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## Justice and the Prophets

**ADULT LEADER’S GUIDE • MARCH, APRIL, MAY 2020**

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**Evaluation Form**  
**Looking Ahead: Summer 2020**  
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About the Quarter
The study this quarter focuses on justice as presented in Scriptures from the prophets and in the reading for Easter Sunday, which is taken from First Corinthians. The prophets communicated God’s will to the people. They called for repentance and justice.

Unit I, “God Requires Justice,” is a five-lesson study from four of the minor prophets. The prophets issue God’s call for justice in the conduct of human affairs. Amos, Habakkuk, Micah, and Malachi convey that the laws of God require justice for the poor and the oppressed.

Unit II, “God Promises a Just Kingdom” continues a study of God’s justice. The lessons for Palm Sunday and Easter examine the promised Messiah as the defender of justice. The unit concludes with the Lord’s proclamation of the redeemed nation where justice and righteousness are restored.

Unit III, “Called to God’s Work of Justice,” has five sessions that explore ways that people are called to participate in God’s work of justice. Zephaniah presents both a judgment against the wickedness and injustice of Jerusalem and a vision of restoration. Zechariah calls for a return to God’s ways of justice. In Jeremiah, God’s rigorous standards for justice are defined. And Hosea uses early history to call the people to love and justice.

About the Writers
Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins is an ordained American Baptist minister with more than 40 years of community and congregational service as a pastor, professor and denominational executive. He served the American Baptist Home Mission Societies and Judson Press from 1991 to 2015 as Chief Executive Officer. Currently, he is serving as mayor of Collegeville, Pennsylvania and as Co-Executive Director of the New Baptist Covenant. Dr. Wright-Riggins is married to the Rev. Betty Wright-Riggins, a spiritual director and adjunct professor at Princeton Seminary.

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SESSION 1 • MARCH 1, 2020

Called to Accountability

SCRIPTURE: Amos 5:18-24

KEY VERSE: Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. —Amos 5:24

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to examine the relationship between the justice and righteousness of God with God’s call to champion the poor and the oppressed;
• to identify ways in which our silence contributes to social injustice; and
• to explore ways to address the needs of the disadvantaged and oppressed.

Introducing the Scripture

Amos is chronologically one of the earliest books of the twelve minor prophets in the Hebrew canon. Amos was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel during the second half of the eighth century, and his writings consist of a collection of oracles preserved in Israel as a separate book.

Prior to pursuing his call from God to prophesy to the northern kingdom, Amos was a shepherd and “dresser” of sycamore trees in the southern kingdom of Judah. Such trees in that Middle Eastern region produced small, fig-like fruit that needed a certain cultivating via pinching and puncturing in order for them to sweeten and ripen. Amos engaged in such activity occupationally, along with either herding or owning herds.

Amos began his prophetic activity sometime between 760 and 745 BC during the reign of Uzziah (786–744 BC), king of Judah, and the reign of Jeroboam II (788–747 BC), king of Israel. (Nearly 150 years separated Jeroboam from his successor Jeroboam II.) Amos was not a member of the prophetic guild, the school of religious broadcasters who cozied up to ruling elites, telling them only what they wanted to hear by justifying their self-centeredness with pietistic platitudes and rosy pictures of their future. Amos perceived himself as uniquely called by God to speak words of challenge and caution to ruling elites and words of hope to the poor and oppressed (Amos 7:14).

The time period when Amos preached was prosperous for the privileged and powerful. Israel had extended its geographical borders and was controlling the trade routes of the ancient world that passed through its territory. A wealthy merchant class had developed, and nobles built for themselves luxurious homes. The “haves” were getting richer and the “have nots” were getting poorer.

Amos looked at the religious and social landscape and did not like what he saw. Religion seemed to have little positive impact on the common good. Religious people were making pilgrimages to the major national shrines and sanctuaries at Bethel, Gilgal and Beer-sheba (5:5) but failed to truly seek God (vv. 4, 6, 14) in their pilgrimages. Amos preached that true religion will have an impact in the public square, the place he refers to as “in the gate” (vv. 10, 12, 15). In the gate, the poor and downtrodden are found, victimized by those on the lookout to exploit them with opportunities to do evil. But additionally, “the one who reproves in the gate” (v. 10) is also present. The “reprover” is an advocate for the one who takes up the case of the oppressed against the oppressor. Amos noted that advocates and activists are often hated (v. 10).

Verse 13 is a curious statement: “Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time.” Biblical scholars are not sure how best to interpret this text. It could mean that those who think they are wise will say that the smart thing to do is to say nothing. It is important to note that Amos did the opposite: he spoke up for the
poor and oppressed because he saw the relationship between his religion and the common good.

No one knows for sure how long Amos’s ministry lasted. It may have been for a few years or even just a few months or less. Yet he created quite a stir. His pronouncements concerning the nation’s collision course toward calamity and doom came to the attention of the priest of the royal sanctuary, Amaziah, who would accuse Amos of sedition and conspiracy before the king of Israel (7:10-11).

**Examining the Scripture**

AMOS 5:18-20. “Alas!” cried Amos. The prophet warned that sadness and disappointment were crouching at the nation’s door. Rendered “Alas” in the New Revised Standard Version and “Woe” in the King James Version, this Hebrew term hwy is used exclusively by the prophets in the Bible, except for one citation in 1 Kings 13:30. Alas is used a total of forty-eight times, including in all the Major Prophets and at least half of the Minor Prophets. It expresses God’s indignation and is a warning for people who act contrary to God’s command to turn around.

Amos levies this denouncement against those who “desire the day of the LORD” (v. 18). As used here, desire is incredibly intense. It is more than a preference or a liking. It is an extreme desire like the one acted out through the people who wandered in the wilderness when they wanted meat to eat (Numbers 11:10-34). They lusted for meat and then became ill for consuming too much of it. Amos cautioned his hearers to be careful about what they desired because they just might get it. And it would not ultimately be what they wanted.

The people craved “the day of the LORD,” which was an expression of the expectation that God would one day act decisively to bring disaster and judgment on the enemies of the Lord but salvation and deliverance to the faithful. Amos cited their desire for the day of the Lord three times in this section. Also, three times he stated that the day of the Lord would not be light, but darkness. Amos was saying that the people of Israel mistakenly believed that God was on their side and that their chosen status exempted them from accountability and judgment.

We do not know specifically what the people expected of or from the day of the Lord, but the analogy of the lion, bear, and snake provides us with some clues. It appears that the people expected that God’s decisive action would provide them refuge and safety as well as success and victory from threatening dangers. But Amos contradicted them in these terms. The day of the Lord would only bring greater danger and final disaster.

For Israel, Amos was arguing, there was no presumed success or automatic victory. Israel may outrun the lion only to be met by a bear on the path. They may assume the safety of their home environment only to be unexpectedly bitten by a snake as they rest their hands against a wall.

AMOS 5:21-23. These verses are a direct speech from God. God is angry, and God pleads for the people to repent. God’s point is made by means of six first-person singular verbs: “I hate,” “I despise,” “I take no delight,” “I will not accept,” “I will not look upon,” and “I will not listen.” The tone here is of a God who is on the verge of threatening divorce. The Hebrew word for hate (or detest) is a verb that generally has a direct object, usually a person. In legal texts and in standard use, it indicates the formal renunciation or severance of a relationship, as in divorce.

Here God had no interest at all in festivals, solemn assemblies, burnt and grain peace offerings. God had no interest in the songs of the people or in the melodies of their musical instruments. God was clearly fed up with the people of Israel.

The intensity of God’s expressed loathing in this passage must be understood within the context of God’s
covenantal relationship with Israel and God's expectations of them. God is the God who heard the cries of the Hebrews as they languished in slavery in Egypt and then rescued them with a mighty hand. God nurtured and loved them within a covenantal relationship, teaching them to reciprocate God's love and to care for one another. God was frustrated here that these same people no longer saw the relationship between their worship of God and their call to create a community where all would be treated as beloved of God. Worship without a commitment to creating the beloved community is abhorrent to God.

**AMOS 5:24.** This is the culminating verse for this session. Amos' reference to rolling waters and ever-flowing streams is to remind us that righteousness and justice are to be constant, not intermittent. (As leader you will want to help learners connect this verse back to other foundational verses—vv. 7, 10-12, 15—which are not printed in the student book.)

### Applying the Scripture

A well-known church sign reads, "Enter to Worship; Depart to Serve." My home church had a sign like this hanging in the narthex that members and visitors would read as they entered and exited the sanctuary. Recently I heard about a sign in a church that read, "Enter to Serve, Depart to Worship." With this sign, the congregation was evidently making the point that every place and everything in our lives should be an act of worship and that our service, as members of Christ's body is to function as priests to one another as the church gathers (*Romans 12:1-8*).

Implicit, yet missing from both of these signs are the words *God* and *people*. As Christians we must always remember that our faith is inseparably about worshiping God and serving people.

Our lesson today may make us wonder just what kind of sign Amos would have constructed there at the city gate—where commerce was being conducted, where the poor were begging for charity, where advocates were demanding equity, where debts were being settled, where justice (or the lack of it) was being meted out, and where religious leaders blessed or cursed comers and goers. If "the day of the Lord" is the place of decisive encounter with God, then that means that God shows up in every area and arena of life to demand accountability. God may be far less interested in our Easter cantatas or what we gave up for Lent, our traditional or contemporary worship services, our theologies about tithing or gift giving, than God is about how we do justice in the public square.

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. faced a plethora of criticism from his clergy colleagues during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. Clergymen especially disapproved of tensions created by public actions such as the sit-ins and marches that King led.

When King was jailed for such actions in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, a number of ministers made "a call for unity," arguing that the battle against racial segregation should be fought solely in the courts, not the streets. While in jail, King responded with his now famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. As a minister, King rejoined these criticisms on religious grounds. Referring to his belief that all communities were interrelated, King wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." King further wrote later, "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

This session’s theme is "Called to Accountability." As you explore the lesson, give particular thought to who calls us and to what we are called. To who is Amos’s message directed—the individual, the religious establishment, the community, or the government? Or maybe the message is to all of the above. As citizens we participate in community locally, regionally, nationally, and now internationally. Today’s technology has brought us all so much closer to one another. We are now a global society, and our neighborhoods can look very different from the homogenous neighborhoods in which we grew up.

As Christians, when we seek justice and love mercy as it relates to others, how do we ensure that we extend God’s love freely and equitably to all? How can we ensure that we care about the “least of these” even when they are very different from us and don’t represent the same...
culture or values we may have? God challenges us to love unconditionally as God loves us, and to do unto others as we would truly want them to do unto us—even if they don’t know us or care about the things we are about.

How do you feel Amos’s message speaks to our culture in today’s setting? What current issues in the public square need the administration of justice? Who are the powerless in our society who need our voices to cry out on their behalf? What are the systems in place that re-ward the rich and continue to disadvantage the poor?

Session Plans
These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- Read Amos 5, paying particular attention to verses 18-24.
- Make sure to review all the words in this chapter that may not be clear to you or your class participants. Plan to have several translations of the text available, including a contemporary language version, such as The Message, the New Living Translation, or the Common English Bible. Reading multiple versions often helps to clarify the biblical writer’s meaning.
- Pay attention to questions and observations that come to mind as you review Amos 5. Write them down. Things that are of particular interest to you will be easier to teach with passion.
- For the first option to begin the session, watch a video of Martin Luther King Jr.’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail available as a five-minute YouTube video at https://youtu.be/b4PyAadIH8U.
- Alternatively, print one or two copies of the letter (readily available on the internet) and ask one or two participants to prepare to read excerpts for the group. Or download the outline of the letter from the Judson Press website (www.judsonpress.com/journeys) and make copies for participants.
- For the second option to begin the session, research poverty levels in your community, city, county, or state. Share the YouTube video Wealth Inequality in America, which illustrates the widening economic gap between the rich and the poor in this country. The video can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=drTG9aIa9RQ.
- As an alternative, print a few pictures from internet sites that illustrate the widening economic gap between the rich and the poor in this country. A helpful website that presents information on economic and political injustice is provided by ABCUSA partner Church World Service at www.cwsglobal.org.
- Invite a leader of your local food pantry and a social worker who provides assistance to the poor in your community to discuss the challenges of addressing poverty and inequity in your area.
- Have available Bibles; paper; index cards; pens or pencils; and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.

BEGINNING THE SESSION
(5-10 MINUTES)

- Begin with a prayer that participants will be open to discovery and growth.
- Present the five-minute video of King’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail and/or refer to your copies of the outline from www.judsonpress.com/journeys.
- Distribute index cards and pens or pencils and invite participants each to write a single-sentence response to the letter.
- Invite participants to share their responses, noting that participants are also free not to share verbally.

OR

Economic Inequity

- Begin with a prayer that participants will be open to discovery and growth.
- Present pictorial images of economic inequity.
- Distribute index cards and pens or pencils and invite participants each to write a single-sentence response to the images.
- Invite participants to share their responses, noting that participants are also free not to share verbally.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(35-40 MINUTES)

Consider the Scripture (15-20 min.)

- Ask for three volunteers to read Amos 5:18-24 as printed in Journeys:
  - Verses 18-20 (p. 4)
  - Verses 21-23 (pp. 5-6)
  - Verse 24 (p. 7)
- Divide participants into small groups of three or four persons. Ask each group to discuss one or two of the following questions:
º How do you define the word accountable?
º What does Amos say about accountability?
º What injustices did Amos see in Israel?
º What injustices do you see in your community, state, nation, or world?
º How does your being accountable make you feel?
º When have you found it impossible to keep silent about some injustice or situation of inequity?
º What difference does it make to you that God grieves and can feel heartbroken?
º How might going through the rituals of religion be hazardous to one’s faith and relationship with God?
º What are some ways in which the silence of the church has contributed to social injustice?
º What are some ways that we might address the needs of the disadvantaged and oppressed?
• After ten minutes of discussion, ask a representative from each group to briefly report that group’s responses.

OR
• Invite the leader of your local food pantry and a social worker who provides assistance to the poor in your community to discuss the challenges of addressing poverty and inequity in your area.
• Decide on the topics of discussion prior to the session and remain open to participants’ preferences.

AND

Sorting Out the Polarities (10-15 min.)
• Write the following question on the board or newsprint: “Can a church be Christian if it does not strive for social and economic justice?”
• Divide participants into two groups and assign one group to argue “yes” and the other group to argue “no” in response to the question. The overall goal of this forced polarity is to better understand the tension between personal piety and social engagement that many people experience in our culture.

AND/OR

Pockets of Pain (10 min.)
• Make a list of the “Pockets of Pain in Our Community.” These are people groups and places that may be disadvantaged or marginalized economically, socially, or politically in your neighborhood.
• Discuss how your church or class could be the caring hands, compassionate heart, or prophetic voice to and for this community in the year ahead.

CLOSING THE SESSION
(10 MINUTES)

Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis
• Point out that this session’s biblical text teaches us that it is not enough simply to go through the motions of worship. Real love for God demands putting our faith into action by treating all people, particularly the poor and the most vulnerable members of society, with justice and compassion.
• Introduce the terms orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxis (right actions).
• Explain that right belief has to be combined with right actions. We cannot love God without loving one another and treating one another justly.
• Invite participants to name examples of orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Make columns on the board or newsprint and write responses in the appropriate column.
• Sing a hymn that speaks of justice. For example, “Let Justice Flow Like Streams” by Jane Parker Huber (1984).

AND/OR

Closing Questions
• Invite participants to ask any questions they might have about what has been discussed in this session. Discuss the questions raised.
• Close in prayer, thanking God for being a champion for the poor and oppressed and asking God’s guidance for helping us not to remain silent in the face of victimization.

NOTES
1. Books of the biblical Hebrew prophets are broken down into the categories of major and minor prophets based on the lengths of their books—not the significance or importance of their prophecies.
3. Ibid.
5. Martin L. King Jr., Why We Can’t Wait (New York: Signet, 1964), 68.
SESSION 2 • MARCH 8, 2020

A Prayer for Justice

SCRIPTURE: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 12-14
KEY VERSE: O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? —Habakkuk 1:2

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to reflect on the feelings of those who long for justice when it is slow in coming;
• to explore how justice will be established for all; and
• to rejoice that God is holy and just and never indifferent to sin and injustice.

Introducing the Scripture
The book that bears the name Habakkuk is the eighth among the prophets in the Hebrew canon. Habakkuk lived during the last days of the Judean king Josiah (640–609 BC) and under the reign of Jehoiakim (609–598 BC). During this part of the seventh century before Christ, the Assyrian Empire was faltering, and the Babylonian Empire (Chaldeans) was on the rise (625-605 BC). Perhaps it was then that the first destructive blow from the Chaldeans fell on Judah. For Judah this was devastating. Judah, God’s own people, suffered violence by the abuse of foreign invaders.

The invasion, which Judah interpreted as punishment from God, had long ago been predicted by the prophet Jeremiah as the inevitable result of Judah’s corruption and infidelity:

The word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north.”

Then the Lord said to me: Out of the north evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land. For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the Lord; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands.

—Jeremiah 1:13-16

As painful as the punishment was, there seemed to be more going on in the national psyche. Just how far was God willing to allow the Chaldeans to prevail? Did the punishment fit the crime? Why did so many harmless good people have to suffer so greatly?

Habakkuk appears to have been one of the temple prophets of Judah to whom the task fell to compose songs for the temple singers to express on behalf of the congregation the national mood or ethos. For Habakkuk the note was one of national lamentation: “O Lord, how long?” Habakkuk scarcely knew which was to be more bemoaned: the sin or the punishment of it.

The book of Habakkuk has a unique structure among the prophetic books, with its inclusion of prophetic dialogues with God and its inclusion of a complete psalm (chap. 3). As Habakkuk’s book reveals, he understood why God was punishing his disobedient people, but Habakkuk did not understand why God was using a wicked nation as God’s instrument of judgment. The book deals with this question and the required response of faithful trust in God.

The verses in this lesson correspond closely to the psalms of lament or complaint; prominent features of this form in Habakkuk 1:2-4 include the questions addressed to God, the urgent descriptions of dire need, and the sustained petition for deliverance (compare
Examsing the Scripture

HABAKKUK 1:1-2. The title of the book is taken from the opening verse. We learn from it the name of the penman, Habakkuk, and that he was a prophet, a person divinely inspired and commissioned. We know nothing about his family, his tribe, or his place of birth.

The prophet claimed to have seen an “oracle,” or a divinely inspired message. In the King James Version of this text, the word used is “burden,” which may also encapsulate the compelling pressure Habakkuk felt to deliver the message. In both cases, we are looking at an utterance or pronouncement deemed to be a divinely inspired message.

Embodying the anguish of his fellow citizens, Habakkuk cried out. In fact, the text uses the word cry twice in this one verse. The mood is one of long-term suffering that is undoubtedly physical, mental, and spiritual in its scope and impact. One can imagine Habakkuk beating his chest with tears running down his face, crying out to God for deliverance. But the prophet was frustrated and perplexed because he experienced God as being distant and seemingly deaf to his pleas.

Habakkuk did not see any justice in Judah’s being punished by an even more wicked nation, and he thought that the Babylonians surely would not be allowed to conquer Judah completely. While he saw them as having been appointed by God as God’s agent of judgment (compare to Isaiah 7:18-20), the prophet believed that they too would meet their comeuppance of judgment and punishment. He saw this in the oppressor and the oppressed alike. Chaldeans and Judeans alike had unclean hands. The fallout from this unrighteousness was destruction and violence that affected the community. The fallout cut both ways. The anguish and distress Judah was suffering were both a result of the oppressing invaders, but they were also a consequence of the chaos and confusion Judeans were experiencing as they sought to understand the reasons for their plight and uncertainty of their future.

Habakkuk was witnessing the disintegration of his community caused by the rejection of the forces that bring unity: “law” and “justice.” The “law” in this text points to God’s covenantal code resulting in a relationship established with Israel, given through Moses and mediated through the priesthood in close conjunction with the king or other governing authorities. Habakkuk noted that the effectiveness of this covenant had been compromised by the corruption of the religious and civic leadership. When this happened, justice was thwarted because those who represented, legislated, interpreted, and enforced the law perverted it.

HABAKKUK 1:12. Habakkuk asked, “Why me?” Why had he, God’s prophet, been given this hypersensitivity to “wrongdoing,” “trouble,” “destruction,” and “violence”? One gets the sense that the prophet hurt so much because he saw with clarity the extent of the suffering.

On the one hand, Habakkuk saw wrongdoing and trouble. Undoubtedly, he saw this in the oppressor and the oppressed alike. Chaldeans and Judeans alike had unclean hands. The fallout from this unrighteousness was destruction and violence that affected the community. The fallout cut both ways. The anguish and distress Judah was suffering were both a result of the oppressing invaders, but they were also a consequence of the chaos and confusion Judeans were experiencing as they sought to understand the reasons for their plight and uncertainty of their future.

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The prophet asked God, “Are you not from of old?” as a way of testifying that the prophet and the nation realized that their God was the Eternal One with no beginning and no end. It was an indirect way of acknowledging God’s transcendent sovereignty and power, which had been manifested in God’s past redemption of God’s people. Habakkuk’s confidence in God’s eternal presence and provision (“You shall not die”) reflected his certain knowledge of God’s future commitment to God’s people in salvation history.
“Rock” reminds us of the strength and reliability of “the Lord” as Israel’s God, and the concepts of “judgment” and “punishment” are correlated repeatedly (compare to Isaiah 11:3-4). “Punishment” has an underlying judicial meaning implying the restoration of rule and authority through removal of the causes of disorder. As intimated in Habakkuk 1:7-8, the Israelites’ rejection of God’s authority mediated through the law merely exposed them to the harsher experience of God’s authority mediated through an alien people.

**HABAKKUK 1:13-14.** This is a characteristic statement of the problem of evil within the context of Israel’s faith: Why did evil appear to flourish unchecked by a just and holy God?

To “behold” a matter can imply that it is viewed with acceptance. That the Lord refused to view “evil” and “wrongdoing” in this manner was a basic tenet of Israel’s faith (see Psalm 5:4; 34:16, 21). The evil apparently tolerated was that of the “treacherous,” namely, those who were unreliable and broke faith in relationship. The Lord’s tolerance is implied because God was “silent,” or uninvolved; the treachery was typically that of the wicked who “swallow” the righteous as a predator devours its prey.

The “righteous” in Habakkuk 1:13 corresponds to the nations, who are likened to fish (vv. 14-17). This designation includes Judah, whose sin caused them to be numbered among the nations in judgment. Habakkuk’s concern was for his own people, as both the perpetrators and victims of injustice. Habakkuk seemed to want to remind God of just how wicked the Chaldeans were. Habakkuk drew attention to their evil character and behavior. Life was cheap to the Chaldeans. In the face of their ruthless tactics of war, other societies were “like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler” (v. 14). In light of their reputation (see vv. 6–10), how could God have unleashed this ruthless force on another helpless people?

**Why did evil appear to flourish unchecked by a just and holy God?**

**Applying the Scripture**

Who can understand the problems in our world today? While many of us believe that God can and will take care of us, we still go through trials and tribulations just as unbelievers do. The tragedies of life afflicting believers as well as unbelievers. Believers have the same confusing questions as unbelievers regarding life’s most challenging issues. The questions raised by Habakkuk remind us that life is full of difficulties.

Understanding how God can allow evil happenings is also difficult. Each of us has experienced times when we question God about things that have happened, such as the untimely death of a loved one, an accident, or other tragedy. Who can know the mind of God and the ways that God uses things we consider bad for God’s glory? Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from Habakkuk is that God is sovereign, and God’s plans are different from ours. But the person who is faithful in seeking justice in his or her dealings with others and God will experience God’s blessings.

The first question raised in this session is, when will the wicked get their just reward? How often have we as Christians wanted to see people punished because of their wickedness? Wicked people have been a part of life since the beginning of time. It seems to many of us that God is allowing the wicked to flourish without doing anything to protect God’s children. What should a Christian’s response be when it appears that God is not doing anything about wickedness?

We hold to faith that God has promised to put a hedge around us so that we will not be harmed. At the same time, we want to be assured that those who cause problems and pitfalls for others will get their due reward. While we may be justified in our attitude, we need to be careful that we do not allow anger, bitterness, and hatred to well up in our hearts. Otherwise we will harden our hearts toward other people and God because of the things that happen in life.

How do we live by faith? It is possible for us to have practical, everyday faith when we recognize that God is always doing something in the earth through
and for God’s children. While we may not understand everything God does, every day we can count our blessings and know that God’s loving eye is on us, God’s hand upholds us, and the blessed Holy Spirit indwells us.

