

Friday: *Don't Return...*

Read: Exodus 20:4-6 ⁴“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Reflect:

It is a mistake for us to read these verses (especially v5) and think YHWH is unloving. For one, Israel was already in covenant with Him. What YHWH says goes, period. Failure to live up to one’s part of the covenant meant death.

Also, YHWH had freed them from bondage in Egypt; so He has every right to demand they not submit to ‘spiritual bondage’ via idolatry now that they were physically free. Remember, YHWH freed the Hebrews so they would “serve” (worship) Him (e.g., Exod3:12; 7:16), not other ‘gods’ (v5).

Furthermore, YHWH is far more apt to bless than to curse. Note the disparity in the numbers; “third and fourth” vs. “thousands” – the dramatic contrast in the numbers drives the point home. Furthermore (yet again), “iniquity” is a word for willful rebellion against YHWH. How could someone willfully rebel against One Who has done so much?

Respond:

That YHWH is “jealous” means He tolerates no rivals. Is there anything (anyone) in your life who is a rival to your allegiance to YHWH?

Have you ever been frustrated when someone else took the credit for something that you deserved? How does this relate to God’s ‘feelings’ when He’s slighted for what He’s done?

Is there a more sobering way to view sin than how a parent’s failures can negatively impact the lives of their children? Thank God for His grace...

Pray: Pray for a desire and the resolve to put to death the sin in your life. Continue to pray for boldness to share God’s love (Acts4:29) and for His Word to spread rapidly (2Thess3:1). Thank God for our freedom; pray we honor Him with it.

Saturday: *Effective Structures*

Read: Ephesians

Reflect:

The church is not an end; it’s a means to an end. In other words, the church isn’t God’s ultimate goal for His people; it’s a vehicle through which He has chosen to operate. In the past it was Israel (the OT), now it’s through the church.

Given those facts, how a church functions isn’t the end; it’s a means to the end. How a church governs itself and makes decisions and performs ministry are not the end; they are means to the end.

I’m thankful we all realize that. Yet simply realizing it doesn’t guarantee that we won’t fall into a pattern that would indicate we don’t realize it. Fortunately our goal is to have the Bible be our guide for how we “do church”.

Respond:

What changes have you seen in church over the course of your life? Which changes do you like, which do you miss? Are those even proper questions to ask?

What changes has NLCC made over the span of Her short life? What changes might be good that have yet to take place?

Since you have been reminded that you have been freed to “serve” (worship) God, how will your life reflect that today?

Pray: Thank God for the week you’ve had to serve Him with your life; pray for continued opportunities to serve Him. Pray for open doors to share God’s love with others (Col4:2-6). Pray that our services honor God tomorrow.

Opiate or Emancipation?

June 29 – July 5

So many questions to ask...so little space to ask them; not to mention the questions I’m certain you have as well.

Karl Marx said,

- “Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again...This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world...The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion...Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions...”

Now I admit, I’ve partly done something that is extremely dangerous. I’ve (sort of) taken another’s words out of context (yet you can see I included a lot of the surrounding context). However, you can find the full context on-line (or in a book) if you like. I didn’t leave out a whole lot. Yet it is clear that Marx means that religion’s purpose is to create illusory fantasies for the poor (i.e, things will be better ‘some day’ – the next life) and therefore keep them poor (content). Granted, he’s attacking society as a whole...but one can see how others have taken his words and equated religion to a “crutch” for those who can’t handle life.

Yet I wonder, what does the Bible say?

A website I found told people of their need for God, how Jesus fulfills that need, and allows you a chance to “accept Jesus into your heart”. Once you accept Jesus you can request more information. I really wanted to “accept” and then get their information, but my concious kept me from checking either “I just prayed to receive Christ” or “I recommitted my life to Christ.” I wonder, what type of follow-up would I get?

Please understand, I’m certain whoever set up this website has good intentions, and it is quite possible there have been people come to know Jesus through this means. Yet, are we cheapening the message?

My questions, or at least some of them, are “Is religion a “drug” and a “crutch”...or is everything else a drug and crutch?” “Do we “accept Jesus” or do we submit to His lordship?”

The Bible seems clear to me. Everything else is a drug and a crutch. We were once in bondage, but God desires to (and has the power to) free us to serve Him. We don’t “accept Jesus into our heart” – we enter into covenant with Him and in that covenant He is Lord.

Do we have the courage to daily live out our emancipation? Do we ask for it?

Monday: Basis

Read: Exodus 19:1-4¹ On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ²...There Israel encamped before the mountain, ³ while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ⁴ You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.

Reflect:

For over 400 years the Hebrew people had been in Egypt. An initially voluntary sojourn (cf. Gen46 [which was not voluntary for Joseph cf. Gen37:12ff]), which became necessary for survival (cf. Gen47:13), had turned into bondage and forced labor (e.g., Exod1:8-14). Yet they were now free!

In fact, it had been three months since they’d left Egypt. The people of Israel had already seen YHWH perform miracles since their departure (e.g., Exod14; 16; 17), one of which they celebrated (cf. Exod15:1-18).

As YHWH begins this dialog with Moses, He reminds Moses of His compassion towards them. Certainly the Israelites didn’t have that bad of a memory. It had only been three months, yet the need to remember His graciousness is clear (e.g., 19:1,4).

