A scenic landscape featuring a calm lake in the foreground, reflecting the surrounding environment. On the left, a cluster of tall, dark evergreen trees stands prominently. In the distance, a range of mountains is visible under a soft, hazy sky. A small, light-colored building is situated on the right side of the lake. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and serene.

Journeys

JUDSON BIBLE LESSONS | Summer 2022 | Vol. 1.4



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2 CORINTHIANS 4:6-9



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American Baptist Home Mission Societies

Journeys

JUDSON BIBLE LESSONS | SUMMER 2022 | VOL. 1.4

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COVER PHOTO: iStockphoto

About the Quarter

The lessons for this summer have the overarching construct of IDENTITY with a focus on who we are, whose we are, and how we perceive and treat others. We are invited to earnestly live out our commitment to being Jesus' disciples by embracing all aspects of his teachings and emulating his character. In seeking to be like Jesus, we are challenged to love unconditionally without bias, prejudice, or preference. We are challenged to go the extra mile when confronted with opportunities to engage in acts of compassion and justice. All our efforts are tethered to our understanding of God's deep love for us and God's ability as the Almighty to always give us what we need when we need it. In God, there is no shortage of resources as we are invited to be renewed, strengthened, and inspired by the Holy Spirit, who nurtures our souls.

About the Writers

Rev. John Burns is the pastor of the University Baptist Church in College Park, Maryland. He has served on various committees for the American Baptist Churches USA, the Alliance of Baptists, and the District of Columbia Baptist Convention. He is a frequent contributor to *The Christian Citizen*, and he is the author of *Modeling Mary in Christian Discipleship*

(Judson Press, 2007). John wrote the lessons for the month of June, covering the themes of adoption, understanding, renewal, and freedom.

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Vol. 1.4

JOURNEYS Judson Bible Lessons (ISSN 0898-0691) is published quarterly for \$12.59 by the American Baptist Home Mission Societies at 1075 First Avenue, King of Prussia, PA 19406. Periodicals postage paid at University Park, IL 60484. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Customer Service, JOURNEYS, Judson Press, 1075 First Avenue, King of Prussia, PA 19406. Jeffrey Haggray, Executive Director of the American Baptist Home Mission Societies. Cheryl Price, Judson Press Publisher. Send comments and suggestions to JOURNEYS Curriculum Editor, Shelby Haggray, Judson Press, 1075 First Avenue, King of Prussia, PA 19406. Lectionary selections are reprinted from Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings copyright © 2005. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this publication are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyrighted 1989 © by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission. JOURNEYS Judson Bible Lessons © 2022 by American Baptist Home Mission Societies. Printed in the U.S.A. Other Judson Press resources can be found at www.judsonpress.com. Customer Service can be contacted directly at 1-800-458-3766.

ADOPTION

children of God

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,
but you have received a spirit of adoption.

—ROMANS 8:15a

Introduction

Freedom is vaunted by politicians, libertarians, novelists, preachers, patriots, and composers. Patrick Henry said, “Give me liberty or give me death.” Lee Greenwood sang, “I’m proud to be an American, where at least I know I’m free.” Kris Kristofferson wrote, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” Nina Simone plaintively sang, “I wish I knew how it would feel to be free.” Dr. King thundered, in the most famous speech of our lifetime, “Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we’re free at last.” Yet most of us struggle to experience true freedom. Paul offers some helpful guidance in this passage.

Lesson Objectives

- To liberate disciples to serve God as adoring children rather than as fearful subjects.
- To describe a pathway to deeper communion with the Spirit of God.
- To clarify the connection between a deeper communion with the Spirit of God and true freedom.

Romans 8:14-17 NRSV

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Into the Scripture

The Epistle to the Romans was written by the apostle Paul around AD 57 while Paul was engaged in his third missionary journey. Paul wrote the letter as he was wrapping up his work in Corinth and preparing to take an offering collected from the churches in Macedonia to the impoverished believers in Jerusalem (Romans 15:23-25). At the time, Paul was staying at the home of Gaius in Corinth (Romans 16:23).

Rome was the home of at least five house churches (Romans 16:5-15) whose membership were mostly Gentile but contained a significant number of Jewish Christians as well. Paul hoped to visit Rome after completing his mission of mercy in Jerusalem. Once he had visited Rome, he intended to carry the Gospel to Spain (Romans 15:23-25). Paul did ultimately meet the believers in Rome, but under quite different circumstances than he originally planned. Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and eventually sent to Rome as a prisoner (Acts 21:27-36; 28:14-16).

Paul used the first part of his letter to explain to both Jews and Gentiles that salvation was obtained through faith in Christ. He then described the freedom found in serving Christ as children of God. In Paul's view, all



of humanity was created by God but not everyone could claim to be a child of God. The phrase “child of” was a Hebrew way of describing what or who a person was like as well as pointing to the source of that individual's life. Jesus was called “son of God” to indicate that the source of his life was the eternal God but also to say that

his character was like God's. In John 8:34-47, Jesus told a group of Jewish leaders that if they were truly “children of Abraham” (as they claimed), or “children of God” (as they also claimed), they would act like Abraham and reveal God's nature and values in their character. Instead, Christ said, their behavior demonstrated that they were “children of the devil.”

Paul taught the Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome that they were children of God because they had

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Jesus was called
“son of God” to indicate
that the source of his life
was the eternal God.

received God's Spirit and had been adopted into God's holy family. Nero (AD 37–68), the emperor of Rome at the time Paul wrote Romans, was the adopted son of the former emperor Claudius (AD 10–54). Claudius gave Nero all the rights, inheritance, and status of a biological son. Nero's adoption could have formed the backdrop to Paul's teaching in this passage. Paul told the entire church in Rome that whether they were Jews or Gentiles, they were all “joint heirs” with the only begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ. Part of that inheritance was freedom.

A major concern that threatened to divide the congregation in Rome was freedom. Jewish members worried that Gentile Christians would claim the freedom to engage in behaviors approved by Roman culture but forbidden by the Law of Moses. Gentiles feared the Jews would restrict their freedom by imposing the strict Law of Moses on their Christian lives.

Paul addressed both communities' concerns. He promised the Spirit of God would not make the Gentiles slaves to the Jewish Law and also assured the Jewish Christians that the Spirit of God would not permit Gentiles to be ensnared by the pagan ways of Roman culture. Instead, all the children of God would be led by the Spirit of God into true freedom. Like deeply loved children, eager to please their parents, Paul promised that the children of God would joyfully

follow the Spirit's liberating leadership in order to please their heavenly Parent.

Into the Lesson

In his book *God's Revolution*, Eberhard Arnold uses a hot air balloon to illustrate the role of freedom in the Christian life. Arnold points out that if a hot air balloon is tethered to the ground, it cannot fly. However, if the balloon is cut free from its tether, it will rise into the air and drift aimlessly in the wind. Whether held to the ground or let loose to go wherever the wind blows, a hot air balloon cannot fulfill the purpose for which it was created. When the balloon has a capable aeronaut or pilot, though, that person can guide an untethered balloon to transport passengers on an exciting adventure.¹ If believers obey religious rules out of fear of a punitive master, they are unable to soar in service to Christ. However, if they sever all connection to the guidance of God, they drift aimlessly and never fulfill the purpose for which they were created. When believers accept the Spirit of God as their pilot in life, however, they are set free to experience the great adventure of serving the Lord.

When my second son started the second grade, his mother bought him a new pair of black jeans. She warned him not to get the new jeans dirty. When school was out for the day, my son came to the church where I was working to stay with me until his mother got home from her job. I was surprised and gratified to see that his jeans were fairly clean. I had a meeting and so I set my son, who liked to draw, in front of a large chalkboard in the hallway outside my meeting room. This position allowed me to both conduct the meeting and supervise



him. As he drew on the chalkboard, he scraped a piece of chalk across his jeans. Seeing the mark on his new pants, he froze in fear. Then he made a bad decision. He picked up a chalk eraser and tried to erase the mark. Now he had white chalk dust all over his pants.

At that point, he turned to every boy's remedy for almost any problem: spit. He spat into his hands and rubbed them on the offending chalk. Soon he had chalk dust on his hands and his face, and in his hair. As I watched his misery intensify, I wondered why he did not bring his problem to me. Fear is why. He expected me to punish him, so he handled his problem on his own and made matters worse.

Paul tells Christians they are God's children and can run to God crying "Abba" ("Daddy"—though "Mama" captures the same truth) whenever they encounter trouble of any kind. Believers do not have to live like slaves, fearfully obeying every command of God or face God's wrath. Instead, Christians are free to live under the Spirit's guidance and joyfully serve the God who loves them more than they can comprehend. This freedom is not a license to sin with gusto, however. The tyranny of unrestrained desire puts believers in greater confinement than legalism. Freedom is found through a growing relationship with the Spirit of God. Paul says to have this freedom, Christians must receive the Spirit, be



Freedom is found through a growing relationship
with the Spirit of God.

led by the Spirit, commune with the Spirit, suffer with the Spirit, and eventually receive their full inheritance from God through the Spirit.

The relationship between Christians and the Spirit allows God to guide believers into ever-expanding understandings of the character of God. Rather than bind the disciple to a static system of religious rules, the relationship leads followers of Christ into fresh revelations of God's will. Paul receives one such revelation in this passage. The NRSV of Scripture obscures Paul's enlightenment by translating Romans 8:15a as "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption." The Greek text reads, "You have received your adoption to sonship." In Paul's world, only men were adopted as heirs. Similarly, in his religion, only men were addressed by the promises of God. As a man of his age, "adoption to sonship" would be the expected reading. But the Spirit of God brings new understanding to Paul as he writes this letter. In the next verse, Paul changes the gender exclusive terminology to the gender inclusive "children of God." An inflexible allegiance to the Law of Moses would not have allowed Paul the freedom to expand his view of the purposes of God. But the freedom Paul experienced through communion with the Spirit inspired him to a fuller understanding of the intentions of God.

Into Discipleship

Christians apply Paul's teaching through a lifetime of devotion to the Spirit of God. This begins with accepting the Spirit of God through a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. New birth is not a commitment to a set of laws enshrined by people three thousand years ago. The Christian journey begins with a relationship with the indwelling Spirit. The Spirit is not a secondary gift from God. Paul writes in Romans 8:9b, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." For any reader of this lesson who has not embraced the Spirit of God as a gift of new birth through faith in Christ, Paul has joyful news: Anyone can accept Christ today and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit of God.

Spiritual rebirth is just the beginning of the journey, however. Christians impoverish themselves when they conclude that their profession of faith and baptism are the pinnacle of their spiritual journey. Those momentous

decisions are entry into a spiritual kindergarten, not a religious graduation ceremony. Through the reading of Scripture, prayer, worship, communion, meditation, acts of service, and fellowship with other Christians, the relationship between the child of God and the Spirit of God continually deepens. Without this devotion, the new Christian cannot grow in the freedom promised to the children of God. Instead, they become stuck in an adolescent Christianity that seeks the privileges of being a child of God (forgiveness of sin, removal of guilt, heavenly home) without accepting the responsibilities to grow in their relationship with the Spirit.

Believers can be set free from immature faith with a fresh commitment to worship, fellowship, Bible study, service, and communion. The benefits of this commitment are abundant. As children of God practice devotion to the Spirit, they resonate with the promptings of the Spirit that liberate them from legalism, stodgy religious performance, and destructive desires. New insights come that expand their ability to serve the Lord with gladness. Journaling is a powerful discipline that increases the freedom of the children of God. When Christians journal the insights, questions, concerns, wonderments, and discoveries that come from their communion with the Spirit, God is able to liberate them from the fear, distractions, and confusion that bind them in spiritual lethargy.