And while God is keeping us, we can pray that God’s will be done. We can pray that God keeps others—those we love and those we find hard to love. The more we all are kept, the more peace, love, and joy that can abound for all of us. Also, while God is keeping us, we can ask God to use us to be a blessing to others. Sometimes that requires an easy thing for us to do; at other times, it may be a difficult task we need to complete.

Being a voice for God, especially in a godless society that does not take God’s Word seriously, isn’t easy. Who wants to feel like an outcast? But faith strengthened by God’s Word helps us to understand that evil will not last forever. Thus, we can be people who will be bold for the Lord, whether in our home, community, church, or workplace.

God can undergird our efforts to stamp out the problems in our communities. We also know that the church has the resources to sustain our efforts to eradicate evil and hypocrisy in our world if we are willing to take a stand and live by the faith God has given us.

Session Plans
These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION
- Read the entire first chapter of Habakkuk, focusing on verses 1-4 and 12-14 (the passage printed in the student book).
- Also read session 2 in Journeys and this leader’s guide.
- Review all the words in this chapter that may not be clear to you or your students. Plan to have several translations of the text available, including a contemporary language version such as The Message, the New Living Translation, or the Common English Bible. Reading multiple versions often helps to clarify the biblical writer’s meaning.

Faith strengthened by God’s Word helps us to understand that evil will not last forever.

- Pay attention to questions and observations that come to mind as you review the text. Write them down. Things that are of particular interest to you will be easier to teach with curiosity and passion.
- Process your own feelings about injustice in general and perhaps the injustice you perceive a particular group to be going through.
- For “Beginning the Session,” download the handout found on the Judson Press website (www.judsonpress.com/journeys) and make copies for participants.
- For the activity “Recalling an Injustice,” prepare to play “The Silence of God,” a song by Andrew Peterson, featuring Audrey Assad and Jordan Hamlin (One Shot Live, July 26, 2009), found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvytewIxll0 (four minutes). If you prefer, select a different song expressing anguish and silence.
- For the activity “Personal Testimony,” invite a person of faith from outside of your community to discuss the importance of holding fast to faith and recalling God’s faithfulness in the midst of struggle. Communicate clearly with this person exactly what you are asking her or him to convey to the participants, especially those rituals and practices he or she observes to stay strong in the struggle.
- Have available Bibles; paper; index cards; pens or pencils; and either a chalkboard and chalk; a dry-erase board and markers; or newsprint and markers.

BEGINNING THE SESSION
(15 MINUTES)
Drawing Attention to Women’s History Month
- Distribute the handout on Women’s Suffrage.
- Ask for several volunteers each to read one paragraph.
- Invite participants to discuss their feelings regarding what took place in Washington, DC, on March 3, 1913.
- After the discussion, share this additional insight with the class:
The resulting press coverage of the March 3, 1913, debacle led to a congressional investigation and the first congressional debate over a federal amendment enfranchising women in twenty-six years. The parade
successfully reintroduced the suffrage movement as a legitimate and formidable political force. Seven years later, the 19th Amendment passed by a margin of one vote.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION  
(40-50 MINUTES)

Read the Scripture (5 min.)
- Ask for two volunteers each to read a portion of Habakkuk 1:1-4, 12-14 as it is printed in Journeys:
  - Verses 1-4 (pp. 10-11)
  - Verses 12-14 (p. 12)
- Read Habakkuk 1:2 (the Key Verse) in unison.

Recalling an Injustice (5-10 min.)
- Distribute 3 x 5 cards and ask participants to take three minutes to reflect and then make notes about a time in their lives when they may have felt they were treated or adjudicated unjustly and when they felt that neither God nor others were there to hear them. Inform the participants that they will not be sharing their Injustice Notes out loud unless they voluntarily choose to do so.
- Ask for up to two volunteers who are willing to read their Injustice Notes to also read the Habakkuk 1:2 passage aloud, rendering their own unique emphasis and emotional tone based on the experience noted on their 3 X 5 cards.
- View or listen to the four-minute song “The Silence of God,” by Andrew Peterson, featuring Audrey Assad and Jordan Hamlin. Sit in silence for a minute after watching or listening to the song.
- Discuss the difficulty of holding fast to faith in the midst of long-term oppression, adversity and/or opposition. Use these questions or ones of your own:
  - What words in today’s text jumped out at you? Why?
  - What wrongdoing or trouble are you most sensitive to as you observe society or read or watch the news?
  - Who or what do you feel like fighting for? Why?
  - When change toward justice is slow in coming, how is your faith affected?

AND/OR

Remembering God’s Commitment to Justice (5 min.)
- Explain that when it comes to God’s responding to our cries for deliverance from injustice, the answer is always either yes or “not yet.” Our experience of God being silent is not God’s ultimate no.
- Refer participants to page 12 in Journeys. Ask them to read Habakkuk 1:12-13 and to underscore the words and phrases that highlight God’s resistance to evil and injustice.

OR

Personal Testimony (20 min.)
- Introduce the person you invited to provide a personal testimony about how to observe rituals and practices to remain strong in the midst of a challenging faith walk.
- Invite the person to share his or her story.
- After the testimony, encourage participants to engage her or him in a brief dialogue.

CLOSING THE SESSION  
(5 MINUTES)
- Secure a copy of Langston Hughes’s poem “Dreams” either from the internet or your local library, and read it out loud or have a participant do so.
- Invite participants to reflect on the poem.
- Close by having each person add a sentence to a group prayer as you reflect back on the lesson.
SESSION 3 • MARCH 15, 2020

Consequences for Injustice

SCRIPTURE: Habakkuk 2:6-14

KEY VERSE: But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

—Habakkuk 2:14

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to identify social injustices cited in the Bible for which there will be divine consequences;
• to compare the injustices listed in the text with injustices going on in our contemporary world; and
• to identify ways to personally address social injustice.

Introducing the Scripture
The prophet Habakkuk had waited intently for answers to the prayers and complaints he presented to God. He had earlier asked, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?” (Habakkuk 1:1).

In this session we explore God’s answer to the prophet’s grievances (2:1) regarding the violence and victories of the Chaldeans recounted in the close of the first chapter (see 1:14-17).

The revelation Habakkuk received in chapter 2 is one that was to be realized, not immediately, but in due time, and therefore had to be waited for in faith. He learned that the Chaldeans would fall and would be punished for their harsh avarice, and that false gods were powerless to avert the judgment of the true and living God.

All of this would come in due season. First, God had to fulfill God’s own purposes through the prevailing power of the Chaldeans. In addition, God had to test the faith and patience of God’s people and distinguish between the hypocrites and the sincere. Finally, God would reckon with the Chaldeans, humbling them and their haughty monarch, Nebuchadnezzar, by bringing them down.

Further, chapter 2 informs us that God would deal with the empire’s insatiable thirst for dominion and wealth. In fact, the Chaldeans themselves would at length be made prey (vv. 2-8) as they had preyed on others. Punishment would not be confined to the Chaldeans only; all other sinners like them would perish under a divine woe.

Among them were the covetous, the greedy for wealth and honors (vv. 9-11), those who were injurious and oppressive, and those who established towns and cities by bloodshed and iniquity (vv. 12-14). Such would face judgment and punishment. This also included those who promoted drunkenness that they might expose their neighbors to shame (vv. 15-17) and those who worshiped idols (vv. 18-20).

The first two verses in chapter 2 contain elements that are worthy of comment in preparation for this session. In verse 1, the prophet compared himself to one standing watch as he awaited the revelation of God. Watching requires sober patience and an intense eye to all that comes within view.

Verse 2 says, “Write the vision; make it plain . . . so that a runner may read it.” The vision is that which God was about to reveal. “Make it plain” probably refers to writing the vision in large, legible characters on boxwood tablets covered with wax, on which national affairs were engraved with an iron pen and then hung up in public. “That a runner may read it” is most often explained as being readable by a runner. Some scholars argue that it actually means so legible that whoever read it might then run and tell of the good news of the foe’s coming doom and Judah’s deliverance.

Examining the Scripture
HABAKKUK 2:6-8. Earlier in chapter 2 the Chaldeans are described as
treacherous oppressors, swallowing up nations, never having enough to satisfy themselves (v. 5). Beginning with verse 6, the prophet articulates God’s judgment that the oppressed will rise up singing songs or shouting taunts against the Chaldeans, who are here described as greedy usurers, who have grown filthy rich through unscrupulous lending practices. Habakkuk envisions them as becoming the brunt of jokes or satires. Turnabout is fair play!

Earlier the prophet prayed, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help?” (1:2). Now he was challenging the Chaldeans with another “How long”: “How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge?” (2:6). Goods taken in pledge refers to the conquest of people and the burdening of them with tribute, taken in the form of pledges and bound on the people perpetually. The Hebrew people abhorred usury and had Levitical laws regarding pledges (see Exodus 22:25 and Leviticus 25:36).

Soon and very soon, the tables would turn says the prophet, for the Chaldeans would inevitably reap what they had sown among the world’s nations (Habakkuk 2:7-8). Oppression always provokes just such hatred and denunciation against the oppressor as that described in these verses.

HABAKKUK 2:9-11. These verses comprise a second set of “woes” for the wicked. They comprise a polemic against exploitation and extortion. This passage is directed against dishonest and unscrupulous devices of all kinds, by which persons or nations seek to elevate themselves at the expense of others.

The “nest” in verse 9 is an image in reference to the eagle (see Job 39:27), who builds its nest on high to protect itself from all danger, sitting high and looking low. This is a fitting image for the royal citadel of Babylon. Like the Babel founders, the Chaldeans built high towers to be fortified against those who would challenge them.

The Chaldeans had built an empire by exploitation of conquered peoples and extortion of their possessions. They intended to sustain a thriving economy by these same means. God would have none of it.

By exploiting weaker and less fortunate people, the Chaldeans thought they were building their own security, but actually they were destroying it. Now they had brought shame to their own house (Habakkuk 2:10). As expressed in Jeremiah, “Is it I whom they provoke? says the LORD. Is it not themselves, to their own hurt?” (7:19). Sin can have a violent recoiling impact on the sinner.

God concluded this second refrain with a proverb: “The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork” (Habakkuk 2:11). It is intended to denote the savage cruelty with which the Chaldeans were regarded since the walls and timbers of Babylon were specifically the spoils extorted from the enslavement of conquered peoples. The ascription of speech to inanimate objects such as stones is a very forceful way of calling attention to their true meaning, especially as regards their being or utility. Shakespeare spoke of “tongues in trees, books in running brooks, and sermons in stones.”1 Jesus also used this metaphor: “I tell you, if these [disciples] were silent, the stones would shout out” (Luke 19:40).

HABAKKUK 2:12-14. The third “woe” in this section of the Scripture is against violence and cruelty. Towns built by bloodshed are those that evoke images of mutilations of prisoners, weary incarcerations, unjust detentions, and massacres of noncombatants. We cannot be surprised that when the final judgment was denounced against Babylon, it was declared to be sent in a great measure because of shed blood.

Whether of individuals or of nations, energy devoted to building without fear of God or concern for God’s will shall end in vanity and futility. God’s fire will devour evil empires and bring to naught the proud, the ruthless, the cruel, and the unscrupulous.

Habakkuk concluded this section prophesying the kingdom of God on earth, saying, “But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (v. 14). This allusion appears to be based on Isaiah 11:9, where the prophet declares, “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”

The good news of this passage is a world in which people turn toward each other and not on each other. Our longing for a society where individuals and their leaders do not hurt or destroy one another will be realized.

Applying the Scripture
Habakkuk foresees a time when the earth would be filled with knowledge of the glory of the LORD. That declaration stood in contrast to the words of the prophet from the fallen kingdom of Israel, “My people are destroyed
Three main categories of injustice are raised in Habakkuk 2:6-14, any of which could easily be discussed at length. Each injustice is introduced and identified first with the word *Alas*. *Alas* is a word used to express unhappiness, pity, or concern. The King James Version uses the word *Woe*. After the injustice is identified, God’s remedy is specified. The leader may want to walk participants through these three injustices and identify God’s responses to them.

The first category of injustice (see vv. 6-8), which evokes God’s concern is aggression, those forceful actions or procedures intended to dominate or master others. Acts of aggression often come as unprovoked attacks. Judah saw itself as victims of Chaldean aggression, losing homes, business, and lives to an oppressor that invaded them.

On a global scale, “aggression” is a concern between nation states. The United Nations seeks to secure peace between nations by mediating disputes that can lead to aggressive acts. In the United States, advocacy groups seek to mitigate charges of police brutality through instituting community policing. In the workplace and in communities, mediators work to decrease incidences of assault and harassment between individuals.

The second category of injustice is exploitation and extortion. This is highlighted in Habakkuk 2:9-11. Powerful people and powerful institutions often exploit the unsuspecting masses while protecting themselves with laws and policies that are meant to protect them from litigation or charges of corruption. In our day, many are exploited by pay-day lending schemes, redlining, and exorbitant lending fees.

A third category of injustice is cruelty and violence. Habakkuk focused on this in verses 12-14. Whole societies are often built on the backs of invaded, enslaved, and incarcerated people. What societies are founded on or built on matters. Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners, calls racism “America’s original sin” and claims that we continue to suffer from the legacy of racism. Wallis sees old patterns of white privilege colliding with the changing demographics of a diverse nation. In the midst of this, the church has been slow to respond, and Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of the week.

In his book *America’s Original Sin*, Wallis offers a prophetic and deeply personal call to action in overcoming the racism so ingrained in American society. He speaks candidly to Christians—particularly white Christians—urging them to cross a new bridge toward racial justice and healing.

Because the topics discussed can be sensitive, this session may be particularly painful or even controversial for some. Be open to how the Lord is leading you as you study and determine best how to discuss topics. Recall Habakkuk’s final words prior to his psalm in chapter 3: “But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!” (2:20). This phrase suggests that even though everything in Habakkuk’s world and our world may be in shambles, God still reigns. All things are under God’s sovereign control and within God's power to manage.

Session Plans
These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

**GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION**
- **Pray** for God’s guidance as you prepare for this session.
- **Read** all of Habakkuk 2, focusing on verses 6-14.
- **Also read** session 3 in *Journeys* and this leader’s guide.
- **Review** all the words in this chapter that may not be clear to you or your students.
- **Search** for visual images, using your computer’s search engine, that depict aggression, exploitation, extortion, cruelty, and violence. **Print** ten to fifteen images that best exemplify those words to you.
- **Write** the words, aggression, exploitation, extortion, cruelty, and violence on the board or newsprint.
- **Obtain** an audio or YouTube recording of Michael Jackson’s “Man in the Mirror” to be played in a section of this lesson.
- **Identify** a hymn or song that typifies thanksgiving for God’s deliverance from injustice or oppression. **Make copies** available to participants.
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- **Have available** Bibles; paper; index cards; pens or pencils; and either a chalkboard and chalk; a dry-erase board and markers; or newsprint and markers.

**BEGINNING THE SESSION**

**(5 MINUTES)**

- **Introduce** the idea that actions, both positive and negative, have consequences.
- **Invite** participants to reflect on times in their own lives when they have experienced consequences of actions.
- **Invite** participants to share these thoughts.
- **Explain** that the Bible has many stories in which people and nations encounter divine consequences for their actions. The text for this session tells us that the Chaldeans faced divine consequences for unjust actions.

**DEVELOPING THE SESSION**

**(35-40 MINUTES)**

**Experiencing Injustice (10-15 min.)**

- **Ask** for a volunteer to read Habakkuk 2:6-14 (pages 15-16 in Journeys).
- **Lay out** or mount around the room all of the visual images you prepared before the session.
- **Invite** participants to emotionally identify with one of the images for three minutes as they contemplate the Judean experience of injustice.
- **Time the exercise** using a watch, timer, cell phone, etc. After two minutes, **invite** participants to discuss some of their thoughts and feelings that surfaced, identifying where they see this injustice being played out in the world.

**OR**

**Discussing Injustice (20-25 min.)**

- **Ask** for three volunteers to read these passages:
  - Habakkuk 2:6-8
  - Habakkuk 2:9-11
  - Habakkuk 2:12-14
- **Summarize** and **present** the main points presented in “Applying the Scripture.”
- **Discuss** where and how you see these injustices playing out in your community and world.
- **Discuss** what consequences, if any, you expect to see as a result of these injustices.

**God’s Judgment (10 min.)**

- **Invite** participants to identify the verses that describe God’s judgment.
- **List** the responses on the board or newsprint.
- **Ask** participants if they have ever experienced God’s judgment as a result of bad choices.
- **Invite** participants to read Habakkuk 2:14, God’s restorative promise, together (p. 16 in Journeys).

**OR**

**“Man in the Mirror” (10 min.)**

- **Play** Michael Jackson’s recording of “Man in the Mirror” and **ask** participants to listen to the lyrics.
- **Ask** participants to reflect on the lyrics of this song and ask themselves how they might best respond to aggression, exploitation, extortion, cruelty, and violence around them.

**CLOSING THE SESSION**

**(5 MINUTES)**

- **Distribute** hymnals or song sheets. **Close the session** by singing a hymn or song you selected, one that expresses thanksgiving for God’s deliverance from oppression and injustice.

**OR**

- **Close the session** by reading Habakkuk 3:17-19, the final verses of the book of Habakkuk, which give a great promise to those who trust in God’s security:
  **Though the fig tree does not blossom,**
  **and no fruit is on the vines;**
  **though the produce of the olive fails**
  **and the fields yield no food;**
  **though the flock is cut off from the fold**
  **and there is no herd in the stalls,**
  **yet I will rejoice in the Lord;**
  **I will exult in the God of my salvation.**
  **God, the Lord, is my strength;**
  **he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,**
  **and makes me tread upon the heights.**

—Habakkuk 3:17-19

**NOTES**

SESSION 4 • MARCH 23, 2020

Corrupt Leaders

SCRIPTURE: Micah 3:1-2, 9-12; 6:6-8

KEY VERSE: He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
—Micah 6:8

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to identify models of justice worthy of emulation;
• to reflect on doing justice as the basis of servant leadership; and
• to explore ways of doing justice in our contexts.

Introducing the Scripture
Micah, along with Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, form what some describe as a quartet of significant voices who produced the golden age of Hebrew prophecy in the latter half of the eighth century BC. However, Micah may have been a bit different from the other three with regard to social status. We know Amos to be a shepherd from the hill country. Hosea appears to have been a well-to-do farmer from northern Israel. And Isaiah is presented as an affluent person reared at court and in the capital city of Jerusalem.

On the other hand, Micah appears to be a small-town skilled worker or what we today might call a plebeian or blue-collar worker. Micah’s prophecy indicates that he has deep sympathy for and affinity with the poor. If he were alive today, we might find him far more comfortable chatting it up with laborers in a union hall than engaging in networking small talk at a cocktail party.

Micah was from the village of Moresheth, which is located southwest of Jerusalem. This village was a small agricultural community that was constantly under threat from invading armies. It was much more vulnerable than the walled city of Jerusalem to these kinds of assaults. The elite lived in and sought refuge in cities like Jerusalem. The poor and oppressed and vulnerable lived in villages like Moresheth. Throughout Micah’s prophecy we hear the voice of a contrarian; the rural poor versus urban sophisticate and oppressed workers versus the elite.

Although the book of Micah is relatively short and we don’t know many details of his biography, Micah is nevertheless significant. We know that years after Micah did his work, Jeremiah quoted Micah to defend himself against charges of treason. This suggests that Micah may have been very well known in Jeremiah’s time period (Jeremiah 26:16-18).

The background Scripture for our session today is Micah 3–6, and our lesson will focus on Micah 3:1-2, 9-12; and (6:6-8).

The following outline of the background Scripture should prove helpful.

MICAH 3:1-12: Complaints against leaders:
• Micah complains against community leaders who participate in the exploitation of the most vulnerable members of their communities (3:1-4).
• Micah condemns false prophets who “play to pay” in their engagement with the vulnerable (3:5-8).
• Micah levels charges against the rulers and priests engaged in all levels of corruption (3:9-12).

MICAH 4:1-5: Micah condemns militarism and its impact on the poor. An especially powerful passage in Micah, and one that we hear often, says, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

MICAH 4:6-13: A great reversal—the poor and the “lame” shall ultimately become the strong nation.


MICAH 6:1-5: God resumes the trial against God’s people—God has been faithful, but God’s children have turned their backs on God.

MICAH 6:6-8: God requires not only sacrifice but justice.

MICAH 6:7-16: Micah addresses Judean policies of oppression, which are rooted in economic injustice.

Examining the Scripture
MICAH 3:1-2
“Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel!” (3:1a). Micah appealed to the leaders of Judah,
most likely addressing prominent individuals in the capital city of Jerusalem. The language here is like that of a divine covenantal lawsuit (see 1:2-7).

These were corrupt governmental leaders, and Micah indicted them for ignoring the demands of justice. His first question to them was, “Should you not know justice?—you who hate the good and love the evil” (3:1b-2a). Micah had earlier provided a vivid example of Israel’s corrupt rulers in 2:1-2.

The injustice was in how the leaders of government treated the poor, those whom Micah called “my people” (3:2, 3). Micah stood in solidarity with the poor, and through him we see that God does as well. The conduct toward the poor was like the butchering of people as though they were animals (vv. 2-3).

Micah was not implying that the rulers of Judah practiced cannibalism. Rather, he used this vivid imagery of the butchering of flesh for the pot to describe the cruel way the leaders treated the poor and oppressed.

**MICAH 3:9-12.** This passage is a message of indictment and of judgment on corrupt leaders, resulting in Zion’s fall. **Verse 9:** Micah again addressed the leaders of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel. Note that Micah used the word “house” here. Perhaps he was indicating that his audience and hearers were of one family, clothed in a single garment of destiny. In any case, this passage points to a bitter depiction of their transgressions. Micah accused them of despising justice. The Hebrew word for “despise” means to utterly abhor something.

**Verses 10-11:** As the leaders governed, they shed the blood of the poor and oppressed. Their greed and desire for personal gain blinded them to the humanity of their fellow citizens. The leaders were arrogant and violent. Systematically, their governmental processes inevitably led to corruption. The injustices were not limited to governmental leaders. The religious leaders were complicit as well. Micah said, “Its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money.”

These leaders maintained an external veneer of religion. They were overly confident in assuming, “Surely the LORD is with us!” based on a perverted understanding of God’s covenant with Israel. They had grown blind to the ethical demands of the covenant and believed that their historic relationship to the Lord would prevent national calamity despite their failure to address justice.

**Verse 12:** “Therefore because of you…” The actions of the corrupt religious and civil leaders were directly linked to the destruction of the nation. Micah declared that the predicted catastrophe would certainly come. Again the “therefore” here establishes that the cause of the captivity was the disobedience of both the political and religious leaders. Micah also included the destruction of the temple, the visible sign of God’s presence, in his prophecy. Tragically, the temple, now an empty symbol of spirituality and religion, would perish.

Micah 6:6-8 points out the essence of true religion. In response to the question, “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?” the prophet gave an answer unmatched in spiritual comprehension anywhere in the Hebrew covenant. What the Lord requires, God has already showed: acting justly in dealings between persons; walking humbly in tune with God; and showing mercy—also known as steadfast love—as the bond between the horizontal and vertical relationships of life. Micah 6:6-8 is perhaps the best-known text in the book and should be understood as the response of the repentant Israelites to the challenge of verses 3–5.

In verses 6-8 the prophet provided a salient commentary to the proposal of the preceding verses. Corrupt political and religious leaders expressed their desire to bring acceptable worship to God in terms of the sacrificial system familiar to them. The leaders sought to progressively magnify ritual offerings in their religious tradition to win the approval of God and make restitution for past failures. The offerings envisioned by these corrupt leaders progressively increased in value to reach an over-the-top climax. Certainly, burnt offerings were a normal part of cultic worship, but to offer the valuable calves a year old was only the privilege of the rich. On governmental occasions, thousands of rams were offered (e.g., 1 Kings 8:63; 2 Chronicles 30:24), but for the individual to do so would be absolutely devastating. Oil was a recommended complement to a cereal offering (e.g., Leviticus 2), and “ten thousands of rivers of oil” presumes cereal offerings enormous beyond imagination.

Micah pointed out the ineffectiveness of the superficial ritual, his portrayal progressively growing more and more outrageous, the most shocking conclusion being the terrible (and prohibited, e.g., in Exodus 13:13; Leviticus 18:21) act of child sacrifice. But the death of the firstborn, “the fruit of my body,” far from removing transgression, “the sin of my soul,” would merely multiply it. Micah thus illuminated the ultimate ineffectiveness of the prescribed system of sacrificial worship (cf. Hebrews 10:4). He therefore stands in the tradition

Micah concluded in verse 8,

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk Humbly with your God?*

**Applying the Scripture**

**MITCH RANDALL AND ETHICSDAILY.COM**

Mitch Randall is the executive director of EthicsDaily.com, a division of the Baptist Center for Ethics (BCE). The BCE was established in 1991 with the mission of providing proactive, positive, and practical ethics resources to churches. Many American Baptist churches partner with and support BCE.

