

# Sunday Lessons. the Principle of Selection

by J.H. Newman

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*The Sunday Lessons are carefully selected to illustrate God's dealings with His chosen people and to warn against hypocrisy and unbelief.*

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 32:7, Romans 15:4, 1 Corinthians 10:11, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12, James 1:22, 2 Peter 1:20, 1 John 2:14, Revelation 1:3

**Topics:** "Old Testament", "Liturgical Reform"

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## Description

J.H. Newman discusses the alterations in the Liturgy, particularly focusing on the selection of Sunday Lessons from the Old Testament and the New Testament. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the principles behind the Lessons and how they reflect God's dealings with His people collectively and individually. Newman highlights the analogy between the Jewish nation and baptized Christians, pointing out the warnings and lessons embedded in the historical portions of the Old Testament. He concludes by urging caution in changing the established Lessons and encourages a deeper appreciation for the intricate connections between the Old and New Scriptures.

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## Transcript

AMONG projected alterations in the Liturgy, not the least popular seems to be a very considerable change in the selection of the Sunday Lessons. People do not see, first of all, why such and such chapters are chosen out of the Old Testament, in preference to others which they think more edifying. Secondly they see no reason why the Church should not assign Proper Lessons to every Sunday from the New Testament as well as from the Old.

One who hopes that he should not be found froward, were a change to be made by competent Spiritual Authority, begs leave, nevertheless, to submit to all considerate lovers of the Prayer Book, the following remarks on the two points specified above.

I. Before people find fault with the selection of particular chapters, they ought to be tolerably certain that they understand the principle, on which the Lessons in general were selected. It is to be regretted, that we have remaining little, if any, historical evidence touching the views of the Compilers of the Liturgy, in that portion of their task. What we do know, amounts to this:Â--

In King Edward's Prayer-Books no distinction was made, as to appointing lessons, between Sundays and -other days of the week. The chapter of the Old Testament set down for the day of the month was

read in course for the Sunday Lesson; as is the case still in regard of the New Testament. With a view to this, probably the well-known notice was prepared, which now stands prefixed to the Second Book of Homilies, but in Strype's opinion belongs rather to the First Book. "Where, (i. e. whereas it may so chance, some one or other chapter of the Old Testament to fall in order to be read upon the Sundays or Holidays, which were better to be changed with some other of the New Testament for more edification, it shall be well done to spend your time to consider well of such chapters before-hand." This came out first, as it seems, in 1560; and about the same time a Commission was given to Archbishop Parker, Bishop Grindal, and others; "to peruse the order of the Lessons, throughout the whole year, and to cause new calenders to be printed." In pursuance of which the present Table of Sunday Lessons was prepared, and came out the same year. We may then consider it as Archbishop Parker's; and surely not one among the Reformers might be more thoroughly depended on for a sound practical view of things. Farther than this, we have no direct information. We must be guided there fore, entirely by the internal evidence of the Lessons themselves.

The series begins from Septuagesima Sunday, because it was the custom of the early Church to read the Book of Genesis in Lent. Let us examine them in their order, ending with the 6th Sunday after Epiphany in the following year. We shall find, if I mistake not, that the selection may be accounted for on this supposition, viz. That the arrangers desired to exhibit GOD'S former dealings with His chosen people collectively and the return made by them to GOD, in such manner as might best illustrate His dealing with each individual, chosen now to be in His Church, and the snares and temptations most apt to beset us as Christians.

Certainly, there does exist a very wonderful analogy between these two cases, that of the Jewish nation delineated in the Bible, and that of a baptized Christian, as known by daily experience: an analogy most striking in itself, most clearly pointed out more than once in the New Testament, and very serviceable, if rightly understood in many great points of faith and practice. This analogy arises out of the fact, that Christians severally are, what the Jews collectively-were, partakers of an especial Covenant.

It is to be supposed, that the Great Enemy has his peculiar way of dealing with souls placed in such a relation, as with parents, children, subjects, and others, according to their several relations. To exhibit such his purpose and proceedings, and to exemplify also the counteracting methods of providence, seems to be one especial purpose of the historical portions of the Old Testament: in which the prophetic are here included.

To give an instance of what is here meant. One of the most prevailing temptations to unbelief and careless practice is the daily experience we have, of Christians behaving so very differently from what one should expect, *Ã* priori, in GOD'S elect. It does not seem as if, left to ourselves, we should have any adequate idea of the kind of hypocrisy described by Bishop Butler, in his Sermon on Self-deceit, and elsewhere; I mean the temper which leads men to act towards GOD ALMIGHTY, (whom, in theory and understanding? they own,) as if it were in their power to deceive Him. To explain this for the benefit of those most in danger, seems one great purpose of the Old Testament: to explain it I say, for the benefit of unworthy Christians, who may discern themselves, by anticipation, in the faithless demeanour of the Jews.