The relationship between the child of God and the Spirit of God continually deepens.



Another application of this lesson is for believers to nurture their spiritual lives with positive messages of God's love rather than by feeding on frightening themes of God's anger. The Holy Spirit has inspired grace-filled passages of Scripture, hymns, and songs that tell of God's love and preaching and teaching by people deeply acquainted with God's grace and compassion. The Holy Spirit uses these channels to convict the children of God of sin so they can be liberated from destructive behaviors—not to terrify the vulnerable into obedience to a threatening God. A steady diet of condemnation from angry voices in the church and on the airwaves keeps children of God quaking in fear of God, not deepening their intimacy with God.

For some, living in communion with the Spirit of God is not easier than rote obedience to religious rules. In some ways it is simpler to read an ancient command and obey the command in fear of a wrathful God. That way of life, however, is not what Christ died to provide us nor is it the intention of God for our lives. Christ died to remove all barriers to an intimate walk with God. That intimate walk grows sweeter as believers learn more about the mind, power, and love of the Spirit of God. In that process, all fear and dread of God are replaced with freedom.

Note:

1. Eberhard Arnold, *God's Revolution: Justice, Community, and the Coming Kingdom* (Walden, New York: Plough Publishing House, 2021), 122–123.

“

Christ died to remove all barriers to an intimate walk with God.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, help us to walk in the freedom whereby Christ has set us free. Help us to freely follow his teachings and example and, in doing so, experience the abundant life you have for each of us. Jesus promised that his burden was easy, and his yoke was light. Remind us that your Spirit is always with us to help us on our faith journey as we grow into mature Christians with a deep fellowship with you. Amen.

Reflection Questions

Introduction

What additional cultural references to freedom come to mind? Which references are connected to true freedom, and which are not?

Into the Scripture

Do controversies about spiritual freedom still divide the church? How do Paul's words help resolve such controversies?

Into the Lesson

- Which do you feel is the greater threat to Christians today—being tied down by legalism or being adrift without a guiding relationship with the Spirit of God?
- Have you ever tried to handle your sins or problems by yourself instead of taking them to God?
- How did that work out? Why did you resist “running to God” with your problems?

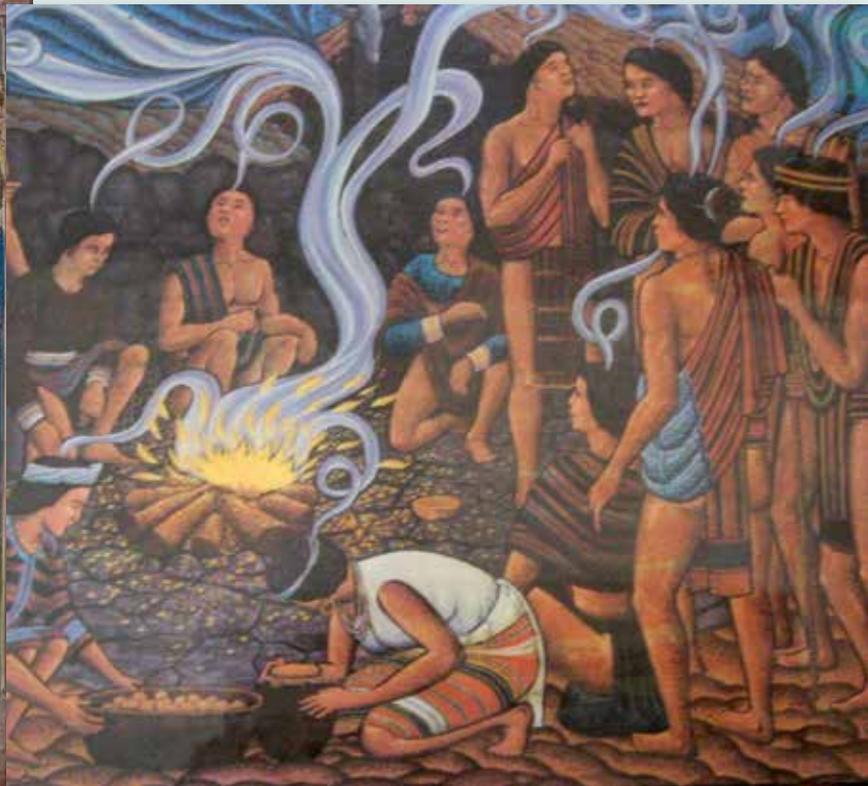
Into Discipleship

Do you need a fresh commitment to any spiritual disciplines in order to deepen your communion with the Spirit of God? If so, which ones? Has anyone tried to motivate you to obedience through frightening images of a punitive God? Did those attempts move you closer to God or increase your spiritual distance from God?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” sung by Fernando Ortega: https://youtu.be/IW_3iaTCgu4?t=2
- “Higher Ground” sung by Islington Baptist Church: <https://youtu.be/jYckqCG933M?t=1>



- “In the Garden” sung by Daniel Martin Moore:
<https://youtu.be/cPkfDEotDfo?t=1>

Activity Ideas

- Give pencils and paper to each participant. Invite them to move to different areas of the room so they can each be alone. Invite each participant to read Romans 8:14-17 and journal any thoughts, questions, ideas, discoveries, or wonderments they have concerning the passage. After a few minutes, gather participants and ask how the experience deepened their understanding of the passage and their communion with the Spirit.
- Divide the class into groups. Invite half of the groups to write an alternate ending to the story of my son and the chalkboard—in which he asks others for help in dealing with his chalk-smudged pants. Invite the other groups to write an alternative ending to the story in which I as a parent go to him to help him solve his problem. Invite the groups to share their endings with the full group. Ask which alternative endings best represent how we should respond to God when we have problems and which endings best represent the way God responds to us.
- Buy a kite or get a pattern online on how to make a kite. Lead the group in building the kite and, weather permitting, try to fly the kite outside. Ask participants what happens to kite flying if the string is anchored too close to the ground. Ask what happens to the activity if the string is cut. Invite participants to

discuss how both legalism and permissiveness affect the lives of Christians. Contrast legalism and permissiveness with the freedom the Spirit of God provides to help us “soar” as beloved children of God.

Devotional Scriptures

Year C Day of Pentecost

Week of 06/05/22

Sunday 06/05/22

Acts 2:1-21 or Genesis 11:1-9; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Romans 8:14-17 or Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17, (25-27)

Monday 06/06/22

Psalm 48; Joel 2:18-29; 1 Corinthians 2:1-11

Tuesday 06/07/22

Psalm 48; Ezekiel 11:14-25; 1 Corinthians 2:12-16

Wednesday 06/08/22

Psalm 48; Numbers 24:1-14; Luke 1:26-38

Thursday 06/09/22

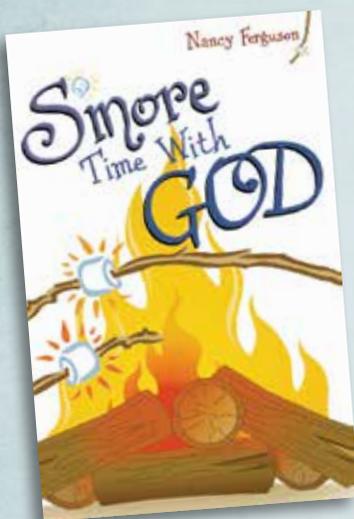
Psalm 8; Proverbs 3:13-18; Ephesians 1:17-19

Friday 06/10/22

Psalm 8; Proverbs 3:19-26; Ephesians 4:1-6

Saturday 06/11/22

Psalm 8; Proverbs 4:1-9; Luke 2:41-52



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By Nancy Ferguson

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UNDERSTANDING

in due time

I still have many things to say to you,
but you cannot bear them now.

—JOHN 16:12

Introduction

I can explain how a rake works. A fan-shaped plastic head with several teeth placed about two inches apart is screwed to a five-foot wooden handle. When a person pulls the rake across a yard, the teeth catch fallen leaves and drag them into a pile. I figured this out the first time I saw a rake. I cannot explain how my computer works but many people can. They studied computer science for years until they understood the technology. Jesus said the fullness of God took more time to explain than he had days left on earth. Fortunately, another messenger from God was on the way. This lesson helps Christians learn from that new messenger, the Holy Spirit.

Lesson Objectives

- To explain the connection between the ministry of Jesus and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.
- To provide safeguards to disciples to help them distinguish the voice of the Spirit from other voices.
- To demonstrate how disciples can discern the voice of the Holy Spirit on complex issues confronted in today's world.

John 16:12-15 NRSV

12 I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. 14 He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. 15 All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Into the Scripture

The Gospel of John was probably written by the apostle John around AD 85 while John resided in Ephesus. Some scholars put the writing as late as AD 120 and more recent studies propose the Gospel could have been written as early as AD 50. The later dates are preferred by those who believe John knew of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and chose to adapt their chronology of Christ's life to focus on theological truth. Earlier dates are chosen by those who think John wrote before the Synoptic Gospels were available and therefore felt no need to harmonize his chronology with theirs.

Regardless of when it was written, John's Gospel is more centered on theological truth than are the Synoptic Gospels. The fourth gospel teaches the preexistence of Christ, the incarnation of Christ, the union of Christ with God, and the relationship of Christ to the Holy Spirit in greater depth than Matthew, Mark, or Luke. The apostle's purpose in writing is evangelistic. He makes this clear in John 20:30-31: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son

of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

John believed Christians needed a vibrant relationship with the Holy Spirit to "have life in his name." According to John, Jesus' mission from God was to proclaim the Gospel to the people in the region of Israel, call and train his disciples, die on a cross to provide the

forgiveness of sin, rise again to reveal God's power over death, and return to his home with God in heaven. Jesus knew that his return to heaven would cause his followers great anxiety. When he left, he knew they would not be sure they could continue his ministry without him.

The fourteenth through sixteenth chapters of John address that anxiety. Jesus affirms his need to return to God in heaven but assures the disciples that he will not leave them orphaned (John 14:18). Jesus promises that



Jesus tells his followers the Spirit would reveal more truth about God.

after he leaves, the Holy Spirit will continue to provide the disciples with power, comfort, and guidance.

After stating that the Holy Spirit would work in the world to convict people of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11), Jesus tells his followers the Spirit would reveal more truth about God than they could "bear" at the present time. Some commentators believe "bear" means the disciples could not carry out their mission without the Holy Spirit, so Jesus did not burden them with information they could not apply. He postponed aspects of discipleship until the Spirit could empower the disciples to do what God asked. Other scholars believe the word meant that the disciples were not spiritually mature enough to understand the deeper truth Christ knew about God. Jesus knew it would take years under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit for the disciples to master such truth.

Either way, Jesus pointed to the Holy Spirit as the divine presence that would guide the disciples after he returned to God. Christ promised, "When the Spirit comes, he will guide you into all truth." Jesus asserted that God had endowed him with divine truth which he had shared with the Holy Spirit—who would share it with Christ's followers in due time.

Into the Lesson

In grade school, my third son was frequently punished for talking during tests, study time, and even while his teachers were addressing the class. In exasperation, one





of his teachers called me to complain about his chatty nature. She said, “I’ve tried everything: scolding him, lowering his grade, keeping him after school, and sending him to the principal’s office, but nothing works. I am embarrassed to admit that last week I put him in a closet by himself to shut off his conversation. Even all alone in the closet, however, he kept chattering away.” I responded, “I guess the boy has a lot to say and does not think he has enough time to get it all said.” Jesus felt the same way, and so he entrusted to the Holy Spirit the words he ran out of time to say.

