



WEEK OF MARCH 17, 2024
(COVERS READINGS FROM MARCH 17-23)

Overview

The following information is provided as a basic orientation to reading the Bible. Feel free to add to it and use it in any way that is helpful for your group. Also, feel free to make copies of these pages for members of your group!

Romans 8 serves as the *pièce de résistance* of Paul's letter to the Romans and, perhaps, the entire gospel message – that through Christ, we have been set free from the law of sin and death and made alive by the power of the Spirit at work in us. Not only is this so, but the Spirit of God works in us to make us true children of God, raising us with Christ into a new life that is the redemptive hope of all creation. Not only is this so, but the Spirit intercedes for us, sanctifying us into the image of Jesus – who also intercedes for us. All of this is further proof of God's unconditional, steadfast love for us. This love is not shaken, swayed or otherwise diminished by anything natural nor supernatural, present nor future, in life nor in death.

In Galatians 5:16 – 6:10, Paul admonishes his readers to live by the Spirit. The Spirit-filled, Spirit-led life is marked by the two-fold action of intentionally turning away or otherwise denying the “works of the flesh” – e.g. immorality, jealousy, anger, strife, etc. – and intentionally turning toward the “fruit of the Spirit” – e.g. love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc. Those who do so successfully will “restore [a sinner] in a spirit of gentleness,” “take care to not be tempted,” “bear one another's burdens,” “share in all good things”, and “test their own work...for all must carry their own loads.” In Ephesians 6:10-20, Paul further clarifies that the struggle to live by the Spirit is a spiritual struggle and can only be won on spiritual terms – i.e. by putting on the “whole armor of God” and praying “in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.”

In Philippians 4:2-9, Paul gives a call for unity, urging the church to “be of the same mind in the Lord” – one that rejoices always, is always gentle, continually prayerful, continually focused on the things that are excellent and worthy of praise, and attentive to the teaching of the apostle. In Colossians 1:1-23, Paul gives thanks for the faithfulness of his readers and prays that they may be filled with

...the knowledge and wisdom of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, full pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

He goes on, then, offering a hymn regarding the supremacy of Christ – “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation...” Paul declares that we have been reconciled through him, “provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith...”

In 1 Timothy 3:1-16, Paul writes to his young disciple regarding leadership within the church. He gives behavioral guidelines for bishops and deacons (both men and women). These guidelines are to be observed because the church is “the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” In chapter 6:3-21, Paul further warns Timothy to “guard what has been entrusted to you,” taking care to stay away from false teachers and their teachings which lead to ruin and destruction. He also gives instructions concerning wealth, generosity and contentment.

In 2 Timothy 2:1-16, Paul admonishes Timothy to “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus,” to not waiver in teaching the sound truth of the gospel knowing that his toil is not in vain. In chapter 3, Paul reminds Timothy of the struggles he endured within his own ministry of proclaiming the gospel. He solemnly and urgently charges Timothy to “proclaim the message...for the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but with itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires...”

1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11 offers a word of hope to the church that has lost so many to death and languishes in the wake of grief – that Christ will return as promised and those who have died in Christ will be resurrected to live and be with him forever. Though we do not know the time or season in which Christ will return, we are to not “fall asleep” but wait in eager expectation and hope, encouraging each other in faith.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 declares that the truest essence and most essential quality of a new life in Christ is love. Love trumps any good works we can do and any supernatural experience we may have or can produce. “It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

General Discussion Questions

Use any or all of the following questions, depending how much time you have:

- How familiar were you with this week’s readings? Was there anything that surprised you?
- What do you learn about God from these readings? What do you learn about humanity, or about human nature? How did the authors of these writings understand their relationship with God?
- What passages or aspects of these readings give you comfort or assurance? What passages or aspects of these readings do you find difficult to accept?
- Are there any particular passages that you want to study in-depth?

