-51; Luke 15; Job 30; 1 Corinthians 16

THE PASSOVER WAS not only the climax of the ten plagues, it was the beginning of the nation. Doubtless Pharaoh had had enough of Moses; God had had enough of Pharaoh. This last plague wiped out the firstborn of the land, the symbol of strength, the nation's pride and hope. At the same time, by his design it afforded God an opportunity to teach some important lessons, in graphic form, to the Israelites. If the angel of death was to pass through the land, what principle would distinguish the homes that suffered death from those where everyone survived?

God tells the Israelites to gather in houses, each house bringing together enough people to eat one entire year-old lamb. Careful instructions are provided for the preparation of the meal. The strangest of these instructions is that a daub of blood is to be splashed on the top and both sides of the doorframe; "and when I see the blood, I will pass over you" (Ex. 12:13). The point is repeated: "When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down" (12:23). Because of the blood, the Lord would "pass over" them; thus the Passover was born.

The importance of this event cannot be overestimated. It signaled not only the release of the Israelites from slavery, but the dawning of a new covenant with their Redeemer. At the same time, it constituted a picture: guilty people face death, and the only way to escape that sentence is if a lamb dies instead of those who are sentenced to die. The calendar changes to mark the importance of this turning point (12:2-3), and the Israelites are told to commemorate this feast in perpetuity, not the least as a way of instructing children yet unborn as to what God did for this fledgling nation, and how their own firstborn sons were spared on the night that God redeemed them (12:24-27).

A millennium and a half later, Paul would remind believers in Corinth that Christ Jesus, our Passover Lamb, was sacrificed for us, inaugurating a new covenant (1 Cor. 5:7; 11:25). On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and wine, and instituted a new commemorative rite—and this too took place on the festival of Passover, as if this new rite connects the old with that to which it points: the death of Christ. The calendar changed again; a new and climactic redemption had been achieved. God still passes over those who are secured by the blood.

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BEFORE WE MEET:

1. In the past week what did you learn about God from what you read?
2. In the past week what did you learn about people from what you read?
3. In the past week what is one question you have from what you read?

MARCH 10

Exodus 13; Luke 16; Job 31; 2 Corinthians 1

ON FIRST READING, the parable of the shrewd manager and its unexpected conclusion is one of the strangest stories that Jesus tells (Luke 16:1-9).

An inefficient and wasteful manager is called in by the wealthy owner and told he is to be sacked. He must close out the books and pick up his pink slip. Terribly concerned about his future, the manager wonders what he should do. He does not possess the robust physique that would equip him for manual labor, and he really does not want to go on the dole.

So he comes up with a totally unscrupulous plan. While he still enjoys legitimate authority over the owner's goods and accounts, he starts cutting deals with his master's debtors. It is a huge operation, and the sums are enormous. For debtor after debtor, he slashes the amount of their indebtedness, in some cases as much as fifty percent. His reasoning is very simple. In a culture where a gift creates an obligation, he recognizes that all these people will feel obligated to accommodate him when he finds himself without a job and income. With sums like these, he will be able to rely on their hospitality for a very long time. Doubtless the master did not like having his accounts diddled, but he was savvy enough to recognize the shrewdness his manager had shown.

Then comes the startling application: "For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (16:8-9). What does this mean?

It cannot mean that Jesus advocates unscrupulous business practices. The point is that the manager used resources under his control (though not properly his) to prepare for his own future. Do the "people of the light" use resources under their control to prepare for *their own* future? What is that future? The shrewd manager wanted to be welcomed into the homes of these debtors; the people of the light are to be "welcomed into eternal dwellings" (16:9). So should we not be investing heavily in heaven, laying up treasures there? If that includes spending money on the right things, so be it: when it is all gone, we still have an eternal dwelling ahead of us. The idea is not that we can buy heaven, but that it is unimaginably irresponsible not to plan for our home, when even the people of this world know enough to prepare for their future homes. Understandably, the next verses (16:10-15) strip away the glamour of possessions in favor of what God highly values.

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MARCH 11

Exodus 14; Luke 17; Job 32; 2 Corinthians 2



THREE OBSERVATIONS ON the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 14):

First, the dynamic confrontation between Pharaoh and the sovereign Lord continues. On the one hand, Pharaoh follows his desires, concluding that the Israelites are hemmed in by sea and desert, and therefore easy prey (14:3). Moreover, Pharaoh and his officials now regret they let the people go. Slavery was one of the fundamental strengths of their economic system, certainly the most important resource in their building programs. Perhaps the plagues were horrible flukes, nothing more. The Israelite slaves must be returned.

Yet God is not a passive player as these events unfold, nor simply someone who responds to the initiative of others. He leads the fleeing Israelites away from the route to the northeast, not only so that they may escape confrontation with the Philistines (13:17), but also so that the Egyptians will conclude that the Israelites are trapped (14:3). In fact, God is leading the Egyptians into a trap, and his hardening of the heart of Pharaoh is part of that strategy (14:4, 8, 17). This sweeping, providential sovereignty is what ought to ground the trust of the people of God (14:31). Above all, the Lord is determined that in this confrontation, both the Israelites and the Egyptians will learn who God is. "I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army. . . . The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen" (14:17-18). "And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant" (14:31).

Second, the "angel of God" reappears (14:19)—not as an angel, but as a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day, alternately leading the people and separating them from the pursuing Egyptians. But looked at another way, one may say that "the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light" (13:21). The ambiguities we saw earlier (Ex. 3; see meditation for February 20) continue.

Third, whatever means (such as the wind) were ancillary to the parting of the Red Sea, the event, like the plagues, is presented as miraculous—not the normal providential ordering of everything (which regularity makes science possible), but the intervention of God over against the way he normally does things (which makes miracles unique, and therefore not susceptible to scientific analysis). For people to walk on dry land between walls of water (14:21-22) is something the sovereign God of creation may arrange, but no other.

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