Some Baptists believe the Holy Spirit’s teaching is expressed solely through the written and spoken word of God. Their understanding of the chain of revelation is that God’s word was recorded in Scripture. When Scripture is read by individuals or by the Christian community, the Spirit reveals the truth of God to those reading or listening. Preachers are inspired by the Holy Spirit to interpret and apply the Word of God so that unbelievers come to faith and believers grow in faith. For the most part, Baptists have contended that the Holy Spirit does not communicate fresh revelation apart from the Word of God. Therefore, when charismatic leaders profess to have a new word from the Spirit, some Baptists have been dubious.

Jesus gave the Holy Spirit more room to speak than some in our tradition do. Jesus said the Spirit would “declare to you things to come.” Christians often understand this to mean the Holy Spirit will foretell the future. Another interpretation is that Jesus gave the Spirit the responsibility to speak to modern-day believers on questions and issues that were not known in the time of Christ. The Lord knew that followers through

the ages would face complex problems that were not anticipated in the first century. In addition, Christ knew that some of the wonders of God’s love and power were simply too staggering for those beginning the movement to understand. In both cases, Jesus trusted the Holy Spirit to speak fresh words to those who loved the Lord.

This decision puts the responsibility of discernment on the believer. Anyone can *claim* to have a new word from the Holy Spirit. Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, Sun Yun Moon, L. Ron Hubbard, Ma Anand Sheela and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, Anne Hamilton-Byrne, Jim Jones, and David Koresh claimed to have a new revelation from the Spirit. Some of the revelations they attributed to the Spirit were destructive to their followers. And yet, there are many issues Christians face today that were not mentioned by Jesus nor spoken to in Scripture. **How are we to hear the voice of God on these matters if we cannot discern the voice of the Spirit?** Jesus gave us a litmus test to help us differentiate the guidance of the Spirit from false revelation. He wrote that the Spirit “will not speak on his own” (verse 13). Instead, Christ said the Holy Spirit would only pass on what he heard from Jesus: “he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

The Holy Spirit speaks to us today through the reading, teaching, and preaching of the Scripture. In addition, though, the Spirit helps us deal with issues



Jesus trusted the Holy Spirit to speak fresh words
to those who loved the Lord.

never anticipated in the time of Christ. To discern the guidance of the Spirit on these issues, we should compare what is attributed to the Spirit of God with what Jesus has already taught us. Those who say the Spirit has told them their race is superior to all others, or that their gender should rule the world, can be dismissed because such teachings are opposed to what Jesus said. When a “prophet” says the Spirit wants followers to give him all their money or have sexual relations with him or follow him in suicide, the fraudulent nature of that “revelation” is exposed by the teachings of Jesus.

Followers of Christ cannot avoid thorny issues by saying “there’s nothing in the Bible about that” or “Jesus never spoke to that.” Neither can they twist ancient words of Scripture to make them apply to a current dilemma that was not on the minds of prophets in the Old Testament or Jesus in the New. Instead, the church can rely on the inspiration of the Spirit that only speaks in harmony with the teachings of Jesus to help us know the will of God on all the matters of our lives.

Into Discipleship

How do Christians in the 21st century know how to respond to people with sexuality and gender issues never mentioned by Jesus? Should believers trust vaccines or God alone to protect them from destructive viruses? What does God think of solar power, wind power, and the use of fossil fuels? Does God endorse genetic modifications in embryos to eradicate life-threatening diseases? Does God find “praise music” annoyingly repetitive or does God prefer that to the wordy hymns of the 19th century? These and a thousand other issues stir up painful arguments among believers. In addition, the church’s silence on or angry responses to these matters can cause the world to dismiss the church’s witness altogether. How do we bring the voice of Christ into modern-day controversies and ethical dilemmas? Jesus said we do so by listening to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Three safeguards can guide believers in this process. **Safeguard one** is to compare a claim of the Spirit’s guidance with teachings of Jesus recorded in the Bible. If a response is hateful, bigoted, unfair, or arrogant, it is not from Christ. If a response is unfaithful to those we love, it is not from Christ. If a response makes an idol out of a political party, candidate, expert, movement,

or organization, it is not from Christ. If a response is grounded in unbridled desire, rebelliousness, or vengefulness, it is not from Christ. If a response denies God’s power to redeem, forgive, empower, or liberate, it is not from Christ.

Safeguard two is to contrast what is attributed to the Spirit of God with our own opinion. If it seems the Spirit always affirms our view or our group’s perspective—whether we are Democrats, Republicans, or admire the perspective of the Rainbow Coalition, Make America Great Again or Black Lives Matter Movement—we should be cautious. If the Spirit always thinks like we think, we are probably confusing our own voice with the voice of the Spirit of God.

Safeguard three is to ask oneself, “Is this understanding of the Spirit going to call me to grow in faith, obedience, love, sacrifice, compassion, humility, and servanthood?” The voice of Christ always calls us to grow in such ways. If the voice I attribute to the Spirit of God serves only to allow me to stay the same in every way, it is probably not from God.

Although not foolproof, these safeguards can improve our spiritual hearing. Many Christians struggle to know how to best respond to those whose mind and body give them alternate information on their sexuality and gender. Christians must reject responding with hate and arrogance. Other struggles are rooted in the views of



The inspiration of the Spirit only speaks in harmony with the teachings of Jesus.

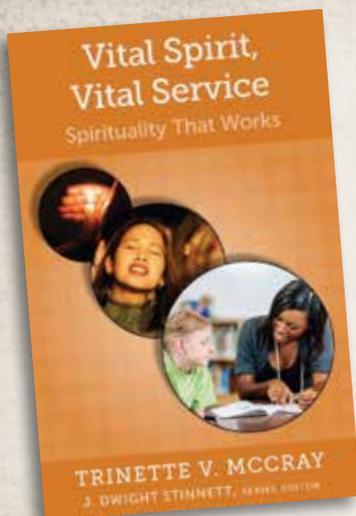


a political leader or movement that demands total agreement from those who follow. Only Christ deserves that level of allegiance. Our responses can be loving, compassionate, faithful, rooted in God’s ability to redeem, forgive, and bless, and can require the responder to grow, sacrifice, serve, and trust God. Such responses can be trusted as the voice of the Spirit.

Climate change is a daily reality. How is the Spirit of God moving in our world to help us take better care of creation? When answers to the question are only measured by dollars or pleasures or the freedom to do as we please, we become deaf to the voice of the Spirit. When

responses condemn everyone’s lifestyle but our own, that is a misunderstanding of the Spirit. However, when the response is prayerful, sacrificial, open to correction, loving towards those who disagree with us, and both appreciative and protective of the world God has created, the Spirit is probably instigating the response.

Much of the time, believers must confess an inability to know exactly what to do in the face of enormous controversies and problems. In such cases, persistent prayer, listening, repentance, and reflection can help us “bear” the things Christ wants to show us today through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.



Vital Spirit, Vital Service: Spirituality that Works

by Trinette V. McCray; Series Editor J. Dwight Stinnett

In a society where we’re inundated with 24-hour news, unfiltered social media, hundreds of TV channels, and more, McCray urges the people of God to seek a vital spirituality—not a contemplation that withdraws from the world, but a spirituality that inspires us to answer Jesus’ call to service and social justice.

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Closing Prayer

Dear God, the world has become so complicated. With all the competing voices, sometimes it is hard to hear your Spirit. Teach us how to make the time to listen quietly and patiently for your direction. Help us to remember to hold each topic and concern up to the light of Christ, knowing that your will is always congruent with his teachings. Help us to be open to truth, righteousness, and equity. Help us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

Reflection Questions

Introduction

Name some items you use every day but cannot explain the way they work. What aspects of the way God works in the world remain beyond your understanding?

Into the Scripture

How does the Holy Spirit continue to help you hear the voice of Christ in your life? How does the Holy Spirit help the church continue the ministry of Christ?

Into the Lesson

Do you believe the Holy Spirit delivers new messages to Christians today or only helps us understand the revelation recorded in Scripture? What makes you dubious of someone who claims to have heard a new word from the Spirit of God? What would you say to someone who claims that if the Bible does explicitly speak to an issue, Christians should remain silent?

Into Discipleship

Do you find the safeguards described in this section helpful to discerning the voice of the Spirit? Do they remove any ambiguity about the Spirit's guidance on matters that Christians face today?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Be Thou My Vision” sung by Nathan Pacheco: <https://youtu.be/ihJAJA4ibEs?t=1>
- “As the Deer” sung by Maranatha Singers: <https://youtu.be/RVQmZCK4Fiw>
- “Draw Me Close to You” sung by Michael Smith: https://youtu.be/7d_oYr-P16M?t=1

Activity Ideas

- Bring several small items that are used every day to the session (examples: can opener, toothbrush, cell phone, TV remote, hair dryer, garden hoe). Ask participants to explain how each item works. If they cannot explain how some item works, ask how long it would take them to learn how that item works. Ask, “Is God more complex than any of these items? Since God is, how long will it take us to fully understand the working of God?”
- Invite participants to compare the various responses to the issues listed below to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

When a young adult asks her church to be more open to members of the LGBTQ community, the varied responses of the church leadership are:

- a. The Bible does not speak to that so I think we should remain silent.
- b. The Old Testament condemns that sort of behavior, and we should condemn it as well.



“Hospitality of Abraham,” from the Genesis visits Abraham as three guests who tell him Sarah will get pregnant, ca. 1420, by Rublev, Andrei, Saint.

- c. Jesus said to love everybody, so I think we should obey that.
 - d. I am uncomfortable with people who claim those identities; I would not want them in our church.
 - e. I do not think we should adopt the liberals' agenda on this issue. We are the church, not a radical political party.
 - f. I fear that if we do not become more accepting of this community, we will lose a generation of young adults who think very differently.
 - g. I think we need a lot of prayer and further study on this topic, possibly with the help of outside leadership, before deciding.
- e. Our youth are so influenced by social media that they do not know which topics are proper for worship and which are not. We have to teach them the difference.
 - f. The next thing you know, somebody will want us to shut off the AC to save the earth. I am not going to be inconvenienced because of somebody else's radical ideas.
 - g. I am sure God wants us to do a better job of caring for the earth. Maybe we ought to start with a study in Sunday School and then consider how to express these concerns in worship.

When the new choir director wants to introduce more praise music in worship, the varied responses of the church leadership are:

- a. The complex theology of the church cannot be expressed in a few words that are repeated ad nauseum. We need to stay with the tried-and-true hymns of the church.
- b. The music of the old hymns is stodgy. I cannot relate to the mundane melodies. Let us try something new.
- c. Why do we have to sing at all? The service could be shortened if we just heard a brief message and prayed.
- d. Jesus only sang at the end of communion. That is the only time we should sing.
- e. I cannot praise God with my heart when I am focused on ancient poetry. I need the simple words and singable melodies to praise the Lord.
- f. I knew we made a mistake hiring this woman. She is already stirring up trouble.
- g. My mother loves the old hymns; I would not want her to be denied those in worship.

When the youth want the church to have an "Earth Day" focus in worship, the varied responses of the church leadership are these:

- a. That is a day sponsored by Greenpeace; I do not think we should take sides in this matter.
- b. The Bible says we are to have dominion over the earth. Does that not mean we can use it for our own good? Why do we need any more discussion on this?
- c. Jesus never spoke to preserving the earth. I do not think that is a matter for a church to discuss.
- d. I am worried about climate change, too. I think we ought to talk about it in church, but I cannot think of any Bible verses to back my opinion.

