

Through The Bible In One Year

The Adventure of Many Lifetimes

Unpublished Work, December 2005, David W. Shockey.

Daily Devotional Companion

Week 33

Day 225. Read Nehemiah 5.14-7.60; 1 Corinthians 8.1-13;
Psalm 33.1-11; and Proverbs 21.8-10.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Nehemiah: Nehemiah is a sterling example of a godly leader. He does not even avail himself to rights that are his because of his leadership post. He didn't eat the food allotted to the governor, nor did he lay a heavy burden on the people as previous governors had by exacting an additional tax above the food and wine allotted them. The assistants of the former governors lorded it over those they ruled. Nehemiah's whole goal was to govern in a way that built the people up and did not lay impossible burdens on them. A frequent refrain in his account of his leadership runs, 'Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people.' He governed the people with an eye to pleasing God and in a way that built the people up. Still, enemies arose to thwart him. They sent messengers with a subtle ploy: meet with us, so we can settle the differences between us. Four times they sent the message, and each time Nehemiah responded truthfully, 'I am carrying on a great project and cannot stop the work to meet with you.' The fifth message the enemies sent included a thinly-veiled threat of reports that Nehemiah and the returned exiles were planning to rebel and restore their own king in Jerusalem. Nehemiah denied this and asserted a counter claim: they were making it all up themselves. The enemies were trying to frighten them and stop the work on the protective wall of Jerusalem. One day all the intrigue came to a head, as someone warned Nehemiah of a plot to assassinate him. He urged Nehemiah to barricade himself in the temple for protection. It was really part of the plot to discredit and discourage him. 'Should a man like me run away or flee into the temple to save his life?' Nehemiah responded. Because of his leadership and example, the wall was completed in only fifty-two days! Now their enemies all around were afraid, because they knew such a work could only have been done with the help of God. Now the gates of Jerusalem were kept closed at night until the sun rose high in the sky. The city was safe, but the people who lived there were few. Nehemiah turned his attention to raising not just the walls but the population who lived in the city of peace. **Questions:** 1. What ploys does the evil one use to frighten or discourage me from doing the work God has given me personally to do? Why do I succumb to them so easily? 2. Who among faithful Christ-followers has been a shining example for me of courage and compassion like Nehemiah? What kind of example am I creating? 2. How have I contributed to my

community of faith living with courage and confidence? How have I intentionally helped my community of faith grow?

Corinthians: Knowledge puffs up; love builds up. Knowledge and learning have a subtle snare built right into their very nature. The more we learn and know, the greater we think we are because of our knowledge; as though somehow the truths and wisdom we gain originated with us or automatically make us better. In fact, those very truths we learn ought to humble us further, since they are beyond us and improve us from outside. In a sense, the more we (think we) know, the less we actually know. Knowledge puffs up only; literally, we tend to develop an overly inflated sense of ourselves and our abilities. Not so love. Paul is speaking not about emotional love—warm feelings—which so often we mistake for real love in our society. He is writing about the selfless, self-giving, serving love that Christ displayed. This love builds up both the one being served and the one serving. The one who loves this way, Paul says, ‘is known by God;’ for God recognizes immediately a kindred spirit between them. Paul gives a practical example of knowledge and love in conflict: eating food offered to gods of other religions. A Christ-follower knows immediately that he or she is free to eat or not eat food offered to gods of other religions, because those gods really do not even exist—there is only one God, the God of the Bible, the Holy Trinity. Externals like food, or ‘religious’ actions like eating or refraining from eating, cannot in themselves achieve the goal we desire: drawing near to God in a deeper, stronger relationship. Love does that. If someone who is weak in faith sees us eating food sacrificed to other gods (all meat in the marketplaces of Paul’s day was sacrificed to some god or goddess) and naturally assumes we are worshipping those other gods, they might be weakened in their own relationship with God. Our ‘knowledge’ and use of our freedom is hurting another believer. Out of love, Christ-followers will refrain from exercising their own freedom and rights, to build up others. Whenever we insist on our own rights, even when we are supported by what we know to be true, we sin against Christ—we go a way Christ did not and would not, for he never insisted on his own rights when it hurt another. **Questions:** 1. In what ways am I tempted to misuse my knowledge and freedom in ways that insist on my own rights and could damage others, for instance in my preference of worship music style, Bible version, prayer habits, etc? 2. How can I keep learning and growing in knowledge about God, the Bible, and my Christian faith, without becoming puffed up? 3. Why does serving specific people with specific demands and needs require the self-less love of Jesus Christ? Who am I called to serve? Who is most difficult for me to serve, and how does my serving them for Christ help me grow more Christ-like?

