

The Compass

Week 4

OT Readings – Genesis 46:1-Exodus 9:35

NT Readings - Matthew 15:1-19:30

Things to Watch for in Your Readings this Week

Old Testament

- In one of the most dramatic scenes in the Bible, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers (Gen. 45). Gen. 50:14-21 is the capstone of the Joseph story – he clearly understands God’s purpose in sending him to Egypt – and understands fully the purpose of his life.
- Genesis ends with Jacob’s family safe in Egypt. Jacob, and then Joseph die. Gen. 50:25-26 prepares us for the next episode of the story – the Exodus. Exodus begins with Jacob’s descendents, now a numerous people, in Egyptian slavery.
- Exodus 2-4 introduces us to Moses – his birth, early life, desert exile, God’s call and his return to Egypt. Exodus 5 begins the struggle with Pharaoh. Who is really God/god and who “owns” Israel?¹

New Testament

- Matt. 15:1-20. A confrontation with the religious leaders leads to Jesus teaching on the source of sin – the “heart.”
- Matt. 16:13-27. Jesus reveals His identity (if it hadn’t been clear before) and what it would mean – His death; followed by the conditions of discipleship – taking up the cross, as He did.²
- Matt. 19:16-26. The “rich young ruler” encounter leads to a clear statement about “entering the kingdom” (= eternal life, 19:16); Jesus must be the only and total Lord and Master of your life.

Highlight of the Week: Who is God?

Matt. 16:21-23. God does not distance Himself from our world, its pain and difficulties. He came to be with us – He knows from personal experience what we face and go through. Jesus’ death and resurrection are the central themes of the Bible and are what make Jesus and Christianity unique among all world religions and philosophies. Yet, how radical and contrary to the way we think! God’s way to bring life, wholeness and healing was to enter into our world and suffer alongside it – to the place of death. And in doing so, He overcame sin, darkness and the demonic and broke their power in the world (Col. 2:8-15). He didn’t have to – but He did – out of love and for us! Where is He in your life?

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

Gen. 50:14-21. These passages round out the Joseph story in a powerfully redemptive way – both in human relationships and in God’s purposes. Joseph’s brothers would have killed him had not Judah intervened; even then they sell him into slavery and fake his death (37:18-36). Joseph’s expression of forgiveness and grace toward his brothers is heartfelt and remarkable. While Joseph tells the truth, that they were really wicked in what they had done, he recognizes that God was able to use even their evil intent and actions to bring about incredible good!³

Do you believe that God’s power and creativity extends even to making use of the evil and harm directed toward you? That He can bring about something good, some redemptive end? The wonderful power of God and His good news!

Difficult Question of the Week

Question: “What does it mean when it says that God “hardened” Pharaoh’s heart?” Exodus 7:3, etc.

The question of this “hardening” must be kept within the whole context of the YHWH and Pharaoh struggle – “Who is the true God and to whom does Israel belong?” There are three Hebrew words translated “harden” or “strengthen” in this account; with a total of twenty uses. Of the twenty times this idea is presented, ten are something Pharaoh does to himself and ten are something God does. The account of this God/Pharaoh conflict is highly interactive and dynamic. All along the way God speaks and acts *and* Pharaoh speaks and acts. There is no indication that God *determined* Pharaoh’s heart condition or *caused* his actions; indeed, God appeals to Pharaoh to change his heart and to respond differently and expects that he can and should do so (see especially 9:8-17).

If Pharaoh was free to act, what are we to make of God’s “strengthening” his heart? There are several possibilities of which I will present two.

One possibility is that God, because of His knowledge of Pharaoh’s heart and character, is predicting what Pharaoh will do when God begins to pressure him to let Israel go. In other words, God’s actions will create situations in which Pharaoh will increasingly resist God, thus having his heart become more and more stubborn or “hardened.” In this option, God is not acting directly on Pharaoh, but God’s work in the circumstances, in effect, increases Pharaoh’s resistance.⁴

Another possibility is that God’s actions in the plagues were opportunities for Pharaoh to repent; i.e., to acknowledge that God was God and that Israel was God’s people, not Pharaoh’s. As Pharaoh resisted, his heart became more and more stubborn until at some point he crossed the point of no return in his resistance and was committed to resist no matter what the cost. There were times in this process when Pharaoh *appeared* willing to let them go, but then went back on his promise. At some point, God steps in and begins a process of judgment. Knowing that Pharaoh is not repentant in heart, despite his “promises” to change, God “strengthens” Pharaoh’s will so that he will do what he really wants to do (resist God and hold Israel in slavery) and not yield simply out of fear of consequences. Thus this “strengthening” or “hardening” becomes a judgment against Pharaoh because of his unwillingness to truly repent.⁵

This is a much debated question, for more on this question from a free will perspective see:

<http://www.gregboyd.org/?s=hardening+>

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¹ Ten plagues, each increasing in intensity and devastation, are the expression of this conflict. The plagues specifically address the gods of Egypt and God systematically shows Himself to be the true God. At any point in the plague cycle, Pharaoh and the Egyptians could have repented and acknowledged God as God.

² This is inescapable; it is not meant to be reasoned away or excused. IF we would be His followers, THEN we must die to ourselves and forsake all else. How many profess Jesus, yet are seeking to “gain the world?” Is that you?

³ An important aside; nowhere in this passage is the idea that God *planned* their evil to bring about good; rather, he *used* their hatred and malice in the end to save them from the famine and preserve their families alive! God is infinitely resourceful and creative. He could have gotten Joseph to Egypt in another way and did not require the brothers’ hatred and sin.

⁴ It would be the equivalent of our saying, “He backed me into a corner with the way he did things.” We do not mean that the other person forced us at the point of a gun against our will; rather, that person’s actions required us to make decisions. It is not that we had no choice; rather, the other person put pressure on us by their actions. God sought to influence Pharaoh and Egypt to make a right choice. As Pharaoh resisted each plague, God increased the pressure with another plague, in hopes that Pharaoh might now repent. Each time Pharaoh resisted, his heart in effect was “hardened.” Some Egyptians did repent, acknowledged God as God, and left with the Israelites in the Exodus.

⁵ True repentance is an authentic change of heart, not simply saying or even doing the “right” thing for fear of the consequences. Some believe that they have repented, when in effect all they have attempted to do is purchase fire insurance or buy a ticket to heaven! All such attempts are nothing more than “more of the same,” selfishness of heart. God knows.