Mitchell Randall explains why he is an advocate for social justice.

I advocate for social justice because of my interpretation and application of Scripture, not in spite of it. Let me offer a few reasons why.

I am an advocate for social justice because of God’s creative mandate. In the book of Genesis, God creates the universe and entrusts humanity with its care. Humans have a social responsibility as caretakers of this world and everything that lives within it. As part of this ecosystem God created, we live in a symbiotic relationship with all inhabitants. Therefore, we are part of a social order that God created and instructed us to treat justly.

I am an advocate for social justice because God liberated the Hebrews. When the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt, God called Moses to help free them. God did not leave them in their enslavement hoping the pharaoh would change his mind or waiting for the Hebrews to revolt and fight their way out. God intervened, demonstrating how individuals who are faithful to the Word could bring good news to the captives. Moses possessed and exhibited a social conscience rooted in his faith that we are called to emulate.

I am an advocate for social justice because of God’s prophets. When I read the prophets of the Old Testament, their sermons and soliloquies strike the match for social justice. They advocated for the poor, the hungry, the sick and the outcast. In both kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the prophets made it clear that any injustice toward the downtrodden was an affront to God. Therefore, judgment came upon them for their social behaviors. Social repentance was the only way to thwart the consequences of their sins.

I am an advocate for social justice because of God’s Son. I cannot read the Gospels without seeing social justice as an essential concept and undertaking of Jesus’ message and ministry. Social justice was at the heart of his gospel. He came to save the whole person—mind, body, and soul.

While Jesus had one eye on the eternal, he had his other eye on the world around him. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, gave sight to the blind, welcomed the stranger, and embraced the marginalized. Before becoming the Christ of history, Jesus was—and remains—a social justice advocate for the many.

I am an advocate for social justice because God’s apostles led the way. With Jesus as an example, the book of Acts and the epistles demonstrate that social justice remained a critical element of the early church. From caring for widows to unique offerings for the poor, these acts of social justice were an extension of Jesus’ message and ministry.

The apostle James states it best. “You have faith, and I have works. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith... For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead” (James 2:18, 26).

Social justice is a vital component of the gospel. It is not the whole gospel, but one should not divorce it from the message and ministry of the church either...

For me, the main reason for my support of social justice is that my faith guides me to do so.¹

**Session Plans**

These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

**GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION**

- Pray for guidance, openness, and wisdom as you prepare for the session.
- Read Micah 3:1-2, 9-12; and 6:6-8, focusing on 6:6-8. Also read session 6 in Journeys and this leader’s guide.
• Have available Bibles, as well as index cards, pens, and pencils for the activities.

BEGINNING THE SESSION (5-10 MINUTES)
Identify Transformative Figures
• Ask participants to think of people who have made a significant impact on their community for the better, and write the names of these people on the board or on newsprint.
• As individuals respond with a name, invite them to explain what it was that made this person so special to them.

OR
• Reflect on the phrases, “Do justice,” “Love kindness,” and “Walk humbly.”
• Distribute three 3 x 5 cards to participants.
• Ask participants to write three words that best describe their images of these phrases.
• Collect all of the cards, mix them up, and then slowly read each word on the cards so that the class hears them.
• Ask participants what themes they noticed as the cards were read. Ask participants to describe their emotions as the cards were read.

Introduce the Text
• Explain that the text for this session, Micah 6:6-8, describes God’s presentation of a devout leader. In this text, God reveals that God’s servant is a champion of justice with notable characteristics to emulate.
• Pray.

DEVELOPING THE LESSON (35-40 MINUTES)
Read the Scripture
• Ask two volunteers to each read aloud the texts printed in Journeys, pp. 21-22, 23, 24:
  o Micah 3:1-2, 9-12
  o Micah 6:6-8
• Ask the rest of the participants to identify a word or phrase in the reading of these texts that capture their attention or move them. Ask them to share that word or phrase.
• Point out that the Israelites were living in a time of exploitation, where the rich and powerful were lording over the poor and oppressed.
• Read Micah 6:8 (the Key Verse) in unison.

Discuss the Text (15-20 min.)
• Lead a discussion of Micah 3:1-2 and 6:6-8 using material from “Examining the Scripture.”
• Identify some of the key words and phrases in the text (“heads of Jacob,” “rulers of the house of Israel,” “justice,” “kindness,” “walking humbly,” etc.), and explain their meanings in this context.
• Add to the discussion with questions such as these:
  o In our community, what kind of priority do political and religious leaders place on the plight of the poor?
  o What are the differences between charity and justice?
  o What images come to mind for you when you think of a just leader?
  o Growing up, how much time did your church or Sunday school spend talking about justice? How important is justice to your faith perspective?
  o How has having experienced a leader fail to fulfill his or her social responsibilities impacted you emotionally, spiritually or tangibly?

Paraphrase Micah 6:6-8
• Distribute index cards, pens, and pencils.
• Ask participants to write a paraphrase for Micah 6:6-8.
• Invite participants to form groups of two or three and share their paraphrases with their partners.

Contemporary Witnesses
Mitch Randall and the Baptist Center for Ethics (10-15 min.)
• Read “Applying the Scripture,” which deals with Mitch Randall of EthicsDaily.com, who is a Baptist champion for social justice.
• Then ask each participant to identify and share a way or ways they might demonstrate justice in their context.

CLOSING THE SESSION (5 MINUTES)
• Invite participants to name champions for justice in the church and community for whom they are praying.
• End the session with a prayer of gratitude for these leaders and for their continued faithfulness and steadfastness.

NOTE
SESSION 5 • MARCH 30, 2020

Leading Justly

SCRIPTURE: Malachi 2:1-9, 3:5-6

KEY VERSE: My covenant with him was a covenant of life and well-being, which I gave him; this called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in integrity and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. —Malachi 2:5-6

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to reflect on the relationship between reverence for God and community well-being;
• to identify qualities of a just leader; and
• to know that loving God means serving people.

Introducing the Scripture

The book of the Bible that bears the name Malachi may or may not be based on an actual person by that name. Malachi literally means “my messenger” or a messenger or angel of Yahweh. Nevertheless, the book does present a considerable amount of information about the author’s perspectives, especially as it relates to the connection between covenant and right actions.

Malachi is the last of the short books that comprise the Minor Prophets and is the last book of the Hebrew, or Old Testament canon. Together with the books of Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi forms a block of postexilic prophecy. We are, in these books, given insight into the social and religious conditions of this meagerly documented period of Israel’s history.

The book of Malachi is laid out in a series of oracles. The King James Version of the Bible uses the word “Burden” instead of oracle (cf. Malachi 1:1). An oracle is simply a literary (or oral) formula used to introduce a divinely inspired message. An oracle primes us for the fact that we are about to hear a speech, utterance, or pronouncement from God.

There are six oracles in the book of Malachi. The first (Malachi 1:2-5) reaffirms God’s love for Israel within the context of the skepticism that had crept into Jerusalem. Some had questioned whether God still cared for God’s people.

The second (Malachi 1:6-2:9) denounces the priests who had failed to provide moral and religious leadership and failed to take responsibility for the hardships for which the people were suffering.

The third (Malachi 2:10-16) speaks to Jewish men divorcing their wives and marrying foreign wives and taking on contradictory religious views and practices. Marriage is here affirmed as a lifelong commitment of companionship and not just a biological necessity.

The fourth (Malachi 2:17-3:5) is a prophecy of the coming of Yahweh in judgment, at which time spiritual leaders will be the first to be judged.

The fifth (Malachi 3:6-12) equates divine disfavor with people’s complaints and their failure to give God reverence and respect.

The sixth (Malachi 3:13-4:3) returns to the affirmation that there is a moral order in the universe, and God is reconciling the world unto God’s self. Our lesson is comprised of the first oracle and parts of oracles four and five.

Malachi’s book appears to have been written sometime between 460 and 450 BC, after the return from exile, where the land was now ruled by a Persian governor (cf. Nehemiah 5:14 and Haggai 1:1). Although our texts show no evidence of extraordinary oppression or abuse of power in this occupied state, being a subject state is never a happy lot. Vassals had to bear the cost of colonization and taxes to pay for the Persian military. This would have been a drain on the small Jewish community. Certainly together with the books of Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi forms a block of postexilic prophecy.
disillusionment was beginning to set in for many who had one time held tenaciously to the promises of Isaiah (e.g., Isaiah 49, 54). How do leaders respond when people begin to lose heart and forsake their faith?

The temple cult was now in full operation at this writing of our texts (1:10; 3:1, 10), and the prophet was complaining that the priests had grown slack and weary of their responsibilities and rituals (1:6-13). Priests were offering polluted food on God’s altar. Blind and blemished animals were sacrificed. Lame and sick animals (cf. Leviticus 22:17-25) were given while healthy and choice ones were held back. Malachi and Yahweh were appalled by these priests who had despised their God and their solemn vocation.

Throughout Malachi one central theme dominates his thought. That theme is the need to remain faithful to the Lord’s covenant and its teaching. This is especially important for spiritual leaders who are called to lead justly.

Examining the Scripture

MALACHI 2:1-2. An important context of these opening verses is Malachi 1:1 where the prophet and purpose of the book are introduced. We learn from it the name of the author (Malachi) or the perspective from which the book is written (“Messenger of Yahweh”). The prophet claims to have received an “oracle” or a divinely inspired message. Now in 2:2 Malachi aimed this message at the priests, announcing that “this command is for you.” As we will discuss later, Malachi made no real distinction in his oracle between priests and Levites. For the purposes of this lesson, the words priest and Levite may simply be understood as “spiritual leader.”

Here God was giving an ultimatum. “Listen! Straighten up and fly right. If you do not, you will suffer severe consequences.” According to Malachi 1:6-14, these same priests were guilty of a multiplicity of offenses against God. The priests didn’t honor God. They didn’t respect God. They brought polluted food to the altar. They offered blind and lame animals in sacrifice. It was for these reasons that God said, “I will send the curse on you and I will curse your blessings.”

A fundamental role of the priest was to pronounce blessings on the people (see Numbers 6:23–27), but God declared that their blessings would become curses so that their uniquely priestly function would be worse than useless, essentially null and void.

MALACHI 2:3. First of all, God declared, “I will rebuke your offspring.” We need to remember that this reproof was addressed to the priests who had failed to fulfill their duties. This rebuke is best understood through the perspective of the power of generational modeling. God said, having seen only a corrupt model, succeeding generations would likely continue in the practice of corrupt worship. Therefore, the “offspring” also would be guilty and in need of rebuke. This passage stresses that spiritual leadership carries great responsibility. If leaders carry out their responsibilities with fidelity, the people of God grow in their relationship with God; if leaders serve reluctantly or unfaithfully, the people of God suffer.

Second, God threatened to spread dung on the priests’ faces and on their offerings and put them out of God’s presence. Dung was the refuse that should have been removed from animals prepared for sacrifice. God might have been saying here that just as the priests had become sloppy, careless, and slack in their attention to the requirements of their office, even to the point of neglecting to remove the dung from animals for sacrifice (Exodus 29:14; Nahum 3:6); God was prepared to take that same excrement, smear it all over the faces of God’s priests, and send them out of God’s presence.

MALACHI 2:4-7. Malachi led by reminding the priests of the Levitical covenant and what they were meant to be and do (see Numbers 25:12-13; Deuteronomy 10:8-9). Priests were to be zealous in making atonement for the Israelites. Priests were required (privileged) to stand before the Lord night and day, ministering to God and blessing God’s name. God agreed to provide life and well-being to the Israelites. The
Israelites in response would revere and stand in awe of God’s name.

Exemplifying true spiritual leadership, Levi had held true to the speaking and doing of God’s word (Torah), walked with God in integrity and justice (uprightness), and worked to turn many away from iniquity. Malachi was quick to affirm that all spiritual leaders must walk with God, revere God, and live a life of integrity and justice. Spiritual leaders are guardians of a sacred trust. They are intermediaries between the people and God, messengers “of the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 2:4).

MALACHI 2:8-9. This section sounds the alarm of judgment. The priests had been unfaithful in their teaching, causing the community to stumble by their irresponsible instruction. The covenant, meant for the well-being of the entire community, had been compromised and defiled. Therefore, these priests would be despised and abased, especially because they had shown partiality in their instruction.

Partiality, expressly forbidden in Leviticus 19:15, was particularly egregious when it came to spiritual leadership. The priests were to be like God in this respect. Leviticus 19:15-18 says,

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

MALACHI 3:5-6. Just in case the priests missed it the first time around, Malachi made what God requires of spiritual leaders very plain in these two verses. God first takes aim against priests who function like sorcerers, who practice a form of divination or fortune-telling used to influence people or events for their own selfish gain or for that of their clients.

God disdains priests who mistreat workers by underpaying them or overworking them. God disdains leaders who do not care about the vulnerable in our society and do not address their needs through direct services or the creation of fair and just policies. It is a poor and unjust leader who comforts the comfortable and afflicts the afflicted.

All of the other practices listed in 3:5-6 are extremely damaging to the soul and to the structures of society as well. Adultery as listed here is sexual infidelity to one’s spouse or with the spouse of another. Malachi was particularly concerned here about the practices of some Hebrew men and perhaps even the practices of priests: some were divorcing their Hebrew wives and then marrying foreign women and appropriating their religious practices, negatively impacting the community.

Swearing falsely by God’s name is simply lying and taking God’s name in vain. Some people exploited wage earners, oppressed widows, afflicted orphans, treated foreigners unjustly, and did not fear God. Such demonstrated the biblical concern over social ethics as well as with personal morality.

And as concerned as God is about all of this, God holds out the hope of repentance and promise. God declared that God’s character is immutable, it does not change (v. 6), and based on God’s commitment to well-being, the people of Israel had not perished—nor would ever perish! Furthermore, in spite of Israel’s propensity to renege on its covenantal commitment, God always proves faithful.

In spite of Israel’s propensity to renege on its covenantal commitment, God always proves faithful.

MALACHI 2:8-9

In spite of Israel’s propensity to renege on its covenantal commitment, God always proves faithful.

Applying the Scripture

All spiritual leaders must speak God’s Word and do the Word of God as well. They are to do so with integrity and justice, following the example of Levi. Leadership grounded in a reverence for God issues forth in words and wisdom.
from the leader to the gathered community. Ultimately the posture and actions of leaders impact the well-being of the entire community.

Just leaders act honorably and serve reverently, even in the midst of challenging situations. The Reverend Dr. Jitsuo Morikawa is an example of such a leader. Morikawa was a minister of Jesus Christ, powerful prophet of the twentieth century, a gadfly, and a winsome neighbor. Read his story in the Journeys student book, session 5, pages 30–31. You will see how Morikawa modeled great leadership and had a tremendous positive impact on those around him.

Session Plans
These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION
- Also **read** session 5 in Journeys and this leader’s guide.
- **Pray** for guidance, openness, and wisdom as you prepare for the session.
- **Identify** at least one instance in your life, which you are comfortable sharing with the class, where you have allowed weariness and doubt to undermine your performance as a leader.
- **Have several copies of the Bible available** for participants who may not have brought them. These will be helpful when reading from Malachi 1, which is not printed in the student book.
- For the activity “Historical Witness: Mother Pollard,” **cue up** the four-minute YouTube video of “My Feet Is Tired but My Soul Is Rested,” at https://youtu.be/zVeKed3BY3s.1
- **Have available** Bibles, paper, index cards, pens or pencils, and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.

BEGINNING THE SESSION (5-10 MINUTES)
- **Distribute** paper and pens and markers and ask participants to doodle, sketch, or write about a time when they were going through tough times and subsequently failed to perform or present or give their best. This failure may have been experienced as emotional, spiritual, physical, or any combination of the three.
  - After participants have finished, **ask** them to gather in groups of two or three and share their experiences of not doing their best.
  - **Share** your own experience with the class of you failing to perform or give your best in a situation.
  - **Explain** that this session’s Scripture was written to address the leaders of God’s people at a time in their history when they had failed in their responsibilities to serve with integrity and uprightness. Because of that failure, the community slowly devolved. In this text, the prophet spoke with a word of exhortation, judgment, and eventually consolation.

DEVELOPING THE LESSON (35-40 MINUTES)

A Persevering Faith (10-15 min.)
- **Ask** three volunteers each to read a portion of Malachi, some of which is printed in Journeys:
  - Malachi 1:6-8
  - Malachi 2:1-9
  - Malachi 3:5-7
- **Read Malachi 2:5-6** (the Key Verses) in unison.
- **Ask** participants to point out words and phrases that can come across as rebuke, reprimand, or encouragement with each reading.
- **Point out** that the Israelites were living in a time of occupation of a foreign power, resources were increasingly growing scarce, and faith among both the people and their leaders was beginning to wane.
- **Discuss** the challenge of remaining faithful and hopeful during periods of hardship and adversity. Use these questions or come up with some of your own:
  - How has having experienced a leader fail to fulfill his or her responsibilities impacted you emotionally, spiritually, or tangibly?
  - What does reverence for God (Malachi 3:5) have to do with paying workers fair wages, caring for the vulnerable, and welcoming immigrants and refugees?
When do you find it most challenging to hold on to your faith?

º How do you feel when you see leaders cut corners or cheat or simply “phone it in”?
º Which Scripture passages read today resonate with you most powerfully?

AND

Historical Witness: Mother Pollard (10-15 min.)

- Read this introduction to “Mother” Pollard, an elder in the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church during the time of the Montgomery bus boycott led by Martin Luther King Jr. and others.

Mother Pollard

“Mother” Pollard was an elder of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, during the time of the bus boycott. The boycott was a seminal event in the civil rights movement that produced a political and social protest campaign against the policy of racial segregation on the public transit system in Montgomery. King recounted in his writings that he suggested to Mother Pollard, then about age seventy-two, that after several weeks of walking to her destinations instead of taking the bus, she might take the bus again for the sake of her health. She replied, “My feet is tired, but my soul is rested.”

- Then view the four-minute YouTube video of “My Feet Is Tired but My Soul Is Rested,” performed by the Main Street Singers.

- Afterward discuss the following:
  - What encouragements or resources do you find in today’s Scripture passages that may help leaders remain faithful in their responsibilities?
  - How did Mother Pollard demonstrate responsible leadership in times of adversity?
  - What characteristics of God’s nature and activity helped to strengthen her leadership and walk with God in tough times?

OR

Historical Witness: Jitsuo Morikawa (10-15 min.)

- Have volunteers read the affirmation of the leadership of Jitsuo Morikawa as listed on pages 30-31 in Journeys.

- Then discuss the following:
  - What encouragements or resources do you find in today’s Scripture passages that may help leaders remain faithful in their responsibilities?
  - How did Jitsuo Morikawa demonstrate responsible leadership in times of adversity?
  - What characteristics of God’s nature and activity helped strengthen Morikawa’s leadership and walk with God in tough times?

CLOSING THE SESSION (5 MINUTES)

- Invite participants to name leaders in the church and community for whom they are praying.

- End the session with a prayer of gratitude for these leaders and for their continued faithfulness and steadfastness.

NOTE

Introducing the Scripture

Isaiah is quoted or alluded to in the New Testament more frequently than any other part of the Hebrew Scriptures, with the possible exception of the Psalms. In fact, the Christian church father and translator Jerome said that the prophet Isaiah should be called an evangelist instead. His reason for making this distinction was that Isaiah did such a good job of describing the mysteries of Christ and the church that one could easily conclude he was compiling a history of what had already happened instead of prophesying what was yet to come.

Some early church fathers referred to Isaiah as their “fifth Gospel” because of language they believed predicted the virgin birth. By the latter part of the Middle Ages, however, Isaiah was considered the prophet of the Passion.

At the time of the Reformation, Isaiah 40:8, “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever,” was central to Martin Luther’s Bible-centered faith. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Christian missionary societies found support for their fervor in Isaiah 40–55. The same section of the book with the addition of chapters 56–66 has been significant in feminist theology because of the positive female imagery the text suggests.

While on the surface Isaiah appears to be a unified book, biblical scholars call it an amalgamation or blend of the oracles of two or three separate writers. Thus, we have the designation: First, Second, and possibly Third Isaiah. Second Isaiah is the anonymous prophet credited with writing Isaiah 40–55. Our text this week is found in chapter 42. Second Isaiah was written toward the end of the neo-Babylonian period. Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, would soon move westward and Babylon would fall. But the Hebrew exiles living in Babylon at the time inevitably doubted their status as God’s chosen people.

Nowhere in the Old Testament is the message of God’s sovereignty over history made clearer than in Isaiah’s Servant Songs (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–11; 52:13—53:12). Innumerable pages have been written about the poetry in the book of Isaiah. Suffice it to say that we will find the writer’s style to be warm, flowing, and impassioned. This week’s study centers on the first of these songs, followed by five verses that elaborate on it.

Examining the Scripture

ISAIAH 42:1–4. The identity of the “servant” (v. 1) is widely debated. Elsewhere in the book, Israel (also called Jacob) is referred to as God’s servant (41:8–9; 44:1–2, 21; 45:4; 48:20). Yet we find evidence to suggest that the servant and Israel/Jacob are not one and the same (49:5–6). In another place, Moses is called God’s servant (63:11). Considering the political situation of the day, some scholars have even speculated that
the writer had Cyrus, the liberator, in mind as God’s agent who would bring justice and salvation to the nations. But the servant songs are also considered to be messianic in nature. In fact, in many ancient translations, the word “messiah” was inserted after “servant” in verse 1.

The position adopted for this lesson is that the servant is Jesus, God’s Anointed One. This view is substantiated by the fact that Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism (Matthew 3:13-17) echoes this first servant song. Also, in Matthew 12:18-21 we find the apostle quoting Isaiah’s words to clearly identify Jesus as the servant.

There is something very distinctive about this servant: he belongs to God (Isaiah 42:1a). God upholds, supports, and sustains him at every turn. God has chosen him. In other words, God has singled out the servant for a specific purpose. Furthermore, God regards him with deep affection.

The servant is fully equipped to do his work because the Holy Spirit is upon him (v. 1b). The final line of verse 1 gives us a glimpse of what his work was to be: “he will bring forth justice to the nations.” This assignment is reiterated in subsequent verses: “he will faithfully bring forth justice” (v. 3c), and “. . . until he has established justice in the earth” (v. 4b). Humans have always sought a champion of justice to work on their behalf. And God’s chosen servant, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, has always defended and upheld the cause of justice.

The servant is to accomplish his work in a quiet, unostentatious, and unobtrusive manner (v. 2). He stands in sharp contrast to a leader who loudly and proudly broadcasts his agenda. Rather, he will speak calmly and quietly, refraining from raising his voice in strife or argument. We recall what people said about Jesus in his day: “The crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7:28b-29). Even the temple police recognized something different about the manner in which he spoke. They said, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” (John 7:46).

Likewise, the servant does not force anything upon anyone (Isaiah 42:3a).

He respects the weak and oppressed. The nouns in this verse are symbolic. Just as a bruised reed cannot withstand a significant amount of force, people who are weakened by whatever situation oppresses them may collapse under duress. A gentle approach is preferred. We find myriad examples of Jesus’ gentle approach in the Gospels.

Furthermore, the servant’s mission is to bless, not abolish (v. 3b). The poet offered the image of a dimly burning wick as a symbolic parallel to the bruised reed. The servant will not mistreat the person whose hope is nearly extinguished due to external oppression or internal disillusion. The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12; Luke 6:20-22) certainly promise welcome blessings to anyone seeking hope.

So far, statements of what the servant is not have been used to describe the servant’s work. The pattern continues in Isaiah 42:4. God’s chosen servant “will not grow faint or be crushed.” As we look more closely at the poetry, we discover that the writer has introduced a chiasm. The term chiastic comes from the Greek letter chi, which looks like our letter X. It is a literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order. The result is a mirror effect. Consider the following:

- v. 3 – a bruised reed – not be crushed

From this diagram, we see that the first verb in verse 4 reflects on the dimly burning wick, while the second verb reflects on the bruised reed. (There are numerous chiastic passages in the Bible. Matthew 23:12 and Mark 2:27 are two examples of Jesus’ use of this literary device.)

Implicit in the poet’s language is the thought of difficulty. Nevertheless, the mission will be accomplished; justice will be established in the earth. Toward this end, we continue to work and wait.

**ISAIAH 42:5-9.** Although biblical scholars agree that this section of verses forms a unit, that’s about the extent of...
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their agreement. Notes in the New Interpreter’s Study Bible dub it a hymn that praises God as the creator of the cosmos. As such, it also elaborates on the preceding servant song.

