

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

NRSV

The book purports to be Moses' final speech to the Israelites before they cross into the Promised Land; however closer inspection shows that Deuteronomy is a reinterpretation of the Exodus legal tradition for a later generation, who now live a settled life. Exodus 23:19 and 34:26 say only: "The choicest [best] of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God." Our passage expands on this.

The commandment here is highly specific: the *first fruits* are to be taken in a "basket" (v. 2) to "the priest who is in office" (v. 3): to a central location. Earlier, there were several shrines to God but now there is only one – at Jerusalem. Here the giving is linked to Israelite history: God swore to Abraham ("ancestors", v. 3) to give the Promised Land to Israel. Jacob, the "wandering Aramean" (v. 5), and his children moved to Egypt in a time of famine. There they multiplied, were oppressed and enslaved. When they prayed to God to help them, he used his power to free them.

Note v. 9: no longer are they *wandering* semi-nomads; now they live in a prosperous "land flowing with milk and honey". In thanks for God's gift of both the land and abundant crops, Israelites are to give produce to God (v. 10); in recognition of his sovereignty over the land, they are to prostrate themselves ("bow down") before him. God's gifts are cause for celebration by Israelites and foreigners ("aliens", v. 11) who live in Palestine.

Psalm 100

NRSV

Perhaps this psalm was composed for use during the Festival of Booths, the autumn harvest thanksgiving for cereal crops and grapes. At that time, the Israelites also gave thanks for God's protection during their years of wandering in the desert.

Vv. 1-3 form one hymn and vv. 4-5 is another. All people everywhere ("all the earth", v. 1) are invited to praise God, to be joyful in him. Why? Those processing to the Temple would, in "The Lord is God" (v. 3), be reminded of the first of the Ten Commandments. (That he is the only god is implied.) The covenant brought the people into a special relationship with God. V. 4 was probably spoken by the priests: they invite the faithful to enter the Temple to give thanks and praise. Both the Temple and royal palaces had "gates" (v. 4) and "courts", so God the king, present in the Temple and reigning from there, is envisaged. God is goodness; he is eternally compassionate and faithful to those who keep his law and follow his ways. In the original context, his *goodness* was specifically his concrete acts of love promised in the Sinai covenant and shown to Israel.

Philippians 4:4-9

NRSV

Paul began the conclusion to the letter back in 3:1a. After a digression – to warn against heresy and self-indulgence and to urge devotion to Christ – he tries to finish the letter, but certain concerns intrude. It seems that "Euodia" (v. 2) and "Syn-tyche", two workers for Christ, differ in their understanding of what the way of Christ is, and that this is causing disunity in the Philippian community. We do not know to whom Paul refers as his "loyal companion" (v. 3); he is asked to be instrumental in achieving reconciliation.

V. 4 is the conventional Greek salutation (like our *goodbye*) but here Paul means "rejoice" literally. May you behave towards others as you should ("gentleness", v. 5). Paul expects the Second Coming soon: "The Lord is near."

Then v. 6: rather than worrying on their own, the Philippians should ask God to help them, through prayer, both in prayers of "supplication" (petition) and of "thanksgiving". God's "peace" (v. 7) will protect them against their own failings and external threats. It "surpasses all understanding" either by being beyond the grasp of the human mind or by achieving more than we can conceive. In v. 8, Paul advises members of the community to live according to an ethical standard.

John 6:25-35

NRSV

Jesus' miraculous provision of food to the crowd has recalled, for John, the gift of manna to the people of Israel in the desert. The crowd has taken Jesus for a political messiah who will free them from Roman occupation. John continues to pursue the question: Who is Jesus? Is he divine?

Jesus and the disciples have escaped the crowds, but only for a while. Rather than tell them of his walking on water (which they would misunderstand), he does not answer them. He tells them that they are seeking him not because they understand the spiritual meaning of the food, but for another free meal (v. 26). He says: raise your sights above material things, to eternal ones, to what I, "the Son of Man will give you" (v. 27). The Father has shown me to be authentic ("seal"). I will give you nourishment for ever.

But they have only grasped that the food is miraculous, a work of God, so they ask: how can we do such miracles? (v. 28) Jesus answers: only one *work of God* (v. 29) is essential: to trust in me. Again, they misunderstand; they ask: what proof will you give us? (v. 30). Moses gave us manna from heaven in the wilderness (v. 31); you have only given us earthly food. We expect the Messiah to give us manna again.

In v. 32, Jesus tries to clear up the misunderstandings: (1) it was God, not Moses who gave you manna; (2) the Father gives bread now; and (3) manna met physical needs but "true bread" is more than that. Then v. 33: Jesus himself is the true bread, the "bread of God": he "comes ... from heaven and gives life ...". They still do not grasp that *he* is the bread, Finally, he says: I am the sustenance of life itself, of very existence, for those who trust in me; I will fill their every need.