Devotional Scriptures Year C Trinity Sunday Week of 06/12/22

Sunday 06/12/22

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 and Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

Monday 06/13/22

Psalm 124; Proverbs 7:1-4; Ephesians 4:7-16

Tuesday 06/14/22

Psalm 124; Proverbs 8:4-21; Ephesians 5:15-20

Wednesday 06/15/22

Psalm 124; Daniel 1:1-21; Luke 1:46b-55

Thursday 06/16/22

Semi-continuous: Psalms 42 and 43; Genesis 24:1-21; Romans 2:17-29
Complementary: Psalm 22:19-28; Isaiah 56:9-12; Romans 2:17-29

Friday 06/17/22

Semi-continuous: Psalms 42 and 43; Job 6:14-30; Galatians 3:15-22
Complementary: Psalm 22:19-28; Isaiah 57:1-13; Galatians 3:15-22

Saturday 06/18/22

Semi-continuous: Psalms 42 and 43; Proverbs 11:3-13; Matthew 9:27-34
Complementary: Psalm 22:19-28; Isaiah 59:1-8; Matthew 9:27-34

RENEWAL

restored for service

Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.”

—1 KINGS 19:15

Introduction

When I informed the church that I served for more than 30 years that I was going to retire, the responses were mixed. Most supported my decision and wished me a happy and productive retirement. Some were a little too relieved that my tenure was coming to an end. A few, however, believed a minister was to serve until death. They pointed out that Moses did not retire nor did Isaiah or Paul or Lydia. Elijah tried to retire, but God did not allow it. Instead, the Lord renewed the prophet for one more assignment. Pastors may retire from serving a specific church but not from serving the Lord. God renews all Christians for a lifetime of service.

Lesson Objectives

- To help disciples recognize the dynamics that cause “burn out” in ministry.
- To lead disciples to identify ways to restore their joy in service once burn out occurs.
- To help disciples evaluate the activities in their lives to create a healthy balance between vocation, church, and family life.

1 Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a NRSV

1 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” 3 Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. 4 But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” . . . 8 He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. 9 At that place he came to a cave, and

spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 10 He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” 11 He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 14 He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” 15a Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.”

Into the Scripture

First Kings 18 recounts the public contest between Israel’s God and the fertility gods, Baal and Asherah. The contest proved that Baal and Asherah were false gods, and that Yahweh (the name of Israel’s God) was the true and living God (**1 Kings 18:17-39**).

Elijah represented Yahweh in the contest and believed that after God revealed the impotency of Baal and Asherah, Israel’s queen Jezebel would repent of her support of the fertility gods and return to the worship of Yahweh. Elijah was so eager to see Jezebel’s repentance that he ran all the way to her residence in Jezreel. However, when Jezebel’s husband, King Ahab, told her of the defeat and slaughter of the

850 prophets of Baal and Asherah, she declared that she would have Elijah killed within 24 hours.

Jezebel’s vindictive response frightened Elijah. He concluded that if Jezebel and Ahab were not brought

“

The Lord sent an angel
to make Elijah rest,
rehydrate, and eat.

to repentance by the great acts of God on Mt. Carmel, nothing would alter their idolatrous reign. Elijah therefore fled to Beer-sheba, a city in the southern kingdom of Judah (a nation not under Jezebel or Ahab’s sovereignty). Elijah left his servant at Beer-sheba and traveled another day into the wilderness. Overcome with sadness and frustration, the prophet sat down under a scraggly broom tree and asked God to let him die. Elijah once thought he had a special relationship with God that afforded





him God's provision and protection, but Jezebel's threats convinced him that he was no closer to God than his ancestors, who were all dead. God did not permit Elijah's death. Instead, the Lord sent an angel to make Elijah rest, rehydrate, and eat. When he was renewed in strength, God led him on a journey of forty days and nights to Horeb, another name for Mt. Sinai.

The parallels to Moses' relationship with God are striking. Moses, too, despaired of the task God had given him. In Numbers 11:14-15, Moses cried out to God, "I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once." Moses also experienced renewal on Mt. Sinai when, after forty days and forty nights, God gave him the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28). Many of God's most faithful servants experienced exhaustion in ministry. When Elijah reached Mt. Horeb, he took refuge in a cave. The next morning, God asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (verse 13b). God's question might not have been about location but about spiritual condition. The question might have meant, "How did you get into this spiritual despondency?"

Elijah tells God that despite his best efforts, the people of Israel have forsaken God's covenant, thrown down the altars of God, and killed all God's prophets. The discouraged prophet says that he is the only prophet of God still living and that his life is in great danger. God directs Elijah to stand on the mountain as the Lord passes by. A great wind, an earthquake, and a fire cross in front of Elijah's cave, but God was not in any of the frightening manifestations. Then there was the "sound of sheer silence." Some translators call it a still, small voice, while others refer to the sound as a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard the silence or the whisper or the

voice, he emerged from the cave and heard God ask him a second time, "What are you doing here?" Elijah repeats his first answer verbatim, and then God gives him a new assignment. He must anoint Hazael as king of Aram or Syria, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as Elijah's successor. Renewed by a new mission from God, Elijah faithfully returns to his calling.

Into the Lesson

In the beginning years of my ministry, I had an "Elijah moment." I had been working long hours to prepare the church I served for an upcoming revival. Regardless of how passionately I sought their participation, the congregation did not respond. Attendance was far less than I had hoped, the spirit of those who gathered was anemic, and their general response to the evangelist's preaching was disinterest. When the week came to an end, the guest preacher scolded me for providing such poor leadership. I was exhausted, disappointed, and a little embarrassed. I went home and sat in a shed at the back of my yard. I told God I was not cut out for this work and that I needed to quit. I prayed but could not connect. I tried to rest but I could not sleep. The thought of going back to the church terrified me.

After a sleepless night, I went to see a former seminary professor. After hearing my tale of woe, he read Psalm 139 aloud and then waited on me to respond. When I did



Renewed by a new mission from God, Elijah
faithfully returns to his calling.

not respond, he read it again. After the third reading, the message began to sink in. God created me, commissioned me, and would sustain me. I simply had to trust in God to use me as God intended. I received the renewal of an encounter with God and went back to work.

Three realities caused Elijah to want to quit his ministry as a prophet. **Reality one** was the opposition of Jezebel and Ahab. When we give of ourselves in service to others, we can be especially devastated by the criticism of those who oppose what we do. If we sing a song in worship and receive negative feedback, we feel like never singing again. If we try to rally the congregation to provide a meal for a local homeless shelter only to have a feeble response from a handful of members, we feel like our church does not really care about those in need. When we argue passionately in a church business meeting for our congregation to give more to missions and less to lawn maintenance, only to see our motion voted down by the majority, we can decide to keep our future opinions to ourselves.

Reality two was the disappointment Elijah felt with God's inability to convert the self-centered rulers of Israel. He had risked his life to battle the prophets of Baal and Asherah. His acts of faith, in his opinion, should have been used by God to change the hearts of the wicked king and queen, but they remained hateful and idolatrous. Like Elijah, we can invest our time, talent, and energy in ministry to others with the expectation that God will use all we give to transform lives. Sometimes that is exactly what God does, but other times, the transformation does not occur. We may use a precious week of our vacation to sponsor youth for summer camp because we expect God to call many to discipleship. Instead, the teenagers spend the week on their phones and groan every time a worship service begins. We may march against the racism demonstrated by our local city council only to discover that even the worst offenders are re-elected in a landslide. We may give our money to support relief efforts in a nation damaged by natural disasters only to find that most of the contributions were kept by corrupt officials. In such cases, anger at human sinfulness is often coupled with disappointment in God's power to transform.

Reality three was Elijah's physical, emotional, and mental fatigue. The prophet had gone without sleep, fluids, and food in his battle with the prophets of Baal and Asherah. Running on empty, he then experienced

emotional depletion as he stood in the face of great danger and called down fire from heaven. Even though the fire came, and his God was victorious over the false gods, he came out of the contest emotionally drained. Then he ran from Mt. Carmel to Jezreel. When he arrived at Jezebel's residence and discovered she had not repented, Elijah was fully exhausted and ready to abdicate his calling. Lay people work in their churches and hold down full-time jobs, manage families, volunteer in their communities, tend to friendships, maintain their homes, and do countless other tasks. When these obligations drain them of all energy, they get burned out and feel like dropping out of their ministries in the church. God responded to Elijah's dismay in the face of all three realities with care and commission. He gave the prophet extra rest, food, and water. Then God renewed the prophet with a quiet spiritual encounter to assure Elijah of God's sustaining presence. Finally, God revitalized Elijah with a new ministry assignment. By the time the prophet left Horeb, he was fully engaged in the service to God once again.

Into Discipleship

Elijah's encounter with God on Mt. Horeb provides three lessons that disciples can apply to their daily lives. **First**, we can seek to serve God without preconceived notions of what God is going to do with our acts of service. Elijah battled the false prophets at Mt. Carmel so that Jezebel would repent and no longer threaten his existence. When that did not happen, Elijah was crushed. Many wise teachers have warned us against being too attached to a desired outcome when we offer



Bathing our souls in the softer hymns of our faith renews us for ministry.



our gifts to others. If we teach a Bible study class because we love the Scriptures and find them meaningful to our lives, then that act of service will be spiritually rewarding. If we teach the same Bible class to convince other adults to adopt our viewpoints on abortion, capital punishment, and war, we are likely to be deflated. If we serve God with gratitude for the opportunity to please the Lord, then how others respond will not diminish our commitment to serve. If we have another agenda, we will quit when that agenda is not realized.

Second, we can prioritize quiet moments with God. Elijah had a mountaintop spiritual experience like few ever have. Fire descended, a nation fell to their knees, the enemies of God were slain, and a three-year famine was ended with a downpour from heaven. Yet, the pyrotechnics of such a public miracle did not meet the needs of Elijah's hungry heart. No wonder he was not moved when the wind, earthquake, and fire passed before him at Mt. Horeb. He had seen all this before and had been left empty and scared. He needed an intimate encounter with the tenderness of God to restore his soul. The mighty praise music, rousing testimonies, and thunderous sermons of the church often feed our souls. However, believers are wise to include quiet moments with God along with their more elaborate public worship. Withdrawing to a quiet place of prayer, sitting in silence with the Lord, meditating on a promise from God, or bathing our souls in the softer hymns of our faith are essential ways to renew us for ministry.

Third, we can maintain a healthy balance in our lives. Elijah overextended himself, neglected his own health, and ended up dangerously depleted. We err when we see our work in the church as ministry but everything else as secular activity. If we live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, then everything we do is ministry. We can grow a garden, help a daughter with homework, take our spouse to dinner, take a nap, remember a friend's birthday, help in a soup kitchen, walk in the woods, raise money for missions, go on a vacation, and serve communion in worship, all to the glory of God. Balancing our lives according to the wisdom of God enables us to serve God with joy instead of quitting when God needs us most.

Lastly, Elijah's experience on Mt. Horeb can teach us that we are called to do something, not *everything*. God restored Elijah by giving him three specific acts of service to perform before his life was over. Elijah was asked to do *something*, not everything. God might ask us to sing alto, not make our church choir the most prestigious in town. We are not likely to be called to remove the spiritual lethargy of our generation, but God might ask us to start a prayer group for neighbors in our age group. We do not have the resources to end all human suffering, but God might move us to provide a temporary home for a refugee family. Finding fulfillment in doing something instead of exhausting ourselves by trying to do everything is a faithful application of this passage.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, we desire to live in full service to the ministry to which you call us as laity and as the ordained. With so many needs in the world, sometimes we are overwhelmed as we are pulled in all directions. Give us your wisdom and guidance, so that we are able to make a difference that makes a difference. We want our efforts to yield fruit, and we want to enjoy the journey along the way. Amen.

Reflection Questions

Introduction

Do you think pastors and missionaries have the same right to retire as teachers, law enforcement officers, and nurses, or do you think they should serve for life?