It is conceivable that a series of extracts might be made, to illustrate this matter more particularly, i. e. on a principle of admonition. Would not such a series coincide, very nearly, with the Sunday Lessons?

Thus, the first and second chapters of Genesis, represent man as at first placed in covenant with his Maker; the third, sixth, and ninth represent his fall, and the wonderful mixture of judgment and mercy which prepared him for the recovery, which GOD had in store for him, by virtue of a New Covenant. Then, (Gen. xii.) follows the first definite step towards the establishment of that New Covenant: the call of Abraham to be the select pattern and spiritual progenitor of all who shall ever be saved by it. And here again judgment is shown mingled with mercy, and thorough probation accompanying both, by the two selected chapters of Abraham's history; the fall of Sodom, and the sacrifice of Isaac. Then begins the account of Jacob and his family, the other great section of the Patriarchal History; displaying on the one hand, the great danger of taking liberties with moral duty, under the notion of being favourites with GOD; (for the subsequent misfortunes of Jacob's family are clearly traceable to that first want of faith;) on the other hand, the mysterious ways of Providence, turning those misfortunes and errors into means for the great purpose of preparing a covenanted nation to take the place of the covenanted family.

With Exodus begins the history of that nation, which may perhaps not improperly be styled the appropriate type of each backsliding Christian, as Abraham we know was the type of the faithful. The chapters selected shew, first, GOD preparing the way for their election; then their reluctant acceptance of the favour; next, the actual process of their deliverance; the whole being so arranged, that this latter shall correspond with the season of Easter; which is indeed (so to speak) the point of sight of the whole Christian Calendar, as the passover is of the Jewish.

But to proceed--the Lessons from Easter to Whit-Sunday (taking into account the great days of Easter-week and Ascension,) are so many specimens of the transgressions of the elect people, and of the methods taken to chastise or reclaim them. The case of Balaam, most evidently needs not to be excepted from this account; for never was a clearer analogy than between him and the Jewish people: they murmuring and rebelling with the Shechinah before their eyes; he coveting the reward of iniquity, perhaps plotting seduction in his heart, while he heard the words of GOD, and saw the vision of the ALMIGHTY. NO analogy can be more exact; except it be that between the same miserable man, and a Christian baptised, sinning against faith and knowledge.

The Lessons for Trinity-Sunday as was natural, interrupt for one week the progress of the history, for the purpose of reviewing the whole course. The mind is carried back, first, to GOD'S original intent in creating man after his own image; next, to the appointed condition or mean, by which that image is to be regained; viz. the imitation of Abraham's faith. In effect, they rehearse to us both Covenants; that of Paradise, and that of the Gospel.

Resuming our view of the covenanted people, we contemplate them first victorious, peaceful and comparatively innocent, renewing their engagements with their Maker in the days of Joshua in the days of the Judges backsliding and factious, but not yet deliberately unbelieving; next, trained by Eli's sons to irreverence for holy things; and, not ill-prepared to apostatize, by choosing a king on principles of accommodation and worldly policy.

The gradual degeneracy and downfall of that unhappy king (the emblem of the Jews of his time, as Balaam had been of a former generation,) and the substitution of one of better mind, are continued through a chain of Lessons, to the excision, long after his death, of almost all that remained of his family.

But, in the mean. time, a new source of sin and misery had arisen in the family of David himself. His personal sins, indeed, were fast followed by sincere repentance, and therefore obtained speedy pardon;

but because they were the sins of one with whom peculiar covenant had been made, they drew down the severest temporal judgments; the sword never departed from his house; and, by the dissensions which arose in his time a way was prepared for the schism and two-fold apostacy, first heretical and afterwards infidel, of the greater part of the chosen people. These, with GOD'S endeavours to reclaim them by the warnings of Elijah and Elisha, and by the sword of Jehu are traced in the chapters taken from the Books of Kings, from the first curse of Jeroboam's schismatical altar, till the final reprobation and captivity of the ten tribes. In the course of which history, especial emphasis is laid, first on the misfortunes incurred by the nameless prophet from Judah, by king Jehoshaphat and others, for their licentious communication with the heretical and idolatrous tribes, secondly, on the extension of GOD'S favour to the Gentiles, in two instances for ever memorable; which extension, we may believe, was virtually a signal warning to his then elect people.

