

MARCH 12

Exodus 15; Luke 18; Job 33; 2 Corinthians 3

EACH OF THE FIRST FOUR UNITS OF **Luke 18** can easily be misunderstood; each makes abundant sense when read in conjunction with the others.

The *first* (18:1-8) is a parable that Jesus tells his disciples “to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (18:1). An unjust judge is badgered by a persistent widow so that in the end he provides her with the justice she asks for. “And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?” (18:7). If even this judge eventually puts things right, how much more will God, when his “chosen ones” cry to him? By itself, of course, this parable could be taken to mean that the longer and louder one prays, the more blessings one gets—a kind of tit-for-tat arrangement that Jesus himself elsewhere disavows (Matt. 6:5-15). But the last verse (18:8) focuses the point: “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” The real problem is not with God’s unwillingness to answer, but with our faithless and lethargic refusal to ask.

The *second* (18:9-14) parable describes a Pharisee and a tax collector who go up to the temple to pray. Some modern relativists conclude from this story that Jesus accepts everyone, regardless of his or her continuing sins, habits, or lifestyle. He rejects only self-confident religious hypocrites. Certainly Jesus rejects the latter. But the parable does not suggest that the tax collector wished to continue in his sin; rather, he begs for mercy, knowing what he is; he approaches God out of a freely recognized need.

In the *third* unit (18:15-17) Jesus insists that little children be brought to him, “for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” One must “receive the kingdom of God like a child,” or not at all. Yet this does not commend childlike behavior in all respects (e.g., naïveté, short-term thinking, moral immaturity, the cranky “No!” of the “terrible twos”). But little children do have an openness, a refreshing freedom from self-promotion, a simplicity that asks and trusts.

The *fourth* unit (18:18-30) finds Jesus telling a rich ruler to sell all that he has and give to the poor, if he is to have treasure in heaven, and then follow Christ. Does this mean that only penurious asceticism will enjoy the blessings of heaven? Is it not Christ’s way of stripping off this particular person’s real god, the pathetic ground of his self-confidence, so that he may trust Jesus and follow him wholly?

Can you see what holds these four units together?

DAILY BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What did you learn from this chapter?
2. Which point in this chapter spoke to you the most?
3. Are there truths in this chapter that contradict the ideas we hear in the world? If so, what are they?
4. During your reading has God laid something upon your heart?
(a need to confess a sin, a person or people in your life who need prayer, something to be thankful for)

MARCH 13

Exodus 16; Luke 19; Job 34; 2 Corinthians 4



THE CLOSING VERSES OF Exodus 15 are a harbinger of things to come. Despite the miraculous interventions by God that characterized their escape from Egypt, the people do not really trust him; the first bit of hardship turns to whining and complaining. Exodus 16 carries the story further, and shows that this muttering is linked, at several levels, to overt defiance of the living God.

We need not imagine that the Israelites were *not hungry*; of course they were. The question is what they did about it. They might have turned to God in prayer and asked him to supply all their needs. As he had effected their rescue so dramatically, would he not also provide for them? But instead they sarcastically romanticize their experience of slavery (!) in Egypt (16:3), and grumble against Moses and Aaron (16:2).

Moses might have felt miffed at the sheer ingratitude of the people. Wisely, he recognizes its real focus and evil. Although they grumble against Moses and Aaron, their real complaint is against God himself (16:7-8): "You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD."

In all this, the Lord is still forbearing. As he turned the bitter waters of Marah into sweetness (15:22-26), so he now provides them with meat in the form of quail, and with manna. This frankly miraculous provision not only meets their need, but is granted so that they "will see the glory of the LORD" (16:7). "Then you will know that I am the LORD your God" (16:12). Further, the Lord says, "I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions" (16:4).

Unfortunately, not a few in the community fail the test miserably. They try to hoard manna when they are told not to; they try to gather manna when, on the Sabbath, none is provided. Moses is frankly angry with them (16:20); the Lord himself challenges this chronic disobedience (16:28).

