

Bible Challenge November 19-25, 2017

Advent's weekly Bible Challenge is based upon the readings assigned for each Sunday. The Basic challenge is to re-read the texts that were read on Sunday morning and included in the Sunday bulletin. You may want to recall how the passages were incorporated into the sermon. The Adventure and Explorer challenges are suggestions to deepen your knowledge of the Bible. The challenge is organized as one reading for each of five days, but find a pace or style that fits your schedule.

INTRODUCTION

Our readings during November speak of the end times. Zephaniah proclaims that the coming day of the Lord will be filled with wrath and distress. Paul says it will come like a thief in the night and urges us to be awake and sober. Jesus tells the parable of the talents, calling us to use our gifts, while we still have time, for the greater and common good. In a world filled with violence and despair, we gather around signs of hope—word, water, bread and wine—eager to welcome the good news of Christ's coming among us.

DAY ONE: Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

Zephaniah (like the prophet Amos in last week's first reading) presents the day of the Lord as one of judgment and wrath. Descriptions of the last day in the New Testament include details taken from Old Testament accounts of the day of the Lord.

⁷Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is at hand; the LORD has prepared a sacrifice, he has consecrated his guests. ¹²At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, "The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm." ¹³Their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them. ¹⁴The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there. ¹⁵That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, ¹⁶a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. ¹⁷I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the LORD, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. ¹⁸Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD's wrath in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

Adventure Challenge: Zephaniah 1. (Zephaniah is only four chapters; consider reading it all.)

Explorer Challenge: *Option A* - Read an introduction to or summary of Zephaniah to find out when and why he prophesied such destruction; does he provide any hope? *Option B* - Verse 18 announces a *terrible end* for *all the inhabitants of the earth*. Read all of Chapter 1 to determine if Zephaniah literally means "all inhabitants" or if his phrase is hyperbole (exaggeration for effect).

DAY TWO: Psalm 90: 1-12.

Awed by God's timeless strength as compared to human frailty, the psalmist prays that we have understanding "to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom."

¹Lord, you have been our refuge

from one generation to another.

²Before the mountains were brought forth,
or the land and the earth were born,

from age to age you are God.

³You turn us back to the dust and say,

"Turn back, O children of earth."

⁴For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past
and like a watch in the night;

⁵you sweep them away like a dream,

they fade away suddenly like the grass:
⁶in the morning it is green and flourishes;
in the evening it is dried up and withered.
⁷For we are consumed by your anger;
we are afraid because of your wrath.
⁸Our iniquities you have set before you,
and our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
⁹When you are angry, all our days are gone;
we bring our years to an end like a sigh.
¹⁰The span of our life is seventy years,
perhaps in strength even eighty;
yet the sum of them is but labor and sorrow,
for they pass away quickly and we are gone.
¹¹Who regards the power of your wrath?
Who rightly fears your indignation?
¹²So teach us to number our days
that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.

Adventure Challenge: Psalm 90.

Explorer Challenge: *Option A* - Read all of Psalm 90, noting the change in attitude that occurs at v. 13. Do you identify more with the first part of the Psalm or the second? *Option B* - Compare this reading with the hymn *O God Our Help in Ages Past* (available on the internet). Does Isaac Watts' hymn effectively carry the meaning of the psalm?

DAY THREE: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Though we do not know and cannot calculate the day of Christ's return, we live faithfully in the here and now as we anticipate the day when we will be given eternal salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Adventure Challenge: 1 Thessalonians 5.

Explorer Challenge: *Option A* - Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-23, the passage following this reading, to learn what specific instruction Paul offers on how to *keep awake and be sober*. *Option B* - At the time Paul was writing, the phrase *Peace and Security* (v. 3) appeared as a legend on some Roman coins. Is it likely that Paul was thinking of that when he wrote this passage?

DAY FOUR: Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus tells a parable about his second coming, indicating that it is not sufficient merely to maintain things as they are. Those who await his return should make good use of the gifts that God has provided them.

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹⁴"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability.

Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' ²¹His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²²And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' ²³His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²⁴Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' ²⁶But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

Adventure Challenge: Matthew 25. (All this chapter is about the second coming.)

Explorer Challenge: *Option A* - Research the actual value of *a talent*; how is the relative value of a talent important to the meaning of the parable? *Option B* - The Gospel of Matthew was likely written towards the end of the first century, when people realized that Christ's second coming was not going to happen as quickly as first thought. Is that important to our understanding of the parable. (How might people of the time understand *going on a journey*, versus how we make travel plans today.)

DAY FIVE:

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Righteous God, our merciful master, you own the earth and all its peoples, and you give us all that we have. Inspire us to serve you with justice and wisdom, and prepare us for the joy of the day of your coming, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Abide in me as I abide in you; those who abide in me bear much fruit. (*John 15:4, 5*)

Adventure Challenge: Do you sense you are living in *end times*? Does that influence how you live?

Explorer Challenge: Research *abide*. (What exactly does it mean? Where did it come from?) Since it is a word that we don't often use anymore, how might you rephrase the Gospel Acclamation for a millennial?