

Bible Study Lesson Summary, Oct. 11, 2020

Today's lesson includes Days 208-214 on your reading guide.

THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET NEHEMIAH

Neh. 8: In vs. 3 Ezra reads from the book of the law and the people listen attentively. Vs. 5, “as he opened it, all the people rose.” This is just like the reading of the gospel at Mass. Vs. 8, “Ezra read plainly from the book of the law of God, interpreting it so that all could understand what was read. That would be the homily.

Neh. 9: Vs. 2, “Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all who were of foreign extraction, then stood forward and confessed their sins and the guilty deeds of their fathers.” This should sound familiar. We still are supposed to confess our sins, and not just keep them between God and ourselves. In doing this the people realize “As soon as they had relief, they would go back to doing evil in your sight.” This was their history. The problem is that confession can be like taking a bath, not an attempt at a change of heart.

Neh. 10: The people recommit themselves to Godly ways.

Neh. 11: Jerusalem is reopened and priestly duties are worked out so the priests can help the people to remain good.

Neh. 12: Vs. 44-47 are about the offertory gifts that are brought forward as the people realize how they have been blessed by God.

Neh. 13: In vs. 6 Nehemiah proclaims, “During all this time I had not been in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon, I had gone back to the king.” He had to come back and straighten more things out. Levitic service, Sabbath observance, and mixed marriages were his main concerns. To him these seemed to be the minimum that should be expected.

THE BOOK OF TOBIT

The Book of Tobit is an awesome story about how God works in the lives of individuals. Many of the books of the OT are filled with what happens to the nation, or the tribe, or their leader, etc. It makes it sound like God does not care about the little guy. That He sees them as expendable, or insignificant. This is not the case. In the big picture many people might die in a battle. That does not mean that God forgets everyone who died. The reality is that everyone dies. No one gets out of this world without dying. How that life and death for each individual is lived might

have many different purposes. Many people in the OT died so God could prove a point about what happens to a nation that does not obey Him. Within that group that died there are people like Tobit who follow God faithfully and God takes care of them by answering some of their prayers with a yes. He does answer all prayers. Sometimes He says "No." But even when a person has prayers answered, he/she still dies. Only the NT shows us the final plan of God to make everything come out fair, but the OT books like Tobit already help us understand many of the ways that God has to help people and nations.

Tb. 1: The first chapter sets the stage. Tobit and his family have been deported from Israel to Nineveh, capital of Assyria. He misses his homeland. He is trying to do good things for the other deportees, especially burying the ones who get killed. This is dangerous for the king might find out and kill him. In vs. 20 the king does find out and confiscates Tobit's property and leaves him only his wife Anna and son Tobiah. In the next verse, 21, that king is assassinated by two of his sons and Tobit brings his family back into Nineveh. By the way, vs. 6 tells us that Tobit is a faithful steward and tither, for he gives God 10%.

Tb. 2: Tobit buries another fellow countryman and in vs. 8 is mocked by his neighbors. Vs. 9 tells how he ends up blind. This sounds like a punishment from God but it is not. It is actually a part of His plan. In vs. 11 we read about Anna doing her work and Tobit getting angry with her, so he is not perfect but probably feeling sorry for himself.

Tb. 3: Tobit's prayer is great. In vs. 3a he says: "Punish me not for my sins nor for my inadvertent offenses, nor for those of my fathers." He wants to make sure that God gets it right. Since he cannot see all that God sees, he might be thinking that his blindness is a sign that God doesn't always get things right. In vs. 6 he says: "So now, deal with me as you please, and command my life breath to be taken from me..." God does deal with him as He pleases but does not want to kill him. Tobit is feeling bad because many have insulted him.

Then we get the story of Sarah. She has also been insulted and wants to die. She has been married seven times but each time an evil spirit kills her husband on her wedding night. She would kill herself but that would be an insult to her father, so she prays to God to slay her or fix the problem. This answers the question about whether it is okay to pray for death, as many elderly people do. It is okay, but God might have a better plan in mind, and He will always go with that plan.

God does hear both of their prayers and sends Raphael to heal them.

Tb. 4: We have just had two people pray to die, because their life is so bad. God gives them something better. But Tobit presumes that God will answer his prayer to die so he gives his son Tobiah some final words of wisdom and sends him off to get some money that is owed him. In vs. 20 Tobit tells Tobiah how to get the money but says: "You will be a rich man if you fear God, avoid sin, and do what is right before the Lord your God." He won't be rich just because he has lots of money.

