

Lesson Nine

Review from Previous Lesson: We learned that one of the ways we can assure that we are connected with the purposes of God is to rely upon the indices that link us to Him: the Holy Spirit, revelation, faith, and the manipulation of symbols (specifically, our use of our language and our actions to correctly symbolize through words and deeds what God says.)

The Problem: We have seen that when we depend upon revelation and not upon what we have called “information,” we can more accurately assess situations and represent them in the way that God wants us to. In addition, the Bible promises us guidance when we rely upon Him. However, there’s a problem. Many Christians observe that, while they see great promises in the Bible, many times what they see in their own lives doesn’t look very “blessed.” To put it another way: what God says doesn’t always match up with what we see Him doing in our lives.

Why the problem persists in churches: Christians believe that God can and does intervene in situations of illness, natural disasters, and other situations. However, we act as if we believe that that is the exception, not the rule; and we apparently do not have the Scriptural tools to think and talk about this.

Underlying Assumptions As Expressed in Everyday Language:

1. I’m afraid to speak too unequivocally about the promises of God because I see they are not automatically fulfilled in all cases.
2. I fear being disappointed, or disappointing others, when referring to the blessings that God assures us He will give. What if He doesn’t come through?
3. I wouldn’t dare tell someone that God will heal them, or help them out of a bad situation. In my experience, sometimes God just lets people stay in bad situations.
4. I have questions about God. I love Him and want to serve Him, but don’t always see His actions in my own life or that of others who are faithful to Him.
5. I’m pretty sure the disparity I see between what God promises, and what He’s doing, isn’t because of my personal sin. But if not because of that, why am I not receiving some of the promised blessings?

Background Reading Before Teaching This Lesson: The text under consideration in this lesson is Psalm 105. Teachers must read the psalm repeatedly during the week before the lesson. You must also be familiar with the life of Joseph as depicted in the book of Genesis.

This is a lesson that requires study and leadership. You must feel confident and comfortable with the answers you’ve formulated in response to the discussion questions before you cover them in class.

The point is to be able to see in this psalm three main issues.

- *First*, God’s words and His actions are congruent: When He speaks or commands, reality takes the shape that He says.
- *Secondly*, we must deal with the fact that we often find ourselves in situations in which His words apparently have *not* changed reality.
- *Thirdly*, and most important, we will explore ways that God uses His word to actually test us.

We will use generalizations from this psalm to clarify some of these issues. This is not a lesson with glib answers. There are no one-size-fits-all explanations of how and why God does what He does. However, you as a teacher are responsible for pointing students to the impeccable and kind character of a God who often acts in ways we will not understand until we get to heaven. (For future reference: Dr. Strawn is preparing an extensive study of this psalm that will be of great benefit in understanding some of the issues raised here.)

It may be that you will need two weeks to cover this material, depending on your class time and the discussion involved. If that is the case, assign the students a daily reading of Psalm 105 during the week.

The Lesson

- 1) Read Psalm 105 aloud.
- 2) Look at verses 1-11. We can say that from reading this psalm, God wants us to understand that there is a congruency between His words and His actions: He makes promises, covenants and oaths, and fulfills them. We might even think of them as “words/actions.”
- 3) We could also generalize from verse 8 that God’s acknowledgment of those promises bridges the past, present and future.
- 4) Here are some other aspects of God’s words/actions as depicted in Psalm 105: (this is by no means an exhaustive list.)
 - His words/actions are preventative and act as contraventions: verses 12-15
 - They are protective: verses 14-15
 - They are directional (caused the Israelites to act in a certain way and go to Egypt): verse 16
 - They are preclusive (of worse things): verse 17
 - They are probative (they test people): verse 18-19
 - They are productive in a physical way: verse 24
 - They are confrontational and divisive in some cases: verse 25
 - They compel: verse 26
 - They control the basic elements of life (water, light): verses 28, 29
 - They are judicial (verse 28)

- They are responsive (to the actions of humans): verse 28
- They are powerfully invasive: verses 30-31
- They control meteorology (and, by extension, all of physical science): verse 32
- They can control/destroy economies: verses 33-35, 37
- They control and can dispose of our most personal assets: verse 36
- They enable the weak: verse 35
- They control human psychologies: verse 38
- They are by nature providential, thoughtful and kind: verse 39
- They can provide extraordinary things for even ordinary needs: verse 40
- They demonstrate God's delight in demonstrating the unexpected, the antithetical, and the contradictory (more about this in Lesson 10): verses 40- 41.

5) We want to give particular attention to the story of Joseph in verses 16-22. Joseph had been given very specific and powerful prophecies about his future in dreams when he was a young boy (Genesis 37:1-11.) For much of Joseph's life, what the Lord had told him about his future did not match up with his experience. Some versions of the Bible (New American Standard, for instance) state that God's words were testing him. He is a powerful example of someone living most of his life with a great disparity between the words of God and the actions that fulfilled those words. In addition, we can generalize about two types of situations that he exemplifies: the situation of being confined or unable to act, and the situation of being injured by the actions of others.

6) In the case of Joseph and some others mentioned in this psalm, the words of God and His actions in fulfilling those words was delayed or in some cases even absent in an earthly, temporal sense. Look at Hebrews 11:32-40 for another depiction of this type of condition.

7) There is also a startling generalization to be derived from verse 38. The Egyptians *felt* better when the Israelites left. But their feelings misinformed them – when the Israelites left Egypt, so did the presence of the Lord in the cloud and the pillar. The only real hope for Egypt was out of their reach.

8) Thus we can see that our feelings about a situation, as well as the situation's own very facts, often do not tell us the truth about what is going on. Here is the most important generalization of all: if we are to be faithful, we must allow the words of God to define reality. Even when they do not seem to be fulfilled in our own experience (the words of God don't match the actions of God), even when we do not *feel* their influence over situations and people.

9) If we look at Biblical examples of the way that faith or lack of it affected circumstances, is it possible to conclude that God is testing us by His Word, waiting to let us see the connection between our faith in His version of reality and

the actions He does to reward us for that realization? (Or, as Dr. Strawn puts it, “If you do not replace human lived experience with the Word of God, you won’t be able to see the power of God.”)

Questions for Discussion with Class

- 1) Read verses 1-11 and point out examples of congruency between God’s words and His actions. What aspect(s) of the character of God is He trying to get us to see in these verses?
- 2) From verses 1-11, how are *we* to “manipulate symbols” through language about God? How could it be said from these verses that when our language expresses glory to Him, that we are activating or making more real to ourselves and others His promises?
- 3) The period of time covered by verse 23 is 400 years. How would the Israelites of those centuries have seen the relationship of God’s words to His actions?
- 4) Did you see any examples of the word/action relationship in this psalm that was not covered in the lesson material?
- 5) What does verse 38 tell you about the relative importance you should assign to your feelings about a situation? What part do emotions play in what we see of the Israelites in verses 10-39?
- 6) How does Hebrews 11:13-16 link the words of God to actions beyond this lifetime?
- 7) What does 2 Chronicles 15:1-8 tell you about the temporal relationship of God’s words to His actions?
- 8) Read 2 Corinthians 12:10. What did the words of God change in Paul’s life?
- 9) What points of agreement do you see between Psalm 105 and Isaiah 55:8-11?

“Yeah, but..... “

Okay, if God delights in contradictions, are they part of building our faith? How should we deal with them? Lesson 10 will talk about the phases of faith.