Images of God as Creator introduce the hymn (v. 5). It is essential that the one who is to bring forth justice to the nations is supported by God, the creator of heaven and earth. The poet often linked images of the heavens and the earth (40:22; 42:5, 44:23-24; 45:8, 12, 18; 48:13; 49:13; 51:6). The combination appears in the first verse of the Old Testament (Genesis 1:1) and is repeated regularly by many Christians as they recite the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.” But this usage even predates the Bible and can be found in Babylonian and Canaanite texts. By combining the two concepts of heaven and earth, writers were able to describe the full range of creation.

Images of God as Creator led to descriptions of God’s actions (Isaiah 42:6-9). Applying the words to the previously described messianic servant brings further clarity.

- God called (and chose) the servant.
- God took the servant by the hand and kept him secure.
- God gave him as a covenant to the people and a light to the nations.
- God assigned him the tasks of opening the eyes of the blind and releasing prisoners.

The words are self-explanatory with the exception, perhaps, of “a covenant to the people.” The poet repeated the phrase in 49:8. Many study Bibles and commentaries note that the Hebrew meaning is uncertain, so an attempt to interpret it is pure conjecture. We can say, however, that “the people” becomes all-inclusive with the addition of “light to the nations.” And if we regard the covenant concept as a divine outpouring of grace, a new agreement, “a covenant to the people,” it describes the Messiah. The servant is not just the mediator of a new covenant (Hebrews 8:6) but the embodiment of a new covenant.

Isaiah 42:8 again declares “I am the LORD,” thereby adding appropriate emphasis. But here we find the parallel statement: “that is my name.” In the Semitic languages, the name expresses the nature of the person. Another way to read the verse is “I am Yahweh; that is my name.” The name Yahweh, translated as “LORD” in the New Revised Standard Version, is a form of the Hebrew verb “to be,” thus rendered “I AM WHO I AM” in Exodus 3:14. It denotes the eternal nature of the Divine who neither shares glory with anyone nor gives praise to idols. Glory and praise belong to God alone.

Finally, the almighty God proclaims the end of the old prophecies and the beginning of new things to be brought about by the chosen servant. They are compared to seeds in the ground that have not yet germinated and appeared above ground.

Applying the Scripture

Before exploring an application, take a moment to read Matthew 21:1-17. (This is a common Palm Sunday Gospel reading.) In it we find Jesus, the chosen servant, fulfilling Second Isaiah’s vision of the Messiah. He entered Jerusalem humbly and quietly. He upheld God’s justice when he cleansed the temple. What more is there to say in this regard?

Following are a few applicable nuggets:

“I have put my spirit upon him” (Isaiah 42:1b). God never assigns a task without also furnishing the necessary equipment. Many congregations as well as individual believers long for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit already indwells those who believe in Jesus. If God is nudging us toward a special task, we need look no further for spiritual empowerment. Go ahead, fulfill God’s call to servanthood!

“He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street” (v. 2). Loud, pompous rhetoric has only a brief effect and can be self-defeating. The prescribed unostentatious manner of the servant stands in stark contrast. We communicate God’s Good News most effectively when we do not engage in contentious argument but rather speak calmly and quietly.

“A bruised reed he will not break” (v. 3a). Coercion doesn’t work very well.
John Stott wrote, “The authority by which the Christian leader leads is not power but love, not force but example, not coercion but reasoned persuasion. Leaders have power, but power is safe only in the hands of those who humble themselves to serve.” As followers of Jesus, we approach others with gentleness, tenderness, patience, and compassion.

“He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice” (v. 4a,b). Working for justice requires perseverance. Congregations and individual believers who are called to the task of setting the mind of Christ as the ruling standard in the world must be as steadfast as their God. Endowed with the Spirit, we can do this!

**Session Plans**

These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

**GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION**

- Read Isaiah 42:1-9 as well as the material in this leader’s guide and Journeys for this session.
- Have available Bibles and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers, or paper and pencils.
- Note that the session plan offers small-group options as well as options for the larger group. Choose the small-group option in the beginning, choose the small-group options throughout, because each activity builds on the previous one.
- For the closing activity, check to see if “The Servant Song” or “Make Me a Servant” is included in your congregation’s hymnal or praise book. (This song is under current copyright, so it may not be downloaded or copied without licensed permission.)

**BEGINNING THE SESSION** (5-10 MINUTES)

- Inform participants that this session will explore one of the “servant songs” in Isaiah.
- Ask, “What descriptive words come to mind when you think of the word servant?”
- Invite responses, and record them on the board or newsprint.

OR

- Divide into small groups and ask each group to generate its own list of descriptive words related to servant.
- Provide paper and pencils.
- If you plan to use the small-group option in the next exercise, keep the seating arrangement intact as you make the transition in the rest of the session.

AND

- Say, “Later on we’ll see how our expectations match up with God’s as described in Isaiah 42.”
- Pray.

**DEVELOPING THE SESSION** (35-40 MINUTES)

**Explore Images in the Servant Song Scriptures** (15 min.)

- Ask someone to read Isaiah 42:1-4 (pp. 33-34 in Journeys).
- Invite participants to suggest words and phrases directly from the passage that describe this servant.
- Record the responses.

OR

- If you chose the small-group option in “Beginning the Session,” continue in the same fashion for this part of this exercise. Invite each group to generate its own list of scriptural servant images.
- Reconvene the entire class, but keep the seating arrangement intact again.

AND

- Invite participants to identify any of Isaiah’s words and phrases that are unclear. Ask participants what they think the meaning might be. As necessary, explain the meanings using information in “Examining the Scripture.”

**Compare/Contrast Descriptive Word Lists** (10 min.)

- Place the list you generated in “Beginning the Session” beside the list from the previous activity.
- Identify the similarities and differences. Use different colors or marks (such as check marks, asterisks, arrows) to differentiate between the similarities and differences.

OR

- Ask group members to compare and contrast their two lists.
- Reconvene the larger group and move the chairs back into the original configuration.
AND

- **Explain** that the servant Isaiah described was Jesus, the Messiah.
- **Ask**, “How did Jesus match up with Isaiah’s description, focusing primarily on the images in verses 2-4?”
- **Add** insights from “Examining the Scripture” as needed.

AND/OR

**Recognize Jesus as the Old Testament Servant** (15 min.)

- **Share** the information from the first paragraph of “Examining the Scripture” regarding the various ways biblical scholars have identified the servant.
- **Ask** someone to read Matthew 21:1-17.
- **Ask**, “What attributes of the servant that Isaiah described were fulfilled in the Matthew 21 account?”

(He entered Jerusalem humbly and quietly. He upheld God’s justice when he cleansed the temple.)

- **Invite** participants to draw on their knowledge of Jesus’ entire earthly ministry and suggest other instances in which he emulated Isaiah’s description of God’s chosen servant. You might start by offering John 7:46 as an example.

**OR**

**Identify Jesus as God’s Servant** (10 min.)

- **Ask** several participants to read Isaiah 42:1-9 (pp. 33 and 35 in Journeys). You might assign each reader two verses, with a final person reading verse 9.
- **Discuss** the following questions:
  - What terms express this servant’s relationship to God?
  - What terms describe this servant’s mission?
  - What terms speak of this servant’s character?
- **Be prepared** to augment the discussion with appropriate explanations from “Examining the Scripture” since some of the biblical terms will likely be unclear to some of the participants.

**Simplify the Hymn of Praise** (10 min.)

- **Ask** someone to read Isaiah 42:5-9 (p. 35 in Journeys).
- **Point out** that these verses elaborate on the “servant song” and give us further insight into the work of God’s chosen servant.
- **Ask**, “What specific tasks are named here? What additional support does God provide for the servant?”

AND

**Apply the Scripture** (10 min.)

- **Refer** participants to the “Questions for Reflection” on p. 37 in Journeys. **Invite** them to silently read the suggested Scriptures.
- **Allow** time for participants to reflect on the questions and write their answers in the spaces provided.
- **Invite** participants to share personal insights with which they are comfortable.
- **Ask**, “As we seek to work for justice here in our community, what application can we make for our class? Our congregation?”
- **Augment** the discussion with the ideas in “Applying the Scripture.”

**CLOSING THE SESSION**

(5-10 MINUTES)

- **Sing** “The Servant Song” (words and music by Richard Gillard, © 1977 Scripture in Song/Maranatha! Music) or “Make Me a Servant” (words and music by Kelly Willard, © 1982 Maranatha! Music & Willing Heart Music) if it’s available and familiar.

**OR**

- **Offer** sentence prayers of thanksgiving by asking participants to look again at the printed Scripture on pages 33 and 35 in Journeys and to read it silently, putting themselves in the place of the servants whom God now calls us to be. **Invite** volunteers to offer sentence prayers inspired by Isaiah 42:1-9. (Some examples: “Thank you for choosing me to serve you, O God.” “Thank you for empowering us through the Holy Spirit.”)

**NOTE**

Introducing the Scripture

In the early months of AD 50, not quite twenty years after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, and about seventeen years after his own conversion, Paul arrived in Corinth. There he preached the Gospel, and as a result, a community of believers was formed. According to Acts 18:11, Paul stayed in Corinth for eighteen months, presumably to nurture the new church. Then in the late summer of 51, Paul crossed the Aegean Sea and went to Ephesus. His work there also prospered (1 Corinthians 16:9). It was from Ephesus in the late fall or winter of 53-54 that Paul wrote the letter that we call 1 Corinthians. However, 1 Corinthians was actually not his first letter to the congregation at Corinth (5:9-11). That letter was perhaps lost; at least it was never included in the canonical collection of Pauline letters that appear in our Bible today. Not only had he written to the Corinthians, but they had also written to him about various issues that arose. They valued his opinion for he was, after all, their founding pastor.

In his writing, Paul employed introductory phrases to announce the topic he was about to address e.g., “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote” (7:1), “Now concerning food sacrificed to idols” (8:1), “Now concerning spiritual gifts” (12:1), and “Now concerning the collection for the saints” (16:1). However, our study this week in chapter 15, which focuses on resurrection is not introduced that way. We have no idea what the Corinthians had asked Paul about the subject. We get one short hint in verse 12 where the position of some in the church is noted: “How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” It was to this challenge that Paul responded in chapter 15. There are three subtopics:

• the resurrection of Christ (vv. 1-11),
• the resurrection of the dead (vv. 12-24),
• and the resurrection body (vv. 35-58).

Examining the Scripture

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11. To broach the subject of the resurrection of Christ, Paul reminded his readers about his foundational teaching on the topic. The resurrection of Christ played an essential role in Paul’s preaching, and he as much as told them they should not have forgotten that fact. He had expected the Corinthians to hold firmly to his teachings (v. 2). If they were rejecting belief in the resurrection, their faith was in vain. In this introduction, he seemed to express his own uncertainty as to whether the Corinthians were remaining steadfast in their faith.

Paul’s language, “handed on . . . received” (v. 3a) was a technical reference to church tradition. (He used similar phrasing in 1 Corinthians 11:23.) Tradition was the basis for Paul’s foundational teaching. As a Pharisee, he had been exposed to a particular tradition. When he became a Christian on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-22), he received a different tradition directly from Jesus (Galatians 1:12). It was this tradition—the saving gospel of Christ—that he was...
compelled by God's Spirit to proclaim to the fledgling groups of believers, who in turn passed it on to others.

Paul's foundational message remains significant today. Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again on the third day (1 Corinthians 15:3b-4). All of this was in accordance with the Scriptures. And just in case anyone desired proof, Paul listed some of the people and groups to whom Jesus appeared (vv. 5-8). It is interesting to note that the appearance to women is excluded. Suffice it to say that the Pauline list and the Gospel narratives of the resurrection appearances cannot be harmonized.

This segment ends with Paul's look inward (vv. 9-11). Perhaps he was recalling the aspersions cast on his self-proclaimed status as an apostle. It was true; he had not been numbered among the original twelve. But in a humble confession accented with pride, he pointed his readers' attention away from himself toward the glory and grace of God.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-34. The resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith (Romans 10:9). Therein lies our hope, and therein lay the hope of the believers at Corinth. But some among them evidently doubted the Christian concept of the afterlife (1 Corinthians 15:12). So in Paul's inimitable style, he set forth his argument against what he understood to be a false doctrine.

Paul used a number of literary devices to illustrate his point. Verses 12-34 form a chiastic ABA pattern. Verses 12-19a and 29-34a make the case for the absurdity of Christian belief and practice if the bodily resurrection is not true. Verses 20-28b reaffirm that it is true and point to some of the consequences of this basic doctrine.

The central idea in verses 12-19 is that if there is no bodily resurrection for Christians, then Jesus was not bodily resurrected either, and that renders the Christian faith pointless. Paul restated this premise from several different angles in these verses.

Then Paul asserted that there is a bodily resurrection (vv. 20-28). Just as the firstfruits of a harvest herald a larger crop sometime in the future, Jesus' resurrection guarantees the bodily resurrection of all believers (v. 20). Paul inserted the Adam/Christ typology to further explain the idea (vv. 21-22). When writers use typologies, they choose a person or event and selectively retell the details to make their point. Paul concluded this segment by describing his understanding of the end of human history (vv. 24-28).

As was necessary to complete the ABA pattern, Paul returned to arguing the absurdity of denying bodily resurrection (vv. 29-34). To do so, he used three arguments.

The most puzzling of these is the first one: proxy baptism (v. 29). Evidence exists that second-century Gnostics were baptized on behalf of those in their group who had died without having been baptized.1 Given the Corinthians' inclinations toward early Gnostic belief and practice, it follows that some of them may have adopted the ritual.2

Next Paul advanced two arguments from his own experience. Why, he asked, should he continue to tolerate hostility and risk his very life for the sake of the gospel if there is no hope of a resurrection (vv. 30-32)? Subsequently, he referred to “wild animals at Ephesus” (v. 32a). We don't have enough evidence to know what danger he was recalling here. It is likely a metaphor for human opposition or personal attack.

In summary, Paul interjected the famous Epicurean slogan (v. 32b) paired with a popular Greek proverb (v. 33). If this life is all there is, then humans ought to live it up. But those who deny the resurrection of Christ are “bad company,” so Paul made a stern appeal to his readers: “Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more” (v. 34a). The intensity of his convictions is unmistakable.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:35-58. Here, as Paul continued his discussion of the resurrection body, he employed a literary device common to philosophical and ethical writing in his day (v. 35) by addressing an imaginary questioner: He anticipated a reader who might say, “This is all well and good, but I want to know exactly how the dead are going to be raised. What kind of bodies are they going to have?”

It seems it was the body that caused the difficulty. The people had seen bodies being burned or wasting away in graves, so they couldn’t comprehend that the dead could have a body. So, Paul
used the example of a seed (vv. 36-38). When planted, a seed seemingly dies and begins to decompose. Yet on that very spot, new life emerges, totally different in appearance from the seed. In principle he meant that when either a body or a seed is put into the ground, something different “comes up” (resurrects). Just as glorious variety reigns throughout the natural order, so, too, it permeates the heavenly world (vv. 39-40). New resurrected bodies will be appropriate to the new age. Their exact nature is in God’s hands.

While Paul was wisely reticent about describing what he thought the spiritual body might actually be like, he returned to images from his analogy of the seed to shed further light on the subject (vv. 42-44).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE EARTHLY BODY</th>
<th>THE SPIRITUAL BODY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perishable, subject to decay</td>
<td>Imperishable, permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sown in dishonor, a servant of human passion and impulse</td>
<td>Raised in glory, a servant of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sown in weakness, subject to physical limitations</td>
<td>Raised in power, free of limitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sown a physical body, an imperfect vessel of the Holy Spirit</td>
<td>Raised a spiritual body, a perfect instrument of the Holy Spirit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to revisiting the seed analogy, Paul also touched on the Adam/Christ typology once again (vv. 45-48). After contrasting the images of the first and last man, he allowed his readers to identify with both (v. 49).

As we come to the familiar climax of this chapter, we would do well to remind ourselves that he was dealing with a mystifying subject that defies language. Reading these final verses as poetry will help us get a glimpse of Paul’s intent.

His message was clear—we in our earthly flesh will not inherit the kingdom of God (v. 50). But the good news is that we will all be changed when Jesus returns to the earth (v. 51).

Paul went on to declare that there is no reason to fear death—the big change (vv. 53-57). In typical Pauline fashion, he ended his writing on the subject of resurrection by setting forth a practical challenge: “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (v. 58).

Applying the Scripture

Today is Easter Sunday. We joyously proclaim, “Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed!” As Christians, our very worship and acts of service are founded on the fact that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again on the third day. In what additional ways does the resurrection give us purpose and meaning? At the risk of stating the obvious, following are four possible answers to that question.

1. Belief in the resurrection helps us deal with the difficulties we face. When we run into problems, we don’t just quit. We do not say, “Let’s eat and drink and be merry, because nothing really matters much.” No, we have hope for the future, and life today does matter.

2. The message of the resurrection is also relevant for day-to-day Christian conduct. Because there is a resurrection, we live in a new and different way. Instead of serving the desires of the flesh, we commit ourselves to serving God in whatever ways we have been spiritually gifted.

3. The resurrection gospel is good news not only for people who believe, but also for people who do not yet believe. There is hope because sins can be forgiven. Joy and peace can become reality. Just as Paul shared the message that he received, so must we.

4. Finally, knowing about the resurrection gives us a new perspective on death. We know that death does not end it all. We believe that we will see our loved ones again in the afterlife. We still grieve, yet our belief in the resurrection gives us hope for the future.

Ponder these questions: What do we do because we believe in the resurrection? How would our lives be different if we were to abandon this hope?
Session Plans
These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION
- Read 1 Corinthians 15 in its entirety.
- Have available Bibles and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.
- Since this session begins with suggestions for worship, set up a worship center at the front of the classroom. You might include an Easter lily or other spring flowers, one or more lighted candles, a Bible, and perhaps a few butterflies (related to “Closing the Session”).
- As participants arrive, assign readers for Voices 1 through 8 in the responsive prayer (page 44 in Journeys) to be used in “Beginning the Session.”
- Locate the hymn, “My Hope Is in the Lord” with words and music by Norman J. Clayton. This hymn is not in the public domain, but it appears in print in many hymnals. If it is not in your church's hymnal, choose another Easter hymn with which participants are familiar, such as Bill and Gloria Gaither's “Because He Lives.” Secure a leader and accompanist if needed.
- Prepare to introduce 1 Corinthians 15 by creating a chapter outline ahead of time and displaying it as a visual aid. You can refer to it as you describe the different sections of the chapter.
- Invite someone in the class to be prepared to read 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 aloud.
- Be prepared to explain the butterfly analogy, which is one of the significant symbols of Easter. Its life cycle is meant to symbolize the life of Jesus Christ. The first stage, the caterpillar, stands for his earthly life. The second phase is the cocoon stage, which portrays the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. The third and final stage is the butterfly, representing Jesus’ resurrection from the dead in a glorified body.
- Using a variety of bright colors, prepare a piece of paper for each participant, either in the shape of a butterfly or with the outline of a butterfly on a quarter sheet of paper.

BEGINNING THE SESSION
(10 MINUTES)
- Greet participants with the traditional words: “Christ is risen!” Invite their response: “He is risen, indeed!”
- Ask the person you have chosen to read 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 aloud to do so at this time.
- Sing “My Hope Is in the Lord” or another Easter hymn.
- Refer to “An Easter Prayer” on page 44 in Journeys.
- Pray, using the responsive format.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(35-40 MINUTES)
Introduce 1 Corinthians 15 (5 min.)
- Deliver an overview of the background of chapter 15 based on the information provided in “Introducing the Scripture.” Use your own words to summarize the main points.
- As you come to the latter part of the overview that deals with the sections of the chapter, refer to the basic outline on the board or newsprint that you prepared ahead of time and is displayed for the class.

AND
The Foundation of Christianity (5 min.)
- Read or ask a volunteer to read 1 Corinthians 15:1-8 on pages 39-40 in Journeys.
- Ask, “In one sentence, what can we say is the foundation of the Christian faith?” (vv. 3b-4).
- Ask, “Why did Paul boil Christianity down to three basic beliefs?”

Paul’s “If . . . Then” Arguments (10-15 min.)
- Read or ask a volunteer to read 1 Corinthians 15:12-34. Since not all of this section of 1 Corinthians 15 is printed in Journeys, participants will need to follow along in their Bibles.
- Point out that, depending on which version of the Bible participants are using, they will find ten (eleven in the NIV) “if . . . then” arguments imbedded in verses 12-19 and 29-34.
- Ask, “According to Paul’s “if . . . then” statements, what problems arise if there is no resurrection?”
- Invite participants to locate each of the “if” statements and identify the related problem. Supplement the ideas with material from “Examining the Scripture.”
- (Optional) Ask, “What additional, if any, ‘if . . .then’ arguments can you think of in favor of the resurrection?”
- If the class is large, consider dividing into groups of six to eight participants for the entire activity. By doing so, you will give more people opportunities to be involved and express their own ideas.
AND

The Resurrection Body (10 min.)
- **Introduce** this activity by sharing the information from the first paragraph in “Examining the Scripture” related to 1 Corinthians 15:35-58.
- **Invite** participants to read 1 Corinthians 15:35-49 silently. Again, they will need to use their Bibles.
- Because the last part of the chapter is so famous and glorious, **read** or **ask** the same participant who read the passage in the opening worship to read to read 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 again aloud.
- **Invite** general discussion. **Ask** questions such as the following: What images are the most striking? What is the most difficult to understand? What images give you the most peace and hope?
- If needed, **supplement** the discussion with information from “Examining the Scripture.”

OR

- **Invite** each pair of participants to discuss some or all of the “Questions for Reflection” on page 41 in Journeys.

OR

What Difference Does It Make? (15 min.)
- **Divide** the class into groups of six to eight people.
- **Distribute** Bibles as needed. Each person should have a Bible; or at least provide one for every two participants.
- **Tell** them to read all of 1 Corinthians 15. Each group may choose its own process.
- After the Scripture has been read, **ask**, “What difference does it make that Jesus was raised from the dead? What can we say in response when someone says, ‘I don’t care that Jesus was raised from the dead. What interests me is real life today, not whether somebody came back to life two thousand years ago. All sorts of strange things have happened throughout history, but they don’t really matter to me because they don’t affect my everyday life?’”
- **Instruct** participants to draw on Paul’s arguments as well as their own personal experiences.
- **Allow** about ten minutes for group discussion.

CLOSING THE SESSION
(5-10 MINUTES)
- **Distribute** pencils and the butterfly-themed pieces of paper to participants.
- **Invite** participants to write a sentence or phrases or single words that depict what the resurrection means to them personally.
- **Pray**.
- As people leave the classroom, **invite** them to leave their written responses at the worship center (or another convenient location) as an offering of thanks to God for our resurrection hope.

Looking Ahead
Next week’s session is from the book of Esther. Although only chapter 7 is printed, it’s important that participants have a grasp of the whole story. If you don’t want to take the time during the class session to read the entire story or have it read aloud, ask participants to read it during the week and complete the “Reading Guide” (p. 46 in Journeys). Let them know that it’s best to read the story in one setting if possible.

NOTES
2. Manfred Brauch, former professor of biblical theology at Palmer Theological Seminary, considers the possibility of believers dying before they can signify their new faith by baptism and receiving proxy baptism. Manfred Brauch, *Hard Sayings of Paul* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 175.
SESSION 8 • APRIL 19, 2020

Justice Prevails

SCRIPTURE: Esther 7:1-10

KEY VERSE: So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. —Esther 7:10

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to analyze the story of Esther as a triumph of justice.
• to illustrate that treachery will not win.
• to explore the implications for one’s individual spiritual journey that can be found in the story of Esther.

Introducing the Scripture
The book of Esther has occupied a dubious position in the canon since its inception. The reason is simple: the book lacks religious content in the way we look for it in the books of the Bible. There are no prayers; there are no sacrifices. There is no mention of God, Jerusalem, or the temple. Kindness, mercy, and forgiveness are not the emphases of the story line. But the spirit of vengeance is overtly present.

We also find that the main characters, Esther and Mordecai, don’t appear to follow or even acknowledge Jewish law. Esther’s spouse is a Gentile. She eats non-kosher food and appears to be completely assimilated into the Gentile world.

We should not, however, overlook Esther’s call for a fast (Esther 4:16) and the inauguration of the Feast of Purim (Esther 9:20-32). Both of these components are viewed by most as having religious overtones. Likewise, the often-quoted verses in Esther 4:13-14 (“...for just such a time as this”) point to a theology of God’s providence.