Prayer: God, it is a challenging thing to live for you in this world. It scares me, if I may be honest, as I know you want me to be. As soon as I do, enemies rise up to stop me. The greatest enemy of all is myself. Wonderings and warnings pop up instantly. Could God really want me to do this...risk that...right now? My mind comes up with very good reasons why I shouldn’t have to...couldn’t hope to...do what you ask. You brushed aside all those self-serving thoughts, Lord, to serve me...all the way to the cross and the tomb...and beyond. You still love and serve me now. Let me love as you have loved

me...specifically, practically, personally. Let me serve these people you have put me with where we work and live together, these specific ones with their specific demands and needs. Let me be a learner in your school of service, Lord. Then I will learn you, and you are who I want to know above and before and beyond all else. Amen.

Day 226. Read Nehemiah 7.61-9.21; 1 Corinthians 9.1-18; Psalm 33.12-22; and Proverbs 21.11-12.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Nehemiah: After the wall was built and the people had settled in their towns, they came together as one person. God was working a spiritual renewal among the people. Ezra, the scribe versed in God's Word, stood up in the square and read aloud from daybreak to noon. The people stood, listening attentively, and bowed in worship as they heard the Word read. The Levites instructed the people, so they could clearly understand it. The people wept as they heard the Word; but Nehemiah, the governor, and Ezra, the priest and scribe, bade them not weep or mourn, for this was a day sacred to the Lord, on which they should remember 'the joy of the Lord is your strength.' The leaders were moved to delve deeper into God's Word with the help of Ezra. They found written the story of the Feast of Booths commemorating Israel's living in tents, as they followed God faithfully from the slavery in Egypt through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The people went out, brought back branches, and built booths on the flat rooftops of their homes. The whole company of returned exiles who had been brought out of slavery and into the Promised Land, just like their ancestors celebrated the feast for seven days. Then they gathered, fasting and wearing sackcloth in mourning, to confess their sins and the wickedness of their ancestors in not following God. They heard the Word for a quarter of a day and then spent another quarter of the day in confessing and worshipping God. God was continuing his saving work in them, the same saving work he had accomplished for their ancestors.

Questions: 1. Why am I tempted to think of the Bible as about a time and about people of which I am not a part? Why do I not see that I am a part of God's saving work in the same way as the people of the Bible? 2. How would my thoughts, words, and actions be different if I remember every day that I am a part of God's saving work in the world today? 3. What can I do to better understand the Bible as my story? What do I need to confess to God in the way of unfaithfulness or failure to follow him or live like him?

Corinthians: What soldier serves at his own expense? A soldier is due by right the support of the people he serves. But Paul does not insist on his own rights. Rather than receive support, he works with his own hands. Others who do differently are not wrong. The worker deserves her pay. Paul will put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel. He even works with his own hand, so that greatest impediment to others coming to faith can be removed: the idea that the Gospel is shared to reap some personal benefit from the one who comes to faith. Paul is proud that he takes nothing from anyone, saying, 'I would

rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast.’ Paul cannot help himself. He must proclaim the good news of God’s love and new life available through faith in Jesus Christ. He had met the Lord and experienced firsthand his forgiving love, that lifts up even the enemy. Paul had persecuted and killed Christians before he proclaimed Christ. He is simply discharging the trust committed to him by the one who gave him new life. His reward is making it free of charge, not insisting on his own rights. He was given new life as a gift; now he gives it away as a gift. **Questions:** 1. How is my service and witness in some ways preferable to that of the ‘professionals’ who receive their livelihood by proclaiming the Good News (pastors, priests, paid ministers, etc.)? How are my inviting words and serving actions in a way more powerful and convincing since I am not paid? 2. In what ways can I make the gospel ‘free’ to others? How can I not insist on my own rights and interests, following the example of Paul? 3. Do I do my part in supporting those who have dedicated their lives fulltime, professionally, in God’s service? Do I show the proper respect and honor they deserve for their work? How could I do so better?

Prayer: I am free in you, O Christ. Totally free, just like you. So, just like you, let me give up my right to myself and my own interests. Teach me to serve as you serve. Teach me to love as you love. Take myself, my time, my talents, everything you have given me. They are yours, not mine. I am yours. And when I am yours totally, then and only then am I truly myself. Amen.

Day 227. Read Nehemiah 9.22-10.39; 1 Corinthians 9.19-10.13; Psalm 34.1-10; and Proverbs 21.13.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Nehemiah: There, before the assembly, the Levites rehearsed the history of God’s saving acts for Israel from the deliverance from slavery in Egypt until he brought them into the promised land, through their apostasy right down to the very day they stood publicly to renew their covenant with God. They recited how God gave them kingdoms and nations when their ancestors took possession of the Promised Land, but also they recited how they were disobedient and rebelled against God. They repeated how when their ancestors were oppressed; they cried out to God and God in his great compassion sent deliverers, but as soon as they had rest from their tormentors, they rebelled again. They confessed how faithful and just God had been by admonishing Israel through his prophets, some of whom they killed. “And now we are slaves today in the land you gave our ancestors. Because of our sins, the abundant harvest goes to foreign kings you have placed over us..” In view of all this, they stood publicly to make a binding agreement, put in writing and sealed, that they would separate themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God and obey carefully all its commands, regulations, and decrees. They promised to be faithful in giving: to maintain the house of the Lord, to provide wood for the sacrificial offerings, to bring the offering of first fruits of the crops and fruit trees every year, and

tithe all their crops to support the priests and Levites appointed to care for the temple and spiritual life of the people. The governor, the officials, the priests and Levites, and the leaders of the people all affixed their names to the declaration. The remnant of God's people put their lives on the line for their faithful God. **Questions:** 1. At what point or points in my life has the Spirit of God led me to a new level of devotion, perhaps after I cooled or even fell away? How did I mark my renewed commitment to God? Do I need to do so now? 2. If I were to write the story of God in my life, what would be the main points where God proved faithful, perhaps even when I was not? What would be the main points of my unfaithfulness to God, as well as the points where I responded 'yes' to God? 3. Do I live my faith publicly, so people around me know I believe in God? Who among the people I know needs to hear my personal story about God's faithfulness to me, personally, so they can come to a better understanding of God or even come to believe in God?

Corinthians: To the weak he became weak. To those under the law, he became as one under the law, though Christ had set him free from the Law. To those outside the Law, he became just like them. Rather than separating or isolating himself away from others, Paul became 'all things to all people, so that by all means I might save some.' Some will be saved. Some will live with God in blessedness now and forever. Not everyone will accept God's invitation and be saved, but some will. Paul could not imagine anyone being left behind. If someone should be, it must not be because no one cared enough to try to reach them. Paul's whole attention was focused on sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others, so they might live with God forever; and he himself might share in its blessings. To give it away is to receive more of the blessing back with interest. 'I do not run aimlessly,' he says, 'or box like someone beating the air.' He disciplines his whole being so that he might not be disqualified for the prize himself, after preaching the Good News to others. Paul models a focused, disciplined life with Christ, urging the Corinthian Christ-followers, 'If you think you are standing firm, be careful lest you fall.' God permits his faithful to be tempted, but always in a way they can bear, if they will rely on him. Whenever the temptation comes, look for the way out the Lord provides; for he is faithful. **Questions:** 1. How do I need to adjust my serving and sharing my faith to those around me, so I can best help them to know and believe in Jesus Christ? Who is weak or suffering that I need to be especially compassionate with? 2. Do I have the same heart and fire for reaching the lost as Paul did? How can I best fan the flame of such love for the lost best? 3. In what areas of my life, service, and witness for God do I need to focus and discipline myself better, so I am more productive for God? What is my next step in doing so?