Why should people who have witnessed so spectacular a display of the grace and power of God slip so easily into muttering and complaining and slide so gracelessly into listless disobedience? The answer lies in the fact that many of them see God as existing to serve them. He served them in the Exodus; he served them when he provided clean water. Now he must serve not only their needs but their appetites. Otherwise they are entirely prepared to abandon him. While Moses has been insisting to Pharaoh that the people needed to retreat into the desert in order to serve and worship God, the people themselves think God exists to serve them.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What did you learn from this chapter?
2. Which point in this chapter spoke to you the most?
3. Are there truths in this chapter that contradict the ideas we hear in the world? If so, what are they?
4. During your reading has God laid something upon your heart?
(a need to confess a sin, a person or people in your life who need prayer, something to be thankful for)

MARCH 14

Exodus 17; Luke 20; Job 35; 2 Corinthians 5

BY THIS STAGE IN JESUS' MINISTRY, the tensions between him and the authorities have become acute. Some are overtly theological; others have pragmatic overtones and elements of turf protection. Every unit in **Luke 20** reflects some of this increasing tension.

We shall focus on the parable of the tenants (20:9-19). The story becomes more comprehensible to Western minds when we recall that these "tenant farmers" in the first-century culture were not simply employees (in the modern sense), but workers tied to an entire social structure. They *owed* the owner of the vineyard not only a percentage of the produce, but respectful allegiance. Their treatment of the servants he sent was not only harsh and greedy, but shameful. That he should send his son would not be thought of as a stupid act on his part: it would simply be unthinkable for them to kill him. But in the story that Jesus tells, that is just what they do: they kill him, hoping somehow that the land will become theirs now that the rightful heir is dead.

What then will the owner do? Jesus answers his own question: "He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others" (20:16).

The people grasp the point of the parable. The main lines were clear: God was the vineyard owner, the tenant farmers were Israel, the servants rejected by the farmers were the prophets, and eventually God sends his "son" (doubtless a slightly ambiguous category for them)—and the result is that the land and prosperity that the owner provided are stripped from them and given to others. Small wonder they exclaim, "May this never be!"

That was exactly the response Jesus expected from them. He had set them up for it. But now he looks at them steadily and cites Scripture to prove that that is exactly how things will turn out, exactly how things therefore *must* turn out. For doesn't Scripture say, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone" (20:17; Ps. 118:22)? That "stone" finally wins; those who fall on it are broken to pieces, those on whom it falls are crushed. But the fact of the matter is that the stone is initially rejected by the builders.

Doubtless Jesus' hearers did not understand all of the ramifications of this parable. But the scribes and chief priests understood enough to know that they themselves did not figure too well in it: they must be included among the people who beat up on prophets and finally reject God's Son. Politically, this is one more step to the cross; theologically, Jesus teaches his followers what kind of Messiah he is, and how his death is as inevitable as the scriptural prophecies that predict it.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What did you learn from this chapter?
2. Which point in this chapter spoke to you the most?
3. Are there truths in this chapter that contradict the ideas we hear in the world? If so, what are they?
4. During your reading has God laid something upon your heart?
(a need to confess a sin, a person or people in your life who need prayer, something to be thankful for)

MARCH 15

Exodus 18; Luke 21; Job 36; 2 Corinthians 6

ONE CAN ONLY IMAGINE the conversations that Moses had enjoyed with Jethro, his father-in-law, during the decades they spent together in Midian. But clearly, some of the talk was about the Lord God. Called to his extraordinary ministry, Moses temporarily entrusted his wife and sons to his father-in-law's care (Ex. 18:2). Perhaps that decision had been precipitated by the extraordinary event described in Exodus 4:24-26, where in the light of this new mission Moses' own sons undergo emergency circumcision to bring Moses' household into compliance with the covenant with Abraham, thereby avoiding the wrath of God.

But now Moses learns that Jethro is coming to see him, restoring to him his wife Zipporah and their sons Gershom and Eliezer. Soon Moses continues the old conversation. This time he gives his father-in-law a blow-by-blow account of all that the Lord had done in rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt. Doubtless some of Jethro's delight (18:9) is bound up with his ties with his son-in-law. But if his final evaluative comment is taken at face value, Jethro has also come to a decisive conclusion: "Now I know that the LORD is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly" (18:11). And he offers sacrifices to the living God (18:12).

