

"Enemies of the Cross" – Christ's crucifixion was offensive to many, including those who wanted to emphasise observant Judaism, or retain worldly, immoral values.

19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

"Destiny is destruction" – eternal judgment. They are self-centred and focused on Jewish dietary laws and circumcision, set on present time and place rather than God's order and eternal purpose.

20-21 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they

IN PRACTICE Paul has founded churches and instructed them to live for God, following his apostolic example. It's an example we know from other places in the NT that is laced with considerable danger and personal cost. In his absence, the churches become prey to unauthorised and unspiritual self-appointed leaders who do great damage to the gospel and to people, as Paul recounts with tears.

But we can tell who is true, who has their citizenship established in heaven, and who does not. As Jesus said several times, "A tree is recognised by its fruit." There will always be people bearing 'bad apples' but we don't have to buy their fruit. Choose what is good and proven and Christlike.

QUESTION *Not everyone who makes their opinions known is saying what is true and upbuilding. How do we work out who to listen to – and how to say 'no' to others?*

PRAYER Lord God, You are light without any darkness, love without any condition, truth without any spin. Help us to believe You, and in taking You at Your word, to be a model to encourage others. To the honour and glory of Jesus,

will be like his glorious body.

"Citizenship... in heaven" – Philippi was a Roman colony where many had earned Roman citizenship and privileges through military service. For Christians the far greater, and unearned, citizenship is belonging to heaven.

• **For further study:** believers are exhorted to think in a heaven-centred, rather than world-centred, way – Colossians 3:1-2; 1 Cor. 15:19; 1 Peter 2:11; and of Christ's return, 1 Cor. 1:7; Titus 2:13.

4:1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

"Stand firm in the Lord" – in present difficulties and conflicts (detailed in verses that follow), hold on firmly to the Lord and His values.

The Living Word

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The Bible readings for Sunday, March 17, 2019 with commentary notes

Revised Common Lectionary readings for **March 17** in Bible order

Prepare for Sunday by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on Sunday's teaching

Theme: **Believing and living the promises of God**

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 – God establishes His covenant with Abram

Luke 13:31-35 – Jesus promises His continuing ministry

Philippians 3:17-4:1 – Paul promises heaven's honour for keeping faith

Also: Psalm 27

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 – God establishes His covenant with Abram

Respecting Abram's trust as righteousness, God makes an enduring promise

repeats his anxiety about succession three times. Eliezer is a servant who has become 'family'.

After Abram and Lot agreed to separate, Lot taking the Jordan valley to the east and Abram the western Canaan lands around Hebron, Lot is captured in tribal warfare and then released as Abram becomes the ultimate victor. However, he refuses any spoils of war as he encounters the angelic figure of Melchizedek – showing how he simply trusted God for the outcome.

1 After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

"In a vision" – showing Abram's role as a prophet. The vision came at night, with stars visible, verse 5.

"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

"Do not be afraid" – a frequent command in the Bible. Satan attempts to influence through fear while God meets us with His love.

"Your shield... your reward" – the vision had a command, an assurance and a promise. Abram was to be assured, and trust God's promise of provision.

2-3 But Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

"Childless... who will inherit" – in a few words Abram

4-5 Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them." Then He said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

"Count the stars" – approximately 8,000 are visible in a Middle East night sky.

"Credited... as righteousness" – a key statement that teaches that righteousness comes by faith, not works. Abram, the "father of all who believe", is the first counted righteous by faith, Rom. 4:11, Hebr. 11:8.

6 Abram believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness.

• **For further study:** In the NT, Paul quotes this verse three times, Romans 4:3, 4:22 and Galatians 3:6, showing that Gentile Christians with no Jewish heritage are made righteous through faith. In every age people have claimed salvation by belonging, whether to the Jewish race or a particular church affiliation or a 'Christian country'. Every renewal has rediscovered the truth of salvation by faith alone.

7 He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the

Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it."

"Brought you out of Ur" – Abram had demonstrated faith in a previous test.

8 But Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"

9 So the LORD said to him, "Bring Me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon."

"Bring Me a heifer..." – royal land treaties were established in this ancient "exchange of contracts".