Respond:

What are four ways in which God has been faithful to you over the last three months?

How have you shown your appreciation to God for His recent faithfulness to you?
Or, why haven’t you and how can you?

With whom do you share (i.e., talk about) God’s faithfulness and blessings in your life?

Pray: Thank God that He is faithful, at all times. Ask for God’s help in being more faithful to the things to which He has called us. Pray for opportunities to share about God’s faithfulness towards you with others.

Tuesday: Offer & Acceptance

Read: Exodus 19:5-8a⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine;⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”⁷ So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. ⁸ All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.”

Reflect:

Notice that verse five is a conditional statement – “If you do ‘this’ **then** ‘this’ will happen”. Unfortunately, all too often it seems that we think the “**then**” should happen regardless of whether or not we fulfill the “**if**”.

To “keep” the covenant is to observe and guard it. Obedience is required, but so is an enforcement of that obedience. Once those two stipulations were agreed to, then they were God’s own personal property. The word used is *segullah*. It’s a privilege given, not a right to be claimed.

Remember, this was all based on what YHWH had already done (cf. Monday). The people of Israel gave the only logical response to this proposition by YHWH – “Yes”. They agreed to be YHWH’s special representatives on earth.

Respond:

From other contexts where *segullah* occurs (Deut7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ps135:4; Mal3:17), it’s quite clear to see we don’t claim it as a right; it’s graciously given to us...isn’t it?

In v7 “the elders” are called to Moses and in v8 “all the people” agree to follow YHWH. Either the elders spoke for the people, or the elders informed the people who responded for themselves (the text is ambiguous). In either scenario, how important are leaders (i.e., “elders”) in God’s Kingdom?

Read Titus 2:11-15 and 1 Peter 2:1-12. How can we do a better job of representing God to people in Emporia?

Pray: Thank God for His gracious offer to us; pray our lives reflect an acceptance of that offer. Pray for the leaders of NLCC. Pray for NLCC’s grocery distribution, coming on 7/13.

Wednesday: Requirements

Read: Exodus 20:1-3¹ And God spoke all these words, saying, ² “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ “You shall have no other gods before me.

Reflect:

This is the start of the Decalogue; a.k.a. The Ten Commandments. Today they’re quite possibly mostly known as controversial...in the sense of it being wrong/right to display them in public places. However, controversy is nothing new to the Decalogue.

The phrase “before me” (v3) means “in my presence”. This means that the Hebrews were forbidden to think in terms of a pantheon (a divine assembly of gods that ruled the earth), which was the view of Egypt (where they had been) and Canaan (where they were heading).

This was controversial back then, just as it is controversial today. Back then it seemed illogical (e.g., everyone knew that gods were regional and there were lots of them). Today it seems intolerant (e.g., you can’t claim everyone else is wrong). However, notice that the entire Decalogue starts with grace, and a physical act no other ‘so-called god’ had ever done (v2).

Respond:

Israel has already entered into the covenant with YHWH (Tuesday). He was now graciously letting them know how to be in a proper relationship with Him. Are you more apt to create your own terms for the covenant, or accept His (cf. Mt9:13)?

I’m sure you know this, but the three major world religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism) make absolute claims...that contradict each other. Therefore, it’s impossible for them to all be true. How can we communicate this in a loving way?

Egypt is referred to as a “house of slavery”. In other words, the Israelites were in bondage. Are you facing any bondage in your life?

Pray: Pray for a heart that truly allows no rivals to compete with God. Pray for the Youth Group which will meet tonight. Pray for “Debt Reduction Sunday,” coming on 7/13.

Thursday: Freed to Serve

Read: Exodus 7:16¹⁶ And you shall say to him, “The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, “Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness. But so far, you have not obeyed.” **Exodus 13:3**³ Then Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place.

Reflect:

The “him” of v16 is Pharaoh. The story is well known. God said “Let My people go” and Pharaoh said, “No”. We know he eventually said “Yes” after YHWH was done with him. The Exodus is an “archetype” story in the Bible; meaning it has a plot, characters, and images that recur throughout life.

Yet as well known as the story is, there is a hidden jewel that has so much meaning, so much untapped power for us today... It’s hidden because it’s found in the original language (Hebrew). It’s the difference between ‘*ebed*’ and ‘*abad*’; a play on words which is almost lost in English.

The Hebrews were “slaves” (‘*ebed*’) in Egypt – forced into manual labor. However, YHWH wanted them to be free to “serve/worship” (‘*abad*’) Him. What’s the power and beauty of this? God doesn’t require of us what He hasn’t (or won’t) enabled us to do. He freed them from bondage so they could serve (worship) Him. The only question is, will they?

Respond:

Can you see a story similar to the plot in Exodus (roughly speaking, God’s redeeming actions) in the New Testament? Who are the characters?

From what has God freed you in order to worship Him? Certainly you have a list.

If you are “in Christ” you are a new creation and have been set free from sin (cf. 2Cor5:17). How are you doing in living properly in light of this fact?

Pray: Continue to pray for workers for God’s Kingdom (Mt9:36-38). Pray for a heart that increasingly wants to serve/worship God. Pray for the unity and purity of NLCC.