One commentator notes the following about the story of Esther:

God, though unseen and unacknowledged, works through human instruments to ensure the survival of the chosen people. Human action plays a major role in achieving God’s purpose in the world. The author’s interest lies in the lives of the Jews in the diaspora. Esther (and Mordecai to a lesser extent) serves as a role model for Jews living in exile. As a powerless woman in a patriarchal society, she represents the powerless Jew living in a Gentile and sometimes anti-Semitic society. Esther uses her position and influence to work within the system to accomplish her goal.

The events in this book took place in the Persian Empire, sometime between 483 and 471 BC. Esther and Mordecai’s story transpired sometime between the return of a first group of Jews to Judah from Babylon (538 BC) and the return of a second group led by Ezra (458 BC). The setting is Susa, one of the four capitals of the Persian Empire.

This week’s study covers chapter 7. However, to put those events in their proper context, take time to read the entire book of Esther before teaching the session. The story of a Jewish girl who so wittily maximized the circumstances in which she found herself that she was able to save her people is a well told narrative. As you read, take particular note of the ironic reversals in the story. For example, a humble orphan became a powerful queen; the intended victims of an edict of destruction became the victors. Pay attention to the paired events—for example, two banquets hosted by Queen Esther. Make a list of unanswered questions, such as this one: Why didn’t Esther come out and accuse Haman right away instead of hosting a second banquet? In addition, look for the presence of the Divine in spite of no mention of God. What coincidences might be God-incidences? Depending on your frame of mind, you may even find examples of the author’s attempts to infuse humor into the narrative—for example, in chapter 6. Savor the drama!
Examining the Scripture

ESTHER 7:1-5. The stage is set. We jump into Esther’s story at the time of the second banquet she prepared for Haman and King Ahasuerus, also known as the historically documented emperor Xerxes (v. 1). Haman’s plot against Mordecai had already been derailed. Though deeply humiliated, he was still obligated to attend this banquet.

In this segment of the story, we find the king using Esther’s official title when he addressed her (v. 2). By doing so, he emphasized her superior status over Haman and added to Haman’s shame.

When the king asked Queen Esther to voice her request, she unabashedly identified with her own people—the Jews (v. 3-4). Her mention of being sold (v. 4) may have been an oblique reference to Haman’s sizable bribe (3:9). Biblical scholars find the last half of verse 4 difficult to explain. The consensus seems to be that Esther meant the king would suffer financially if the Jews in his empire were annihilated. If they had been sold into slavery, Esther might not have said anything. But all the money Haman could conceivably pour into the treasury would not compensate for the complete loss of what the Jews had to offer. By speaking as she did, she successfully appealed to Ahasuerus’s self-interest.

What an incredible shock Queen Esther’s request must have been to Haman! At this point he began to realize that she was pleading for the life of all the Jews whom he had determined to destroy, and that she herself was among their number. Her appeal was expertly presented. He probably held his breath as King Ahasuerus asked for the villain’s identity (v. 5). Evidently the king was naively unaware of the plot that had developed in his own court in which he himself had been complicit.

ESTHER 7:6-10. At last the king would see the big picture. “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!” Queen Esther exclaimed (v. 6). Indeed, it had been Haman who had invented that evil story about the Jews and advised their destruction. It had been Haman who had used the king’s own ring to seal the letters that went out everywhere ordering the annihilation of all the Jews in the Persian Empire. It was Haman!

In his anger, the king got up from the table and went for a stroll in the palace garden (v. 7a). Why? Could he no longer bear the sight of his top official? Or did he need to cool off a bit? Did he want to be alone to sort things out? Plot his next step? Did he debate the relative expendability of Esther versus Haman? We can only imagine.

Haman was astute enough to know that his future was at stake. Naturally, he pleaded with Esther to spare his life (v. 7b). But what actually happened in the dining room?

The words “Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining” (v. 8a) are modified by most commentators. According to Persian custom, diners reclined on couches. So Haman likely fell on his knees in front of the queen who remained seated. So in that context, the king’s accusation of assault was absurd (v. 8b). Nevertheless, such an accusation would have enabled the king to sidestep the real dilemma. After all, he had given Haman permission to destroy all the Jews in his empire. Likewise, he had accepted a large bribe. By accusing Haman of assault, he freed himself from any further obligation to Haman. Haman’s crime as stated was notorious; no trial was required.

“As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman’s face” (v. 8c) requires some clarification. We need to ask, “What is the proper antecedent for ‘they’?” It is safe to assume that the king’s and queen’s attendants covered Haman’s face. Why? There are two possible reasons. They may have covered his face so that the king would not be offended or grieved at the sight of a person whom he now loathed. They also may have done so because they looked upon him as a condemned person. This explanation corresponds to the ancient Greek and Roman practice of covering the face of a criminal before he was led away to be executed.

Execution was, indeed, imminent. One of the royal attendants told the king that the very gallows Haman had prepared for Mordecai was operable (v. 9). What remarkable timing! So it was there, at his own house, that Haman was quickly executed (v. 10). Thus, the king’s wrath was abated.
Applying the Scripture

The writer of the book of Esther, who remains unidentified to this day, was a master storyteller. The literary devices—paired events, ironic reversals, and mysteries—underpin the intriguing plot and, on close examination, help us see the hidden hand of the Holy One. Behind friends, families, enemies, leaders, and events, the Almighty moves and directs to bring about God’s purposes on earth.

The unifying principle on which this lesson is based reads as follows: “Ignoble people often seem to attain great power and wealth. What evidence is there that people will receive the recompense their evil deeds deserve? The story of Esther’s triumph over Haman provides assurance that evil does not prevail.” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. put it this way: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Yes, many biblical scholars have subtitled the book of Esther as being a story of the providence of God. The word providence is not in most modern translations of the Bible. But the doctrine of providence states that God quietly and unceasingly works through cause and effect in the physical and social universe to supervise events all to God’s own glory. Depending on one’s personal theology, we might want to add the word eventually to the end of that definition. Eventually God will be glorified. Eventually justice will reign.

Most of us believe that God works in our lives, but how do we know? It’s easy to see the hand of God in the recovery of sick friends or in restored relationships. But sometimes our prayers seem to go unanswered. We even begin to wonder if God has forgotten us. Is God’s faithfulness erratic? Or does God’s faithfulness flow in an uninterrupted fashion?

The psalmist tells us “He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Psalm 121:4). God’s work in our lives, though constant, may not always be visible. In fact, it may be so inconspicuous that we are totally unaware of it. So we “walk by faith and not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7) as we trust the hand of God is at work in every aspect of our everyday lives.

It is sometimes true that we can’t sense God’s guidance or protection as events unfold. It’s only when we look back that we see the hand of God more clearly. Thus, we do well to look back often to examine the “coincidences” that set us on a new life path. When we take this backward look, we see many of the coincidences as God-incidences. We often sense the invisible hand of God on our lives, even in experiences that appeared at first to be tragedies. The doctrine of God’s providence teaches that God is always at work in our lives. It may be hidden, but it’s very real. God will be glorified and justice will prevail—eventually.

Session Plans

These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- Read the book of Esther, chapter 7 in particular, as well as the material in this leader’s guide and Journeys for this session.
- Have available Bibles and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.
- If you assigned the reading of Esther last week to be completed before this week’s session, send out an email or text reminder, if possible.
- Study the information provided in “Examining the Scripture” so you can present an overview of Esther 7:1-10 in your own words.
- Bake cookies as a part of preparing to discuss the Purim tradition of eating hamantaschen pastries. Many recipes can be found online including one at https://www.allrecipes.com/recipe/27201/easy-hamantaschen/.

BEGINNING THE SESSION

(5 MINUTES)

- Ask what makes for a good story?
- Record responses on chalkboard, dry-erase board, or newsprint.
- If necessary, insert the following in the list:
  - adequate character development
  - intrigue
º humor or wit
º a main point
º a well-crafted plot

• **Introduce** the Scripture for this session by saying, “The story of Queen Esther has all of these and more. Biblical commentators have called it a literary masterpiece. It’s filled with drama and excitement, plots and subplots. And best of all, like the rest of Scripture, the book of Esther has a living word for us today.”

• **Pray.**

**OR**

• **Serve** hamantaschen, the triangle-shaped cookies eaten by Jews during Purim, and give a description of Purim observances.³ (This gives a bit of levity to the telling of Esther’s story, which is one of triumph of good over evil—as opposed to it often being told like a melodrama where the listeners boo when the name of the villain Haman is mentioned and cheer when the names of the hero Mordecai or heroine Esther are mentioned.)

**DEVELOPING THE SESSION**
(35-40 MINUTES)

**Enjoy the Story** (20-25 min.)

• To get the most out of the book of Esther, **treat** it as a complete story.

• **Invite** individuals or small groups each to read a separate chapter and then paraphrase, chaining together the story from all ten chapters.

• **Distribute** Bibles as necessary.

**OR**

• **Meet** in an alternate setting and view a movie portrayal of the story of Esther. It is available on YouTube or DVD. You might plan a class party on Saturday night complete with popcorn.

**AND/OR**

• Before either reading the story aloud or viewing the movie version, **divide** the class into listening teams and make the following assignments:
  ° Team 1: Note events that happen in pairs.
  ° Team 2: Note ironic reversals.
  ° Team 3: Note mysteries and unexplained situations.
  ° Team 4: Note humorous occurrences.
  ° Team 5: Note the God-incidences or situations indicating the hidden hand of God.

• **Distribute** paper and pencils as needed so participants can take notes.

• After the story has been read or viewed, **invite** team members to discuss what they heard/saw.

**AND/OR**

• **Reconvene** the larger group and **invite** each team to share their observations. **Note:** If you choose this small-group option, the exercise will likely take most of the time available for the class session.

**OR**

• If you assigned the reading of the book of Esther and the completion of the “Reading Guide” (p. 46 in Journeys) last week to be completed before the session, **hold** a general discussion of participants’ findings and observations. **Invite** questions.

• **Review Esther 7:1-10** (10 min.)

  • **Present** a mini-lecture based on information in “Examining the Scripture.”

  • **Discuss** the following questions:
    ° What spiritual issues does this story raise for you?
    ° Why do you think Esther invited Haman to the banquet in the first place? To allay his suspicions? To give him a chance to change his mind? Or was she acting in good faith, wanting to confront him face-to-face?

  • **Read Deuteronomy 19:15-21.** According to Old Testament law, was Haman’s execution justified? Why?

**AND/OR**

**Discuss Implications of the Story** (10 min.)

• **Lead a discussion** using these questions:
  ° What injustices, intrigue in high places, and unholy alliances do you see in our world/nation/state/community/church? (Choose one or two.) What needs to be done? What could you (or the class) do to assist?
  ° Why does it seem that we as humans allow injustices to take root and grow before we deal with them? Wouldn’t it be easier to prevent the injustice in the first place? If so, why don’t we?
  ° Take a look backward in the life of your church. How has God’s providence been evident through the years? If no examples are forthcoming, why not?
  ° What evidence have you seen that ignoble people receive the recompense their evil deeds deserve? How do you deal with evidence that points to ignoble people prospering?
  ° How are false witnesses dealt with today? What is a biblical approach to the problem?
  ° Why do we hesitate to deal with social injustice? Is it because we don’t want to make judgement calls?
Do we believe it will all work out in the end according to God’s providence?
º What is the role of the Christian in the quest for justice? What encouragement can we draw from the book of Esther?
º What personal illustrations can you share regarding the providence of God?

CLOSING THE SESSION
(5-10 MINUTES)

º Share with the class background concerning other versions of Esther: Explain that there are three editions of the book of Esther. Our Bibles contain the Hebrew version preserved in the Masoretic text. The Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Septuagint retells the Esther story and adds seven chapters. (It is found in the Apocrypha.) A third edition of Esther, also in Greek, did not achieve canonical status in any religious tradition.

It is the Septuagint edition that spikes our interest, because it contains major additions that give the text a decidedly more religious tone. The section known as Addition C emphasizes the importance of prayer.
º Inform participants that you will close the session with a prayer attributed to Mordecai.
º Read Mordecai’s Prayer in Addition C/Chapter 13:

8 Then Mordecai prayed to the Lord, calling to remembrance all the works of the Lord.
9 He said, “O Lord, Lord, you rule as King over all things, for the universe is in your power and there is no one who can oppose you when it is your will to save Israel, for you have made heaven and earth and every wonderful thing under heaven. You are Lord of all, and there is no one who can resist you, the Lord. You know all things; you know, O Lord, that it was not in insolence or pride or for any love of glory that I did this, and refused to bow down to this proud Haman, for I would have been willing to kiss the soles of his feet to save Israel! But I did this so that I might not set human glory above the glory of God, and I will not bow down to anyone but you, who are my Lord; and I will not do these things in pride. And now, O Lord God and King, God of Abraham, spare your people; for the eyes of our foes are upon us to annihilate us, and they desire to destroy the inheritance that has been yours from the beginning. Do not neglect your portion, which you redeemed for yourself out of the land of Egypt. Hear my prayer, and have mercy upon your inheritance; turn our mourning into feasting that we may live and sing praise to your name, O Lord; do not destroy the lips of those who praise you.”

OR
º Pray the “Prayer of Commitment” (p. 49 in Journeys) in unison.

Looking Ahead
The Scripture for next week’s lesson is poetry from Isaiah. Find someone either in or outside the class who reads poetry well aloud. Ask the person to be prepared to give an interpretive oral reading of Isaiah 61:1-62:4.

NOTES
2. The unifying principles are supplied by the Committee on the Uniform Series, Education and Leadership Ministries Commission, National Council of Churches USA.
3. Details around the meaning and symbolism of the cookies for Purim can be found at https://www.thespruceeats.com/why-do-jews-eat-hamantaschen-2122223.
SESSION 9 • APRIL 26, 2020

God Loves Justice

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 61:8-11; 62:2-4a

KEY VERSE: For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

—Isaiah 61:8

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to read Isaiah’s prophetic writing as poetry;
• to explicate the context in which Isaiah’s prophecy was written;
• to explore ways God’s love for justice calls Christians to action; and
• to commit to making just decisions in everyday life.

Introducing the Scripture
(A brief introduction to Isaiah was offered in session 6. Reviewing “Introducing the Scripture” on page 26 in this leader’s guide may also be helpful.)

Isaiah is one of the most significant of the Old Testament books. This towering collection of prophecy is quoted or alluded to in the New Testament more frequently than any other part of Hebrew Scriptures (with the possible exception of the Psalms). It is referenced at least forty-six times by the Gospel writers, thirty times by Paul, and several times by John in the book of Revelation.

While on the surface Isaiah appears to be a unified book, biblical scholars call it an amalgamation or blend of the oracles of three separate writers. Thus, we have the designations First, Second, and Third Isaiah. This week’s study is found among the oracles attributed to Third Isaiah.

There is no denying the beauty, grandeur, passion, and pathos of the literature in Isaiah. Its messages of judgment are balanced by compelling words of comfort and hope. They reveal a powerful, vital God, give us a vision of Jesus the Messiah, and provide glimpses into history’s end. “Isaiah” means “salvation is of the Lord,” and that is ultimately the message the writers communicated. Yet their work was not solely to prophesy the future.

The section of Scripture we study this week was written after 537 BC when Israel’s return from exile under the edict of King Cyrus of Persia began. The returnees were undoubtedly expecting a glorious restoration. Instead, they found themselves facing innumerable adversities. They were vulnerable and desperate to hear some good news.

Isaiah 56-66 is attributed to Third Isaiah. The writing dates from the period after 537 BC when Israel’s return from exile under the edict of King Cyrus of Persia began. The returnees undoubtedly were expecting a glorious restoration—one not unlike that envisioned in chapters 34–35 and 40–55. Instead, those in the postexilic community found themselves facing innumerable adversities:

• Tension arose between the returnees and those who had remained behind, for the latter had taken over the land and considered it theirs.
• Additional religious tension developed between the returnees and the Samaritans who perceived themselves to be full-fledged Jews, while the Jews treated them as Gentiles.
• Consecutive years of severe drought wreaked havoc in the land shortly after the people returned.
• The city of Jerusalem faced security problems because the walls had been demolished.
• Friction developed between the leaders of the returned community. Joshua the high priest was satisfied with the religious autonomy granted to Jerusalem by the Persians, but Zerubbabel advocated for full independence.1

As their despair deepened, the people begged God for a miraculous resolution to their dismal state of affairs.

The final chapters of Isaiah are filled with promise. They begin with an invitation to experience redemption (Isaiah 56–59) and conclude with a glorious picture of what will happen on earth.
when the Messiah returns to reign (Isaiah 60–66).

Our study this week begins in the middle of chapter 61. This chapter is closely related to the one that precedes it. Having described the future blessing of Zion, Isaiah went on to introduce the Holy One who is to bring that blessing. Since the assigned beginning point (v. 8) is in the middle of a superb and well-known poem, we will examine it as a whole, beginning with verse 1.

Examining the Scripture

**ISAIAH 61:1-7.** Jesus began his ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth by reading from this very passage and an excerpt from Isaiah 58:6 (Luke 4:18-21). The poem’s author claims to have been anointed by the Spirit of the all-powerful God (v. 1a). The prophet here does not call himself the servant, yet the mission on which he would embark meshed nicely with the work of the servant in Second Isaiah’s renowned Servant Songs (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13–53:12).

The poet skillfully laid out the prospectus describing the work God commissioned him to do (vv. 1b–7). For the most part, the message of comfort and consolation is clear: “bring good news to the oppressed,” “bind up the brokenhearted,” and so on (vv. 1b–7). However, a few phrases beg explanation:

“Proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God” (v. 2a). While the writer may have been reflecting on the year of Jubilee set forth in Leviticus 25:10-11, another reading is possible. God constantly looks at humanity with favor and grace. On the other hand, vengeance is a rare action that may be necessary to remove obstacles to God’s grace. In this context, the reestablishment of Israel’s homeland was likened to a year of favor, but now something had to be done to deliver God’s people from political, economic, and spiritual distress.

“Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines” (v. 5). Some commentators say that these words were meant to be taken literally. Flocks and crops would again flourish in the Promised Land, and God’s people would be so blessed that their former Gentile oppressors would even serve the Israelite farmers. Other scholars suggest that the agrarian picture is primarily symbolic. The spiritual prosperity being prophesied will be as noteworthy as if strangers were to come in among God’s people and take over their everyday tasks of shepherding the flocks, tilling the fields, and dressing the vines.

“Because their shame was double” (v. 7a). The phrase mirrors the notion found in Isaiah 40:2 suggesting that the Israelites, while deserving of the punishment of the exile, paid double what they owed. The poet concluded this line of thinking with the promise of double blessings to compensate for the twice-over suffering they had endured (v. 7b).

**ISAIAH 61:8-9** (The printed Scripture in Journeys begins here). In this passage we find that the voice changes and God, not the prophet, is the speaker. As has been established in the previous verse, the shame and suffering brought on Israel was to be replaced with everlasting joy and double the blessings. Yahweh is the change agent here. God loves justice, hates robbery and wrongdoing, and would faithfully reverse conditions for the returnees.

**ISAIAH 61:10-11.** Once again the prophet was the speaker. Here he likened himself to both a bridegroom and a bride (v. 10). The festal garments that a couple wore to their wedding could be compared to the garments with which the prophet had been clothed—salvation and righteousness. The time of rejoicing could also be compared to a wedding feast.

Despite the introductory word “for” (v. 11), the imagery shifts abruptly from wedding to gardening. The writer adeptly combined the physical and spiritual, saying that as surely as the earth puts forth new growth, so Yahweh would cause righteousness and praise to “spring up before all the nations.”

**ISAIAH 62:1-4a.** (Verse 1 is not included in the printed Scripture in Journeys.) The poem continues in the personal energetic vein of the previous chapter. In light of his commission and vision for the future, the prophet could not keep
silent, nor could he rest (v. 1). The point of urgency was the exonation of the holy city. Zion is another name for Jerusalem, which was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC.

(The printed Scriptures in Journeys begin again with verse 2.) As with the preceding verses of this study, the language is clear. Yet our curiosity peaks at the mention of a new name for Jerusalem (v. 2b). According to the ancients, one’s name contains within it the internal character and being of a person. In other words, the name distinguishes the person, and a new name could be the sign of a major change in the individual or a change in how they are perceived differently than before within a significant relationship.

When the idea of a new name for Jerusalem is first mentioned, we don’t learn what it will be. God will give the name. But as we read further, we learn two of Jerusalem’s old names. “Forsaken” and “Desolate” aptly describe Zion’s exile existence (v. 4a).

The good news is found in the remainder of verse 4 (again, a passage not included in the print Scripture in Journeys). The first new name, “My Delight Is in Her,” connotes the joys the city could expect to experience once the people reconciled with Yahweh. The second new name, “Married,” indicates that their spiritual relationship could be envisioned as a marital union. Yahweh’s love for Jerusalem is boundless and unconditional.

The poem continues through verse 12, but our study ends here. The wedding motif arises again (v. 5). The subsequent tone in the chapter is optimistic, promising prosperity, vindication, and salvation.

Applying the Scripture

The poetry of the prophet may be applicable on three levels. One is obvious—the immediate context of Israel’s restoration following the exile. Then Jesus, in his first advent, announced that he was fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy. The third is eschatological, as we await the Messiah’s second advent.

But we can also apply it to our lives today. Jesus came among us to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18). He did that and continues to do these things for humanity. Our response, then, should be to live just as righteously, joyously, and hopefully as those who heard God’s good news in the first place.

Furthermore, just as the Holy Spirit anointed the prophet to announce good news to the returnees, so the Spirit anoints us (1 John 2:20). And we should be proclaiming the Good News to the world too. How do we this?

Each of us does it in our own way. The language of the prophet offers some suggestions. Can you identify someone who is oppressed or brokenhearted with whom you could share a message of hope? Are you gifted to proclaim liberty to the captives or release to the prisoners? Maybe you can gently apply the oil of gladness to someone who is mourning.

For God, indeed, loves justice and requires that we “do justice” (Micah 6:8). To do justice means we not only talk about justice or get other people to act in a just manner. It means that we do the right thing ourselves. But sometimes what is right and just is not what is easy or desirable. Rather than focusing primarily on what we think other people ought to do to act justly, let’s first inspect our own lives and discover the right thing for us to do. Remember, what God requires, the Spirit provides.

Session Plans

These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- Read Isaiah 61:1-62:4a as well as the material in this leader’s guide and Journeys for this session.
- Learn the material in “Introducing the Scripture” and “Applying the Scripture” so you can present them in your own words.
- For “A Band-Aid Isn’t Enough,” review the week’s news and prepare a list of about five contemporary situations that are examples of injustice. Try to find examples that are close to the community where the church is located.
- For “Closing the Session,” direct students to the “Litany for Justice” printed in Journeys, p.56 at the end of the session.
- Have available Bibles and paper and pencils.
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BEGINNING THE SESSION
(5 MINUTES)

- Tell participants that one of the most important philosophers ever to write about justice lived some 2,400 years ago. His name was Aristotle, and he thought that justice was giving persons their due, or what they deserve.
- Ask, “Do you agree?” (Pause for general reaction.)
- Say, “But if we follow Aristotle’s line of thinking, how do we know what people deserve? What goods and opportunities should go to which persons? Aristotle said an educated judge was needed to apply just decisions regarding any particular case.”
- Ask, “Do you agree?” (Pause for general reaction.)
- Point out that as Christians, we believe we have a righteous Judge who will ultimately mete out justice. But what do we do in the meantime? That’s the question we face and the question the postexilic Israelites faced as they returned to Jerusalem.
- Pray.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(35-45 MINUTES)

It’s Poetry, Like It or Not! (10 min.)

- Ask “How many of you enjoy reading poetry?” (Allow time for participants to raise their hands.) “How many of you have good memories of studying poetry in English class ‘way back when’?” (Allow time for participants to raise their hands.) “How about bad memories?” (Allow time for participants to raise their hands.) “How many of you write poetry?” (Allow time for participants to raise their hands.)
- Distribute Bibles, if needed.
- Instruct participants to open their Bibles to Isaiah 61. Ask, “What do you see?” (Poetry!)
- Explain that to understand most of Isaiah—and indeed, much of the entire Old Testament—we cannot ignore the fact that it is written in poetic form. But unlike English poetry, Hebrew poetry does not emphasize rhyme and meter. Rather, Hebrew poetry is filled with parallelism, rhythm (in the original language), remarkable imagery, and figures of speech. The problem is, most of us do not regularly read poetry. Even though poetry is one of the oldest and most common forms of expression known to humanity, we seem to have lost much of our poetic sensitivity in this contemporary culture. After all, reading poetry requires that we slow down, pay attention, and focus. That’s what we intend to do right now.
- Introduce the person who will read Isaiah 61:1–62:4 aloud. Invite participants to simply listen as the poetry is read.

