

Luke 13:10-35: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 13 verses 10 to 35. Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath, and behold there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for 18 years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, Woman, you are freed from your disability. And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, There are six days in which work ought to be done.

Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day. Then the Lord answered him, You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for 18 years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day? As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.

He said therefore, What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches. And again he said, To what shall I compare the kingdom of God?

It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened. He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. And someone said to him, Lord, will those who are saved be few? And he said to them, Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter, and will not be able.

When once the master of the house has risen, and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, open to us, then he will answer you, I do not know where you come from. Then you will begin to say, We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.

[2 : 0 3] But he will say, I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God.

And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last. At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you. And he said to them, Go and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow, and the day following. For it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often would I have gathered your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing. Behold, your house is forsaken, and I tell you, you will not see me until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Our section of Luke chapter 13 begins with a healing on the Sabbath. Jesus seems to make a point of healing upon the Sabbath. He brings in the true Sabbath rest of the kingdom to Israel.

Most typically, people have to come to Jesus to be healed, often even persisting for some time. However, Jesus sees this woman, has compassion on her, calls her over, and heals her. Perhaps part of the point of this is intentionally and purposefully to heal on the Sabbath. Her situation doesn't seem to be urgent. She has been that way for 18 years. Note the earlier reference to the number 18 in verse 4.

[3 : 57] And the synagogue leader is appalled by this. He doesn't address Jesus, but addresses the crowd, directly opposing Jesus' authority to them. The Sabbath healing here should probably be read alongside the Sabbath healing of chapter 14 verses 1 to 6. They have a lot in common. In that other account we read, One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. And he said to them, Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out? And they could not reply to these things. In both of these cases there's a healing on the Sabbath. And in both cases Jesus uses an illustration of showing compassion to an ox or a donkey. Why reference the ox or the donkey?

Perhaps because the ox and the donkey are explicitly mentioned in the Sabbath commandment in Deuteronomy chapter 5 verses 12 to 15. Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.

Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Jesus' teaching stresses that the Sabbath is not just about refraining from work, but about giving rest to those in your care. Healing on the Sabbath is most fitting. And if the ox and the donkey are included in the Sabbath commandment, and you would untie your ox or donkey to give them water, why would you not untie or release a daughter of Abraham who has been held captive by Satan for 18 years? If you would give relief to your animals any day of the week, but are especially bound to do so on the Sabbath, how much more is it the case for the woman that Jesus healed? Jesus gives now two twin parables. The parable of the mustard seed is one in which Jesus is working with Old Testament background, most specifically the parable of Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 17. In verses 22 to 24 we see part of that that can parallel with this. Thus says the Lord God, I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs, a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar, and under it will dwell every kind of bird. In the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest, and all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord, I have spoken, and I will do it. What Jesus says about the mustard seed defies all botanical reality, and this is because it is not an illustration taken from nature, rather it is playing off against the image of the cedar.

We are to recognise that what is happening with the mustard seed is not natural. The jarring contrast between reality and the parable is part of the point. The image of the tree in which birds take refuge is found elsewhere in scripture, and is used of great kingdoms, empires, and their rulers.

[7 : 44] Daniel chapter 4 verses 10 to 12 The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these. I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful, and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. Against all appearances, it is going to be the mustard seed of Israel, the small nation, that outgrows the great trees of the nations.

There is a similar image of surprising growth in Daniel chapter 2 verse 35. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors, and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth. God sowed the mustard seed in his field, and it will become the greatest tree of all.

The parable of the leaven that follows, leaven hidden in three measures of flour, is one that corresponds to this in certain respects. Israel is hidden among the nations, causing the nations gradually to rise up. Perhaps we could connect the three measures of flour with the three sons of Noah. I don't know. It's not a dramatic, but it's a gradual process, and it's not glorious. Indeed, it uses something that might be seen as negative or unclean.

Leaven often has negative symbolism attached to it. The mustard seed and the leaven are twin parables. They can more readily be understood when related to each other. They're not identical twins.

They represent different aspects of Israel's ministry in relationship to the nations. Small in both cases, but making an outsized effect. And hiddenness is an important theme.

[9 : 39] They have insignificant and inglorious origins, but a great purpose and destiny. One of the parables involves a man sowing seed, and its twin involves a woman hiding leaven.

There's a sort of marriage here. Both involve an intentional action towards a goal with significant results, but imperceptible processes. As Jesus gradually works his way towards Jerusalem, someone asks him the question whether those who are saved will be few. Jesus responds with the illustration of a narrow door. This is similar to Matthew chapter 7 verses 13 to 14.

Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide, and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. The gate is narrow, and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

However, there isn't the same contrastive framing of the point here. It's not the contrast between the wide gate and the narrow gate. And as we'll see, Jesus has a more subtle point to make here in his response to the question.

The door will only be opened for a limited period of time, and many who will want to enter will not be able to do so. The verse that Jesus quotes about those being told to go away comes from Psalm 6 verse 8.

[10 : 53] Depart from me, all you workers of evil. Jesus' implication that only few will find the door need not be read as a timeless statement that in each and every age only a few people will be saved. It's given into a specific context, and although it does have more general application, we really must remember the context into which it is first spoken.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are going to be in the kingdom at the messianic feast with Gentiles, while numerous sons of the kingdom find themselves outside. This imagery of an eschatological feast comes from the Old Testament itself.

In Isaiah chapter 25 verses 6 to 9, On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined, and he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.

He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth. For the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Behold, this is our God. We have waited for him that he might save us.

This is the Lord. We have waited for him. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. Many are coming from the east and the west, the north and the south. There is going to be a great turning of tables.

[12 : 18] And this all presents an answer to the question that might have surprised the questioner. The questioner was most likely thinking of the size of the remnant of Israel. But Jesus' answer, while half suggesting that the remnant of Israel might indeed be few, speaks of many people coming from the four corners of the world to join Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the prophets in the eschatological banquet.

The numbers at the feast won't be small, but the identity of the honoured guests might be surprising. Jesus is moving towards Jerusalem. However, he still seems to be in the territory of Herod Antipas.

There are three contrasting desires within this section. Herod's desire to kill Jesus, Jesus' desire to gather Jerusalem together, and Jerusalem's desire to resist this. Jesus is warned by some Pharisees, and again we should remember that the Pharisees are not always bad guys in the Gospels and Acts.

They fear he is going to get caught in a trap, and want him to travel away from the region, so that he will not be destroyed by Herod. Herod is a genuine threat. He has already killed John the Baptist, and he's speculated that Jesus might be John the Baptist raised from the dead.

He's described like a fox by Jesus. He's a pest. He's a minor player. In Judges 15 verses 4 following, Samson seems to associate the Philistines with foxes.

[13 : 36] Jesus is indeed going to leave Herod's region of Galilee, but not to save his life, rather in order to die in Jerusalem, being killed in the chief city, which stands for the entire nation.

In verses 32 to 33, Jesus describes his work in a three-day pattern, corresponding to patterns of death and resurrection. He will finish his course on the third day.

Jesus is a new Jeremiah. He declares judgment upon the house, and then laments over Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the site where the prophet's blood must be gathered, the house, the temple, and by extension the whole nation is to be left desolate.

Jesus wants to gather Israel under his wings. This is a biblical image of God's protection and the provision of refuge for his people. The fact that Jesus compares himself to a hen immediately after speaking of Herod as a fox may not be a coincidence.

A question to consider. How might Jesus' Sabbath practice inform our understanding of the purpose of the law more generally?