All this material is provided as background for what takes place in the rest of the chapter. The next day, Jethro sees Moses attempting to arbitrate every dispute in the fledgling nation. With wisdom and insight he urges on Moses a major administrative overhaul—a rigorous judicial system with most of the decisions being taken at the lowest possible level, only the toughest cases being reserved for Moses himself, the "supreme court." Moses listens carefully to his father-in-law, and puts the entire plan into operation (18:24). The advantages for the people, who are less frustrated by the system, and for Moses, who is no longer run ragged, are beyond calculation. And at the end of the chapter, Jethro returns home.

In some ways, the account is surprising. Major administrative structures are being put into place among the covenant community without any word from God. Why is Jethro, at best on the fringes of the covenant people, allowed to play such an extraordinary role as counselor and confidant of Moses?

The questions answer themselves. God may use the means of "common grace" to instruct and enrich his people. The sovereign goodness and provision of God are displayed as much in bringing Jethro on the scene at this propitious moment as in the parting of the waters of the Red Sea. Are there not contemporary analogies?

DAILY BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What did you learn from this chapter?
2. Which point in this chapter spoke to you the most?
3. Are there truths in this chapter that contradict the ideas we hear in the world? If so, what are they?
4. During your reading has God laid something upon your heart?
(a need to confess a sin, a person or people in your life who need prayer, something to be thankful for)

MARCH 16

Exodus 19; Luke 22; Job 37; 2 Corinthians 7

THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS of the “words of institution”—i.e., the words that institute the Lord’s Supper as an ongoing rite—vary somewhat, but their commonalities are striking. Luke 22:7-20 allows us to reflect on some elements of one of those accounts.

All three synoptic Gospels indicate that Jesus ordered his disciples to prepare for a Passover meal; Luke stresses the point (22:1, 7-8, 11, 15). Jesus wants his own actions and words to be understood in the light of that earlier traditional feast. The Passover celebrated not only the release of the Israelites from bondage, but the way that release was accomplished: in God’s plan, the angel of death “passed over” the houses protected by the sacrificial blood, while all the other homes in Egypt lost their firstborn. Moreover, this miraculous exodus set the stage for the inauguration of the Sinai covenant. So when Jesus now takes bread at a Passover meal and says, “This is my body given for you” (22:19), and when he takes the cup and says, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (22:20), one hears more than overtones from the old covenant ritual. This side of the cross, one cannot avoid the conclusion that Jesus sees his own death, the shedding of his own blood, as the God-provided sacrifice which averts the wrath of God, that he himself is the Passover Lamb of God *par excellence*, and that his death establishes a covenant with the people of God by releasing them from a darker, deeper slavery.

Someone has said that the four most disputed words in the history of the church are “This is my body.” Without entering the lists on all that might be said about this clause, surely we can agree that one of its functions, as it is repeated in the ritual that Christ Jesus himself prescribed, is commemorative: “Do this in remembrance of me” (22:19). It is shocking that this should be necessary, in exactly the same way that it is shocking that a commemorative rite like the Passover should have been necessary. But history shows how quickly the people of God drift toward peripheral matters, and end up ignoring or denying the center. By a simple rite, Jesus wants his followers to come back to his death, his shed blood, his broken body, again and again and again.

It is also an anticipatory rite. It looks forward to the consummated kingdom, when the Passover and the Lord’s Supper alike find their fulfillment (22:16, 18). We eat and drink as he prescribes “until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26), when commemoration and proclamation will be swallowed up by the bliss of his presence.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What did you learn from this chapter?
2. Which point in this chapter spoke to you the most?
3. Are there truths in this chapter that contradict the ideas we hear in the world? If so, what are they?
4. During your reading has God laid something upon your heart?
(a need to confess a sin, a person or people in your life who need prayer, something to be thankful for)

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 17

Exodus 20; Luke 23; Job 38; 2 Corinthians 8

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (Ex. 20) were once learned by every child at school in the Western world. They established deeply ingrained principles of right and wrong that contributed to the shaping of Western civilization. They were not viewed as ten recommendations, optional niceties for polite people. Even many of those who did not believe that they were given by God himself ("God spoke all these words," 20:1) nevertheless viewed them as the highest brief summary of the kind of private and public morality needed for the good ordering of society.