AND

Isaiah’s Poetry 101 (15 min.)

- Point out that poetry is open to many interpretations and resonates with different experiences. This contrasts with the idea we often hold that there is one and only one correct way to interpret a biblical text. But today let’s go with the “many interpretations” approach.
- Ask participants what they heard when their classmate read this poem (previous activity).
- Invite responses.
- Encourage participants to read the Scripture again silently. Then ask additional questions to motivate further discussion. Some suggestions follow:
  - What words and phrases especially spoke to you as a person? Why?
  - What words and phrases aroused your curiosity and made you want to go know more about the poet’s intent? Why?
  - Which promises do you think apply to you today? In the future?
  - Which pictures of God are especially appealing to you?
  - Which lines of Isaiah’s poetry motivate you to work for justice?

OR

Isaiah Prophesied Vindication for Israel (10 min.)

- Present information from “Introducing the Scripture” about the situation in which the postexilic community of Israelites found themselves.
- Introduce the person who has prepared to read Isaiah 61:1–62:4 aloud. Invite participants to try to put themselves in the place of people in the postexilic community and simply listen as the poetry is read.
- Discuss the following questions:
  - What did you hear?
  - Do you have more hope now? Why or why not?
  - What words or phrases mean the most to you as a returning Jew? (Encourage participants to refer to the written text.)
  - What words or phrases give you hope for your holy city, Jerusalem?
  - How do you believe you and your community will realize justice?
A Band-Aid Isn’t Enough (15 min.)

- **Point out** that God’s promise of justice is our call to action. It’s not enough to discuss the topic when we’re here in church or to advocate for other people to act on our behalf. We must do the right thing ourselves. And in most cases, a Band-Aid isn’t enough.

- **Describe** your first example of contemporary injustice. Then **ask**, “How could we help alleviate this injustice? How will we help?”

- **Progress** through your examples in the same manner. If time permits, **invite** participants to offer other examples of injustice that they have recently witnessed.

- **Help** participants decide on one step they as a group will take to help alleviate an injustice they have discussed or witnessed. **Determine** how and when the action will be completed. **Assign** a coordinator and **plan** for follow-up.

**CLOSING THE SESSION
10 MINUTES**

God Loves Justice, and So Do I! (10 min.)

- **Present** the contents from “Applying the Scripture.”

- **Refer** students to the “Litany for Justice” also printed in their **Journeys** on p. 56.

- **Invite** participants to read responsively as you lead.

**Litany for Justice**

**Leader:** You asked for my hands that you might use them for your purpose.

**All:** I gave them for a moment, then withdrew them, for the work was hard.

**Leader:** You asked for my mouth to speak out against injustice.

**All:** I gave you a whisper that I might not be accused.

**Leader:** You asked for my eyes to see the pain of poverty.

**All:** I closed them, for I did not want to see.

**Leader:** You asked for my life that you might work through me.

**All:** I gave a small part that I might not get too involved.

**Leader:** O God, forgive our calculated efforts to serve you . . .

**All:** only when it is convenient for us to do so, only in those places where it is safe to do so, and only with those who make it easy to do so.

**Leader:** Redeeming God, forgive us, renew us, send us out as usable instruments,

**All:** that we might take seriously the meaning of your call to do justice. Amen.²

**NOTES**


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**Looking Ahead: SUMMER 2020**

The Summer 2020 quarter, “Many Faces of Wisdom,” will focus on exploring various aspects of wisdom and faith. Participants will delve into the nature of wisdom, inquiring about its connection to individual and communal integrity and involvement in pursuing justice. This study is intended to give participants the opportunity to re-encounter the challenging texts of the Wisdom writers as well as the Epistle of James with fresh energy.

The Scriptures for this study are:


The writers of the Summer 2020 quarter are the Reverend John Burns and the Reverend Anita Peebles.
The Return of Joy

SCRIPTURE: Zephaniah 3

KEY VERSE: I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast.
—Zephaniah 3:19

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to understand the relationship between consequences and grace;
• to explore the promise of restoration and how we may serve God through relieving poverty and oppression; and
• to acknowledge the difference between works and grace and the significance of both.

Introducing the Scripture
The prophet Zephaniah’s name means “Yahweh has hidden/protected.” Zephaniah had a challenging task: to speak God’s words to the hardened hearts of those living in Judah in 640–609 BC. At this time Josiah reigned as king. Called a “reforming king,” Josiah worked at restoring proper worship practices of the Lord as well as doing away with the worship of pagan idols.

Despite Josiah’s attempts to follow in his godly great-grandfather Hezekiah’s steps, some of the people of Judah remained hard-hearted toward God.

Zephaniah 3:11 states, “On that day you shall not be put to shame because of all the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain.”

Note the choice of words here: “rebell[ed],” “proudly exultant,” and “haughty.” None of these terms are very flattering to true believers. Nevertheless, God had a plan for redemption. Even though God’s people had—yet again—turned their backs on God, God had not reciprocated.

Indeed, while the early chapters of Zephaniah focused on this rebellion and the punishment that was imminent, in chapter 3 the remnant of God’s people are offered hope and the promise of God’s favor. In 3:14 we read, “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!”

Anyone who has ever struggled with the pain caused by someone with negative motives (be it a jealous boss, a former friend seeking retribution, or a vindictive family member) will be encouraged in particular by God’s promise in Zephaniah 3:19: “I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.”

That promise to “save the lame and gather the outcast,” is one that is particularly meaningful to us as Christians today. It takes only a few minutes of watching the news to hear stories of devastation effecting people around the world. As God’s called, we are in turn called to help others in need. Through our actions, financial help, voice, and hands used in times of need, we are able to live out God’s vision of restoration here on earth. Jesus said in Matthew 25:40, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Examining the Scripture
ZEPHANIAH 3:1-8. As mentioned previously, the early chapters of Zephaniah are filled with warnings of the imminent disaster that would befall those who continued in their evil practices, ignoring God’s power and majesty. The coming judgment of Judah and great Day of the Lord was at hand (chap. 1). Enemy nations would be judged (chap. 2). Zephaniah made clear that wickedness was not only in a neighboring country or a distant city but at the heart of the nation in Jerusalem. Verses 1-4 contain an oracle (or the Word of
God) offered to those residing in Jerusalem. There Zephaniah referred to the city as a “she” and reiterated her many failures. He called her “rebellious and defiled” and accepting of no correction. The officials residing within her were like savage beasts—wolves and lions—and her prophets were “fickle, treacherous,” while her priests would “profane what is holy.” Certainly this is not a very flattering picture of Jerusalem at the time.

Similarly, in Zephaniah 3:5-8, God reminded God’s people that God had given them ample opportunity to change their ways, turn away from their hedonism, and run back into God’s arms. Verse 5 says, “The Lord within it is righteous; he does no wrong. Every morning he renders his judgment, each dawn without fail; but the unjust knows no shame.”

**ZEPHANIAH 3:9-13.** Was all lost? Thankfully, no. In verse 9 God’s vision of justice and restoration was unveiled in God’s promise. The remainder of verses 10-13 indicate that God would serve justice to the people. The Lord would remove the proudly exultant ones, “and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain” (v. 11b). A humble and lowly people would seek refuge in the Lord (v. 12).

**ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20.** As we move into the latter verses of Zephaniah 3, however, the tone changes. The focus goes from the punishment due God’s stubborn people to one of love, mercy, and grace toward God’s faithful.

And now comes God’s promise of joy and the restoration of God’s people. Zephaniah reminded God’s people to “rejoice and exult with all your heart” (v. 14). God had cleared the slate. “The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.” God promised through Zephaniah in verse 15. What a promise! Finally, after so much hurt, rebellion, discouragement, and suffering, God’s people were guaranteed grace and redemption.

Looking deeper into the text, we see three truths clearly spelled out in verses 14-15. First, the Lord had taken away the judgments against the people. Second, the enemies of God’s people were no longer a threat. And finally, God was present with the people and would keep them from disaster. Adding all three of these together was cause for pure joy and great celebration.

In verses 16-18 God’s plan is reiterated: The Lord would protect and restore the people and deal with their oppressors. “On that day,” is the same as saying “The Day of the Lord,” which points to the future. God’s people were told not to fear (v. 16). Why? Because they knew God was with them (v. 17). God’s presence, power, and love for the people meant that fear could not flourish there. God promised to remove all barriers from the people (v. 18).

Next, God offered God’s people a list of powerful promises. “I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth,” (v. 19). These “I will” statements offered assurance.

Additionally, God promised to bring restoration to God’s people, to bring them home and gather them together (v. 20b).3

Those today as in Zephaniah’s day who are true to God in word and deed and keep their focus will enjoy the abundant blessings God offers—blessings both here on earth and in heaven and on the new earth, where we will live with God forever.

**Applying the Scripture**

If pictured as a challenging journey through rough terrain, one can easily see the peaks and valleys with which the remnant of believers in Jerusalem struggled. There were consequences for those who chose the path that led away from God but promises of renewal for those the Lord gathered together. The valleys were barren and desolate. These were times of struggle, pain, and perhaps even fear that God had forgotten them. As those around them turned to the newest, glittering idol to worship, these faithful believers clung to their faith in the Holy One.

Along the path, some became injured, some too exhausted to continue. They lacked the provisions needed to get them to the destination. How like us
today in a world full of so much pain, poverty, and powerlessness. As Christians we are to be the hands and feet of Jesus, helping those who cannot bear the weight of the world alone.

What does helping to bear another’s burden look like? Did you know that American Baptist Churches USA has missionaries serving all over the world, teaching discipleship, evangelism, and secular education—just a few of the many areas in which missionaries are tirelessly engaged.

Here in the United States, the American Baptist Home Mission Societies provide everything from disaster relief for victims of natural disasters, to helping children in poverty, to advocating for those with disabilities—and so much more.

Help from God frequently comes through God’s people who are openhearted and want to serve, not because they don’t have anything better to do, and not because they are bored or have huge resources to draw from. God’s people give because they follow the example of Christ.

Mountaintop vistas along the trail provided the people God was speaking to through Zephaniah with hope and encouragement. Not only could they see how far they’d come, but they could also see how small their problems seemed when viewed in context.

Imagine the delight of these true believers when God led them from the brambles and muddy trails onto the path God created just for them—a path they hadn’t been able to see from where they were standing.

And so, it is for us. Life may or may not be as physically challenging as it was for those Israelites. But we are guaranteed that it will always involve hardships and burdens that are too big for us to tackle alone.

Thankfully, God in God’s mercy and generosity provides the provisions for us that we need along the path we are to walk. God also speaks to the hearts of God’s children, asking them to be God’s hands and feet, helping those in need.

Our job then, is to remain open to God’s voice and leading. Whether that consists of sending someone who is ill a card, serving at the local soup kitchen, or providing financial assistance to missionaries who are in the front lines of spiritual warfare, we all are able to offer God’s hope and healing to others.

Who are the oppressed in our society, and how can we serve them? Here are a few examples. American Baptist Home Mission Societies are eager to have support for Rizpah’s Children. This is an outreach program that works to improve the lives of impoverished children and families in our communities.

Prisoner Re-entry and Aftercare Ministries is an important justice ministry within our denomination. One in every one hundred Americans is currently incarcerated. What hope could we offer to these men and women as they serve their time or re-enter the community?

The Penny Project is another example: this unique program is intended to raise awareness of child poverty within the United States and Puerto Rico. The American Baptist Mission Societies has a goal for the youth of American Baptist Churches USA: to raise 14 million pennies—one to represent the number of children in the US and Puerto Rico living in poverty.

We have myriad opportunities to provide justice in our community, our country, and our world. Whether we choose socially responsible investing, advocate for those who have disabilities, provide education opportunities to the underserved, or help in another way, God will be pleased. Whatever skills God has blessed us with, we can use for God’s kingdom.

But isn’t this the same as trying to earn our salvation? some may wonder. Sadly, many Christians work hard for God without fully experiencing God’s presence. In James 2:14-16 we are reminded of the importance of both: service and grace. Giving comes as an outward expression of our inner love for God. “We love, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). We serve others not to earn our salvation but in obedience to the God of our salvation. Zephaniah described a rebellious people who changed their behaviors (3:11-13) because of the gracious acts of a loving God (3:17).

Session Plans

These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.
GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION
- Read Zephaniah 3:14-20 in addition to session 10 in Journeys and this leader’s guide.
- Print sheets of paper (one per student) of the key verse, with extra room around it for the “Verse Mapping” activity.
- Print questions for the “Partner Interview” activity if using it.
- Provide students with blank paper and markers, colored pencils and/or crayons if using the “Create Justice and Mercy Symbols” activity.
- Offer each student a blank greeting card, envelope, and pen if using the “Create Reminders” activity.
- Gather laptop, speakers, projector and/or TV with Wi-Fi connection for playing the recording, “Mercy,” if that is a selected activity for the class.
- Have available Bibles and either a chalkboard and chalk, dry-erase board and markers, newsprint and markers, or paper and pencils.

BEGINNING THE SESSION (5-10 MINUTES)
- Ask participants to describe one way in which they have personally experienced justice and mercy in the past month. For example, “I experienced justice when I got a speeding ticket, but mercy when my wife refrained from saying, ‘I told you that would happen with your lead foot.’”
- Set a timer and allow only one minute or less per student.
- Tell the group that in this session they will be learning about the relationships between consequences, justice, and restoration, as well as the important differences between works and grace as they study Zephaniah 3.
- Create symbols on the board or newsprint to indicate all of these topics or simply write the words relationship, consequences, justice, restoration, works, and grace.
- Open in prayer.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION (35-40 MINUTES)
Read the Text and Use “Popcorn Questions” to Respond (15-20 min.)
- Ask for four volunteers to read portions of the text. Break it down as follows: Zephaniah 3:1-5; Zephaniah 3:6-10; Zephaniah 3:11-15; Zephaniah 3:16-20.
- Popcorn questions are rapid-style responses to questions posed. Explain to participants that there is no need to raise their hands or wait to be called on. Popcorn questions are like verbal brainstorming.
- Ask these questions:
  - Why was God angry with Jerusalem?
  - What did God intend to do to Jerusalem’s inhabitants?
  - What three actions does God tell God’s children to take in Zephaniah 3:14?
  - How does justice as shown in this passage of Scripture relate to justice that Christians show to others today?
  - In what ways might God call you to seek justice on the behalf of others?
- Sum up what the group has learned about Zephaniah 3 so far:
  - The grace that God showed God’s children, even though they deserved punishment.
  - The grace God shows to us even when we fall into sin.
  - How we can be a blessing to others who have been marginalized.
  - How our actions, financial help, voice, and hands can be used to live out God’s vision of restoration here on earth.
- OR
  - Stage a Debate (15-20 min.)
  - Divide the class into two equal sections. Explain that students in Group 1 will be advocates of justice, while students in Group 2 will be advocates of mercy. Set a timer and allow students five minutes to gather points of view to support why their “belief” is more significant than the opposite.
  - Ask for one person to be the debate spokesperson for their team. Other team members are encouraged to quietly give support, remind them of opinions expressed, and so on, but during the debate only the two spokespeople should speak on behalf of their respective group.
  - Regroup and ask participants to express how they felt about the activity in a single word. Ask if there was anyone who felt they would rather have had the opposite word. If so, ask them to share their feelings on that.
- AND
  - Verse Mapping (10-15 min.)
  - Verse mapping is a way to engage more fully with Bible texts. This can be done in various ways. Here are two options to use:
SESSION 10 • MAY 3, 2020

- Write the key verse (Zephaniah 3:19) on the board or newsprint. Ask for a volunteer to come forward and circle all the action words, for example: **save**. Next, ask a different volunteer to make a box around all the references to God. Last, ask a third volunteer to make a wavy line under any words that need further definition. Ask the group to give these definitions as the volunteer records them on the board or newsprint.

OR

- **Hand out** a printout of the key verse on an otherwise blank sheet of paper as an alternative. Ask students to take the same action steps described above but on their individual sheets of paper.

**OR**

**Partner Interviews (10-15 min.)**

- **Separate** the class into pairs. One student will act as the “interviewer” and the other the “interviewee.” Set a timer for five to seven minutes. After the timer goes off, ask students to switch roles.

- **Ask** the following questions:
  - What does this passage say to you specifically?
  - Can you tell me about an instance in which you deserved God’s judgment but instead received God’s grace? Or about a time when you deserved judgment in life but received grace from God or another person instead?
  - There is much in the news about people who are taken advantage of because of poverty or other debilitating factors. What is one area in which you feel the greatest pain over injustice?
  - Have you considered how you might take a step—however small—to shine God’s light into this situation?

**AND**

**Create Justice and Mercy Symbols (10-15 min.)**

- **Give** each group member a blank piece of paper and place markers, colored pencils and/or crayons at each table.

- **Ask** students to fold their paper in half and to create a symbol on each side of the paper. One symbol should represent justice and the other mercy.

- **Share** any or all completed symbols with the group and ask volunteers to talk a little bit about the symbols they created and why they chose them.

**CLOSING THE SESSION**

*(5-10 MINUTES)*

**Create Reminders**

- **Hand out** blank greeting cards and envelopes, one set per person.

- **Ask** students to write themselves a note inside the card, reminding them of a step they can take to counteract some injustice in the world. This could be something as simple as, “Donate money to a nonprofit working to end sex trafficking,” or something more involved, such as, “Volunteer weekly at the soup kitchen.”

- **Tell** students to address the cards.

- **Mail** the cards to the students in four weeks or at random dates as you feel led by the Spirit.

**OR**

**Mercy**

- **Play** a recording of “Mercy,” by Amanda Cook.

- **Show** the music video, which can be found on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=sILwvJShMV8). **Show** the two-minute video of singer Amanda Cook talking about the album *Brave New World*, which “Mercy” is part of. It can be found on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=7&v=b3f5ah5tFqU).

- **Ask** students to sum up the class/message in a single word.

- **Offer** closing prayer.

**NOTES**

SESSION 11 • MAY 10, 2020

Peace and Justice Reign

SCRIPTURE: Zechariah 8

KEY VERSE: So again I have purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; do not be afraid. —Zechariah 8:15

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to understand God’s plan for community and God’s impact on it;
• to build a desire for God’s presence and promise of justice; and
• to grow a communal sense of justice, prosperity, and unity with God as guide.

Introducing the Scripture

Imagine yourself giving a pep talk to a team on a twenty-year losing streak. What would you say? Where would you start? Perhaps the prophet Zechariah also struggled with the best way to relay the message the Lord had given him.

Let’s set the stage. The people of God had returned from exile in Babylon in 536 BC. Soon after, they had laid the foundation for the temple. Imagine their hopes and dreams as they worked to rebuild God’s holy place. But all did not go as planned.

As would be the experience of Nehemiah when he sought to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem all those years later, this seemingly straightforward task was thwarted by the opposition. In Nehemiah’s case the opposition came from Sanballat and his band of jealous and angry cohorts.

Here, in the book of Zechariah, we find a situation parallel to Nehemiah’s. Discouragement had besieged the people. Would the city of God ever be restored? Would God’s temple ever be completed? The people faced deterrents on every side. First, there were the exorbitant tax requirements from Persia. A large portion of the peoples’ income was going to line the king of Persia’s pockets.

Second, a low moral code was pervasive in the culture. Perhaps this was due in part to the fact that the city had few elders left to guide its people. Many senior citizens had died while in captivity or had not been able to make the return journey due to ill health or weakness. The wisdom that the people needed was sorely lacking.

Third, the people needed only to look around themselves to be discouraged. Evidence that the city of Jerusalem was still only halfway rebuilt caused further despair.

Examining the Scripture

ZECHARIAH 8:1-13. In Zechariah 8 we are reminded that God had not forgotten God’s people, nor was the word of judgment spoken to past generations the last word. In verse 3, God’s promise is stated: “Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts shall be called the holy mountain.” God promised to return to the city, and it would be restored to its true potential.

Jerusalem would once again be called “the faithful city,” and the “holy mountain,” would once again be inhabited by the Lord. Boys and girls would once again play in the city’s streets, and old men and old women would sit in the open with staffs in their hands, the text notes in verses 4-5.

But how could all of this be possible? You can almost hear the people asking that question. They’d had nothing but hard times and struggle for years. The hope had been nearly ground out of them. In their minds they were very much on the “losing side.”

Take a moment and imagine all the destruction they’d witnessed. The violence. The death. They had been in exile for years. Many had perhaps given up on the dream that they would ever see God’s promises come to fruition.

Yet God promised to save God’s people—all of God’s people—because nothing is impossible for the Almighty.
This question in verse 6 clarifies: “Thus says the LORD of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the LORD of hosts?”

What was God asking the people? Is there anything that God cannot do? Is there any boundary that humankind as mere mortals can place on God, any hedge we can draw around God?

No, there isn’t. In verse 7, God said that God would save God’s people, “from the east country and from the west country.” In other words, there was nowhere the people could go to escape God’s redemptive love.

While the people may have been shaking their heads at their own hopelessness, the Lord was waiting for that just-right time to reveal God’s power and presence. Even though it might have seemed impossible to bounce back, God promised the people that they would do just that.

There is no impossibility where God is concerned. In verses 7-8, God reiterated the holy plan. God reminded the people that God will save them from all corners of the land and bring them to live in Jerusalem’s holy city once again, with God.

God reminded the people, specifically the builders of the temple, to “let your hands be strong” (v. 9a). In the following verse, God reiterated that while in the past, discord and unrest were common in the people, now God would sow peace (v. 10).

While previous generations had toiled without wages (vv. 10-11), that would all change. In fact, God unveiled a completely new way of doing things. Whereas there had been no “safety from the foe” (v. 10), now God’s chosen were promised a “sowing of peace” (v. 12). Additionally, they were given the promise of great yield from the ground, physical provision that God’s people needed.

Also, in verse 12, it was explained that the remnant of God’s people would undergo a status change. Rather than their name being a curse, it would become a blessing (v. 13) because of God’s saving grace.

The Lord was waiting for that just-right time to reveal God’s power and presence.

- Speak the truth to one another.
- Make judgments that were true and made for peace.
- Not to sin in their hearts against one another.
- Love no false oath.

According to Dr. Iain M. Duguid, the people were also to make previous fasting days into days of feasting: “Formerly, the people fasted in the fourth month, when the walls of Jerusalem were breached; in the fifth when the city fell; in the seventh when Gedaliah was assassinated; and in the tenth, when the siege of the city first began. Yet in the days ahead, these fast days would be turned to feast days.” Moreover, the people were called to love truth and peace.

ZECHARIAH 8:14-17. Verse 14 tells us that God had clearly decided to turn over a new leaf with the people. Unlike the previous generations of stubborn, hard-hearted people, God promised this remnant, “I have purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah” (v. 15). God also encouraged them not to be afraid.

In verses 16-17, requirements were laid out for the people. They were not simply to be passive observers, but were to take action. How? They were instructed to do the following:

- Speak the truth to one another.
- Make judgments that were true and made for peace.
- Not to sin in their hearts against one another.
- Love no false oath.

The Lord proclaimed that many from outside of Jerusalem would see God’s truth and be saved.

ZECHARIAH 8:18-23. The chapter finishes with even more promises of goodness from God. In the last few verses, the Lord proclaimed that many from outside of Jerusalem would see God’s truth and be saved. People from various cities would come to experience God’s blessings. “Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the L ORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of the L ORD” (v. 21b).

This speaks not only of the people of this time period drawn to Jerusalem from faraway lands, but also of the future spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. Verse 23 states, “Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, ‘Let us go with you,
for we have heard that God is with you.”

These ten men, states Duguid, represented a complete group from the nations of every tongue who recognized that God was with God’s people. It’s a prophecy that was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost.²

Applying the Scripture

What does the message found in Zechariah mean for believers today? As we become more and more fluent in the language of technology, are we losing our sense of true community with other human beings?

It is, in fact, a trend that is growing. Social experts call this “cocooning,” and the term is defined just as it sounds. We are more likely to curl up in front of the TV after a hard day or week of work than to get together with friends over a potluck dinner. Gone for the most part is the tradition of Sunday dinners with extended family. Even weekday meals with immediate family or friends is often too much to fit in.

Additionally, we Americans spend portions of our income buying services that effectively cut us off from other people. You can purchase a subscription service for groceries, clothing, gifts, and even pet toys and treats, among other things, all from the blue glow of your computer screen. Use the self-checkout line at the supermarket and pay for your gas at the pump with a card, and you cut out two more opportunities to interact with others on a regular basis.

But maybe we should take a step back and consider what God thinks about the importance of community.

