

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Read the Bible in a Year Challenge

Week 25

Monday	Nehemiah 1-3	Psalm 137	1 Corinthians 12
Tuesday	Nehemiah 4-6	Psalm 138	1 Corinthians 13
Wednesday	Nehemiah 7-9	Psalm 139	1 Corinthians 14
Thursday	Nehemiah 10-12	Psalm 140	1 Corinthians 15
Friday	Nehemiah 13	Psalm 141	1 Corinthians 16
Saturday	Esther 1-3	Psalm 142	2 Corinthians 1

Sunday: *Enjoy the lessons from Scripture as they are read aloud in Sunday worship. The Bible study summary for each Sunday of the year is found as a separate document on the parish website, under “Adult Education, Bible Study”.*

The Nehemiah readings:

1. Nehemiah is part of the same narrative as found in Ezra. In fact, considerable debate exists among scholars regarding which parts of which book can be placed in different sequence, with a consensus view being: Ezra 1-6; Nehemiah 1-6 + 12 + 11; Ezra 7-10; Nehemiah 7.73-10.39.
 - a. Both books are part of the same historical tradition begun in 1 & 2 Chronicles, and thus represent a later re-telling of history (much of which is found in 1 & 2 Kings), *i.e.*, a re-telling as prophetic exegesis and commentary.
2. As found in the canon, Ezra ends with discussion of the situation in Jerusalem following the return from exile. Nehemiah then begins with the eponymous author serving as cup bearer to the Persian king, in the Persian capital of Susa.
 - a. Nehemiah learns of the state of Jerusalem and pleads with the king that he might go and restore the city. The king grants leave, and commissions and finances the project.
 - i. The narrative continues with a return to Jerusalem, and an inspection and rebuilding of the walls.
 - ii. The narrative then shifts to the difficulties faced: and to the need for reform in social justice, following which there is a dramatic completion of the mission.
 - iii. The Law is then promulgated by Ezra, reforms are instituted to comply with the Law, and the city and Temple are consecrated.
3. Details of Nehemiah’s life, outside of those provided in the book, are unknown. His writing style is one which is much more concerned with people than with a mere recitation of events (*compare* 1 & 2 Chronicles; Ezra).
 - a. Nehemiah may have been from a lateral Davidic line. He was clearly a “senior” exile in the Persian king’s court.
 - b. The nature of the text as a sort of self-glorification need not be taken at face value. Such a narrative can be viewed as a cult text deposited in a shrine, *i.e.*, the people’s glory (showing forth that of God) is seen in their leader.

The Esther readings:

1. Esther bears all the hallmarks of legend. It may reflect memory of a threatened pogrom against the Jews in the Persian empire, but the narrative is in a literary form intended to instruct in the classic Wisdom themes of the vindication through faithfulness to God.
 - a. Mordechai and Esther are of the classic type of seemingly naïve righteous persons, who turn the tables on subtle schemers. They also reflect the type as found in Joseph (Gen. 37ff), the faithful servant of God who assumes responsibility in a foreign land.
2. Both Hebrew and Greek text elements are found in Esther. The Hebrew text is no more than a story. The Greek text includes lengthy additions, which serve as a religious commentary on the Hebrew story.
 - a. The Greek text is found in the Apocrypha as “Additions to Esther”.
3. The book is the last of five rolls (*megilloth*) which are read at the great festivals of the Jewish year. It is the roll for Purim, a secular feast celebrating deliverance from enemies.
 - a. Esther was long excluded from the canon by rabbis who questioned the fact that in the original version God is not credited with the victory; it is Mordechai and Esther who triumph.
 - b. The book may have been written in the Maccabean period, but is probably earlier (fourth or fifth century B.C.?), written to promote Purim, a feast brought home to Palestine by Jews of the Diaspora.

The psalms: *The psalm numbering and versification system used throughout these study summaries is that found in The Book of Common Prayer (1979).*

1. The psalms encountered this week can include:
 - a. 137: A communal lament, with elements (*e.g.* references to Babylon) which point to an exilic nature.
 - i. Vv. 1-6 are notable for their beauty, and vv. 7-9 for expressing perhaps the most powerful emotions of vengeance in all of the Psalter.
 1. The vengeful verses are treated as optional in the Lectionary. Omitting them is troublesome, for their inclusion makes clearer that no human emotion exists which is not found in the Psalter, and which cannot be expressed in prayer, and thus lifted up to and redeemed by God.
 - b. 138: Appointed in the western monastic office for use at vespers on Michaelmas, and on other fasts of angels. An individual hymn of thanksgiving.
 - c. 139: How to classify this psalm is debatable. What is not debatable is the reality that psalm expresses (particularly in vv. 1-11) the completeness of God’s knowledge of each one of His creatures, and also expresses God’s abiding presence in all places.
 - i. Elements both of hymn and lament are present.
 - d. 140: Appointed in the Gregorian office for use at vespers on Good Friday. An individual lament of one unjustly accused.
 - e. 141: An individual lament containing Wisdom motifs.
 - f. 142: An individual lament pleading for divine help against persecution.