Prayer: God, I pour out my days in seconds and minutes squandered and wasted, with little to show for them. The saddest part is the loss is not just mine, but yours as well. Oh, I know you are perfect and complete in every way; and there is no way I can add to your perfection. But you love, which means you open yourself to loss whenever we don't love in response. You suffer whenever anyone is lost, the unutterable pain of longing love. God, I don't have the same love. Through your love teach me to love the lost, just as you do. Give me the longing, loving pain for those who are lost that was in

your servant, Paul. If it hadn't been for his heart for the lost, I would most likely be lost myself. Teach me to be like your Son and like Paul who were all things to all people that I too might somehow be your instrument to save some. Amen.

Day 228. Read Nehemiah 11.1-12.26; 1 Corinthians 10.14-11.2; Psalm 34.11-22; and Proverbs 21.14-16.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Nehemiah: The city of peace, surrounded again by its protective wall, stands half-empty. What will help to fill it until it teems with people again? A special collection: A tithe, not of produce of the land, but of people! The leaders set an example by settling in Jerusalem themselves, but the city is still empty. The people decide on a very unique lottery: they cast lots to bring one out of every ten people to live in Jerusalem. They commend all who volunteered to live in Jerusalem. And many did. The names and numbers were carefully recorded...of the men at least. Sadly, the women and children remain nameless; though they are known to God forever. Special care was taken to preserve the names of the family heads of the priests and Levites. The temple is again looming large as the center of the community life and work. They put God at the center of their lives. **Questions:** 1. Because there is always room for more in God's community of peace (just as there was room in reconstructed Jerusalem), whom among my family members, friends, fellow workers, neighbors and others I know should I invite to be part of God's community? What is my first step toward inviting them? 2. How does it affect my thoughts, word, and actions to know that my name is recorded in God's book of life, since God included me in his community of the saved? How is my life different because of what God has done for me? 3. To what extent is God the center of my life, as the temple was the center of the newly-reconstructed Jerusalem? Does the centrality of God show in my thoughts, words and actions? How? How could God be more central in my life?

Corinthians: In Israel, to eat the sacrifice meant to participate in the altar. It meant to truly share in the death and forgiveness that the altar and sacrifice reflected. Just so is the Lord's Supper a participation. More than a mere memorial, it is a real sharing in the reality the meal signifies. Drinking the cup of wine is sharing the blood of Christ. The bread broken is a participation in the body of Christ, broken on the cross for sin. All who eat the one loaf of bread are, in reality, one body because they truly partake of the One Body, in whom they are united. In Paul's day all meat available in the marketplaces had been sacrificed to some god or goddess. To eat it meant to partake in the worship of the god or goddess to whom the meat had been sacrificed. In Christian freedom, believers might, with a good conscience, eat that meat since the mature Christ-follower knew there was no other God than the Trinity. The other 'gods' were no gods, really, but 'demons.' Paul says we cannot share the cup of the Lord and also the cup of demons, even though it is permissible. All things are permissible, but not all things are profitable. The believer

does everything for the glory of God...and the good of people. If an unbeliever invites you out to eat, take him up on it. But if someone makes a point of publicly emphasizing the celebration is for a different 'god,' then decline. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether they be believers in others gods, or believers in God. Show forth the love and truth of Christ in all things. **Questions:** 1. How does believing that eating the bread and wine of communion is truly participating in the reality of Christ's body and blood make communion more meaningful to me? 2. How do I reflect the unity I have with all my sisters and brothers in Christ who share the bread and are, therefore, one body? What can I do to better demonstrate the unity that is ours as a gift through the Lord's Supper? 3. How can I keep the proper balance and proclaim the proper message in my relationships with non-believers so I am not overbearing or inconsiderate and, yet, witness faithfully for Jesus Christ to them? Who most needs my service and witness for Christ right now? Who is most ready to receive it?