Their importance is now fast dissipating in the West. Even many church members cannot recite more than three or four of them. It is unthinkable that a thoughtful Christian would not memorize them.

Yet it is the setting in which they were first given that calls forth this meditation. The Ten Commandments were given by God through Moses to the Israelites in the third month after their rescue from Egypt. Four observations:

(1) The Ten Commandments are, in the first place, the high point of the covenant mediated by Moses (cf. 19:5), delivered by God at Sinai (Horeb). The rest of the covenant makes little sense without them; the Ten Commandments themselves are buttressed by the rest of the covenantal stipulations. However enduring, they are not merely abstract principles, but are cast in the concrete terms of that culture: e.g., the prohibition to covet your neighbor's ox or donkey.

(2) The Ten Commandments are introduced by a reminder that God redeemed this community from slavery: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (20:2). They are his people not only because of creation, not only because of the covenant with Abraham, but because God rescued them from Egypt.

(3) God delivered the Ten Commandments in a terrifying display of power. In an age before nuclear holocaust, the most frightening experience of power was nature unleashed. Here, the violence of the storm, the shaking of the earth, the lightning, the noise, the smoke (19:16-19; 20:18) not only solemnized the event, but taught the people reverent fear (20:19-20). The fear of the Lord is not only the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7), but also keeps people from sinning (Ex. 20:20). God wants them to know he had rescued them; he also wants them to know he is not a domesticated deity happily dispensing tribal blessings. He is not only a good God, but a terrifying, awesome God.

(4) Since God is so terrifying, the people themselves insist that Moses should mediate between him and them (20:18-19). And this prepares the way for another, final, Mediator (Deut. 18:15-18).

DAILY BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What did you learn from this chapter?
2. Which point in this chapter spoke to you the most?
3. Are there truths in this chapter that contradict the ideas we hear in the world? If so, what are they?
4. During your reading has God laid something upon your heart?
(a need to confess a sin, a person or people in your life who need prayer, something to be thankful for)

MARCH 18

Exodus 21; Luke 24; Job 39; 2 Corinthians 9



THE FIRST TWO VERSES of the following poem are a meditation on part of Luke 24:1-8, 13-25. The last two verses draw on other resurrection accounts (John 20:24-29; Heb. 2:14-15; 1 Cor. 15:50-58). It may be sung to the Londonderry Air (“Danny Boy”).

*They came alone: some women who remembered him,
Bowed down with spices to anoint his corpse.
Through darkened streets, they wept their way in honor him—
The one whose death had shattered all their hopes.
“Why do you look for life among the sepulchers?
He is not here. He’s risen, as he said.
Remember how he told you while in Galilee:
The Son of Man will die—and rise up from the dead.”*

*The two walked home, a study in defeat and loss,
Explaining to a stranger why the gloom—
How Jesus seemed to be the King before his cross,
How all their hopes lay buried in his tomb.
“How slow you are to see Christ’s glorious pilgrimage
Ran through the cross”—and then he broke the bread.
Their eyes were opened, and they grasped the Scripture’s truth:
The man who taught them had arisen from the dead.*

*He was a skeptic: not for him that easy faith
That swaps the truth for sentimental sigh.
Unless he saw the nail marks in his hands himself,
And touched his side, he’d not believe the lie.
Then Jesus came, although the doors were shut and locked.
“Repent of doubt, and reach into my side;
Trace out the wounds that nails left in my broken hands.
And understand that I who speak to you once died.”*

*Long years have passed, and still we face the fear of death,
Which steals our loved ones, leaving us undone,
And still confronts us, beckoning with icy breath,
The final terror when life’s course is run.
But this I know: the Savior passed this way before,
His body clothed in immortality.
The sting’s been drawn: the power of sin has been destroyed.
We sing: Death has been swallowed up in victory.*

DAILY BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What did you learn from this chapter?
2. Which point in this chapter spoke to you the most?
3. Are there truths in this chapter that contradict the ideas we hear in the world? If so, what are they?
4. During your reading has God laid something upon your heart?
(a need to confess a sin, a person or people in your life who need prayer, something to be thankful for)