At length we arrive at the last sad scene of the history; the downfall of the Church of Judah also. We behold a temporary amendment in the days of Hezekiah, occasioned by the combination of miraculous mercy to herself, with judgment on Samaria in her sight. But we presently read of her thorough relapse; of her resistance to the example and efforts of good Josiah; of her sensuality and oppression her neglect and contempt of warnings, all accompanied with high pretences to civilization, and a certain kind of orthodoxy. All these, her dealings with GOD, are delineated at large by Jeremiah. In the Lessons from Ezekiel we have revealed more of GOD'S dealings with her. He peremptorily orders his message to be delivered, whether men will hear, or whether they will forbear, He denounces the false prophets, preaching peace where there was no peace; and discovers their secret and vulgar artifices. He answers pretences from feigned conformity, from reliance on the remnant of good in the land; and again, from an affected perplexity at the supposed inequality of his proceedings. He recapitulates, by special message, all their past conduct, as His chosen people: a summary, answering with marvellous exactness to the sad experience of the Christian world. When all these had failed, He utters, in two fearful parables, a final sentence of direct reprobation. All this we have set before us from Ezekiel. The Lessons from Daniel serve to show that the chosen people were not yet abandoned; they keep alive hope, and exemplify faith, triumphing in the worst of times; which is also the drift of the prophecy selected from Joel. Then Micah is introduced, like Samuel and Ezekiel, recapitulating the whole course of the probation of the elect; and Habakkuk, extending the judgment to their oppressors, and reasserting the condition required on their part to make their election not a curse but a blessing. "The just by his faith shall live." Finally, the readings from the Proverbs of Solomon bring the warning home, so to speak, to every man's own door. Taken in connexion with all that had gone before, they turn GOD'S miraculous proceeding, with the Jews into an available sanction of righteousness, for the meanest man's use on the slightest occasion.

And now, the year drawing to a close, and the mysterious time of Christmas approaching, our Mother, with true parental anxiety, takes up, as it were, the thread of her instructions anew at that point of the fortunes of Israel, to which the circumstance of civilized and Christian Europe, especially those of our own country, during the comparatively few years which have passed since the arrangement of the Prayer-Book, may reasonably be thought to correspond most nearly, the Church reverts to the time of Hezekiah, and selects the prophecy of Isaiah as the fittest to prepare the minds for CHRIST'S two Advents. By the confession of some who are most apt to find fault, her selection here has been most appropriate. Witness the sins reprov'd in the Jews; their formality, pride, oppression, drunkenness, presumption, sophistical self-deceit; their impatience of primitive truth, and reliance upon mere worldly expedients. Witness again the wonderful mixture of triumph and desolation, judgments and mercies foretold; such as might seem impossible to be accomplished together, at one and the same time, among one and the same people. Yet

we seem to behold both accomplished; the one is the tendencies of the Gospel, and what it performs for the faithful privately; the other, in men's ordinary way of receiving it, and what may be called its public failure. The very denunciations against idolatry by some, perhaps, accounted an outward sin, how well do they apply to the various apostasies, which men contrive for themselves now, and say, to one after another, Deliver me, for thou art my GOD! The summaries of past national mercies, how truly do they represent what is now done for each redeemed and sanctified soul! And as to the anticipation of mercies and judgment to come, they do not only correspond to the revelations of the New Testament, but we have the express authority of our LORD and St. Paul for believing, that, of both, language was purposely used, (in the purpose, I mean, of the HOLY SPIRIT,) which literally refers to the life and death everlasting, the sanctions of GOD'S covenant with every Christian singly.

This hasty and brief sketch may serve to point out the thread of warning, which, it is conceived, runs through the Sunday Lessons, and renders it very improper to deal with them as if they had been taken at random, or might fitly be changed at will, for others supposed in themselves more edifying.

Whether Archbishop Parker and his coadjutors had this connexion in view, as it is not, perhaps, possible to ascertain, so neither is it very material. Perhaps the fact of its spontaneous evolution (if such an expression may be allowed,) would make it appear so much the more delicate, and tampering with it so much the more perilous. For, on that supposition, it must be more than humanly interwoven with the very staple of the Scripture History. But, supposing it designed, it may have been suggested by the tenour of the Invitatory Psalm, commonly called, Venite exultemus; which Psalm had been used daily in the Church quite down from primitive times. Many persons, probably, have asked themselves, why that Psalm in particular should be preferred above the many of the same general tenour, for unremitting use in the Church daily. The answer probably may be found in the grave monitory warnings at the end: which, by the case of the Jews in the wilderness, describe so forcibly the position and peculiar danger of a chosen people. That one Psalm may, on reflection, give the key to the arrangement of the Lessons; allowing, of course, for the interruption sometimes caused by the special matter of some great Christian Festival. In general, however, the course of the Lessons will be found adapting itself, with exquisite felicity, to the course of the Festivals also.