Prayer: In your holy supper, you live in me; and I live in you. You make me one with you in this spiritual supper, even as you make one all who share in it. God, so often I am forgetful and completely complacent. I ought rather to be transformed in every bit of my being, even as you nourish every bit of my being with your limitless love. God, as I receive the bread, broken, and the wine, outpoured, let me be like a piece of your Son's body, broken and dispersed for the life of the world. Let me be like his blood outpoured for the life of the world. Let me be a sacramental presence for Christ to everyone I know. May they see not me, but him who loves them so much as to give his body, broken, and his blood, poured out for them. Amen.

Day 229. Read Nehemiah 12.27-13.31; 1 Corinthians 11.3-16; Psalm 35.1-16; and Proverbs 21.17-18.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Nehemiah: The protective wall was complete. Spiritually, the people had sought the protection of God by fashioning a new covenant and promising to follow God. The new relationship was literally 'signed, sealed and delivered' publicly before all the people. They sought God as their security. Now the day to dedicate the physical, protective wall had come. Nehemiah, governor, arranged a deeply symbolic celebration. All the leaders of Judah were assembled atop the wall. Two large choirs with musicians were appointed to give thanks to God in song. The choirs led the way as the leaders of Judah, divided into two groups, processed with them in opposite directions, along the top of the wall. After parading around the wall, praising God all the while, the two choirs took their places in the temple to give thanks. Women and children joined in as well. The sound of Jerusalem, rejoicing, could be heard far away. The Book of Moses was read in the hearing of the

people, particularly the part which said no person from Ammon or Moab should ever be admitted to the assembly of God's people; so the people excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent, going beyond the letter of God's law to make sure they were honoring it. One of the foreigners, Tobiah, who had tried to weaken or stop the work on the wall, had been given a large room in the temple area because of his close connections with the priest in charge. Zealous for following God's Law to the letter, Nehemiah personally threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room and ordered that the rooms be purified. Fearful, lest they repeat the rebellion of their ancestors, Nehemiah rebuked the people for selling merchandise on the Sabbath and ordered the gates of the city not to be closed each week until the Sabbath was over. Nehemiah railed at the men who had married foreign women, fearing the same, spiritual downfall that had come upon Solomon who was led astray to worship other gods by his foreign wives. One of them, the grandson of the High Priest, had married the daughter of the arch enemy, Sanballat. Nehemiah drove him away. The fear of falling into disobedience drove Nehemiah to extreme precautions. Again and again Nehemiah pleads with God in prayer, "Remember me for this, O my God and show mercy to me according to your great love." **Questions:** 1. In my following of God, am I motivated more by fear of the consequences should I disobey than by a loving desire to honor and please God? Do I act motivated by love or fear? How does that color my actions? 2. How can I be faithful to God in a society that does not honor God? What actions and customs do I need to forgo to be faithful to God? 3. How can I live and work among people who don't know or honor God without compromising my faith in God or separating from the very people who could come to know God through my words and actions?

