

# The Compass

Week 44

OT Readings: Lamentations 1:1 – Ezekiel 11:25

NT Readings: Philemon – Hebrews 6:20

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## Things to Watch for in Your Readings this Week

### Old Testament

- Lamentations is composed of five “laments” (each chapter) as the author reflects on the destruction of Jerusalem. The language is vivid, the pain and emotion intense.<sup>1</sup> The unthinkable has become a reality and the author in his grief asks, “Why?” and “Now what?”

### New Testament

- Philemon is Paul’s correspondence to Philemon, a Gentile believer in whose house a church meets. It concerns Onesimus, Philemon’s slave, who having come to Christ in Rome meets Paul.<sup>2</sup>
- The author of Hebrews intermixes OT Scripture argument and exhortation to share with Jewish-Christian believers the superiority of Jesus and the implications for their lives. The author’s primary concern is that these believers not abandon their faith in Jesus and retreat to the relative safety of Judaism.<sup>3</sup> See “How to Read Hebrews.”

## Highlight of the Week: Who is God?

**Philemon.** Questions often come up related to the Bible’s seeming indifference to issues that seem so obviously wrong to us, e.g., “Why does God seem to allow polygamy?” or “Why doesn’t the NT address the social standing of women?” or “Why doesn’t Jesus or Paul ever address the injustice of slavery?”

The practice of slavery in the 1<sup>st</sup> century points toward an answer to these kinds of questions. Slavery was not simply accepted in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, it was institutionalized. Estimates are that from 30-50% of the Empire’s population were slaves. Why isn’t this institution attacked directly; why do Jesus and the NT authors seem to accept this injustice? Part of the answer is related to a Biblical understanding of how culture and society actually work, i.e., how do we deal with injustices so as to see things actually change? The Biblical answer, I believe, has to do with roots and fruit; kill the root and the fruit will die. It is necessary to change worldview (root = ways of thinking) if the behaviors (fruit) associated with that worldview are to change.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century it would have been futile to attack the evils of slavery head on. Here is where Philemon comes in. Paul’s short letter to his slave owner friend Philemon concerning Philemon’s slave Onesimus sets the world on a trajectory to make slavery unacceptable. It becomes difficult for Philemon to see the legitimacy of Onesimus *as a slave* once he recognizes Onesimus *as a brother* in Christ!<sup>4</sup>

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

**Hebrews 4:14-16.** The author of Hebrews writes to those who have found their stand for Jesus to be increasingly difficult and dangerous. Their recent past has included prison, persecution and loss of possessions (Heb. 10:32-34) and the difficulty of their situation has intensified, not lessened. The psychology of this may be hard for us to understand given the social stability we experience as American Christians. Their world was not simply shaking (12:25-29), it was coming apart at the seams. They needed perspective, a way to *see* forward and *move* forward, “lest they drift away” from their faith and confidence (Heb. 2:1).

The author points them to the One and to the only place of ultimate security in an insecure world – Jesus Himself. No one can charge God with indifference to our situation as though He has kept Himself safe and insulated from our pains and difficulties. He came to be with us *as a human* and in doing so experienced the worst our world has to offer. We can draw near to Him in confidence because He knows what we experience and knows exactly what we need in the middle of our mess. His grace and His mercy await us; if we will only run to our gracious King, confident that He knows what we need and confident He will willingly, lavishly give it to us.

## Difficult Question of the Week

### Heb 6:1-8 with 10:26-31. Q. "Is it possible to 'lose your salvation?'"

These two passages have given pause to even the most die hard believers in the doctrine sometimes called "once saved always saved."<sup>5</sup> The larger context of Hebrews is about faithfulness to Jesus in the midst of persecution and for the Hebrews' author to deny Jesus is *apostasy*, a conscious and deliberate turning of one's back on their faith. Can someone believe at one time and then decide to no longer believe?