Into the Scripture

What made Elijah ask God to let him die? Was this evidence of depression, fatigue, or something else? Have you ever wanted to quit a ministry that once gave you joy? If so, what caused you to want to quit?

Into the Lesson

Have you invested in a ministry with high expectations only to see those expectations go unmet? How did you handle that disappointment? What causes people to grow weary in well doing? How does fatigue affect the joy of service? What can be done to replenish energy for service once fatigue sets in?

Into Discipleship

Is it possible to be wholehearted in our approach to a specific ministry without being overly attached to the outcome? Where do you find “quiet resources” to restore your depleted soul? In what ways is your life out of balance? How do you restore a sense of balance to your life?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Here I Am, Lord” sung by Sound of Worship: <https://youtu.be/NyXloTRf1lg?t=1>
- “Through the Storm” sung by Yolanda Adams: <https://youtu.be/N86Gc-kVwQE?t=3>
- “Be Thou My Vision” sung by Nathan Pacheco: <https://youtu.be/ihJAJA4ibEs?t=1>

Activity Ideas

- Invite someone who has suffered from spiritual burnout in the past to share their story. Coach them to present the events that caused the burnout, who



responded to them when they were spiritually fatigued, and what they did to restore their joy in service.

- Or read the author’s testimony of burnout in “Into the Lesson” and ask participants to identify the elements that caused the burnout and define what restored the author.
- Conduct a mock interview with someone “playing” Elijah. Ask the prophet what caused him to ask God to let him die and what helped him return to ministry.
- Make a handout with a large circle in the middle of the page. Around the outside of the circle write *Service, Rest, Church Work, Fun, Family Responsibilities, Vocational Work, Quiet Renewal, and Worship*. Invite each participant to make a pie chart showing how much time and energy they invest in each. Lead in a discussion of whether their lives are well balanced or need some adjusting.

Devotional Scriptures

Year C Second Sunday after Pentecost Week of 06/19/22

Sunday 06/19/22

1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a and Psalms 42 and 43;
Isaiah 65:1-9 and Psalm 22:19-28; Galatians 3:23-29;
Luke 8:26-39

Monday 06/20/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 59; 2 Kings 9:1-13;
1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Complementary: Psalm 64; Job 18:1-21;
1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Tuesday 06/21/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 59; 2 Kings 9:14-26;
Ephesians 2:11-22

Complementary: Psalm 64; Job 19:1-22; Ephesians
2:11-22

Wednesday 06/22/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 59; 2 Kings 9:30-37;
Luke 9:37-43a

Complementary: Psalm 64; Ezekiel 32:1-10;
Luke 9:37-43a

Thursday 06/23/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20;
1 Kings 22:29-40, 51-53; 2 Corinthians 13:5-10

Complementary: Psalm 16; Leviticus 9:22-10:11;
2 Corinthians 13:5-10

Friday 06/24/22

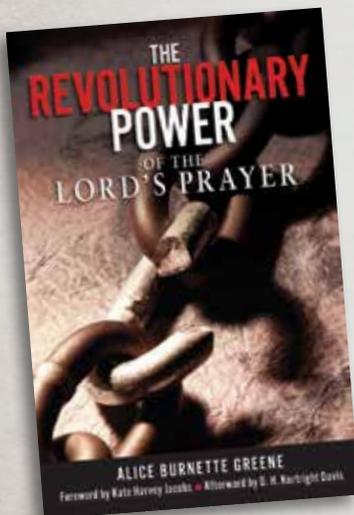
Semi-continuous: Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; 2 Kings 1:1-12;
Galatians 4:8-20

Complementary: Psalm 16; 2 Kings 1:1-16;
Galatians 4:8-20

Saturday 06/25/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; 2 Kings 1:13-18;
2:3-5; Luke 9:21-27

Complementary: Psalm 16; Deuteronomy 32:15-27,
39-43; Luke 9:21-27



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by Alice Burnette Greene

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FREEDOM

walking in the Spirit

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.

—GALATIANS 5:13

Introduction

During the global pandemic, face mask mandates prompted a conflict between freedom and regulation. Most citizens affirmed the government's right to require face masks to fight the spread of the virus. A minority of people, however, saw face mask mandates as an affront to their freedom. They refused to wear them or to require their children to wear them in school. Physical fights and arguments broke out in airports, school board meetings, stores, and even churches between people claiming their freedom to go maskless and those supporting the government's requirement to wear face masks in public settings. Conflict between freedom and regulation has existed since the beginning of the church. In this passage from Galatians, Paul helps us resolve the tension.

Lesson Objectives

- To identify the conflict that arises in churches between regulations and freedom.
- To obey the Scriptural call to choose love over personal freedom.
- To develop a loving strategy for dealing with the conflict between regulation and freedom in the church.

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 NRSV

1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. . . . 13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. 16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you

from doing what you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Into the Scripture

Most scholars believe that Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia was written around AD 48, making it the first communication from Paul preserved in Scripture. The letter was written to multiple churches that Paul founded in the region of Galatia (modern-day Turkey). The conflict between freedom and regulation that Paul addresses is derived from disagreements over the role of the Jewish law in those churches. A small group of influential leaders (Paul refers to them as "a little yeast" in Galatians 5:9) demanded that Christians follow the Law of Moses as well as the teachings of Jesus. They required Christian men to be circumcised, and all Christians to follow Sabbath laws,

kosher dietary restrictions, and Old Testament codes, and observe the Jewish festivals. Paul saw these requirements as a "yoke of slavery" upon the churches.

Paul was angry with these leaders (whom he sometimes called Judaizers) because he felt their teachings undermined the Gospel. If the believers

in the region of Galatia agreed to the demands of the Judaizers, Paul said they would have "fallen away from grace" (Galatians 5:4b). They would be trusting in the Law to save them rather than in salvation through faith in Christ. Paul advised the Galatians to "stand firm" in their freedom. Some in the church took Paul's words to



Love would not allow Christians to engage in destructive behavior.

mean they were free to disregard the moral and ethical teachings of Scripture. Warping Paul's theology, they bragged that they were free to do anything they pleased because the death of Christ had forgiven all their sins—past, present, and future. They quoted the apostle's words on freedom as they refused to yield to any of the Scriptural regulations embraced by the Judaizers.

The Judaizers worried that without the regulation provided by the Law, the Gentile believers in Galatia would continue in their pagan lifestyles. They feared the new converts would embarrass the church and Christ by claiming their spiritual freedom permitted them to engage in sexually promiscuous lifestyles, undisciplined consumption of food and alcohol, brawls with one another, idol worship, and sorcery. The conflict between those in favor of regulation and those defying all restrictions on their





behavior threatened to tear the church apart. Paul warned the congregation that if they continued to fight over whether freedom or regulation was their primary value, they would “bite and devour one another” (verse 15).

Paul resolved the conflict by teaching that freedom in Christ did not grant believers the right to self-indulgence. Instead, Christ’s freedom called his followers to love their neighbor as they loved themselves. Love would not allow Christians to engage in destructive behavior. Instead, love would cause Christians to yield their lives to the authority of the Holy Spirit, who would empower them to follow the ways of Christ. Paul knew that some in the church were happy to receive the salvation provided by Christ but were reluctant to obey the Holy Spirit. Paul refuted this practice by teaching that when people accepted the salvation provided by Christ, they also accepted the Spirit’s authority.

Yielding to the Spirit’s control required believers to recognize the battle inside them between the Spirit and their flesh. Paul said fleshly desires pull Christians away from God’s reign while the Spirit guides them toward obedience in the Kingdom of God. If Christians gave in to their undisciplined desires, Paul said, they would engage in everything the Judaizers feared: unfaithful sexual behaviors, drunkenness, idolatry, sorcery, and feuding with one another. Such disobedience would prevent them from receiving and celebrating the reign of God in their lives. The good news was that if they yielded themselves to the guidance of the Spirit, Paul assured them the Spirit would inspire all the qualities God intended for them to exhibit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The apostle promised that people living under the leadership of the Spirit did not need external regulation. They did what God desired from the internal motivation of the Spirit.

Into the Lesson

Recently I sat across from a seventy-year-old woman in the Denver airport who would not wear her mask even though there was a mask mandate on everyone in the terminal. A young father sat beside me along with his seven-year-old daughter. He asked the woman to wear her mask since his daughter was not vaccinated and was, therefore, vulnerable to the virus. The woman replied that she was not vaccinated and believed that all mandates were a “power grab” on the part of the federal government. Then she added that it was her right not to wear a mask, and no one was going to make her do it.

The father offered some other perspectives, but she did not agree with him. Instead, she said it was her discipleship to Jesus Christ that caused her to reject the mandate. Christ was her Lord, she boldly asserted, not the government. Just before the father and daughter moved to the opposite side of the waiting area, the woman quoted Revelation about the mark of the beast and said that in these “last days,” she would not submit to godless tyranny. I wondered if the woman had ever read this passage from Galatians.

The tension between freedom and regulation continues to befuddle the church of Jesus Christ. The tension plays out in ordination: Is the church free to ordain whomever they believe God has called to the ministry, or must they follow regulations imposed upon them by their denomination on who can and cannot be ordained?



Mistakes are made on both sides of the tension
between freedom and regulation.

Are churches free to decide how much money they want to give to the mission work of their denomination? Or to make sure there is enough funding, should denominations require a set amount of contribution?

Are churches free to offer whatever type of ministry they want to provide in their own building, or are they subject to city ordinances that limit the number of people in a building and require compliance with regulations concerning food preparation and the care of children? Is one segment of a congregation free to put signs in the church yard supporting movements that offend other members of the congregation, or should the policies of the church dictate what can be visually promoted on church property? Should new believers be free to serve the Lord in any capacity as soon as they are baptized, or should they be required to complete a new members' course or some other training before they are given a position of leadership?

Even more painful turbulence can be churned up if church leadership imposes moral requirements on its membership. Should the church require leaders to pledge not to use marijuana recreationally? Should divorced members be prohibited from serving as deacons? Will the church marry members who live together before the wedding? Should a modest dress code be imposed upon youth and sponsors when they are on church trips? Shall those convicted of crimes be removed from the church rolls? All these quandaries stir up the debate between freedom and regulation. Those who tout their freedom to do as they please can become entrenched in conflict with the people who believe being a good Christian means following the rules. When such conflict becomes public, the entire fellowship of the church is jeopardized, and the testimony of the church to the outside world is tarnished.

Paul taught that the way around this unhealthy conflict was through loving one another by the power of the Spirit. Mistakes are made on both sides of the tension between freedom and regulation. As New Testament scholar John William MacGorman wrote on this passage, the church can be wounded by “publican’s pride” as well as “pharisaic pride.”¹ Whether we are arrogant about our “freedom” to do what we want or self-righteous about our rules and regulations, the outcome is the same—the community of Christ is damaged.

As Paul warns, pompous disagreements over freedom and regulation lead church members to “consume” one

another. In his commentary on Galatians, Dr. Herman Ridderbos claims that to consume one another means “to leave no room for” one another.² When Christians fail to leave room for one another in the church, we cease to be a community of believers and fail Christ in our mission. Rather than disintegrate in conflict, Paul calls us to allow the Spirit to tame the dissension inside us and produce the kind of fruit in us that helps us serve one another in love.

Into Discipleship

Everybody loves authority as long as they are the authority. To a degree, both those who argue for more regulations and those who defy regulations are claiming to be the authority. One group stands on their right to demand compliance; the other group stands on their right to reject restrictions. This showdown on who has the authority is the real culprit in most disagreements.

The only resolution is for all involved to yield their rights to the authority of the Spirit. Paul writes, “Live by the Spirit, . . . do not gratify the desires of the flesh.” One verse later, the apostle says that the Spirit’s authority will “prevent you from doing what you want.” The Spirit will always guide us to choose love over personal freedom. Let me be clear: according to Scripture, in a battle between love and personal freedom, love should always win.