10-11 Abram brought all these to Him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

"Cut them in two" – a symbol of staking one's own life on keeping the agreement, Jeremiah 34:14.

IN PRACTICE God appears to His loyal follower, Abram, and sets him preparing a royal treaty covenant ceremony. People of those times were accustomed to 'cutting a covenant' together. The splitting in half of the sacrificed animals was symbolic of the penalty for not following the agreement, although in this case God is making His covenant promise unilaterally. This promise was made to Abram, father of the Jewish nation – and all believers. "Abraham [as he became] is the spiritual father of those who have faith... counted as righteous because of their faith." Romans 4:11.

Taking God at His word is the one action, one only, that establishes us as righteous.

QUESTION *If Abraham were to come and give us his life lesson, what would it be?*

Luke 13:31-35 – Jesus promises His continuing ministry

Lamenting the nation again putting itself outside the covenant, Jesus predicts many Jews coming to faith in Him before His second coming

31 At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to Him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you."

"At that time" – Jesus had been teaching in stories and directly the unpopular truth that many Israelites would be excluded from the kingdom while Gentiles from north, south, east and west would be included.

"Birds of prey" – vultures, symbolising the attacks that always come on God's people following His will.

12 As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.

17-18 When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire-pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates."

"When the sun had set" – God's presence comes into the darkness as a flaming torch and smoking fire-pot, see also Exodus 13:21-22.

"The Lord made a covenant" – the Hebrew phrase means "cut a covenant". The reference to land and descendants links this solemn and unconditional pledge, with the earlier promise, which required Abram to journey to a new location in order to become a great nation, Genesis 12:1-9.

"Leave this place" – Jesus was probably in Perea and Herod Antipas, a Roman appointed tetrarch, could execute who he wanted to. But most likely the Pharisees just wanted Jesus to leave their region.

32-33 He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day – for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!"

"I will keep on" – emphasises Jesus' continuing ministry. Deliverance and healing show God's kingdom to be present. Jesus' resurrection on the third day would show that He inaugurated the kingdom of God.

"No prophet can die outside Jerusalem" – of course, some had but Jesus is using irony to show that Jerusalem, from David's time onwards the centre of Jewish religion and worship, was far more dangerous to a true prophet of God than threats from Herod in Galilee.

34 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

"You who kill the prophets" – the holy city (standing for the whole nation) had often killed its prophets, 2 Chron. 24:21; Jeremiah 26:23.

IN PRACTICE The Israelites had abandoned the covenant and paid a terrible penalty in seeing Jerusalem overrun and its people taken into captivity and exile. Now Jerusalem, and its proud tradition as the centre of worship for the nation, is setting itself up again for a similar disaster. Jesus foretells that He will join a long line of prophets who were put to death by the city and people that He loves.

Believing in God's purposes, which are based on a much longer timescale than we are used to, is made difficult by the situations and difficulties which rise up to oppose. We read the circumstances and say, "It can't happen," but God repeats the promises which say, "It cannot NOT happen!". Which do we believe?

QUESTION *When it all seems to be going wrong, what voices do we hear, and which do we listen to?*

Philippians 3:17-4:1 – Paul promises heaven's honour for keeping faith

In contrast to unbelieving teachers, Paul models heaven-centred living.

17 Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

"Following my example" – the concept of discipleship was following an example e.g. Paul's apostolic demonstration of Christlike living. Christians should live lives that are models to follow. As Paul

"Gather your children" – Jesus repeated many of his teachings and this was declared again on Tuesday of Passion Week, Matt. 23:37-38.

"Under her wings" – in the OT tradition, God sheltered His people under His wings, Psalm 17:8, 36:7; 57:1 etc

35 Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see Me again until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.' "

"Your house... desolate" – Jesus is predicting the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

"Blessed is He who comes..." – quoting Psalm 118, one of the psalms sung by pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem for one of the festivals. Here Jesus is referring to His second coming and the allusion to people coming to worship is a prediction that many Jews will turn and trust Jesus before that time.

• **For further study**, see Rom. 11:12,14; 24-27; 31-32

has written earlier (verse 10) "I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him in his death."

18 For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the Cross of Christ.

"With tears" – aware of how unbelieving teachers destroy God's work, people and kingdom.