The readings from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians:

1. See the weekly summary for week 23 for an introduction to 1 Corinthians.
2. Ch. 12 is part of a longer discussion of problems in liturgical assemblies, which began at 11.2 and will continue to 14.40. The context, therefore, of a discussion of spiritual gifts is *not* gifts in individuals, but gifts in the worshipping community, and how those gifts an individual has can only be realized and offered in life together.
 - a. Paul warns that attributing the honor owed to God is a form of idolatry, and that to be “puffed up” with one’s own gifts as an individual is not to attribute the gift to God.
 - i. Pride and idolatry are intimately connected, with the connector being an emphasis on “me”.
3. Having discussed the offering of gifts, Paul continues in his argument into the famous “love chapter,” ch. 13. Ch. 13 is, in effect, an insertion into the argument contained in chs. 12 and 14.
 - a. The “more excellent way” he describes is that unity must characterize Christians in their life of worship and in their mutual life in the Spirit.
 - i. In ch. 11 Paul was addressing the problem of divisions between the rich and poor, and in chs. 12 and 14 the problem of the misuse of spiritual gifts threatening the community.
 1. The more excellent way is inserted to show how these problems may be avoided and overcome. Love is the highest spiritual gift, without which any other gift is of no or secondary import.
 - a. In describing how we are to embody love, Paul switches to the 2nd person singular from the plural. *I* must have love in order that *we*, together may embody Christ to each other.
 2. Love is more important even than faith and hope. This does not diminish any of the other gifts, but love is an expression of God’s love, enabling us to share our gifts with each other.
4. Having taught on life in community, Paul passes in ch. 15 to an exposition on how the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ are fundamental to Christian faith and ethics. Paul speaks of an experience of Jesus’ resurrection experienced by him directly, and by many others (including others whom the recipients of the letter can question).
 - a. Paul’s message includes the reality that if the Corinthians truly grasp the resurrection, then their divisions will cease. How can people who experience new life in Christ worry over such petty issues as status and disagreement?
 - b. To the same point, if Jesus is not risen, then faith is in vain (15.14, 17). Christ is our hope and our assurance that we will experience resurrection.
 - c. Paul makes clear that it is vain effort to speculate on how we will be resurrected. The point is that we are corruptible and earthly (as in Adam), but that in Christ we shall be incorruptible and eternal.
5. The concluding chapter of the letter includes an appeal for funds for the poor in Jerusalem, greetings to friends, and a description of travel plans.

The readings from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians:

1. 2 Corinthians appears to lack an orderly sequence. There are two principal reasons for this:
 - a. The letter is written with strong emotion, in response to a crisis in faith and practice in Corinth.
 - b. The letter as it exists in the canon is likely made up of more than one piece of correspondence.
 - i. Paul's relationship with the Corinthians is consistent, but consistent in difficulties.
 1. He mentions Timothy as a co-author in the address because Timothy and Titus were apparently well-known to the Corinthians, and may have enjoyed greater trust than Paul did (2.13; 7.6; 8.16, 23).
2. Despite the problem in order in the letter, three main parts can be discerned:
 - a. 1.12-7.16: Paul reviews his past relationship with the Corinthians.
 - b. Chs. 8 & 9: Paul develops a theology of giving, and relates the giving by the Corinthians to the fruitfulness of mission.
 - c. 10.1-13.10: Paul reviews his own credentials as an apostle, and relates this to a personal experience of God in the believer (12.9).
3. *What was the nature of the crisis?* It is perhaps more accurate to describe the history of Paul and the Corinthians as one of continuing crisis (remembering as well that the meaning of this word in Greek is "decision").
 - a. Paul reviews a change of his plans to come to Corinth, his confrontation with an offending member of the community, and his anxiety about a lack of information.
 - i. Given the factionalism in Corinth, a change in travel plans may have been enough for some to question Paul's sincerity.
 1. Paul therefore recites God's fidelity, and the fact that he (Paul) is doing God's will, as evidence of his desire to engage the Corinthians on a substantive basis.