Churches can apply this teaching by asking four central questions when they have conflict between freedom and regulation. **Question 1:** “Will either this regulation or this claim of freedom violate the call of the Gospel?” The Gospel invites us to take Christ as Savior and Lord.



The Spirit will always guide us to choose love over personal freedom.



If a church passes new requirements for baptism that include tithing and the ability to speak in tongues, their policies violate the Gospel by saying that faith in Christ is not enough for salvation. If an ethnically homogenized congregation claims their freedom in Christ allows them to refuse fellowship with people of other races, they violate the call of the Gospel to the Lordship of Christ.

Question 2: “Will the enforcement of this regulation cause the church to be unloving to anyone in the congregation?” Some churches have policies that crying babies should be taken out of the worship service. Although it might be the parent’s “right” to keep a crying baby in worship, the loving act toward the congregation and probably the baby is to move the child to a more private area where his or her needs can be met, and the church can worship with less distractions. However, if the only place a parent can take the baby is into an austere room without a way to participate in worship, that church has been unloving to the parent. The loving act would be to create a welcoming space for baby and parent that enables the parent to be connected visually or audibly with ongoing worship.

Question 3: “Will the rejection of this regulation cause anyone to be unloving to anyone else in the congregation?” Most churches have parking spaces for disabled people that are positioned near the entrances of the church. If a member without physical disabilities claims to have the right to park in those reserved spaces, that would be an unloving act toward people with

disabilities. Many Baptist churches prohibit the consumption of alcohol in wedding receptions held in the church fellowship hall. If a family touted their freedom to drink in moderation and smuggled beer and wine into their wedding reception, that would be an unloving act toward the rest of the church.

Question 4 is “Will the handling of this regulation harm the church’s witness to the outside community?” Suppose a church that hosts a daycare feuds over whether those who use the daycare should be required to come to the church. Those who think they should do so pass new policies to mandate membership. Those who think they should not do so say they will defy the new policies. What does that say to the community about Christian love? If a church votes to fire a choir director because he has suffered a divorce and the choir walks out in protest of the decision, what does that say to the surrounding community about the power of Christian love?

Paul wrote in Galatians 5:6, “the only thing that counts is faith working through love.” When congregations ask such questions before either adopting regulations or defying them under the banner of freedom, they love one another in the freedom of the Spirit.

Notes:

1. John William MacGorman, *Broadman Bible Commentary Vol. 11* (Nashville, Broadman Press, 1971), 116.
2. Herman N. Ridderbos, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: St Paul’s Epistle to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953), 202.

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord, help us to be open to the direction of the Holy Spirit when making difficult decisions. Help us to love one another and make decisions that hold the other person's wellbeing at heart. Thank you that we are not bound by legalism but are beholden to Christ's teachings and the Holy Spirit. Help us remember that we are all family and part of the body of Christ. Amen.

Reflection Questions

Introduction

Why do you think mask mandates stirred up so much conflict in our nation? What do you think Christ would have said about such conflict?

Into the Scripture

How would you describe the conflict Paul was addressing in the churches in Galatia? In what circumstances are regulations needed in the church? When should personal freedom be allowed? What does the church do when members defy the leadership of the Spirit to act in ways that are embarrassing to the church?

Into the Lesson

How would you have handled the airport situation if you were the father of the little girl? What are the dangers of "publican's pride"? What are the dangers of "pharisaic pride"? Are you more of a "rules person" or do you often resist imposed regulations? Why? Have you ever felt there was no room for you in a discussion in the church? What made you feel that way?

Into Discipleship

Do you agree or disagree with the author's assertion that "according to Scripture, in a battle between love and personal freedom, love should always win"? Would the questions posed in this section help or hinder a church's efforts to resolve conflict between regulation and freedom?

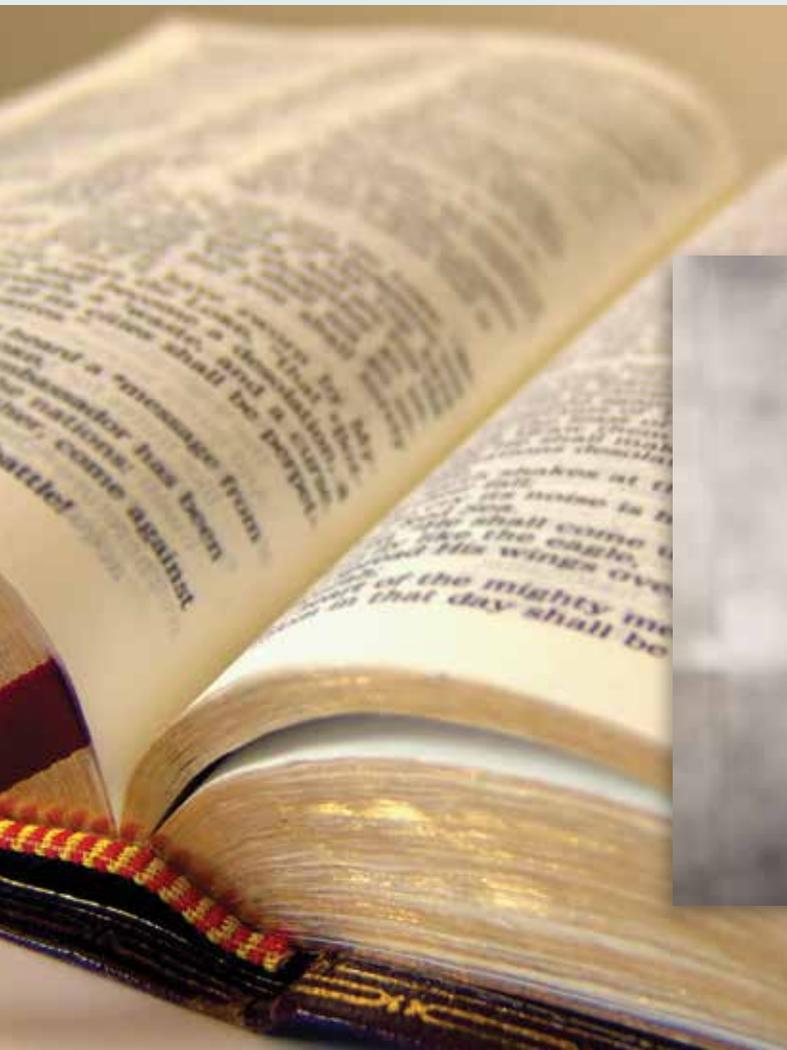
Resources

Songs to Consider

- "Open My Eyes, that I May See" sung by Joslin Grove Choral Society: <https://youtu.be/GDceaG7kFQA>
- "Living for Jesus" sung by Islington Baptist Church: https://youtu.be/12Tww_FPthc?t=1
- "I'm Free" sung by Yolanda Adams: <https://youtu.be/aA0084uNIjU?t=3>

Activity Ideas

- Show a video clip of a conflict over mandates in our culture. Ask participants how the conflict could have been resolved.



- Assign half of the participants the role of the Judaizers and half the role of Paul's supporters of freedom. Invite them to read the lesson and prepare to debate the premise "Regulations are unnecessary in the church of Jesus Christ."
- Read the author's assertion "according to Scripture, in a battle between love and personal freedom, love should always win." Invite participants to identify exceptions to this assertion. Ask them to identify instances when the assertion holds true.
- Take any of the examples in section "Into Discipleship" (a new policy to require tithing and speaking in tongues before baptism, a church vote to exclude people of races from fellowship, a crying baby in church, a member who defies parking for the physically disabled designations, a family smuggles alcohol into the church, the daycare conflict, the firing of a music minister), or think up your own and ask participants to demonstrate how the conflict could be resolved under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Devotional Scriptures Year C Third Sunday after Pentecost Week of 06/26/22

Sunday 06/26/22

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 and Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20;
1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21 and Psalm 16, Galatians 5:1,
13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Monday 06/27/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 75; 2 Kings 2:15-22;
1 John 2:7-11
Complementary: Psalm 140; Genesis 24:34-41, 50-67;
1 John 2:7-11

Tuesday 06/28/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 75; 2 Kings 3:4-20;
Ephesians 5:6-20
Complementary: Psalm 140; Jeremiah 3:15-18;
Ephesians 5:6-20

Wednesday 06/29/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 75; 2 Kings 4:1-7;
Matthew 10:16-25
Complementary: Psalm 140; Jeremiah 23:16-22;
Matthew 10:16-25

Thursday 06/30/22

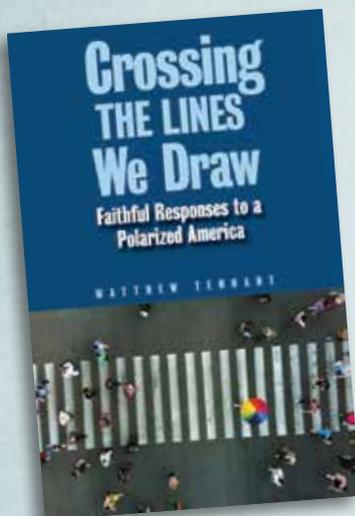
Semi-continuous: Psalm 30; 2 Kings 4:8-17;
Romans 7:14-25
Complementary: Psalm 66:1-9; 2 Kings 21:1-15;
Romans 7:14-25

Friday 07/01/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 30; 2 Kings 4:18-31;
2 Corinthians 8:1-7
Complementary: Psalm 66:1-9; Jeremiah 51:47-58;
2 Corinthians 8:1-7

Saturday 07/02/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 30; 2 Kings 4:32-37; Luke 9:1-6
Complementary: Psalm 66:1-9; Zechariah 14:10-21;
Luke 9:1-6



Crossing the Lines We Draw: Faithful Responses to a Polarized America

By Matthew Tennant

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PERCEPTION

the value of the underestimated

Naaman's servants came up to him and spoke to him: "Our father, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, wouldn't you have done it? All he said to you was, 'Wash and become clean.'"

—2 KINGS 5:13 (CEB)

Introduction

In 1990, Garth Brooks released a song on his album *No Fences* titled "Unanswered Prayers." The song told the story of a man whose life unfolded in a way quite different from the desires of his youth. Though his life did not fulfill his teenage dreams, an even better dream took their place. "Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers." Have things ever gone differently than the way you planned? Were you ever taken aback when things unfolded differently than expected? What about when God answers prayers in unexpected ways? Perhaps life has looked a little like a Garth Brooks's song.

Our God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and ever-present. God does not always work in the ways we expect or desire. The Scripture today is no different: a person looks for healing from God, but it comes in a way he does not expect and he almost misses his opportunity for healing because his expectations did not meet reality.

Lesson Objectives

- To explain the connection between the ministry of Jesus and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.
- To provide safeguards to disciples to help them distinguish the voice of the Spirit from other voices.
- To demonstrate how disciples can discern the voice of the Holy Spirit on complex issues that people face in today's world.

2 Kings 5:1-14 NRSV

1 Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. 2 Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. 3 She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." 4 So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from

the land of Israel had said. 5 And the king of Aram said, “Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.” He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. 6 He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, “When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.” 7 When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.” 8 But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, “Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.” 9 So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. 10 Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” 11 But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! 12 Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” He turned and went away in a rage. 13 But his servants approached and said to him, “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean?’” 14 So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Into the Scripture

The Land and Leaders

In this passage, we read references to two different kingdoms: Aram and Israel. However, both names are misleading for the contemporary reader. The kingdom of Aram is better known today as Syria. We have heard of Israel’s interaction with Aram before in 1 Kings 20 and 22. This time, we learn that God gave Aram their latest victory against Israel! That is right—God *gave Aram* victory over Israel. The name “Israel” is also deceiving because by this time in Israel’s history, the twelve tribes are no longer one kingdom.