God recognized as early as the very first human that people need people, and Eve was created. In fact, in Genesis 1:26, it’s obvious that it was God’s intention from the very beginning to create an entire race of humans, not just one solitary man. Note here the terms used at the beginning of this verse: “humankind,” and “them.” God intended from the beginning that we live in community.

It’s easy to see throughout Scripture that the Lord believes community is important. Our family-like relationship with other believers is essential. Even our relationship to our Creator is based in part on the community that we create to support it.

When bad things happen, community buoy us up. Have you ever experienced something deeply troubling, worrisome, or just plain frightening? It helps to have someone else come alongside you who has been through a similar difficult circumstance or trial, doesn’t it?

God’s promises in Zechariah 8 indicate that the faithful—however few in number—will reap rich rewards for their love, obedience, and care of one another. God reveals a desire for justice, mercy and compassion (Zechariah 7:9).

An integral role of community is the care of all its citizens. That means the protection of the poor, the weak, the less fortunate by those who have been blessed with much. “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress,” we’re reminded in James 1:27.

Today a simple look around will provide us ample opportunity to create community, especially by helping these two groups. Perhaps if we look outside the traditional definition of “widow” and “orphan,” we can see more easily those who need our help. Is there a single mother on your street who could use support? What about children whose father has abandoned them, or whose family has been changed through divorce?

What can we do today to foster a sense of community involvement and a communal sense of justice? Could we write a letter or join a group or a church team that could use our help? How would God have us use our gifts for God’s kingdom here on earth, right here and now?

Session Plans

These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

Getting ready for the session

- Read Zechariah 8, as well as session 11 in Journeys and this leader’s guide. Read the entire book of Zechariah for context.
- Provide sheets of paper with questions if using the “Explore Community” activity, or the same questions on slips of paper for the “Defining Community” activity.
- Bring a hat or bowl to class if using the “Defining Community” game.
• Have available Bibles and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers, or paper and pencils.
• Bring recent weekend newspapers if using the “Seeking Justice” activity.

BEGINNING THE SESSION
(5-10 MINUTES)

Define Community
• Ask participants to define the term community in one word. Go around the circle or room and make sure that everyone has a chance to respond. An individual can “pass,” but let them know that you’ll come back to them after everyone else has spoken. Write the terms on the board or newsprint, or ask a volunteer to do so.

OR
• Divide participants into two groups. Ask for a volunteer to record responses on a sheet of paper. Explain that this activity will take three minutes. Ask participants to list all the reasons they can think of that community is important. Bring the group back together and ask the recorder to share the top five reasons (most often mentioned by the group) that community is essential.

AND

Introduce the Topic for This Session
• Tell the class that this week’s session will be spent exploring Zechariah 8.
• Share the key verse.
• Explain that the purpose of this week’s session is to help students do the following:
  ° Understand God’s plan for community and God’s impact on it.
  ° Build a desire for God’s presence and God’s promise of justice.
  ° Grow a communal sense of justice, prosperity, and unity with God as guide.
• Pray for the group or ask for a volunteer to do this.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(35-40 MINUTES)

Introduce and Read the Text (5-10 min.)
• Write the Scripture reference on the white/chalkboard.
• Ask for four volunteers to read the following texts:
  ° Zechariah 8:1-4
  ° Zechariah 8:5-8
  ° Zechariah 8:11-13

  ° Zechariah 8:14-17
• Encourage participants to share what God promises God’s people in these verses. Record responses on a whiteboard/chalkboard or ask a volunteer to do this task.

AND

Get an Insider’s Look (10-15 min.)
• Explain that the class will now watch a four-minute video called Zealous over Zion. This will provide students with an insider’s look into the Holy City and help them to imagine themselves there. Listen for the words from Zechariah we just read. The video can be found online at www.godtube.com/watch/?v=M0MJFNNU.
• After they’ve watched the video, ask students to create a list of three things that helped them get the feel for the city of Jerusalem. Going around the room or circle, ask each participant to share one of the three things that stood out to them.

OR

Explore Community (15 min.)
• Read a dictionary definition of the word community.
• Ask how this definition varies from the community to which God calls all believers. Record any differences on the whiteboard/chalkboard.
• Separate group into smaller groups of four (or more as needed).
• Explain that the next activity will take approximately seven minutes. Within each group, ask participants to answer the following questions:
  ° Why do you believe that God calls us to community with other believers?
  ° What benefits come from community?
  ° Describe the first community in Genesis 1:26 and the few verses following.
  ° Is the need for community as important to believers today as it was to those in the early days of the Bible? Why or why not?
  ° In what ways do you shy away from community? Why do you think that is?
  ° What is one small step you might take to build community this week?
• Ask for one group member to act as the speaker. After the ten-minute time period is over, ask the recorders to share their group’s thoughts with the larger group.
• Suggest that another volunteer from each group act as the recorder and jot down a succinct version of the speakers’ responses on the board or newsprint.
• **Request** one more volunteer from the larger group to circle similar responses in the recorded answers.

**OR**

**Defining Community Game (10-15 min.)**

• **Explain** that the group will play a game called “Defining Community.”

• **Ask** for a volunteer to pass around a hat/bowl with slips of paper inside. Each participant should take one slip of paper. On each slip of paper is a question about community. Ask each class member to read their question and ask it to the person on their left. Continue this process until everyone has asked and answered a question. It’s okay to have duplicate questions asked. The questions from “Explore Community” listed above can be used in this activity as well.

**AND**

**Seeking Justice (10-15 min.)**

• **Explain** that this activity is hands-on but likely won’t be completed before the session ends today.

• **Give** each student a blank piece of paper, a pen or pencil, and a section of the weekend’s newspaper. Ask them to skim it until they find an account of something unjust. (For example, “Soup Kitchen Reduces Hours Due to Lack of Volunteers.”)

• **Ask** participants to make a line down the center of the blank paper. Ask them to write down a brief description of the injustice on one side. On the other side of the page, they should write one or more steps that could be taken to create a communal sense of justice in this situation. *Note: Some situations are so horrendous that we feel paralyzed in the face of them. Encourage students to pray for the person or people involved, that justice will be served.*

• **Encourage** students to share one thing they could do to bring justice to the community this week and to continue adding to their lists throughout the week ahead.

**CLOSING THE SESSION (5-10 MINUTES)**

**Just ACT**

• **Ask** participants to Just ACT this week.
  ◦ **Acknowledge** the world’s need for God to provide justice, daily necessities, and love.
  ◦ **Contemplate** how God could use them to show His love and mercy to others, or how they might build community this week.
  ◦ **Tell** another believer what they did, and ask that they “Just ACT” too.

**OR**

**Memorize the Key Verse**

• **Explain** that sometimes as adults we have a harder time memorizing Scripture passages than we did as children.

• **Invite** participants to find a unique way this week to attempt to memorize the key verse.

• **Ask** successful students if they would be willing to share their method at next week’s class.

• **Close the session** with prayer.

**NOTES**

2. Ibid.
Practice Justice

SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 21

KEY VERSE: O house of David! Thus says the Lord: Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. —Jeremiah 21:12a

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
- to define divine justice;
- to acknowledge God as a God of justice; and
- to accept justice as a personal mission and learn how to advocate for justice.

Introducing the Scripture

In the second movie in the Lord of the Rings series, The Two Towers, a movie based on J.R.R. Tolkien’s novel by the same name, there is a scene reminiscent of our passage in Jeremiah.

In the film, the people of Rowan are about to be besieged by Orcs. Fearing for their safety, the king is encouraged to send the people to Helm’s Deep, a place of refuge. While he is initially resistant, he does eventually acquiesce. He sends the women, children, and elderly there. Later he is encouraged to ask for aid from those in other lands—elves, dwarves, and men—to help the people fight against the evil that is drawing closer. That request is too much for the king to consider.

Instead, he draws the barriers of the city closer, intent on waiting out the battle and hoping for the best. “Hoping for the best,” isn’t necessarily a great military strategy. Isn’t this similar to King Zedekiah’s approach when Jeremiah warns him that Nebuchadnezzar’s powerful army is about to attack Jerusalem? Rather than confess his sin to God, though, and wave the white flag to his enemy, King Zedekiah plants his heels in the dirt and crosses his arms—metaphorically speaking—intent on doing what he believes is right. He chooses not to listen to the prophet of God.

How does it end? Will the people of Judah be lost because of the decision of their king?

Examining the Scripture

JEREMIAH 21:1-7. King Zedekiah was in a jam. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II chose him when Zedekiah was a young twenty-one years old to be a puppet king in Judah and demanded tribute be paid to Babylon. After a few years, Zedekiah switched allegiances and cast Judah’s lot with Egypt. Tribute payments to Babylon stopped, and now Nebuchadnezzar was making war on Judah. The LORD had spoken against this Egyptian alliance, and Jeremiah had been punished physically by the son of the chief official of the temple for speaking this unpopular message (Jeremiah 20:1-2). Jeremiah 21 begins with the promise that Jerusalem would fall to Nebuchadnezzar. When King Zedekiah sought the Lord’s deliverance, he did so in a flippant and halfhearted manner. “Please inquire of the LORD on our behalf, for King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is making war against us; perhaps the Lord will perform a wonderful deed for us, as he has often done, and will make him withdraw from us” (v. 2).

What other “wonderful deed,” was Zedekiah referring to? It could be that he was remembering the miraculous deliverance of the people from Sennacherib’s siege approximately a hundred years earlier.¹

God’s reply, however, was not encouraging. “I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and mighty arm, in anger, in fury, and in great wrath. And I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both human beings and animals; they shall die of a great pestilence” (vv. 5-6).

So, too, the reply Jeremiah sent back to Zedekiah was not what the king anticipated or desired to hear: Jeremiah
told the king that he and the entire city should surrender to Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah had other plans, though, and none of them involved surrender.

JEREMIAH 21:8-10. Since the king was not listening, Jeremiah appealed to all the people to flee for their lives. “See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.” Jeremiah said on God’s behalf in verse 8. The choice then became crystal clear: run for your lives, surrender to the Chaldeans, or stay in the city and suffer the consequences of that action. “Those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence,” the Lord warned (v. 9a).

If one were to begin reading the account here, they might have the wrong impression of God. Often people who aren’t familiar with God and Christianity are quick to share this negative view of the Lord. Even some Christians view the God of the Old Testament as vengeful and angry, happy to smote those who disobey God.

This wasn’t the first stubborn act of rebellion that God’s people had shown, however. Chapter 7 catalogs the many sins of Judah. It seems they had broken all ten of the commandments. In verses 13-15 God threatened justice for Judah’s abominations and wickedness.

JEREMIAH 21:10-13. Now, it appears, God will take action against the people. “For I have set my face against this city for evil and not for good, says the LORD: it shall be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire” (v. 10). Zedekiah was a king in David’s dynasty, and thus the current occupant of the throne of David. In verses 11-12a we’re reminded of this lineage.

Chapter 21 concludes with an oracle or word of God to Zedekiah. In verse 12a God instructs, “Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed.”

What does “in the morning,” refer to? Justice is to be administered promptly, when the mind is clear and the morning cool. The royal household is specifically addressed: the king’s attention—or lack thereof—to justice is underscored.

Likewise, “Deliver from the hand of the oppressor” in this verse refers to all types of injustice.2 As king of Judah, Zedekiah had many duties. One essential act was to administer justice to all the people in his realm. Was he doing so consistently and with great respect? Likely not, since God had to remind the king of this duty.

If Zedekiah was seeking God’s counsel and paying particular attention to the justice work he was supposed to be doing, he and the city might have been spared the fate that awaited them. In fact, reading on, it’s specifically pointed out that judgment would come “because of your evil doings” (v. 12b). Obviously then, Zedekiah wasn’t doing the work he should have been doing in the way it should have been done.

Rebellion was at the root of this problem. Yet it went deeper than the rebellious nature of a single man. The house of David had long fallen away from living as God intended them to live. Poor choices lead to negative consequences.

Rather than humble themselves though, and seek forgiveness, they added insult to injury. Listen in verse 13 to what can only be described as a taunt: “You who say, ‘Who can come down against us, or who can enter our places of refuge?’” Then, later, “I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, says the LORD” (v. 14a). This verse reminded the people, and us today, that God allows us to suffer the consequences of our sinful actions at times.

Finally, in verse 14b God said, “I will kindle a fire in its forest, and it shall devour all that is around it.” Though there was no forest in the city of Jerusalem, the “forest” may refer to one within the king’s domain. Another thought is that it referred to the wood (cedar) used to build much of the city, including Solomon’s temple, the palace, and many other buildings.3 First Kings 7:2 says that Solomon’s palace was built of lumber from the forest of Lebanon.

**Applying the Scripture**

Two words come to mind when reflecting on this chapter of Jeremiah: rebellion and justice. Over and over the people...
had pushed against God, believing that the “old ways,” and the “old God” weren’t good enough, not when the world had so much more to offer.

Are we that different?

A look at modern culture assures us that the answer is no. Technology has improved our lives in many ways, as has an increase in leisure time, instead of working from sunup to sundown. But these things have also made us dependent on them.

No longer are we content with two or three channels on TV. Those from the younger generation would be horrified to learn how long dial-up internet took to access not that long ago. And what about those from earlier generations? Were they equally flabbergasted by relatives who remembered using horse and buggy or lacked indoor plumbing?

Still, it isn’t as easy as blaming the culture in industrialized nations. In fact, in many ways life today is more complicated, stressful, and anxiety-ridden than it has ever been. But what lies underneath?

The temptation to ignore God and God’s will is still as prevalent today as it was in Jeremiah’s time. The belief that somehow we “know better,” or that God is trying to deceive us into missing out is an old and familiar lie. In fact, it’s a lie as old as time. In Genesis 3:1b Satan started his deceit with a question: “He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden”? ’” From there he falsely reassured Eve, “You will not die” (3:4). This was the first lie ever accepted as truth.

Our weakness frequently shows up as rebellion. In gifting us with free will, God took the riskiest chance in the history of the world. God lets us choose. Will we choose to follow God faithfully or to rebel?

Like the parent of a toddler, God lets us know where the boundaries lie and then sets us free, loving us enough to allow us to choose.

What a dangerous, risky thing to do! And yet in God’s wisdom, God recognizes that it is the only path to true, unadulterated love.

Where does justice enter the mix? Like any other decision, the outcome of one’s actions must be pondered. Just because something “feels good,” or “appears legit,” doesn’t make it so. We must carefully weigh the decisions we make against the word of the LORD, as well as through prayer and seeking wise counsel of other mature Christians.

Daily, Christians are bombarded with temptations: Do we overlook the error on our taxes and enjoy the larger refund, or tell the accountant? Does it really hurt anyone if we look at pornography online? Is it gossiping if we’re just trying to get the full story so that we can “help” someone?

Justice plays out in another important area too. In the United States we are blessed in many ways. Unfortunately, we’ve allowed many of these blessings to make us too comfortable in our lives. So cozy in fact that we stop growing, stop helping, stop trying to change the world for the better. It’s more difficult to imagine the plight of a slave girl in Taiwan when we’re reclined in our La-Z-Boy, watching the game on a fifty-five-inch screen. It’s hard to ponder the suffering of a village undergoing a severe famine while out with the girls enjoying pedicures. Is watching sports or enjoying a pedicure wrong? No. When these things happen so frequently, though, that there is little or no time left for God, then there is a problem.

God doesn’t want complacent, comfortable Christians. He wants us to work on behalf of those who are at risk, those who are oppressed. He expects us to give aid to those who cannot help themselves. Many of God’s children do not have bootstraps to pull up. Even if they did, they are so tired, discouraged, and worn out from the hardships in life that they couldn’t pull one more time.

Just as God shows us justice, we are to show justice to others: in our church, our community, our workplace, and our world. What does that look like? For each of us, it will appear differently.

The important thing is that we are moving in the direction of justice, not sitting on the sidelines, watching others do the work. Eugene Peterson paraphrases Jeremiah 21:13-14 this way: “You think you’ve got it made, all snug and secure. You say, ‘Who can possibly
get to us? Who can crash our party? Well, I can—and will!" (MSG).

Session Plans
These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION
• Read Jeremiah 21:8-14 and session 12 in Journeys and this leader's guide.
• Provide students with copies of recent newspapers if using the “Order in the Court” activity; slips of paper if using the “Prayer Circle” activity; sample of visual prayers, colored pencils, markers and/or crayons if using the “Visual Prayer” activity, along with blank index cards if using the “Sharing God’s Love” activity.
• Have available Bibles and either chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, newsprint and markers, or paper and pencils.

BEGINNING THE SESSION
(5-10 MINUTES)
Introduce the Topic for This Session
Define “Boundaries”
• Ask each participant to say the first word or phrase that comes to mind when they hear the word boundaries.
• Ask for a volunteer to record these on the board or newsprint.
• Note with a line or circle any of the same or similar words or phrases captured.
• Read the definition of boundaries from a dictionary to see if you missed any descriptors.
• Ask or comment on how boundaries connect to Jeremiah’s message.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(35-40 MINUTES)
Good and Bad Boundaries (5-10 min.)
• Explain to participants that they will be making a list with a partner.
• Separate the larger group into pairs (or threesomes as needed).
• Ask that one person act as the recorder and the other the timekeeper.
• Distribute paper and writing utensils to each pair.
• Take three minutes. On one side of the paper list all the benefits of having good boundaries (physical, emotional, etc.) Then take another three minutes and list all the negatives of having or observing boundaries.

AND The Bible on Boundaries (10-15 min.)
• Learn what the Bible has to say about boundaries and their importance.
• Look up the following verses and share them either in pairs or together as a large group:
  ° Psalm 16:6
  ° Psalm 74:17
  ° Ezekiel 47:13
  ° Acts 17:26
• Ask participants to describe the role of boundaries in these verses. Were these good boundaries to have, or would they have been frustrating? Why or why not?

AND/OR Boundaries in Jeremiah 21
• Summarize the situation and prophecy in Jeremiah 21.
• Note the following boundaries in chapter 21:
  ° “Church and state” (prophet and king)
  ° National borders (Judah, Egypt, Babylon)
  ° Way of life and way of death (v. 9)
  ° Evil and good (v. 10)
  ° Either side of the city wall (v. 9)
  ° “Place of refuge” (v. 13)
• Discuss with the group how we experience each of the above boundaries in our contemporary society and lives.
• Draw out instances where justice and injustice intersect with these boundaries. Examples might include religious liberty in conflict with social issues, immigration, social consequences of individual moral choices, rural and urban divides, socioeconomic disparities, etc.
• Ask how the truth of Jeremiah speaks to the local and national powers of our century.

OR Order in the Court (15 min.)
• Tell students that you will hold a ten-minute “legal session.”
• Hand out copies of newspapers from the past week or two (you can sometimes get past issues free from the local library).
• Ask students to split into groups of three.
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- Each student, acting as if they are an attorney, should find one story of injustice in the newspaper.
- Then they should write down three ways in which the outcome would have been more just, in their mind.
- Next, ask each student to share their findings with the small group.
- After ten minutes, reform the larger group. Ask what themes of justice each smaller group noted.

OR

Prayer Circles (10-15 min.)
- Create smaller groups of three to six members.
- Hand out slips of paper and writing implements.
- Ask each person to take one minute and list something (community, regional, or global—not within the church itself), where they see injustice happening.
- Place the slips of paper in the center of the table.
- Encourage each participant to take a single slip from the center of the table.
- Go around the circle and ask each participant to pray for the situation listed on the slip of paper.

AND

Visual Prayer (10-15 min.)
- Explain what visual prayer is. Basically, it is using simple symbols or doodling while praying to keep your body connected with your mind. (See a great definition here: https://prayingincolor.com/praying-in-color-praying-in-black-and-white.)
- Hand out sheets of white paper and pens, pencils, crayons, colored pencils and/or markers. Optional: Hand out a sample visual prayer (from above website, or simply google “visual prayer”) for students to see what you’re talking about. Try to choose simple designs, nothing too complicated or overwhelming.
- Tell students that for ten minutes they can pray visually. This could be as simple as drawing a cross and listing on each section of it one concern or worry. It could also mean doodling and making boxes, circles, triangles or other areas in which to print their prayers.
- Ask participants to spend time thinking in particular about an injustice in the world that they would like to pray about in the week ahead.

CLOSING THE SESSION
(5-10 MINUTES)

Closing Circle Prayer
- Ask participants to gather together and form a large circle.
- Going around the circle, ask each person to offer up a single word prayer to God about an injustice in the world that they are trusting God to right.
- After everyone has had a chance to offer up a single word prayer, close the session with a prayer of your own.

OR

Sharing God’s Love
- Hand out blank index cards, colored pencils, crayons, and/or markers.
- Ask participants to write a single word that to them defines God’s love (e.g., peace).
- Participants should decorate the card as much or as little as they’d like, making sure to keep the word legible.
- Encourage students to take their finished card with them and to leave it anonymously somewhere to be discovered (e.g., by the coffeepot in the break room at work) this week.
- Close the session with prayer.

NOTES
2. Ibid., 223, 225.
3. Ibid.
SESSION 13 • MAY 24, 2020

Do the Right Thing

SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 22:1-10

KEY VERSE: Act with justice and righteousness.  
Jeremiah 22:3b

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to define the role of justice in God’s relationship with God’s covenant people;
• to translate the role of justice in our relationship with God today; and
• to commit to taking action for the oppressed.

Introducing the Scripture

Imagine God calling you to become a prophet. Then imagine that you’re still a teenager. Such was likely the case with Jeremiah, who served as a prophet for more than forty years (Jeremiah 1:5-6). This wasn’t a cushy calling. The people of Judah were rebellious and hard-hearted toward God. They wanted new and different. They worshiped gods formed by their hands. They turned away from the true, living God.

Rather than smite them in anger, however, God chose to dispense justice before gathering the remnant for a new beginning. None of this would come easily, though. As true change often requires, this would involve dedication, faithfulness, and the listening ears and open hearts of God’s people.

Becoming a prophet during the reign of Josiah, Jeremiah witnessed the rule of the last of God’s faithful kings in the land of Judah. From Josiah, other kings then obtained the throne. A series of kings: Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Jehoiachin were followed by Zedekiah, who was king during these latter chapters of Jeremiah.

Throughout the reign of each of these kings, the land of Judah was in upheaval. Egyptians and Babylonians fought for power. Political unrest was high. It was only by switching sides that at least one of the kings on the throne, Jehoiakim, remained in power.

Finally, though, Zedekiah became king. He did not, however, have the people’s best interests at heart, nor did he concern himself with consulting God on matters large or small.

In chapter 21 God made his intentions clear for the wayward king and his followers: “I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and mighty arm, in anger, in fury, and in great wrath” (v. 5). Was this a sudden threat from a God who suddenly became wrathful?

Hardly. God had been trying to get the people’s attention for years. Finally, they would have to suffer the consequences of their sinful actions. Let’s look now at Jeremiah 22:1-10.

Examining the Scripture

JEREMIAH 22:1-5. The chapter begins with the Lord telling the prophet Jeremiah to deliver a message to both the king and the people alike (vv. 1-2). What was the message? “Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place” (v. 3).

How fitting these words remain for all of God’s followers today. Here we are reminded of the importance of seeking justice for those who are oppressed. In the midst of all the upheaval happening in the days of Jeremiah, it’s somewhat surprising to see that this is where God’s attention was focused. Should ours be any less, then, in our modern-day time of upheaval, political divisiveness, and apathy?
Next a choice is outlined for God’s people in verses 4-5: Option 1 states that the future kings and the people of the land will ride in chariots and on horses. In other words, David’s descendants would continue to rule in the land of Judah. Option 2 states that if the people do not heed the words of the Lord, then, “I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation” (v. 5b). It seems like a no-brainer, doesn’t it? Yet the people of Judah, their king, and yes, even believers today, if we’re honest, still struggle to serve God above all else.

JEREMIAH 22:6-10. The lush forests of Lebanon were the source of timber for the royal palace, but that palace and all of Jerusalem are in jeopardy. “For thus says the LORD concerning the house of the king of Judah: You are like Gilead to me, like the summit of Lebanon; but I swear that I will make you a desert, an uninhabited city” (v. 6).

What is “Gilead,” and why does the Lord compare Judah to it here? Gilead was the richest, most fertile part of the country. Because of God’s providence, the land of Judah and its inhabitants had experienced plenty. They knew what it was to prosper and enjoy the fruits of the land. However, God also had the power and ability to make them like a desert, or “an uninhabited city.”

If they chose the latter, the punishment would be steep. Verse 7 says that the Lord promised to “prepare destroyers against [them].” These would come with weapons. Additionally, their enemies would “cut down your choicest cedars and cast them into the fire.”

Verse 8 states that those passing by would be left wondering why this happened. Their answer comes directly in verse 9. “And they will answer, ‘Because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD their God, and worshiped other gods and served them.’”

