

The Compass

Week 46

OT Readings: Ezekiel 24:1-38:23
NT Readings: Hebrews 11:1 – James 2:17

Things to Watch for in Your Readings this Week

Old Testament

- The oracles of Ezekiel 25-32 are pronouncements of judgment against the nations. Chapter 33 marks a turning point, a decisive change of direction in the book. Having pronounced doom and tragedy (1-32), God/Ezekiel now turns to give words of consolation and future hope (33-48).¹
- This week's reading includes the well known passage where God gives to Ezekiel a vision of "dry bones," "Can these bones come to live again?"

New Testament

- Having concluded an argument for the superiority of Jesus, the author now defines faith (11:1), illustrates it from O.T. "heroes of the faith" and summarizes by an exhortation to "run the race" following Jesus' example (12:1-3). Hebrews final chapters are filled words of challenge and encouragement.
- James feels a bit random in the reading. His focus is on Christian behavior, practical and not doctrinal, aimed at real concerns among the Christians to whom he writes.² It feels a bit like a "N.T. Proverbs."

Highlight of the Week: Who is God?

Heb 12:1-3. The picture is of the games, something like the present day Olympics. The stands are filled with those who have completed their race – they rise to cheer us as we run our own. Can you hear them?

Most striking in this picture is the One who stands at the end of the course. Having completed His race, enduring death and the shame and humiliation of public execution, He turns to face us as we run toward the completion of our race. And He stands with the wreath of life and victory in His hands.

There is nothing we will go through that our God doesn't understand *because He Himself has been there*. He does not ask of us what He Himself has never done, He does not sympathize with our difficulties rather He empathizes, because He knows the difficulties of this earthly life as His own experience. *And He never leaves us alone* (Heb. 13:5-6). So run! Let's "keep our eyes" on Him. He, too cheers for us, holds out His arms in anticipation of the time when we will be joined for all time.

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

Hebrews 11:1-12:3. The author seeks to assure his audience that faith matters, "don't throw away your confidence" (10:35) even amidst incredible pressure to compromise and draw back. The foundation of faith is hope; not wishful thinking, but confident expectation. Faith reaches its heart into the unseen realm and grasps hold of something real and that real forms a conviction inside of us about how we do life on this side of the curtain.³

Convictions are powerful things – they change us and they change the world. A conviction is truth that so grips us that we cannot but live according to its summons, its beckoning call. In a world without conviction, emotion alone governs the will and people are adrift in a quagmire of competing feelings and urgings. There is nothing real to grasp, nothing of substance to determine the course of life, nothing worth living for and nothing worth *dying* for. No wonder the Hebrews' author was so concerned that they live in faith. The author provides a listing of OT persons who became convinced that God is who says and that He does what He says and that He can be fully trusted; and they were willing to let go of all earthly attachments, all earthly comforts to know Him and walk in His ways.

Where are we? What is real to us? What decides our course, our priorities, our life? Are we convicted that these things are really true? True enough to “run the race” (12:1-2), true enough to let go of all else, even our lives for it? (11:35-38) Will we join them and gain the approval of God, hear His testimony of us?⁴

Difficult Question of the Week

Ezek. 28:1-19. Q. “Is this a reference to the fall of Satan from heaven?”

The entire context of Ezek. 26-28 is about God’s declaration of judgment on Tyre, its arrogance and pride, especially seen in its king (28:1-19). Tyre’s island geography made it nearly impregnable and its maritime prowess brought to it wealth and prosperity.

This passage is an important reminder of the most fundamental principle of Biblical interpretation, one we violate at our peril: **context**. Context means that we must find the meaning of any Biblical passage in its original setting. Context also means that a passage can have only one meaning and that meaning is to be found in what the original author meant to say in that original context.⁵ In this passage, context indicates that God’s intent was to address the actual king of Tyre (Ezek. 28:1, 12) who lived around 586 BC (Ezek. 26:1). This king claimed to be a god; his heart was proud because of his wealth (28:2, 5, 9).

What of the references to Eden and to the “cherub?” Given that the text addresses a king who is a *human being* (28:2) these references must be metaphorical. The key question is this, “Would the original hearers have understood this to be about Satan and a heavenly fall?” The answer must be no. Is there some actual event, a real fall from heaven of Satan, which is *background* to Ezekiel’s addressing the king of Tyre?⁶ Some scholars believe that such an event does lie in the background and that the king of Tyre is *like* the cherub whose pride led to being cast from the “mountain of God” (28:14-17).⁷

Conclusion? Any reference to Satan is highly unlikely, even as an allusion. The details simply do not add up. This passage provides another example of the danger of reading into a passage an outside idea or thought.⁸ The message of the passage is powerful. The temptation of human rulers to see themselves as “gods” is real enough – the attraction to power has left deadly consequences in its wake throughout human history.⁹

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¹ Notice that in 33:21 the word comes to Ezekiel that Jerusalem has fallen to the Babylonians and all that the prophets warned has come to pass. God now, immediately, seeks to console His people with future possibilities and promises of restoration.

² James is Jesus’ brother and became for many years the leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15). He writes to Jewish believers among the “Diaspora.” Diaspora Jews were those scattered throughout the world for various reasons including exiles from the Judea over the centuries.

³ N. T. Wright, widely respected NT scholar, explores the nature of heaven and earth and their interrelationship in his book, *Surprised by Hope*. While we have tended to see “heaven” as some geographic location somewhere in outer space where we go some day, the Biblical understanding is quite different and far more engaging. Heaven is within the reach if we could somehow put our hand into its realm. The realms of heaven and earth are interconnected or perhaps interfaced – heaven is all around us, but we are not yet able to see or experience it directly. Yet, we do experience it as we respond to Jesus the Lord who now rules all of heaven and earth (from heaven) and seeks to bring His loving rule to bear on this earthly realm through us by His Spirit.

⁴ It is interesting that they were not simply “testifying” about Him, but that He was bearing testimony to them! (11:39) Would it be true that God not be ashamed of us! (11:16)

⁵ We cringe when people take what we say “out of context” but we seem to be fine with doing that to God and God’s word. Every passage has a single intended meaning, the one God/human author intends. To look for multiple meanings or additional meanings beyond this is make the Bible say anything anyone wants it to say and violates God’s authority in giving it. In effect, the Bible means nothing because it can mean anything. You can find more resources on Biblical interpretation by checking out my reading list at:

⁶ In other words, does Ezekiel have Satan’s fall in his mind, thus showing how the king of Tyre and his coming fall is like Satan?

⁷ See D.E. Heibert, Satan article in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, (Zondervan, 1975-1976), Vol. Five, 284.

⁸ See Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel*, The New International Version Application Commentary, 348: “This passage has suffered from imaginative exegesis...” See Daniel I Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, 118-119: “...the OT is remarkably disinterested in demonology...” Block feels that seeing Satan in this passage is untenable.

⁹ A superficial reading of even 20th century history reveals the danger of power and the danger of giving to humans the adulation that only God deserves: Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Lenin, Mao, Pol Pot, etc. Untold suffering has been the result. If we choose to interpret this as Satan, we will miss the impact of its indictment on *human* pride and lust for power.