Recall that they could not agree who should succeed Solomon as king, and the disagreement resulted in Israel’s being split into two kingdoms: “Israel” in this text therefore means the Northern Kingdom, which comprised nine

of the twelve tribes plus some Levites. “Judah” refers to the Southern Kingdom, which comprised the two remaining of the twelve tribes plus some Levites. By the time of our passage, we have seen multiple kings rise and fall as leaders of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. The people and their kings struggled to be faithful to the Law of Moses. As the kings failed, God sent prophets to direct the people back to God. Living in Samaria was a man named Elisha; he was one of those prophets.

The People

Second Kings 5:1-14 opens up with a focus on Naaman. The author describes Naaman as someone of high regard, the general in his king’s army, AND a successful warrior to boot. As you are reading this Scripture, there



is a good possibility that a few things may slip past your eyes. Naaman and Elisha stand out as the only two characters with names in this passage. The narrative draws Naaman and Elisha to the foreground of the story. Just behind them in the literary portrait are the kings. Though the King of Aram and the King of Israel are not named, their titles convey their significance.

Two additional different groups blended into the background when focusing on Naaman. Their significance blends in with the shadows of the narrative while Naaman is in the foreground. These characters, like the kings, are not named. Unlike the kings, these unnamed individuals are servants, ranked low in society. An unnamed young Israelite girl and unnamed servants of Naaman *should* be the spotlight of this story, but without names they get tucked into the background while their contributions are integral to the outcome of the narrative. We learn through the text that the Arameans stole this young Israelite girl when they raided Israel. The Northern Kingdom of Israel has had ongoing disputes with the Kingdom of Aram, and Aram is winning with God as their credit. This girl is only a hint at the impact of war on these two kingdoms. Naaman's astronomical wealth that he brings on his journey is another hint. The sum of money mentioned would cover the annual wages of hundreds of workers.¹ This war has been a *profit* to the Arameans, and now Naaman seeks a prophet from the Israelites.

Into the Lesson

Unnamed but Not Worthless

On the surface, this passage does not seem too special compared to other healing stories in the Bible. Sure, a guy with a skin disease goes to a “holy man” and that

“holy man” heals him, BUT that simplified version of the story misses significant parts of the way God works. As we look deeper into the text, we notice Naaman has a young servant girl from Israel. Unfortunately for this girl, her presence in the narrative is because she was a spoil of war. Naaman is the general of an army from a kingdom in ongoing conflict with Israel. Technically, this young girl is his *enemy*. Enemy or not, she informs her new master of a pathway to healing. Why would she want to do him any favors? He took her from her homeland and has made her a servant in his household. Our Bible does not even reveal this girl's name, yet she is an agent of healing. This young girl sees Naaman's pain, knows the solution for that pain, and tells him about it. Naaman listens to the voice of a girl. Though she is a servant, her master listens. The narrative creates a conflict of ideas: though this girl is unnamed, she is not worthless.

Game of Thrones

Because of the young girl, Naaman knows that behind enemy lines is a prophet who can heal him. The King of Aram provides Naaman with a letter for the King of Israel explaining the situation. These two kings allow this man to cross lines to find the prophet amid their disagreements and war. The King of Israel seems fearful



This war has been a *profit* to the Arameans, and now Naaman seeks a *prophet* from the Israelites.

that his enemy is sending someone to his land with ulterior motives under the ruse of an expected healing. After all, Aram is currently winning the war. The King of Israel acts as though he does not even know Elisha—a curious reaction. He tears his clothes in a mourning fashion when the King of Aram asks him to heal Naaman. Elisha learns of the king's distress and tells the king to send Naaman to him.

The Faithful Healer(s)

Naaman and his servants go to see Elijah and request his healing. But their interaction with Elisha does not go as Naaman planned. Instead of speaking directly to Elisha, they are attended by a messenger. Elisha tells Naaman to go wash in the Jordan River seven times. That is it. These actions are *supposed* to heal Naaman? Why would washing in the rivers of Aram not work? What was so special about the Jordan River? Elisha's instructions do not fit Naaman's expectations, and Naaman is filled with anger. Naaman has every intention of walking away without doing what Elisha said because it did not fit his expectations. He wanted a big miraculous spectacle, but all he was told to do was wash.

Naaman's preconceived expectations were barriers to his healing. Once again, unnamed characters become agents of healing. The Scripture does not specify how many servants Naaman has with him—nor does it specify their names—but the servants gently object to their master, telling him to follow through with the prophet's instructions. Their words are our key verse: “Our father, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, wouldn't you have done it? All he said to you was, ‘Wash and become clean’” (2 Kings 5:13, CEB).

These unnamed servants push beyond Naaman's expectations so that Naaman would follow Elisha's instructions and be healed. The unnamed characters in this story play the most significant role in Naaman's healing. Their faith helps transform not only Naaman's physical situation but also his spiritual one. Naaman did not just receive healing—his skin became like a young man's. As a soldier and general in an army, there is no doubt that along with Naaman's skin problems he also had battle scars. Elisha's instructions and God's healing turned back time for Naaman. He wanted a miraculous healing, and he got it and more. And as a result, he committed faithfully to following the one true God. (Keep reading in the chapter for Naaman's confession of faith!)

Into Discipleship

A Listening Ear

Because the path to healing did not fit Naaman's expectations, he almost missed an opportunity for healing. If it were not for the unnamed persons, Naaman would not have been healed. Yet, instead of only chiding Naaman, let us give Naaman the benefit of the doubt for a moment. Naaman chose to listen to those *below* him in wealth, society, and narrative. He not only listened to the unnamed Israelite girl (the spoil of war and from an enemy kingdom), but he also listened to the unnamed servants who corrected Naaman's disappointment in Elisha's instructions. AND Naaman listened without rebuke or consequences to his servants. Not everyone chooses to listen to their *enemies* or their *subjects*. How often do we miss opportunities for healing or to be God's agents when we refuse to listen to or see the credibility of the person in front of us? In what ways are we like Naaman? In what ways are we called to be like the unnamed servants?

Bad Reputation

Unfortunately, the church's reputation to the world has been changing. The world knows us more as people who exclude than people who include. Christians are more known for the things we are against than the things we support. Such does not reflect the commission that Jesus gave his disciples before he ascended into heaven. How did we gain this reputation? What has changed over the



Christians are more known for the things we are against than the things we support.



centuries for the church that we are no longer seen as a safe refuge for the ostracized, broken, orphaned, and the poor?

Everything Changes

It is now 2022, and we are just beyond our second year of the Covid pandemic. Everything changed for churches beginning in 2020. As churches are now opening back up after the long period of digital worship, congregations are in the midst of a rebirth of sorts because of the impact and changes they experienced. Perhaps your church has gone 100 percent back to the way it was before the pandemic. Or maybe your church is in the process of discerning how to now worship.

There is a possibility you are amid new changes and trying to decide if the 'new thing' is worth continuing. Change is not an easy stage to be in as Christians. We all long for stability and homeostasis. If we look closely, we can see God redeeming the story of 2020 by giving churches a chance at a new life. Unlike Naaman, the church has not always been great at listening to the voices of those outside of our circle. But now we can work on rebuilding. Now we can work on including new ways of carrying out our ministries.

Note:

1. Joel B. Green, ed., "5:5," footnote in *The CEB Study Bible*, 576 OT (Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2018).

The Spiritual Art of Raising Children with Disabilities

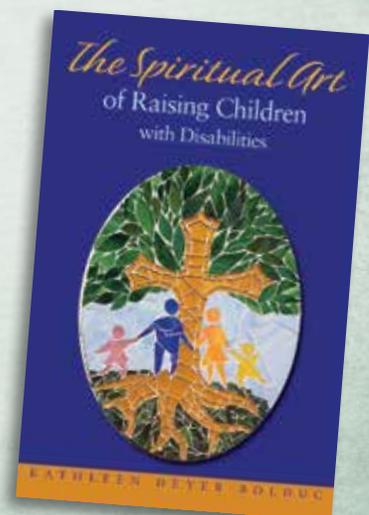
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Closing Prayer

Dear Lord, through your creativity you have infinite ways that you can answer our prayers and come to our rescue. Help us to not be myopic and prejudicial, putting restraints on how we seek to receive your blessings. Help us to be open and welcoming to everyone regardless of their background or presumed status, for we are all created in your Imago Dei. As such, may we always reflect your character and unconditional love. Amen.

Reflection Questions

- Naaman was forced to be open to God’s working differently than the way Naaman expected. How has Covid led your congregation to think in different ways than before the pandemic?
- There are always subgroups within our communities that are marginalized and undervalued. Who might be such individuals around the church that you can welcome into fellowship?
- How can focusing on inclusion instead of exclusion help our churches flourish?

- What message about God does acts of exclusion send to those who are outside of the church?
- God works in unexpected ways and through unexpected people. When was the last time you were surprised by God?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” a version sung by Jeremy Riddle: <https://youtu.be/FqQRi8aJm0E>
- “Just as I Am,” a version sung by Travis Cottrell: <https://youtu.be/wrNfaqZa8PI>

Baptist Connections

- Hearing the voices of the unnamed and standing up for their voices is one of the ways we can engage in acts of justice. **Public Witness and Advocacy** include trainings on becoming a more effective public ally/ advocate. Consider a conversation or Zoom interview with ABHMS’ Associate for Public Witness and Advocacy, Rev. Brittany Graves, who can be contacted at brittany.graves@abhms.org.
- Learn more about the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists at <https://awab.org/>.
- Defending the civil right to be heard and valued from a Baptist perspective:



- Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty: <https://bjconline.org/>.
- Roger Williams Fellowship: <https://www.facebook.com/RogerWilliamsFellowship/>.

Media Options

Consider books on minority experiences with the Gospel and the Church:

- *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way* by Richard Twiss. Twiss is a Native American pastor redeeming the story of Jesus from the pain of Christian settlers. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/24043200-rescuing-the-gospel-from-the-cowboys?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=fQfVmF3Yg1&rank=1.
- *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James H. Cone. Cone opens the readers' eyes to see the story of Christ through the eyes of African Americans. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/12417679-the-cross-and-the-lynching-tree?ac=1&from_search=true&qid=bXniOj4m3V&rank=2.
- *Reading the Bible from the Margins* by Miguel A. De La Torre. De La Torre's book shows how race, class, and gender influence the way we interact with and understand Scripture. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/892626-Reading_the_Bible_from_the_Margins?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=rpTx4HyLxN&rank=1.
- *I Am Not a Number* by Dr. Jenny Kay Dupis & Kathy Kacer—a difficult story about a First Nations girl in a residential school run by nuns. This book focuses on the painful dehumanization of First Nations children but can also teach us about listening to the stories of other unnamed peoples. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/29403531-i-am-not-a-number?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=IDpccg2WXa2&rank=1.