Tb. 5: Raphael shows up to help Tobiah find his way to Media. Raphael says: "I am an Israelite, one of your kinsmen." This sounds like a lie but then neither we nor the author knows exactly how angels or demons work. That still has not all been revealed. This statement, that is confusing to us, does not diminish the goodness of Raphael. For that line is not the point of the

story. There are many incorrect things mentioned in the Bible, but the message is true. Vs. 13: ““Raphael answered, “I am Azariah, son of Hananiah the elder, one of your own kinsmen.”” This also sounds dishonest. Someday I hope to meet Archangel Raphael and ask him about this. In vs. 15, Tobit agrees to pay Raphael 17 cents a day, a drachma, for his work. Vs. 20, Tobit consoles Anna with the line: “For a good angel will go with him, his journey will be successful, and he will return unharmed.” Good guess!

Tb. 6: Raphael gets medicine from a big fish that jumped out of the Tigris River and tried to swallow Tobiah’s foot. Raphael takes Tobiah to Raguel and Sarah’s house to stay. Tobiah has heard of Sarah and is not pleased when in vs. 16 Raphael reminds Tobiah: “Do you not remember your father’s orders? He commanded you to marry a woman from your own family.” Raphael explains what Tobiah must do to save himself when he marries Sarah, “for she was set apart for you before the world existed.” That is a marriage made in heaven.

Tb. 7: Tobiah and Sarah are married according to the law.

Tb. 8: Tobiah follows Raphael’s instructions about adding the fish parts to the incense to drive the demon away. Raphael takes care of that demon in Upper Egypt, or the devil’s territory. Tobiah even prays with Sarah so he survives their wedding night, even though his father-in-law dug a grave just in case. Sarah’s prayer is answered and a perfectly good grave goes to waste.

Tb. 9: They get the money owed to Tobit.

Tb. 10: Tobit and Anna are worrisome parents. Tobiah receives Sarah’s dowry from her parents and everyone is happy and hoping for grandchildren. What a great family.

Tb. 11: Raphael gets Tobiah back to Tobit safely with Sarah and the money. The medicine works to cure Tobit’s blindness and Tobit’s prayer is answered better than he planned. That is how God works. His plan is to answer our prayers in a more abundant way than we asked.

Tb. 12: Tobit is ready to give Raphael half of what they came back with. Raphael tells him to thank God and proclaim His goodness to everyone, then he reveals himself in vs. 15, “I am Raphael, one of the seven angels who enter and serve before the Glory of the Lord.”

Tb. 13: Tobit prays a prayer of thanksgiving.

Tb. 14: Tobiah has seven sons. Tobit tells them all what he has learned from the prophets about Assyria and Israel. Tobit repeats the words of the prophets that “the temple of God shall also be rebuilt...” Then in vs. 6: “All the nations of the world shall be converted and shall offer God true worship...” Then they all died. Basically, all of this was during the 70-year exile. The moral of the story is that even with the big picture going on in seemingly disastrous ways, God does not forget the faithful individuals.

THE BOOK OF JUDITH

Now we have a story of a woman who saves the day. Her name, Judith, means Jewess. This is certainly part of God's plan to help us understand how he uses everyone and explains why some of the praises of Judith are applied to Mary in the liturgy. The book is not about history, so there are liberties taken concerning some facts, but the message is that God works through women also.

Jdt. 1: Nebuchadnezzar is king of Assyria and is in Nineveh, its capital. He wants a whole bunch of countries, including Judea, to send soldiers to fight with him against the Medes. He doesn't get his way so he falls into a violent rage. It was always hard for the little guys to decide who to fight for because being on the losing side was disastrous. Not picking a side was also risky.

Jdt. 2: He plans to take revenge and sends Holofernes, general-in-chief of his forces, to do the destruction. This is important because we have read of how God occasionally led the people of Israel into battle with the idea of total destruction. Now it is the other way. Realize that this was how things worked back then and even now. War is not peaceful.

Jdt. 3: In fear the people try to submit but it does no good for Nebuchadnezzar thinks of himself as god so he is going to keep his word and destroy these people. There is no mercy with him, like with the God of Israel.

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Prv. 27:15-27: Vs. 17 is fairly famous, "As iron sharpens iron, so man sharpens his fellow man." The process starts with brothers and sisters, who do this through competition.

Prv. 28: Vs. 13 gives a foreshadowing of the Sacrament of Confession. "He who conceals his sins prospers not, but he who confesses and forsakes them obtains mercy." So it is not just confessing them, but forsaking them also. That is why we prefer calling the sacrament Reconciliation now, rather than confession.

