

The Compass

Week 37

OT Readings: Isaiah 6:1-24:23
NT Readings: 2 Cor. 11:16 – Galatians 3:9

Things to Watch for in Your Readings this Week

Old Testament

- 6:1-13 is the well known passage of Isaiah's call and stunning revelation of God's holiness.
- Isa. 9:1-7 and 11:1-12 are announcements of a coming Davidic King to rule over His people.¹
- Isaiah 13-27 comprises words or oracles against the nations.

New Testament

- 2 Corinthians concludes with more interesting insights into Paul's life including visions, a "thorn" and his relationship with the church at Corinth.
- Gal. 1-2 give some interesting insights into Paul's early years, his call and relationship with other leaders in the early church. The issue of Gentile circumcision and keeping of the Torah is front and center.²
- 3:1-14 is decisive. Paul challenges the error of the Judaizers by calling the Galatians to consider the working of the Holy Spirit among them; after all they have experienced of God's life and power by the Spirit because of Jesus, would they now try to bring to completion their faith by keeping the law?

Highlight of the Week: Who is God?

Gal 3:1-5. Paul's rebuke is meant to be stinging, "Are you so quickly abandoning your experience with the Spirit so as now to try to relate with God by the human efforts of the old way of the law?" 3:5 is important to our highlight this week. The Greek verbs here are continuous tenses, so we might read, "God continually gives you the Holy Spirit...continually work miracles among you..."

The Spirit is continually with us, God continually "gives Him;" there is no once-for-all-time "giving" of the Spirit, past tense, which we vaguely remember but do not know as our present experience. Such an idea would have been incomprehensible to them.³ God the Spirit is now presently experienced (3:4) and that in dynamic, powerful ways. Is this our experience?

All of this points to the lavishness and extraordinary generosity of our God; He is not stingy, His resources are inexhaustible and ever available. And then there is His longing to be close to us and ever intimately involved with us – NOW!

Application: "What about me? How does this apply?"

2 Cor. 11:23-29 with Rom 8:31-39. The circumstances of 2 Cor. 11:23-29 are intense. It is a laundry list of discomfort, danger and difficulty; all because Paul had fallen in love with Jesus and committed himself fully to Him and His mission. Paul came to see that these hardships were to be his life and accepted them without a complaint. One wonders how he survived them, let alone thrived. He tells us.

Rom. 8:31-39 was written *after* 2 Cor. 11:23-29; this is a very important point.⁴ Place the two passages side by side and reflect. God's love as expressed in Romans 8 was no *theory* for Paul. What he knew of God's love he knew personally from a lifetime of difficulty and he had always found God's love to be more than enough, "despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ who *loved* us." (8:37) This love is found to be strong enough, full enough, real enough to sustain us, no matter the situation or circumstance. We can lean on it, fall into it; we can trust Him and His love to give us "everything else" (8:32) we need.

Difficult Question of the Week

2 Cor. 12:1-10. Q. "What are we to make of Paul's 'thorn in the flesh?'"

Debate has continued over the centuries about the exact nature of this “thorn.” Some have seen it as a physical affliction of some sort; others as the unrelenting opposition to his apostolic ministry.⁵ There are strengths and weaknesses to either position. As with any interpretive discussion, immediate context must control the meaning.⁶ Paul does say it was “given to him” and that it was a demonic messenger to keep him from exalting himself because of the awesome revelations he received and has just described (12:1-6). Also that He implored God to remove it and that God’s answer was for Paul to trust Him in this weakness, apparently so that Paul would continue to allow God’s power to operate through him unimpeded.⁷

Paul sounds a lot like Job in this passage! And perhaps that is his intent. Like Job, in the end God’s answer to Paul is practical – “Trust Me!” But it doesn’t address our desire to know the particulars of this “thorn.”

Many have been the misapplications of this passage; the worst of which have been seeing physical sickness as a personal thorn. I would suggest that unless you are Paul, your time would be better spent than looking for your own “thorn.” ☺

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¹ While these came to be seen as Messianic and later about Jesus, those who first heard them would not have necessarily seen them so. We must be very careful in interpreting the OT not to read our understanding from later times, especially the NT, back into an OT text. Every Biblical text must be understood in its own context, both literary and historical.

² While there is some debate on both date and recipient location, I am taking the position that Galatians is written early, before the Jerusalem Council (49 AD) and to the churches of South Galatia that Paul established during his first missionary journey (Acts 13-14). Jewish Christians had followed Paul’s route and taught his Gentile converts that if they were going to walk with God that they must keep the law and become circumcised, in effect to become Jewish to follow Jesus. This issue is at the heart of the letter as Paul writes to correct this false teaching of these so called “Judaizers.”

³ Such is the danger of all “second” experience theologies. I would argue that life with the Spirit should be understood as the *fullness of experience* as defined by the early church as seen in the NT itself. It is not that the debate about “second experience” is unimportant, but practically we must simply say, “Holy Spirit, I want all of you, everything you got, all of the time!”

⁴ In other words, 2 Cor. 11:23-29 was Paul’s life experience out of which he writes Rom. 8:31-39.

⁵ The word skolops can mean either thorn or stake. A stake was possibly used as an instrument of torture or in war to impede a siege, either way “stake” connotes violence. Thorns were what we might think; the allusion in the OT was to Israel’s enemies. For more details on the options that have been considered over the centuries, consult a good exegetical commentary. For example, Scott Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, NIVAC, 461-166; Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, 566-571.

⁶ I find 12:10 interesting with its focus on external difficulties and persecution. Given Paul’s litany of difficulties associated with his apostolic ministry (11:23f.), I would tend to see the thorn as that – the difficulties and persecutions associated with his apostolic calling (see Acts 20:17-27).

⁷ Did God actually send a demonic messenger to harass Paul? I find that highly unlikely. Paul does see that the effect of this harassing thorn has been to keep him focused on God and God’s strength.