Corinthians: Turning to the respective roles of men and women in the church, Paul shares the astounding belief that both women and men are expected to pray and even prophesy in the gathered community of faith but always in ways that honor God, without drawing the attention to themselves. For Paul, in keeping with the custom of the synagogue of his day and his Pharisee upbringing, this meant with uncovered head if you were male and covered head if you were female. Yet, for all who are in the Lord, the deeper reality is that both male and female are interdependent on one another. The woman is not independent of the man nor the man independent of the woman; for as woman was created from man, every man is born of woman. All time-bound cultural and societal differences aside, in God's wonderful plan of complementarity and interdependence, each needs the other; and both are equally essential, not only in life, in general, but in God's community of the redeemed as well. **Questions:** 1. Am I careful to honor and respect the service of the opposite sex in my community of faith? 2. Do I inappropriately denigrate or undermine the service of the opposite sex in God's work in any way? Is there anyone of the opposite sex in the community of faith I need to ask forgiveness from or reconcile with? 3. In my own service for God, am I careful to serve in ways that honor and please God, working together with others and not just seeking my own recognition or reward?

Prayer: God, I pray that in all my words and actions within the community of faith to which you have called me, I will always honor you and lift you up. Take away the contentious spirit within me that would divide with others or denigrate the good contributions of others. May everything I say and do bring the focus on your love for people, not my abilities or actions. May I always be a good partner to my sisters and brothers in Christ, as together we lift up witness and service to others for you. May my working and cooperating in love with my sisters and brothers in Christ be part of that witness that draws people to you. Amen.

Day 230. Read Esther 1.1-3.15; 1 Corinthians 11.17-34; Psalm 35.17-28; and Proverbs 21.19-20.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Esther: The self-centered person knows no boundaries, really. Overly impressed with the power and magnificence of his realm, in a paroxysm of pride, the foreign king, Xerxes, decided to display the wealth and splendor of his kingdom for a solid six months. To climax this prideful ostentation, he gave a great banquet lasting seven days. On the final day, having drunk too much, he summoned his beautiful queen, Vashti, to be the crown jewel of the display. It was a fateful mistake. She refused to be used. His unbounded pride wounded in front of his guests, he seethed with anger. Consulting with his counselors about how to deal with a wayward queen, they warned him that all manner of disrespect and discord would come if an example were not made. Her position as queen consort was to be given to another. Xerxes initiated a sort of beauty pageant search for a queen; and of all the beautiful women in the realm, Esther was chosen. At her uncle Mordecai's request, she kept secret the fact that she was descended from the tribe of Benjamin, of the people of Israel. Esther won the favor of everyone who met her, not only because of her beauty, but especially because of her character. The king set the royal crown on her head and made her queen, instead of Vashti. Mordecai spared the king from assassination when he learned of the plan of two disgruntled officials; but, while the deed was recorded in the records of the kingdom, it went unrewarded. Perhaps pride was contagious in the court of the king; for another official, Haman, was elevated to a higher honor than all the other nobles. Everyone else knelt down obsequiously, except Mordecai - the Israelite who would not because of his faith. Seething with anger, himself, because of the slight he had suffered, Haman decided to revenge himself not on the man who he thought had wronged him but on his whole race. He persuaded Xerxes—for a handsome price - to issue an edict against the exiles from Israel whom he claimed slanderously followed customs different from all other people, and which meant they wouldn't follow the king's laws. Trusting too much, the king told him to do with the people as he pleased. The date for their destruction was set, and fast couriers were sent throughout the kingdom. The death of God's chosen people was appointed. Could anything intervene? **Questions:**

1. When have I allowed my own pride to get in the way of relationships with other people? Have I allowed the blessings God has given me in life to turn my head or warp my actions?
2. Have I ever stood tall like Vashti and refused to be used by others?
3. When my community of faith is under duress or in need, how do I respond? Do I pitch in to help actively or take a sidelines seat?