The completion of this passage of Jeremiah finishes with an oracle, or word from the Lord. “Do not weep for him who is dead, nor bemoan him; weep rather for him who goes away, for he shall return no more to see his native land” (v. 10). Here the people were told not to weep for those who died in the siege, but rather those who “go away,” referring to the exiles who would never again return home.2

Jeremiah 22:1-10 can leave one with a bitter feeling. If only, we think. If only the people had repented. If only they had stopped their foolish pursuit of idols and turned back to God. How much different things might have been?

What might cause even greater bitterness in the belly would be to look in a mirror. In what ways does God try to woo us back from the idols in our own lives? These aren’t gods made of silver or gold, but those formed of status, success, or trying to live the American dream, even at the expense of others. In the next section, we will look more closely at the way in which this passage of Scripture can be applied to our lives today.

Applying the Scripture

When I was in my teens and twenties, I loved to shop. My father used to joke that it was my “patriotic duty” because of the way I supported the economy though my purchase of clothes and accessories. Over time though, it changed from a fun occasional pastime, to an outlet for my emotions. When I moved away from home and felt lonely or homesick, I would head to the mall. Whether I felt stressed about work or was celebrating a success, I often hightailed it to the closest store to buy “just a little something,” for a pick-me-up. My habit wasn’t hurting anyone, I told myself, other than my checkbook.

Watching a documentary, China Blue, helped me change my thoughts and actions around shopping. The video depicts the lives of those in rural China, many of whom move to the nearest city to work in one of the factories. The cramped living quarters and excessively long hours worked in often extremely dangerous conditions helped me to see that the “deal” I was getting on the rack wasn’t a true savings at all. People were still paying for the “deep discount” I was enjoying, with their lives in sweatshops.

People were still paying for the “deep discount” I was enjoying, with their lives in sweatshops.

God also had the power and ability to make them like a desert, or “an uninhabited city.”
At the start of this passage in Jeremiah, we’re reminded that God places value on justice and providing relief to those who are oppressed. Verse 3 states, “Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.”

How does this verse apply to us today? As Christians, we should be at the forefront of social justice issues. Because these are now seen as political by many (e.g., “those tree-hugging liberals,” or “those pro-life right-wingers”), Christians have lost some of their power in these situations. Does the devil laugh to see how infighting, disagreements, and arrogant self-righteousness serve his purposes? The truth is that God cares about it all: the earth and the people living on it. Because we are made in God’s image, we too, should care about others deeply.

A quick look at Scripture like the verse above reminds us that people matter to God. Justice matters to God. Providing relief to those who are hurting, struggling, or in pain—physical, mental or emotional—matters to God. Sharing in someone else’s pain, in their struggle and their weakness, does something funny to us: it draws us closer. Together we experience that deep human connection that God craves for us.

Some of us struggle with self-righteousness in our day-to-day walk. “If ‘those people’ would just get their acts together, pull themselves up by their bootstraps, start making better decisions, they wouldn’t be suffering,” we tell ourselves in smug tones. Yet Romans 3:23 says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” not just those experiencing severe depression, a divorce, abuse, addiction, imprisonment—all of us. Every. Single. One.

Others of us struggle to feel that we have anything of worth to offer. Whether we’ve dealt with lifelong self-esteem issues or simply feel too old, tired, sick, broken or untalented to help others, we ingest the lie that we can’t do anything meaningful to help. Nothing could be further from the truth, but the lie feels very real.

Some of us are in a season where the kindest thing to do for ourselves and others is to step back, say “no” to just one more volunteer opportunity. Busy-ness isn’t next to godliness, no matter what we may feel. And giving to others from an empty well isn’t as productive as we hope. It can also pull us further away from the Holy Spirit and the connection to God that we need and crave.

How do we counteract all these tendencies? Pray and then take action. By reaching out to our brothers and sisters and seeking justice on their behalf, we are glorifying the God of righteousness and justice. We are partnering together with God in the work that God is doing here on earth. What could be more important than that? Could it be that the devil, knowing this, encourages us to fill our days to overflowing so that we can’t make those connections? Might it be Satan’s great joy that we’re “too busy, too tired, too stressed,” to find the time to spend in deep communion with our Heavenly Father, filling ourselves up spiritually so that we can give to others in need?

**Session Plans**

These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

**GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION**

- **Read Jeremiah 22:1-10** and session 13 in Journeys and this leader’s guide.
- **Provide** students with slips of paper if using the “Stick with It” activity.
- **Bring** a balloon (helium or not), a pin, a piece of masking tape, and a magic marker for the “God’s Justice and Mercy” activity.
- **Have available** Bibles and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, newsprint and markers, or paper and pencils.

**BEGINNING THE SESSION**

(5-10 MINUTES)

**Introduce the Topic for This Session**

- **Explain** the important focus of this passage. Jeremiah 22:1-10: the justice of God, God’s call to obedience, and God’s desire for us to help those who are oppressed and in need.
SESSION 13 • MAY 24, 2020

- Post this question on newsprint, whiteboard, or chalkboard: “What idols are people in our community struggling with today?”
- Ask for a volunteer to capture the answers students give on the newsprint, whiteboard, or chalkboard as you facilitate the discussion.
- In the final minute or two, ask class participants to look at the list, choose a single idol that they are currently struggling with, and pray silently for the Holy Spirit’s help in overcoming it.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(35-40 MINUTES)

Yours, Mine, Ours (15-20 min.)
- Explain that studies have proven individuals are less likely to help someone in crisis (e.g., a fire, robbery, or car accident) if there are many other people around.
- Show the short video *The Bystander Effect*, which can be found here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSSpbup0ac](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSSpbup0ac).
- Ask what students’ reactions were to the video, and record these on the board or newsprint.
- Display these three questions on the board or newsprint:
  - In what ways is standing up for injustice similar to the bystander effect?
  - If we believe that “other people” are taking care of a problem in the world, how does that change our own perceived responsibility?
  - What does the Bible say about standing up for injustice in Jeremiah 22:3?
- Break class into pairs. Instruct each partner to pose the three questions to each other. Allow three minutes per person and take notes as needed.
- Come back together as a large group. Ask partner groups to share one key thing they learned as they reflected on justice and our role in it as Christians.

AND

God’s Justice and Mercy (10-15 min.)
- Show the class a filled balloon (helium or not). Ask them to imagine that we are the balloon.
- Ask students to call out common sins that Christians in America today struggle with. Write these words on the balloon in magic marker or ask a volunteer to do this.
- Read this Bible passage: “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23a). Ask students to imagine that the pin (hold up the pin), is the penalty for sin, and prepare to pop the balloon.
- Stop just short of popping the balloon, and tell the students, “Wait, let’s read the rest of that verse in Romans.” Read Romans 6:23b which says, “but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- Put a piece of masking tape on part of the balloon. Explain that this tape represents Jesus’ sacrifice for us on the cross. Now try to pop the balloon (it shouldn’t pop!).
- Remind students: God provided us with a perfect gift: Jesus our Savior who died so that we might live forever with him in glory. God is just, and because of this, Jesus had to die to save us.

OR

“Can You Hear Me Now?” (10-15 min.)
- Tell participants the group will now play a round of old-fashioned telephone. Start the message at one end of the group and ask students to pass it along as best they can until the last person says the message out loud.
- Ask, “How hard or easy was it to hear the message clearly?”
- Now tell the students you’ll be playing the game again, but this time with a twist: whoever doesn’t get the message exactly right will be made to stand in the corner.
- Play the game again (or not, depending on your class), and then explain that no one will really need to stand in the corner.
- Ask students if they felt differently when they knew that there would be consequences for inaccuracies the second time the game was/would have been played. If so, what was different?
- Record these phrases/thoughts/emotions on the whiteboard or chalkboard.
- God gives us clear boundaries when it comes to idols and obedience to God. Ask, “Why do Christians still struggle with these things?” and “What is one thing we could do today to change how we view idols and obedience to God?”

AND

Exploring Obedience (10-15 min.)
- “Obedience” isn’t a popular word. While we all want our children to be obedient, it’s not so pleasant when someone in authority (e.g., a boss) requires our obedience. Consider: What does God say about obedience?
- Separate the class into four groups. Assign a passage of Scripture (below) to each group. Ask students to
note any action words on God’s part or our part in the passage of Scripture they study.

- Exodus 19:1-10
- Joshua 5:2-9
- John 14:15-27
- John 15:5-14

- Form back into the large group. Ask for a volunteer from each group to paraphrase the passage of Scripture that was read. Alternately, ask for a volunteer to read the passage of Scripture if time allows.
- Ask for a second volunteer to record on the whiteboard or chalkboard under the proper headings:
  - God’s promise
  - Our job
- Reflect on the responses. Did any of God’s promises or our job requirements surprise students? If so, which?

**CLOSING THE SESSION**

**(5-10 MINUTES)**

**Prayer Passing**

- Form a circle (seated or standing) holding hands. Tell the class that the group will be closing in joint prayer.
- Tell them that you will start the prayer, and then ask each person to squeeze the person’s hand on their left. The next person will add a single word or sentence to the prayer and so on.

- Start the prayer by recognizing God’s desire for our obedience. Add in something like, “Please help us to be more obedient as we...” Then pass the prayer to your left by squeezing that person’s hand.
- Close the prayer after everyone has had a chance to add to the prayer.

**OR**

**Stick with It**

- Hand out slips of paper. Ask each person in the group to write down one thing they will do this week to seek justice for someone else (examples: call the soup kitchen/local prison and ask what their needs are; donate money to an organization working to feed the hungry; pray for modern-day slaves).
- Remind each participant to list their name on the slip of paper.
- Gather the slips of paper. Redistribute them, making sure that no one receives their own paper back.
- Encourage students to check in with the person whose paper they received next Sunday and ask how the challenge went. Also, suggest that they pray for the person this week.
- Close the session with prayer.

**NOTES**

SESSION 14 • MAY 31, 2020

Return to Love and Justice

SCRIPTURE: Hosea 11:1-2, 7-10; 12:1-2, 6-14

KEY VERSE: But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.
—Hosea 12:6

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to assess worldly prosperity in light of God’s love and justice;
• to demonstrate repentance over past pursuits of worldly prosperity; and
• to commit to establishing a practice of acting in love and with justice as key traits in the future.

Introducing the Scripture
We can’t jump into the message of the prophet Hosea in our Scripture texts for this lesson without writing a few words about the prophet and the “sign parable” of his life. Famously, God instructed Hosea to marry a promiscuous wife as a sign to Israel of their unfaithfulness to Yahweh. The people had been unfaithful by worshiping foreign idols and Baal. Two of their children were given Hebrew names meaning “not pitied” and “not my people.” Hosea’s reconciliation with his wife, Gomer, mirrored the Lord’s amazing love for Israel. Hosea 2:23 foresaw a day when Israel would be pitied, receive mercy, and again be God’s people. This lesson revealed Israel’s rebellion and God’s compassion (note especially Hosea 11:9).

In the movie based on C. S. Lewis’s classic The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, we’re introduced to Aslan, a gentle, kind, and just lion. Things in Narnia aren’t quite like things here in our world. And Aslan, who appears meek and mild, eventually roars a mighty, powerful roar against the White Witch that produces goose bumps. Like Aslan, these passages in Hosea remind us of the love of God and also of God’s awe-inspiring, terrifying anger. God is not so much angry with sin as God is concerned about justice. While God’s love for God’s people is tremendous, their rebellion and blatant refusal to obey God’s laws fuel the fire.

“The Lord has yoked himself to Israel and will not give up on her, even in the face of the rampant unfaithfulness of the northern kingdom.” This quote from Robert Vasholz of Covenant Theological Seminary sums up the book of Hosea beautifully and succinctly, and reminds us of the “marriage” between Yahweh and Israel.

In today’s culture, giving up is easier than ever. Without the same societal constraints that our parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents experienced, it’s relatively easy to quit things they wouldn’t have dreamed of quitting—jobs, relationships, marriages, churches, and more. And in our American culture of “have it your way,” we don’t often expect or appreciate the trials that come our way.

Indeed, when struggles come into our lives, we hold our heads, wondering what went wrong. Is God angry with us? Did we misstep or misspeak? Is the Lord in that awesome power that God has, going to finally zing us for the sins in our lives? Too many Christians have a vision of God like a bad version of Santa, checking a list to finally mete out our punishment for being “bad.”

These passages of Hosea remind us of the importance of focusing on God and God alone. Bad times will come. So will good. And it is not a sin to enjoy blessings in our lives. God is pleased to give us good gifts. But when these gifts and our focus on things outside of our relationship with God overwhelm us, God is not pleased.

Examining the Scripture
HOSEA 11:1-2. Here the metaphor shifts from husband and wife (Hosea and Gomer) to parent and child. The child grows and is loved and cared for but makes toxic choices as an adult. Tough love follows and reconciliation will
come. In the New American Standard Bible, the heading for the opening lines of Hosea 11 reads, “God Yearns over His People.” Yet even though God loves like a father, calling to his son (v. 1), God’s people turned to other gods, sacrificing to Baals and burning incense to idols (v. 2). This was the ultimate generational rebellion, a rejection of the faith heritage of their mothers and fathers.

Hosea 11:7-10. This push and pull between God’s love and the children’s rebellion continues in later verses. Verses 7-8 note, “To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.” And yet God posed questions that show God still loved. The most poignant of these is perhaps this: “How can I give you up, O Ephraim?”

Reminiscent of the question a parent of a wayward child might ask, you can almost feel God’s pain: “How can I give you up?” Parents of children trapped in the cycle of addiction know this feeling only too well. Though they have been hurt repeatedly, their constant, aching parental love remains. An important distinction to note in the metaphor of God as parent is this: God is omniscient. We are not. Verse 8 finishes with these heartrending words: “My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.”

God loves us in spite of ourselves. Often children, particularly toddlers, feel the burning need to express their independence—even if doing so flies in the face of reality or what’s best for them. Did the people deserve God’s wrath and punishment? Yes.

Do we? Without Christ, yes.

Yet God takes no pleasure in punishment: “I will not execute my fierce anger;” God promised (v. 9). Yet God will come, roaring like a lion, “and His children will come trembling from the west” (v. 10).

Hosea 12:1-2. In chapter 12 God reminds Ephraim, the northern tribe descended from Joseph. Don’t all believers need to be reminded at times of God’s awe-inducing power and majesty? If you’ve ever witnessed the power of a thunderstorm, you’ve seen a glimmer of God’s power and might. Ferocious winds bend trees and lash against everything—moving and not while rain lashes so thickly you can barely see. The thunder that rumbles can be felt in your ribcage and the lightening that splits the dark sky is blindingly brilliant.

The beginning of this chapter reads like poetry: “Ephraim herds the wind, and pursues the east wind all day long” (v. 1). The NASB uses the word “feeds” instead of “herds.” Ephraim remains symbolic of the kingdom of Israel in this passage. But what does it mean to feed on the wind and pursue it? “Feeding on the wind” is an expression that could be used to define that which is elusive and unprofitable. Wind is neither visible nor stable. It blows and moves in seemingly unpredictable patterns. It can be merely blustery or downright dangerous. Here it could be paraphrased that Israel, God’s people, were seeking after that which had no real, lasting value.

The reference to Ephraim (Israel) multiplying lies and violence and making a treaty with Assyria, and “oil . . . carried to Egypt” again speak of Israel’s relations with surrounding countries and cities of power.

In verse 2 we’re reminded again of the long history of God’s love and the people’s rebellion. God’s kindness and longsuffering are in stark contrast to the people’s willful rebellion and ungratefulness.

Hosea 12:6-14. In verse 6 we’re reminded of this: “Israel had only to turn to Him in truth and keep loyalty [covenant-keeping love] and justice (which includes all our duty to our neighbor). . . . Hosea implies continual trust and obedience as they continue in hope.”

Oppression is referred to in verse 7 and here speaks not only to actual dishonesty in their scales and measures, taking advantage of the poor, but also in their relationship to God. Dishonesty has a way of bleeding into all parts of one’s life. Additionally, being referred to as “merchants” wasn’t necessarily a flattering label. Hosea was likely referring to Canaan’s merchants who were great merchant people. Israel should not have been lumped in with these, for they were God’s chosen people.
In verse 8 a strange parallel to today’s culture is exposed. While this verse talks about the moral code of the merchants of this time, it also speaks to the same code in our culture today. “Don’t judge me,” has become the mantra of modern-day Americans, which makes sense in a twisted sort of way. Without clear boundaries and understanding of God’s moral code, how can we say what is right and wrong?

Despite Israel’s (and our own) forgetfulness of God, God has been “the Lord your God since the land of Egypt” (v. 9). In other words, whether we choose to acknowledge God and God’s place in the universe and our lives does nothing to diminish God’s sovereignty. God continued to speak through the prophets (v. 10) and to teach the people continuously. “In Gilead, there is iniquity” God said (v. 11). Like saying, “The sky is blue,” this statement is so matter-of-fact: yes, there is indeed iniquity in Gilead. There they “sacrifice bulls,” and their altars “shall be like stone heaps.”

In verse 12 we see a parallel to the story of Jacob. In Genesis 32:39 we are reminded of, “Jacob’s voluntary poverty, bearing even unjust losses (31:39) and repaying the things which he never took.” As well, “Jacob, trusting in God and enriched by God, returned from Aram to the land promised to him by God.” Sharply contrasted with this are the people of Israel who, not trusting God but themselves and their own riches, would lose the land that God had given them.

The prophet referred to in Hosea 12:13 is Moses. Here God reminded the people that “the Lord brought Israel up from Egypt.” Yet even so, the people did not remember the saving grace of the Lord. And so, though it gave God no pleasure, God would be forced to “bring back his reproach to him” (v. 14).

Applying the Scripture
The themes of these Scripture passages include the importance of loving God above all else, ridding ourselves of idols in our lives, repenting from seeking prosperity with wrong motives, and establishing a practice of acting lovingly and justly in the world, as God does toward us.

Where though, do we begin? These feel like huge, overwhelming issues in our lives—and they may be. But we’re also reminded that we serve and are children of a big, awe-inspiring God: “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory” (Isaiah 6:3). Perhaps you remember the song from The Sound of Music, “Do-Re-Mi?” When the children are struggling to remember the notes of a scale, Maria says, “Let’s start at the very beginning. A very good place to start.” We, too, need to start at the very beginning.

Firstly, we remember that God is love. “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” 1 John 4:8 Without that truth deep in the marrow of our bones and in the furthest recesses of our hearts, we cannot move forward in a way that truly honors God. Everything we do will instead be going through the motions, born from misguided ideas that we need to prove ourselves worthy to God. Christ, thankfully, has already done that.

From that place of love and unconditional acceptance, we ask for repentance from our own “idol” worship. “If anything in all the world is more fundamental than God to your happiness, to your meaning in life, then that thing has become an idol,” said Tim Keller, author of Counterfeit Gods. We believe that we have been forgiven for chasing counterfeit gods and thank the Almighty for grace. That belief is where some of us get tripped up. Forgiveness then, can be an act of faith itself, as we work with God to distance ourselves from our past sin rather than letting it define us. Then we ask for help, taking practical steps to rid ourselves of the power that any idol has in our life. Finally, we seek to extend God’s love and justice to those around us, particularly those who know little or no love and who are most burdened by life’s injustices.

Satan would have us believe that we are “too bad” or “not bad enough” to ask for repentance and help. God, however, loves us enough to know what we need even before we ourselves know.
Psalm 139:1-4 promises this:
O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

Just as these early believers in the Bible, we, too, must commit to God and God's will in our lives.

Session Plans
These session plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION
• Read Hosea 11:1-2, 7-10; 12:1-2, 6-14.
• Read also session 14 in Journeys and this leader’s guide.
• Provide a sign that says, “YES,” and another that says, “NO,” if using the “I Deserve It!” activity.
• Have available Bibles and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, newsprint and markers, or paper and pencils.

BEGINNING THE SESSION
(5-10 MINUTES)
• Explain the focus of this passage, Hosea 11:1-2, 7-10; 12:1-2, 6-14: the exploration of love, justice, repentance, prosperity, righteousness, and faithfulness.
• Post this question on the board or newsprint: “Are we blessed because we deserve it?”
• Ask for a volunteer to capture the answers students give on the newsprint, whiteboard, or chalkboard as you facilitate the discussion. Allow only two minutes for responses.
• Request that students choose one blessing they are thankful for and pray a silent prayer of gratitude for it.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(35-40 MINUTES)
“I Deserve It!” (10 min.)
• Ask, “Do we deserve blessings?” Place a sign that says, “YES,” on one side of the room and a sign that says, “NO” on the other side of the room.

WARNING: You may wish to tie this into a theme of the session—blessings and responsibility. You may also want to discuss this in terms of the Bible’s teaching (See Philippians 2:1-7).
• Instruct participants to stand near the sign that signifies their answer.
• Ask for two or three people from each group to share why they believe or don’t believe that as Christians we deserve blessings.
• What does the Bible say about this? Tell participants to return to their seats. Ask them to read Philippians 2:1-7.

AND

Why Does God Bless Us? (10-15 min.)
• Show the short video Why Does God Bless Us? which can be found by searching for “Why Does God Bless Us?” by Scott Creps. It can also be found on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=227rqAt5f8E.
• Hand out paper and pens or pencils. Ask students to take three minutes to list as many blessings as they can. Note: Let students know that these lists will be shared, and to capture only things they don’t mind others reading.
• Divide the class into pairs. Instruct each person to share their list with their partner. Go over the lists together. Circle any of the same blessings and underline any blessings that are unique.
• Come back together as a large group.
• Ask, “What is one blessing you have that you’d be willing to share with someone else?”
• Record all answers on the board or newsprint or ask a volunteer to do this as you facilitate the responses.

OR

Hidden Blessings (10-15 min.)
• Separate the class into groups of three. There will be three roles: reader, recorder, and presenter.
• Ask them to read the Bible passages from Hosea 11:1-2, 7-10 and 12:1-2, 6-14.
• As the reader reads the passage, the recorder (with help from the others) records any blessings listed within the Bible text.
• Come back together as a large group.
• Ask the presenter of each group to come forward and write down all the blessings they uncovered in the passage.
• After each group has added their blessings to the whiteboard or chalkboard, reflect on these. Are there any that are similar to our blessings today? If so, which ones?
• Ask presenters to circle any similar blessings to what we experience today and underline any blessings that are not similar to what we experience today.
Debate Team (10-15 min.)

- **Separate** the class into two groups. Group 1 will be debating the merits of taking a vow of poverty to avoid the apathy that can come from prosperity. Group 2 will be underscoring the merits of prosperity—how it can make the world a better place and spread God's love.
- **Give** each group five minutes to record their strongest points for the debate.
- **Open** the debate.
- **Allow** five minutes to debate, or end debate when one side runs out of points to discuss or responses.
- **Come back together** as a large group. **Ask** the following:
  - What was difficult about being on your side of the debate team?
  - Did you learn anything new during this process? If so, what?

CLOSING THE SESSION (5-10 MINUTES)

Loving Others Well

- **Ask** students to note any act of love they’ve witnessed within the past week. It could be, for example, someone helping someone cross the street, or picking up something an elderly person dropped.
- **List** these acts on the board or newsprint.
- **Ask** participants to look for more acts of love in the week ahead. Better yet, **ask** them to participate actively in performing these acts!

OR

Acts of Justice

- **Write** the definition of *justice* on the board or newsprint.
- **Ask** if students can think of one part of their community, state, country, or the world where justice is needed.
- **Encourage** students to pray for one of these justice issues in the week ahead.
- **Close the session** with prayer.

NOTES

2. Ibid., 1639.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 239.
6. Ibid.
Evaluation Form
Judson Bible Journeys for Adults
JOURNEYS LEADER’S GUIDE • SPRING 2020

At the end of this quarter, please take a few minutes to complete this form and return it to:
Journeys Editor, Judson Press, ABHMS, 1075 First Avenue, King of Prussia, PA 19406

If you wish, you may send your comments by e-mail to info@judsonpress.com, or by using the Feedback Form on the Judson Press website: www.judsonpress.com > Send Us Feedback.

1. The leader’s guide helped me to understand and relate to the text in the following ways:
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

2. The leader’s guide could be improved by:
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

3. Some participants’ comments/evaluative remarks that would be helpful for you to know include:
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

4. Other comments/suggestions:
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

5. Please list other resources your church uses for Sunday school:
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

Age range of class ___________________________ Average attendance _______________________
Name ______________________________________ E-mail _______________________________
Address _____________________________________________________________________________
Church _____________________________________________________________________________

Thanks for sharing your ideas! Your comments may be used to promote Judson Bible Journeys for Adults. For curriculum and resource help, call 1-800-458-3766.