

## REFLECTIONS ON OLD AND NEW

By Barbara Buzzard

Our church has just finished a rejuvenating and challenging year of reading through the entire Bible chronologically. Blessings galore! (And had we not done it chronologically, I am sure the blessings would have been equal.) Our format was this – we were given the year’s schedule, divided into daily readings. Each Sunday our leader would give an overview of what we had covered and would try to limit his “top ten” highlights, often having to extend to the top 12-14. We then added our own insights, questions, remarks, etc. and often the discussion was animated and intense, having to be curtailed due to time constraints. I never failed to learn something from these discussions. It is common knowledge that the best learning environment is one in which questions are freely asked and even solicited. Interaction is an invaluable tool and one which Jesus exemplified and blessed his hearers with.

Interestingly, there is nothing like the pledge/commitment of others in a group to keep one on track. If at the end of the day one had not managed to do the reading for that day, one was picturesquely reminded/exhorted by the faces of others in the group to rise to the occasion and fulfill one’s commitment. Our intrepid leader particularly shone in this area as he was so encouraged (haunted?) by the imagined faces of his troops that he never once let the side down (a blessed side effect of group commitment).

It is a profound truth that if one misunderstands the Old Testament, he *will* misunderstand the New. It must be that the counterpart of this holds true to some extent as the older testament provides the framework, the building blocks, the vision needed to take in the newer testament.

There is great advantage in taking in the Scriptures in great chunks. There is so much in that older testament that is foreign to our way of thinking and very much ideologically that must be grappled with as well. For instance, can we recognize how very similar we are to our forebears unless we understand their strengths, foibles, and failings? If history repeats itself, ought we not to acknowledge what might be repeated? There was a period of time during our readings when it seemed that nearly every chapter would include this statement: the people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord (e.g. Judges 3:12: “Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord...”). It was so repetitive that it absolutely screamed at me. We worked our way through seemingly endless wars, blood, destruction and the often repeated returning to pagan roots – of the very people God was rescuing. Always in the wings was the umbrella caption “and the people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” Hmm – so glad that we are a different people and no way can we have inherited this propensity (?!).

And yet, why did Jesus meet such trouble, and who gave him most of that trouble? Has anything changed? Good lesson here – to note and mark the identity of the resistance.

As you can well imagine, we were in the older testament a long while. Actually, what this did was to make us hunger for the arrival of Jesus on the scene. Or as our leader put it, it gave us a good case of “Messianic fever.” This, again, is a benefit of continued, uninterrupted, sustained reading – the blessing of the big picture. Thank God for Jesus! His role as Savior can only be

appreciated when one understands what one is saved *from*. For that, one needs to see what the world was like *before* Jesus. As we had just been there (in the older testament) we could understand the desperate need for a Savior and we could empathize with the yearning and craving of those anticipating his coming.

This sustained reading for me highlighted God's character and purpose in a mighty way. One couldn't read very far without seeing that God's delight was in His people (and particularly, of course, in Jesus). His delight was *never* to destroy, banish, or *create in order to destroy* as Calvinists would have it. This is such a ghastly slur on the character of God that I marvel that He is so patient with it. Verse after verse reveals God's desire and plan to bless His people. And then the most awesome fact revealed – that because of Jesus, anyone who so chooses can become one of God's people. How vastly generous and all encompassing is *that*? Anyone who *wills* (modern vernacular: accepts Jesus) can *become* chosen. A completely new system is now in operation. It is one that is generous in the extreme, and kind to the most unlimited degree.

We hear much about the sovereignty of God, but not so much about His integrity. With the rampage of Calvinism that is now occurring, it would be good to remind ourselves what great trepidation people ought to have in demeaning God's character. His integrity would not allow the things His accusers use against Him. Hand in hand with this, we learned much about hardening of the heart, a concept often (and purposefully?) misunderstood by Calvinists and terribly important in identifying accurately God's character. It appears that in Scripture, the individual first hardens his heart against God, and *then* God (and only then) might use that hardening against them (Mat. 13:15). To attribute malice to God's character and intention – may it never be!

Identity is a major theme in both older and newer testaments. Who are God's people and what makes them so? There was a certain group of people who seemed to always misunderstand Jesus' teaching. One got to the point when one could almost hear it coming. They either wouldn't get it at all; would react in some obtuse fashion or would twist his words beyond recognition. It became predictable. And of course we know that this could not be a tendency that we today might have inherited! This was yet another benefit of sustained reading – patterns emerge and one builds on what one has formerly seen. There was much scope for remembering and our teacher often coached us by asking, "Doesn't this verse in the N.T. sound very much like ...?" If we did this enough, perhaps we might even *sound* like Jesus!

Perhaps the mathematical exponential is at work here: the ultimate sum (of the two testaments) being greater than the totality of its parts. The New Testament did provide the balm we craved and calmed our "Messianic fever." We saw that God's greatest gifts are people; He *gave* certain ones to Jesus (John 10:29) and surely has not revoked this policy but will give us people in order that we might in turn bless them.

The "until" theme rang loud and clear. These things happened and certain others will happen *until* the return of the King. The golden thread of the Messiah links both testaments. The promises given to the Chosen People are identical to the ones given to those who choose Jesus.

It was impossible not to note the prominence of women in the New Testament. Jesus was remarkable in bringing in a new order which recognized and included women just as it recognized and included Gentiles: both groups not inferior in any way but validated by Jesus. What more than that could one ask?

Shame on us if we do not remember the point of this lesson: our instructor organized an imaginative exercise based on Psalm 136. We were divided into two teams and stood facing each other. One team spoke the first half of each verse and one the second half. The second half of each verse was exactly the same – twenty-six times! The refrain not only echoed in the room but pounded in our heads – “His love endures forever.”

We did not lack for humor as we analyzed and grappled with the text. We, of course, loved the description of Peter’s release from jail only to find the door slammed in his face by one of the very ones praying for his release and safety. She was unable to believe it was really him. Would you not want to have been there?

We are now on to a new exercise which looks very promising. But this one still holds pride of place in my memory bank. We need a reservoir of scriptural insight and background to give us the grounding and backbone demanded by life. Where else can one turn for a genuine and authentic perspective on the world’s ills? Trust me: this is a win-win. Try it!

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