This Week’s Discussion Questions

Romans 8:28-39 | Paul writes that *neither death, nor life...can separate us from the love of God*. His assertion focuses on the steadfast faithfulness of God’s love throughout all of life and beyond. In his essay titled *Practicing the Presence of God: Earthly Practices in Heavenly Presence*, John Swinton writes this concerning end-of-life care:

When we think about end-of-life care, the assumption tends to be that we are focusing on a particular group of people (normally “patients” under some kind of medical care) who are currently encountering forms of illness that threaten to end their lives, sometimes prematurely. ...For Christians, the place where end-of-life care begins is in the day-to-day practices of the Christian life as it is lived out in community with others. A Christian approach to end-of-life care thus involves much more than palliation and good patient care...rather, it is a formative task that finds its theological roots in Jesus’ words ...*I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly*. ...An absence of illness and disturbance may be desirable, but it is not definitive of abundant life. What *is* definitive of abundant life is the desire to love God in all things and at all

times. ...it is clear that alongside the standard modes of caring for the dying we need to think about end-of-life issues in relation to the formation of people who can hold on to the hope of the gospel and the love of God even amid the storms of illness, death and suffering. This is not an “end-of-life” task; it is a “whole of life” task.

Have you ever considered end-of-life care in these terms? What difference does this make for our day-to-day practices? What difference does this make for how we approach death, dying and suffering? How might we expect to encounter and share God’s love in the midst of our own death, dying and suffering? How might we be called to help others encounter and share God’s love in the midst of their death, dying and suffering?

2 *Timothy 4:1-4* | Paul urges Timothy to “proclaim the message...for the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but with itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.” Consider these words from Mike Yaconelli, founder of Youth Specialties:

There is an authority that each of us possesses that goes beyond words. It is the authority of our own conversion, the authority of our personal walk with Jesus, the authority of our past, the authority of our suffering, the authority of our failures, the authority of the nicks and bruises life has given us. ...Our churches are full of those who have been battered and beaten-down, trampled and broken by people like me, the so-called “experts” of communicating the faith. How many of us out there are buoyed, at first, by those of us who can turn a phrase, manipulate words, weave a story, only to be let down, the moment we get home, by the realities of a life that doesn’t sound pretty or work perfectly? It should be buoyed by the everyday insights we are learning in the trenches of our own faith. We should trust the sacred intuition we have developed over the years of our walk with Jesus. The power of the Church is not in its super-preachers, its mega-structures, or its large institutions. The power of the Church is in its individual people whose sacrifices throughout everyday life have an authority no expert can match.

Have you often found yourself falsely “buoyed” by the “so-called experts” that Yaconelli mentions? How have you learned to distinguish between sound doctrine and myths? Have you ever found yourself resistant to the gospel (“...[they] will turn away from listening to the truth...”) ? Have you ever considered yourself an “expert,” a teacher, communicator, proclaimer of the message of Jesus Christ? If no, then why not? If yes, then what is your “authority?”

Closing Prayer

From Walter Brueggemann’s *Prayers for a Privileged People*:

You God, Lord and Sovereign,
you God, lover and partner.

You are God of all our possibilities.

You preside over all our comings and goings,
all our wealth and all our poverty,
all our sickness and all our health,
all our despair and all our hope,
all our living and all our dying.

And we are grateful.

You are God of all of our impossibilities.

You have presided over the emancipations

and healings of our mothers and fathers;

you have presided over the wondrous transformations in our own lives.

you have and will preside over those parts that we imagine to be closed.

And we are grateful.

So be your true self, enacting the things impossible for us,
that we might yet be whole among the blind who see and
the dead who are raised;
that we may yet witness your will for peace,
your vision for justice,
your vetoing all our killing fields.

At the outset of this day,
we place our lives in your strong hands.
Before the end of this day,
do newness among us in the very places where
we are tired in fear,
we are exhausted in guilt,
we are spent in anxiety.

Make all things new, we pray in the new-making name of Jesus. Amen.