

The Compass

Week 33

OT Readings: Nehemiah 5:14 – Esther 7:10

NT Readings: 1 Cor. 8:1 – 12:26

Things to Watch for in Your Readings this Week

Old Testament

- Neh. 7 records the completion of the wall with the dedication ceremony to be found in chapters 11-12. Chapters 8-10 are climatic as the people renew the covenant; notice the “recital” of their history in chapter 9. Think about the implications – why is it essential that we know where we have come from?
- Esther is a masterfully told story of conflict, courage and God’s faithfulness; see “How To Read Esther.” As you read, think about the choices being made, both good and evil, and the implications. Why does it matter what we do?

New Testament

- 1 Cor. 8:1-11:1 form a unit addressing the related issues of eating food in an idol’s temple and eating food from the marketplace that was dedicated to an idol. While this seems an inconsequential thing to us, it was an important issue for those coming out of paganism.¹ As you read, look for the *principles* that lie behind Paul’s solution to the issues being raised. How might these principles reapply into our contemporary lives?²
- 11:2 begins a section addressing order/disorder when they gather together as God’s people: proper attire for women (a cultural issue), mishandling of the Lord’s Supper and spiritual gifts.
- While we read 12:1-26 this week it is essential to read 1 Cor. 12-14 as a unit to understand Paul’s argument. Look for “spiritual gifts” in the Difficult Question section next week.

Highlight of the Week: Who is God?

Nehemiah 9. History is important. Our history with God is important. Neh. 9 is prayer and praise in which there is an accounting of God’s people’s history with God; it has been more than a millennium since Abraham. It is all about God. Yes, it is about God’s people – their failures, their sin, their disobedience – but mostly it is about *God*.³ It is a testimony to Him, Who He is, His faithfulness, patience, His absolute commitment to His people to work with them and through them in spite of their failure. In that moment, for the Ezra-Nehemiah generation, standing near the completed wall they realize that the wall is not what matters; rather it is Who He is and who they are to be because of who He is. They cannot but confess their sin, yet they cannot but *hope* because He is present and faithful and they will once again give themselves to Him wholeheartedly and in covenant.

Let’s not miss the point. This community confession is the brokenhearted cry of a people who see what God’s people have done to God. Yet they know that God still will embrace them and bring them into all that is in His heart (Neh. 9:31-32. Lam. 3:19-26).⁴ Nehemiah’s generation know God because of Who He *has been* in their history – they can trust Him – regardless of their failure, there is to be a new beginning.⁵

Application: “What about me? How does this apply?”

1 Cor. 12:12-14, 27. Paul uses the “body” analogy here and in Eph. 4:1-16. The power of the image lies in the “connectedness” and corporate-ness it invokes. Parts of a body are joined and interconnected and they have no choice in the matter. First century persons would have readily understood the implications, they were far more corporate in their understanding of life; they saw themselves as *group*, whereas we in the West see ourselves first as *individuals*.

Why does this matter? Paul writes to the group, the whole, with implications for life together and not primarily to individuals.⁶ This means that *we* must think again about doing life together with one another and with God, not just how *I* do life with God. A great weakness in American Christianity lies in the attitude that I when I make choices for myself I need not take seriously the implications to other believers, members together with me in *one* Body.⁷

How can we change? First we must ask God to increase our awareness that we cannot do life with God alone; we really do need each other and are joined together. There are no lone rangers in the kingdom. Second we must ask and then trust the Holy Spirit to make this real to us in our relationships with one another. “Spirit, help me to see how I should *be* with my brothers and sisters; how I should treat them, love them, walk in integrity with them.” It is our common experience with the Spirit, says Paul, that makes us one (1 Cor. 12:13). We must allow the Holy Spirit to work with us and thru us if we are to have the kind of life together that God wants for His people.⁸

Difficult Question of the Week

1 Cor. 11:2-16. Q. “Should women have a ‘head covering’ in church? How do we understand this passage?”

Attempts to “literally” apply Scripture without first understanding what the author meant for his original audience invariably lead to legalism and even at times produces an effect which is the very opposite of the author’s original intent.⁹ What is Paul dealing with here and why does address these things? Without becoming lost in the details, it seems the issue involved *what was proper at Corinth in this time period* in regard to men and women when they gathered together in worship, especially so as to maintain a distinction between the sexes. In the end, Paul is not intending or commanding that women in all times and places put a literal covering on their head. In fact the tenor of argument, while detailed and complex, lacks the passion and intensity we see in other places in this letter; in other words, this issue is not on par with more important concerns.¹⁰ Paul’s solution seems to encourage (though not command) that the ladies return to the *customary* covering so that there would not be confusion within their cultural setting.

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¹ For a helpful short summary of the issues see Fee and Stuart, *How To Read The Bible Book by Book*, 329-330; also *Zondervan Handbook to the Bible*, 699-700.

² E.g., 10:23-33. The principle seems this: obey your own conscience in this matter, but take care not to violate the conscience of another. Why? Because all that we do is to glorify God and bring profit to others.

³ Notice in this prayer/praise how often is “You...”

⁴ The Lamentations passage from two generations before Nehemiah comes as the writer (Jeremiah?) looks upon the devastation of Jerusalem, “How what?” His answer? “The Lord’s lovingkindness indeed never cease; For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.” (Lamen. 3:22-23.) It is to God’s character that every revived generation returns to renew its life and move forward with God into His future purpose.

⁵ This is no cheap grace; it is not an excuse to repeat the failures of their fathers. It is an undeserved new beginning and they get it. So must we.

⁶ E.g., read Phil. 1:6. Read it again with this fact in mind: the *you* of “He who began a good work in *you*” is plural (“among you”), i.e., Paul is addressing their life together, not just “me and Jesus.”

⁷ In part we are shaped by the consumerism of our church culture. If I don’t like the “church” I attend, then I will simply go to another “church.” Such an attitude betrays our ignorance of NT values (that the church is relationship) and our “its all about me” as an individual posture.

⁸ There are something like fifty commanded “one anothers” in the NT.

⁹ 1 Thess. 5:26 reads, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” Paul’s intent seems straight-forward: show appropriate affection for one another when you gather together. In some cultures (including our own) to kiss in church would hardly be considered appropriate and in fact might well create the opposite effect of Paul’s intent! Women’s head covering must be decided based upon sound interpretative principle – what is it that Paul intended by this call for custom? What is an application for our time?

¹⁰ The passage is notoriously difficult to interpret for various reasons. Because this is so, one would be going beyond the Bible in making literal head coverings needed in any time and place outside of Corinth in the first century. See Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, 491-530 for a detailed explanation of this passage. If you consult commentaries on this passage, be sure that they are *exegetical*, i.e., that they deal with the text itself and show the complexities and interpretative options of the text. Not every passage in the Bible has this kind of difficulty, but when a passage does, it is our responsibility 1. to deal with the passage appropriately and 2. to not be dogmatic about our conclusions. Better to say, “We really are not sure what this passage means.” “I don’t know” is always an appropriate answer in such cases. ☺