The core issue is what exactly is "salvation" and what would it mean to "lose" it? If salvation is about a relationship of love and loyalty to God based on faith in Jesus, then one does not "lose" such a relationship like misplacing one's car keys. Relationships can be entered into and they can be abandoned; is it possible to turn one's back on a relationship, forsaking the other person? Absolutely.<sup>6</sup> "Lose" is not really a relational word; if salvation is relational then "losing it" is not really proper or helpful to the discussion.<sup>7</sup>

I believe that as difficult as it is to get right with God, once He captures our hearts, it is more difficult to get "wrong" with Him; God will not let us loose so easily. If we choose to walk away, He will let us go; however, not without an incredible struggle! His love will pursue us, reason with us, challenge us, appeal to us. But finally, He cannot make us love Him and in the end He will let us go our own way if we so choose. And it will break His heart. Salvation is not a ticket to heaven that I get punched by saying a prayer or coming to an altar. It is about the recognition that my selfish heart has broken God's heart and wrecked destruction in the lives of all around me. It is a decision I make to live my life for Him and for others because He deserves everything in light of His incredible love and sacrifice. He will empower me and hold me close in His love and nothing will separate us (Rom. 8:31-39); but He is no cosmic control freak, He will not hold me against my will. I must choose to love Him and choose to *continue* to love and walk with Him (Col. 1:21-23).

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<sup>1</sup> The date is not exactly known, however is probably immediately following the cities' destruction. Tradition has Jeremiah as the author, but this too is not certain.

<sup>2</sup> What makes this powerful and intriguing is the nature of slavery in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. It is likely that Onesimus is a runaway slave; such runaways were often crucified as an example to other slaves. Now Paul find himself "aiding and abetting" just such a slave. Paul pleads for Onesimus' life. The implications are radical. Paul's treatment of Onesimus and Paul's expectations of Philemon's treatment of Onesimus set a powerful trajectory for the undoing of the entire institution of slavery.

<sup>3</sup> At this time in history, Jews could practice their religion legally within the Roman Empire. As long as the Jesus movement was considered Jewish by Rome, it was protected. Rome was especially sensitive to maintain public order and stability. Any sect or religious practice that upset the status quo came under considerable scrutiny and pressure from the authorities and a quick read through Acts shows that the Jesus movement did just that! The temptation for these believers was to simply be "Jewish" and not identify with Jesus, thus being safe and legitimate. The Hebrews' author attacks this as apostasy.

<sup>4</sup> The fundamental issue is about value – Onesimus is valuable, created in God's image, thus he must be loved as a neighbor; like one's self. The 19<sup>th</sup> century English statesman William Wilberforce worked tirelessly to show that African slaves must be valued as human beings. Once this worldview change was made, the institution of slavery in England would finally yield and be abandoned. This is in part our answer to the question of abortion – is the unborn a human being, valued as a human being? If so, then the justification for abortion disintegrates and the institution (and industry) of abortion will necessarily collapse. This is one of the unintended consequences of the newest 3D ultrasound technologies and perhaps why abortion as a practice finds itself more and more unacceptable to the American people; despite the virulent rhetoric to the contrary.

<sup>5</sup> I recognize that "once saved always saved" is a bit of a caricature of the more important theological debate on eternal security. Even Arminians who historically have denied the Calvinistic way of thinking about eternal security hold that we can be confident and secure in our salvation.

<sup>6</sup> I have heard that there are some who believing in some form of eternal security have been heard to say that when Jesus returns He will come for those in brothels, etc. because they were "once saved." Does anyone really believe that? Such thinking is close to blasphemy given the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf. Jesus came to save us, to rescue us, **out of our sin, not in our sin**, for sin is the problem. (See Matt. 1:21 - Jesus came to save us "out from," Greek preposition "apo," our sin.)

<sup>7</sup> Part of the difficulty is that many people see salvation as an "it," not a relationship. If salvation is an "it," then I suppose one could misplace it. © The Bible never discusses salvation as a "personal possession," as if it could be somehow separate from a living, ongoing relationship with God. In fact, we have and experience salvation *only* in a responsive relationship with God. Read John 17:3; 1 John 5:11-12. To "know" God is way of describing a personal intimate responsive relationship.