Corinthians: Divisions show most when they should show least. Paul takes the Corinthian Christ-followers to task for the way they celebrate the Lord's Supper...or don't celebrate it. The situation has so deteriorated that he says that when they come together it really isn't the Lord's Supper, the way they celebrate it. That is the problem: they don't come together. The people who come first go ahead and eat and drink without waiting for the others. Quite probably this meant the well-to-do, those who have the luxury to come early, while the others who worked—or slaved—for them came last. Some got nothing; for the bread and wine were gone. Paul chastises them strongly. 'Don't you have homes to eat and drink in?' he asks. This is not a meal meant to satisfy the body—that is to be done at home—but this is for the spirit. Do you really want to despise the church of God by humiliating the poor who have nothing...and receive nothing in the supper, as they celebrate it? Jesus said on the night in which he was betrayed, 'This is my body...This cup is the new covenant in my blood...Do this whenever you (plural!) drink it in remembrance of me!' Whoever eats and drinks without discerning the body—which means not only believing it is the true body of Christ we receive but also, and especially, that all who partake of the bread and wine are one body together in Christ—is guilty of profaning the body of Christ! When you come together, wait for each other. To discern the body is to care for others, as we care for ourselves. It is to love others, as Christ has loved us.

Questions: 1. When and how have I been guilty of not 'discerning the body,' that is, of not caring for others in the community of faith as Christ would? 2. When I receive the Lord's Supper, do I remember with gratitude and thanks the communal aspect, that God is making all of us one in his Son's body? Do I really believe that and demonstrate this spiritual reality in my actions?

Prayer: Thank you, God, for making me part of your community of faith. I am no longer isolated and alone. I am no more an orphan; for with you as my Father, I have a family of many sisters and brothers. Thank you for the holy meal that makes us one in the body and blood of your Son. He died on the cross alone - his body, broken, and blood, outpoured - so we might become his body alive and at work in the world. He gave us this holy meal that we might be nourished by his true body and blood, drawing our life from him. Let me always live realizing the body, living his care and love for all my brothers and sisters. Amen.

Day 231. Read Esther 4.1-7.10; 1 Corinthians 12.1-26;
Psalm 36.1-12; and Proverbs 21.21-22.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Esther: Why her? Why now? Her secret was safe, after all. No one knows she was an exile of Judah, descended from Israel. She could play it safe from her position of prestige and privilege in the palace. She was the king's favorite after all. Just keep quiet. That would be enough to spare her. Mordecai calls her to another course: Risk everything on one roll of the dice! Go to the king personally and plead with him for the life of your people. To approach the king on one's own without his command could mean death, especially with such a proud monarch as he had proved himself to be. One 'uppity' woman had already upset him so much he had banished her, despite her beauty and spirit. 'Don't think because you are in the king's house you will escape,' Mordecai warned her. 'If you remain silent, deliverance will come from another place - since God is faithful to deliver his people. But maybe God has put you here in this strategic position—perhaps you have been chosen exactly for this time and this place—to be God's instrument to deliver your people.' She asks him to ask all the people of the faith community to fast and pray with her and for her for three days. Then she will go to the king. 'If I perish, I perish,' she says simply. Instead of ordering her execution, the king holds out his royal scepter to her in approval. With his customary grandiosity the king promised to grant her request for anything, up to half his kingdom. Instead, she invites him and Haman to a banquet, where she will make her request known. That night the king could not sleep. Coincidence...or providence? He asks the royal records be read to him to help him sleep, and the account of Mordecai's saving his life is read. The great king is smitten with ingratitude when he realizes he hasn't honored or rewarded the man who saved his life. In an amazing twist, Haman himself is selected to be the one to give the honor and reward...to his enemy, Mordecai. At the banquet, Queen Esther pleads for the life of her people and herself against the enemy who has decreed their destruction. In a fit of anger the king demands to know who it is, only to learn it is his trusted counselor, Haman. In desperation, Haman pleads with Esther for his life, daring even to fall on her couch. The king catches him in this compromising situation and seals his fate. Haman is hung on the very gallows he designed for Mordecai. Deliverance has come. For this time and this place Esther had been appointed. In faithfulness she rose to the challenge. **Questions:** 1. Believing God has appointed me for this time and this place in his great plan, what part do I believe I am called to play for God? 2. Believing I am appointed for this time and place to be God's instrument of deliverance for others, whom am I called to serve; and to whom am I called witness for God? 3. Who among the people I know creates obstacles for me to my faith and life for God like Haman? How can I show compassion for them, as I try to carry out my mission for God?