Occasionally, the Archbishop's choice may have been influenced, (in subordination, however, to the great principle,) by the connexion of the portion of history with some offence which required warning, but, from the weakness of human nature, was very likely to pass unnoticed. The thirty-fourth of Genesis, and the fifth of Jeremiah, are instances. When men shrink from reading those chapters, they bear witness instinctively to the wisdom and kindness of the Church in ordering them to be read.

Whatever may be one's private opinion, it is not necessary here to maintain, that the general principle suggested above was the very best on which selection might proceed, or that the very aptest chapters of all have been selected in each instance. But clearly, if such a principle be at all recognised, it ought to be most carefully kept in view, whatever insertions or omissions are proposed. Many persons seem to think, that questions of this sort are settled, if on merely comparing the present Lesson with the proposed substitute, it appear that the one, taken singly, is more edifying than the other. But this will not hold, if it be a mistake altogether to take any one singly and apart. The quantity of edification may be greater on the whole by completing the proposed narrative or argument, though on this or that particular day the impression made may be less. To neglect this consideration partakes of the same error, as if renounced, or other chapters must be found, completing his idea as accurately as these do: which latter, it is imagined, would prove a difficult task.

2. The other matter proposed for enquiry is less important, and may be dismissed in a few words. Why, it is asked, should there not be Lessons from the New Testament proper for every Sunday in the year, as well as for a few great days? In answer to which it may be observed, first, that there are, generally, two such Lessons, always one, read in the Communion Service. Only that which is called The Second Lesson, varies with the day of the month. Of the reasons which, in point of fact, led to the continuance of this latter arrangement, I am not aware that any record remains. But it appears to be accompanied with two incidental advantages, which some may think considerable enough to render alteration unadvisable, without very clear proof of greater benefit likely to arise from it.

One of these advantages is, the standing memorial thus afforded to the people, that there was once such a thing as a Daily Service; that such is the system and wish of our Church, and the theory on which the Prayer-Book is constructed. It is an intelligible hint, that a Churchman's devotion was not meant to be all narrowed into the Sunday. The Services of that holy day were but to be a continuance and an expansion of those due on the other days; not a totally distinct thing. This we are weekly reminded of, by the very place in the Calendar, where we must look for the Second Sunday Lesson. The value of the hint people of course will estimate more or less highly, according to their sense of a Daily Service, and of the responsibility which Churchmen have incurred by letting it drop so very quietly in almost every parish of the kingdom.

The other advantage of these varying Second Lessons, (and it will be found in practice a very considerable one,) is this; that it presents the Old and New Scriptures in endless variety of mutual combinations, the more striking because they are unforeseen, and in a certain sense casual. The thought is happily expressed by Herbert, thus addressing Holy Scripture:--

"O that I knew how all thy lights combine,

And the configurations of their glory;

Seeing not only how each verse doth shine,

But all the constellations of the story!"

Very much help, both for pastors and people, both for giving and receiving instruction, may be gathered, (if the writer deceive himself not concerning the results of his own experience,) by attending to this hint yearly, as the varying Psalms and Second Lessons come successively into conjunction with the unvarying First Lessons, Epistles, and Gospels. To note and collect the scattered lights will be found in itself a most engaging and interesting task, and it will serve in no slight degree to impress considerate minds, from time to time, more deeply with the fulness, the harmony, the condescension, of the Word of Life.

These reasons are respectfully addressed to those, who, in their anxiety for immediate visible edification, appear somehow to over look the fact, that "the Church Lessons are a series arranged according to certain general principles. Scruples, and feelings of different kinds, occurring to this or that person as to the use of particular passages, must be met, of course, on their own grounds; except so far as they ought to be silenced by the overpowering advantage, which may appear to arise by adhering to the general principle of selection.

At any rate, it is much to be wished, that very free talking, and very cheap publishing, in behalf of such changes, were carefully avoided. Is there not something even cruel, in raising scruples and niceties, and

unpleasant associations of various kinds, among those who as yet happily have never dreamed of criticising the Bible? If change is wanted, let proper reasons be quietly submitted to competent authorities. But let us not appeal lightly, and at random, to the sense of an irreverent presumptuous age, on one of the most sacred of all subjects.

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