Prv. 29: Vs. 18: "Without prophecy the people become demoralized: but happy is he who keeps the law." The purpose of the Transfiguration of Jesus was to keep the apostles Peter, James and John from being demoralized by the Passion. So, Jesus had the great prophet, Elijah, and the great lawgiver, Moses, with him to give the fullest effect.

Prv. 30: This chapter starts a section that contains indirect teaching from God the Father. He is showing how others are learning these lessons. In vs. 1-6 the "most stupid of men" is compared to God. In vs. 4 we are asked questions some of which we can now answer. "Who has gone up to heaven and come down again... What is his name, what is his son's name, if you know it?" (The Father and His Son, Jesus)

ST. PAUL'S LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

Cor. 4: Here in vs. 2-6, Paul finishes his thoughts just like he did in Ephesians with a reminder to persevere in prayer. Then he ends the letter with commendations on trustworthy people.

ST. PAUL'S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

Phil. 1: This letter includes Timothy as a slave of Christ Jesus. If you have been to a priestly ordination this phrase will sound familiar to you: vs. 6, “that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.” A version of that is used in an ordination. Vs. 13 & 14 mentions his imprisonment. This time it seems to be real and not just like his concept of slavery. But in vs. 19 he rejoices because it will result in deliverance for him. Vs. 20-26 is his idea of deliverance. That he not be put to shame. That Christ will be magnified in his body, living or dead. “For to me life is Christ, and death is gain. If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. And I do not know which I shall choose.” He ends the chapter exhorting them to think the same way. It is win-win thinking.

Phil 2: Remember in the start of chapter 1, vs. 1, he writes this to the holy ones in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and ministers. Here he seems to be talking to them as elders or priests, or maybe deacons. In other words, this is to the bigshots. But vs. 5-11 are the basis of my book, that Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” Whether bigshots or laity, everyone must, in vs. 12, “work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” That is expressed after he shows what Jesus has given up in terms of glory to be humble with us. He ends the chapter with notes on the plans and problems of Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Phil. 3: Vs. 3: “For we are the circumcision, we who worship through the Spirit of God... and do not put our confidence in flesh...” Circumcision was a sign that God gave to the Israelites to help them understand that their flesh was not the answer, a guy's strength or vitality. Living according to the Spirit and not the flesh is the same thing without the mutilation. Remember, all circumcision gave them was a membership in the family of God and a place in the Holy Land. Christ gives us much more. Vs. 12-21 are his description of how his life is a model of this goal. It is a goal that drives him and makes it so he never looks back at the good old days.

Phil. 4: After a few words about some specific people in vs. 4-8 he goes back into the theme of looking to the glorious future and living for the sake of that glory. Then he talks of his lack of need but also of their generosity before ending with an extra good-bye. These last two chapters

are really great things to have handy if you are discouraged. He gives great reasons and a wonderful example, with encouragement, that should get you out of the funk.

THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

Here is a letter that would have been like many of the time, one piece of parchment. He is dealing with slavery indirectly. As the notes say, since the end times were expected to come soon there was no need for social reform, just life in Christ.

Philemon: Paul again speaks of himself as a prisoner for Christ, figuratively and probably literally. This is significant in terms of what he is asking of Philemon. Paul must have brought Onesimus into the faith for he sees himself as a father to him (vs.10). He is hoping that Philemon will accept Onesimus as more than a slave, a brother (in Christ). We speak all the time of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul is using that concept to bring harmony to a slave and master.

THE GOSPEL OF ST. LUKE

You have already read the second half of this Gospel when we went through Acts of the Apostles. Remember that these scrolls did not have titles or authors written on them. They would have been one long story, so were written together as an account of salvation history. Theophilus would have known who this was from. Luke was a physician so he is conscious of the sick and suffering. This puts a powerful perspective on the gospel that the Holy Spirit obviously saw as very important.

These first few chapters concerning the Birth Narrative are very important to us as Catholics. Like Matthew and John's account of Jesus' origin they contain information that sets up a stage for us to understand Jesus. They tie things together in beautiful ways.

Lk. 1:1-25: He says he was not an eye-witness of it all but wants to give an accurate account. With vs. 5 he starts with the story of John the Baptist. This is a way of credentialing Jesus. The amazing story of John give credence to the life of Jesus for Theophilus, just as the Gospels give credibility to Jesus in our time. This birth story, for this family from the priestly clan, is so much like Samson's birth. That is significant because Samson was from the time of the judges who came before the kings. You can check that out again in Judges 13. John comes to announce the king. Zechariah was probably 50 and in his last year of priestly service for they were only supposed to serve from 25-50 year of age. So, Elizabeth was probably that age or older. His lack of belief as a priest did not make Gabriel happy.