Corinthians: Gifted! Each and every person who believes in Jesus Christ is gifted. No one can believe and confess Jesus as Lord without having the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit gives gifts to each believer, as the Spirit decides. Not only that, the whole Trinity is involved in the whole life of every believer—the Spirit through the spiritual gifts, the Lord Jesus through the office he gives (appointed as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints), and the Father in the various works they do by which the Father maintains creation. To each person is given a specific realization or manifestation

of the Spirit for the common good, just as the Spirit allots. It is all right to desire and ask for the higher gifts but never to be discontented with the gifts the Spirit has given by his own prerogative. The whole body of Christ together has all the gifts required to complete the work of God. All believers need one another to complete the body. Everyone is important to the proper functioning of the body. For anyone to refuse to recognize and use their gifts, or allow others to use their gifts in God honoring service, is to render the body incapacitated from functioning as it should. As in a body, often the most important gifts are the ones which receive the least fanfare or attention. Just as in a physical body, in the community of Christ, his body alive and at work in the world, if one member suffers, all suffer together. **Questions:** 1. How does it change my attitude and actions to know I have been personally and intentionally given specific, spiritual gifts by God the Holy Spirit? 2. What are my spiritual gifts? How can I accurately discern and discover what they are? What mature believer can help me discern them? 3. Do I use my spiritual gifts together with other believers in my faith community so that our mission is accomplished better? Do I encourage and strengthen others in using their spiritual gifts?

Prayer: Holy Spirit, you shower your gifts upon your people. Thank you for gifting me. The world tells me I am not important, that my life is meaningless, a mere drop in the bucket. You tell me I am so precious to you that you thought in eternity what gifts to give me, so I might be the unique person I am and might accomplish the unique purpose you give me in your plan to redeem this dying world. Help me discover, develop, and deploy the gifts you have given me in concert with my sisters and brothers in Christ; so that together we may lift up your name and share the new life you alone can give, through faith in Jesus Christ. Let me encourage and support my gifted brothers and sisters in their ministry for you, too, so they may reach the fullness of life you intend for us all together. So many people in the world struggle under the burden of meaninglessness and purposelessness. Use me and the gifts you've given me to share with everyone I know or meet the new Christ-life you give; for it, too, is your gift to all who believe. Amen.

Through The Bible In One Year: Week 33

Sunday Worship Lessons

First Lesson (Old Testament): Esther 4.7-16

Psalm: 33.1-11

Second (New Testament) Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12.4-13

Theme: You Are Gifted ~ Personally and On Purpose

Sunday Scripture Selection and Theme Explanation, Week 33:

It was not by accident or chance that Esther was elevated to be queen consort to arguably the most powerful king in the world, Xerxes. Xerxes was misled by a trusted counselor bearing a grudge to destroy the remnant of Israel in captivity throughout the Babylonian empire. Her ancestry had been kept secret and she could well have quietly sat isolated on the sidelines in safety; but urged by the uncle who raised this orphaned, young woman, she chose instead to risk all to save her people. She consented to be God's instrument to deliver the people from destruction, using her God-given intelligence, wisdom, and position. Paul, in the New Testament lesson, proclaimed a radical, even unheard of (at least, from the world) message to the Christ-followers at Corinth: every believer is gifted by the Holy Spirit, intentionally, with powers and purpose for the common good, so the work of God can be carried forth to completion, in concert with the gifts and actions of other believers. Each person is important to God. Each person is uniquely valued by God and given gifts specially selected for them. Together, the community of believers forms the mystical body of Christ, alive and at work in the world. Animated and directed by the Spirit himself, the body works together to minister and witness to the world God loves so dearly. By God's gracious love we are given the gift of one another and true community. All the humanly-created demarcations, like slave or free, crumble as they are caught up in God's higher unity: all are baptized by one Spirit in the one body and given the one Spirit to drink.