Devotional Scriptures

Year C Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Week of 07/03/22

Sunday 07/03/22

2 Kings 5:1-14 and Psalm 30; Isaiah 66:10-14 and Psalm 66:1-9; Galatians 6:(1-6), 7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Monday 07/04/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 6; 2 Kings 5:15-19a; Acts 19:21-27
Complementary: Psalm 119:73-80; Jeremiah 6:10-19; Acts 19:21-27

Tuesday 07/05/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 6; 2 Kings 5:19b-27; Acts 19:28-41
Complementary: Psalm 119:73-80; Jeremiah 8:4-13; Acts 19:28-41

Wednesday 07/06/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 6; 2 Kings 6:1-7; Luke 10:13-16
Complementary: Psalm 119:73-80; Joshua 23:1-16; Luke 10:13-16

Thursday 07/07/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 82; Amos 1:1-2:3; James 2:14-26
Complementary: Psalm 25:1-10; Genesis 41:14-36; James 2:14-26

Friday 07/08/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 82; Amos 2:4-11; Acts 7:9-16
Complementary: Psalm 25:1-10; Genesis 41:37-49; Acts 7:9-16

Saturday 07/09/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 82; Amos 2:12-3:8; John 3:16-21
Complementary: Psalm 25:1-10; Leviticus 19:1-4, 32-37; John 3:16-21

COMPASSION

when religion restrains

Then the legal expert said, “The one who demonstrated mercy toward him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

—LUKE 10:37 (CEB)

Introduction

If you have ever lived in a neighborhood with a homeowners’ association, you may have had difficult experiences with the HOA about trivial things. Tradition claims that HOAs were established to help protect property value of houses within a neighborhood. However, the history of HOAs is not always as polite. These policies have been used to control neighbors, create a bubble of isolation, and protect an idyllic image of *perfection*. Although HOAs, at times, have been established for the best of financial security intentions, they can easily morph into something inhospitable to incoming families.

Today’s parable of the Good Samaritan compels us to ask questions of ourselves concerning whether we allow our well-intended religious rules and mores to interfere with true religion as practiced by Jesus. Do we sometimes forfeit actions of the heart to protect the letter of the law? What would Jesus do in circumstances that may require bending the rule in order to aid someone? How can we be sensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit to help us acknowledge everyone as our neighbor and be willing to lend a helping hand even if it entails an inconvenience?

Lesson Objectives

- To see our faith as an inspiration to action rather than an excuse to ignore our neighbors.
- To notice the places where we turn our heads to ignore the problems.
- To see all our neighbors as equally valued individuals deserving to be treated with dignity.

Luke 10:25-37 NRSV

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27 He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” 28 And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” 29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30 Jesus

replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Into the Scripture

Behind the Scenes

Just before our passage, Jesus has sent out 72 disciples in pairs to prepare towns for his arrival as he makes his way towards Jerusalem. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus only sends out the 12 disciples and tells them not to go into Samaritan cities. Luke, however, uses the number “72” (a connection to Genesis 10) to emphasize that this is a message for all nations.¹ Luke is using Israel’s neighbors for a lesson to the Jews.

The Practice of the Rabbi

Throughout the Gospels we witness Jesus as a teacher in the rabbinic fashion. Jesus typically answers questions



by asking another. This was not a coy thing that the Messiah did but a tactic of rabbis to push their pupils to not simply recite answers but to *know* the answers. Only Luke has the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Matthew and Mark only include the teaching about the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:34-50; Mark 12:28-34). Luke folds the lesson of the greatest commandment around

“

Only Luke has the parable of the Good Samaritan.

a parable. The simple question in Matthew and Mark becomes an involved rabbinic lesson in Luke.

People, Places, and Things

This passage has two sets of people: first, the people hearing the story and, second, the characters within the parable. The text does not explicitly say there is an audience, but there is a good chance Jesus is accompanied by his disciples. From previous verses we learn the 72 disciples have just returned. We only know Jesus has set his eyes towards Jerusalem. The text gives no other hints about location. The text only specifies a legal expert. However, the context of the passage would assume that

the legal expert is demonstrating his knowledge in front of a crowd. The legal expert was not a scholar of Roman law; however, he took pride in being a scholar of the Law of Moses. The text suggests he wants to show off his knowledge and make an example out of Jesus.

The Parable

The three groups of people in the parable fit together like the childhood game where “one of these things is not like the others.” Jesus lists three different men (priest, Levite, Samaritan) who come upon the wounded man. However, the story does not unfold the way a Jewish listener would have expected. A Jewish listener would have anticipated the *bad guy* to be the Samaritan.

1. Samaritans: Jews and Samaritans are technically siblings that reject their familial relationship. Samaria was the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel since Omri was King of Israel (1 Kings 16). Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BC (2 Kings 17). The residents of Samaria became known as Samaritans post-fall of Israel. Nonetheless, some Samaritans today disagree with the Judeo-Christian Biblical account of their origins. Historically, Jews and Samaritans have had tense relationships. There is still an active religious community of Samaritan Israelites today that have formed a distinct faith and biblical canon from both Jews and Christians.² While we cannot cover all of the details of the strained relationship between Jews and Samaritans, we can acknowledge that they have a loosely connected foundation of worshipping the God of Moses (Yahweh), and that both parties have been aggressive to their sibling and neighbor.
2. Priests: Priests are from the Tribe of Levi and are direct descendants of Aaron, Moses’ brother. Only the line of

Aaron could hold the office of priest. Plus, out of this family line, a High Priest would be designated to serve the Temple for a period of time. This priest was a “son of Aaron,” and he carried a sacred role within the Jewish community. Both priests and Levites had a series of laws that they had to follow in order to participate in and lead worship for the people. The priest is going *down* from Jerusalem, meaning his time of service has concluded, and he no longer has to maintain ritual purity. He has no obvious excuse to avoid the wounded man but does so and continues on his way.

3. Levites: Levites also come from the Tribe of Levi. Historically, they served the priests in the Temple and were musicians in Temple worship. When the Israelites moved into the Promised Land, the Levites did not inherit land like the other 11 tribes—instead, they inherited the role of worship leaders. While it is not clear the direction in which the Levite is going (toward Jerusalem and to holy responsibilities or away from Jerusalem and holy responsibilities completed), it is clear that the Levite is avoiding helping the wounded man.

Into the Lesson

Unattractive Arrogance

Jesus uses this legal expert’s question, rooted in arrogance, to teach a lesson on humility to the Jewish listener. If we are honest with ourselves, Christians are not too different from this legal expert. We can grow proud of our religious practices or our religious knowledge, or even assume that God has placed a special blessing on our country because *we* live there. We clearly are God’s *new* favorites, right? . . . Riiiiight? There is a problem assuming that we are God’s favorite child. Where do we have pride and are at risk of arrogance in our faith—in practice,



The Samaritan is “the better guy” who mirrored God’s character—mercy.

knowledge, or identity? Fortunately for us, our lesson does not stop with the humbling of the legal expert.

Lesson Inception

As we dive into the parable some difficult questions approach us. The legal expert may have been one lesson, but we are about to experience lesson inception as we discuss the parable. Jesus used three separate characters to highlight the point of his message. The priest and Levite not only knew the Law, but they also led the worship of Yahweh. They *knew* what was right. They knew the Law was structured in a way to foster community and connection with God. Yet, both men walked past the wounded man. The actions of the Levite and priest broke the essence of the Law.

Their actions are intentionally contrasted to those of the Samaritan. For all intents and purposes, the Samaritan and the wounded man (assumed to be Jewish) are enemies. Yet the Samaritan is the one who approaches the wounded man and cares for him. Not only does the Samaritan care for the victim's immediate needs while ignoring their peoples' disputes, but the Samaritan also takes the man to an inn where he can get ongoing care. On top of that, the good neighbor covers the upfront costs AND promises more money if the bill exceeds what he has already paid.

History Confronted

During Jesus' time, Samaritans were painted as the *bad guys*. Currently, we have entire branches of ministry named after this people group. Generations of disagreements are confronted in this passage. Plus, the narrative still ignores the perspective of current-day Samaritan Israelites. Put yourself in Jewish shoes. How would Jewish listeners in the crowd respond to Jesus' words? Jesus asked the legal expert to identify the one who behaved like a neighbor. The legal expert did not respond by saying "the Samaritan." Instead, he said "the one who showed mercy." Without naming the Samaritan, the legal expert concludes that the Samaritan is "the better guy" who mirrored God's character—mercy.

Into Discipleship

Moral Monopoly

Christian arrogance manifests commonly in the form of a *moral monopoly* mindset. We can falsely believe that *only* Christians are capable of doing good in this world.



The Samaritan was portrayed as fulfilling the Law better than the ones who led worship.

Meanwhile, our reputation to non-Christians has not been one of superior moral practice. Rather, they sometimes assume we have a moral superiority complex. Ever wondered, *Why did the Samaritan care?* The Samaritan's actions do not typically cause a question inside of us as modern-day Christians. For centuries, some Christians have painted the Samaritan as the morally superior character while villainizing the Jews, espousing the view "I mean, they killed Jesus after all!" Naturally, we associate ourselves with the Samaritan. *We are the good guys!* However, to the Jewish ear in Jesus' day, this story was offensive. They saw themselves as having the moral monopoly, and yet the Samaritan was portrayed as fulfilling the Law better than the ones who led worship.

Countless Christians have uttered harsh judgments concerning the extent of evil that they consider non-Christians capable of committing. While this disregards God's presence shining through all of creation, it also builds arrogance in our hearts—all the while non-Christians are developing humanitarian programs to help feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome in the refugees. We can all agree Christians do not have a monopoly on compassion or humanitarian service and doing good.

History Rewritten

If Jesus were here today and rewrote the parable of the good Samaritan for us today, who would play the characters of the priest, the Levite, and the good Samaritan? It may be uncomfortable to consider that Jesus may



place us in the roles of priest and Levite while an *outsider* would fill the role of the good Samaritan. Who is your Samaritan? No, not “Good Samaritan.” Who are your opponents? Who are the people that surprise you when they do something good? Read the story again but place “Baptist,” “Christian,” or your own name where the story says “priest” or “Levite.” Write the name of your *Samaritan opponent* in place of “Samaritan.” Did the story feel different this time? This would be how the Jewish audience would have heard the parable.

The Burden of Religion

The contrast between the merciful Samaritan and the lack of compassion from the Levite and priest is intentional. Both the Levite and the priest knew the Torah. They knew the Law was built for compassion. So why did they walk by without aiding their brother? The text does not explicitly provide excuses for either Jewish man, but let us pause for a moment and consider that Jesus contrasted Jews with a Samaritan. The religious and racial differences matter in this narrative. What are the ways we use religion as an excuse? Have you ever read through Leviticus? Leviticus contains an extensive number of laws regulating Levite or priestly behavior in and out of worship, including any interaction with dead bodies. However, the narrative unfolds in a way to suggest the Levite would have been permitted to aid this man.

Could religious laws actually have been a stumbling block for living by faith for the Levite and priest? Sabbath laws spelled out rest for humans. However, the Sabbath also says animals deserve a day of rest. There are permissible exceptions to break rest for the well-being of an animal, e.g., dairy animals need to be milked to avoid pain.³ The Law was structured in a way to help the vulnerable in all of creation. There was room in the Law for the priest and the Levite to help the wounded man.

The legal expert would have known that the Law was structured in this format. Yet, he was seeking public validation for his knowledge rather than his action. Our faith should not hold us back from caring for others. Our faith should not give us an excuse to drive by those in need. It should compel us. It should give us God’s compassionate eyes.

Notes:

1. Joel B. Green, ed., “10:1 Footnote,” Essay, in *The CEB Study Bible*, 130 NT (Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2018).
2. “Samaritan: Judaism,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. Accessed August 23, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Samaritan>.
3. Rosally Saltsman, “9 Ways Judaism Teaches Us to Be Kind to Animals.” Chabad.org. Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center. Accessed June 29, 2021. https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/4065187/jewish/9-Ways-Judaism-Teaches-Us-to-Be-Kind-to-Animals.htm.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, sometimes we find it hard to emulate Jesus by loving everyone unconditionally. Help us to let go of any bigotry or prejudice that causes us to ignore some while treating others as celebrities. Help us to see all of us as one human family and, by doing so, care for the needs and concerns of the least of us. Help us to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit when we are nudged to go out of our way to make a positive difference in someone's life. Let us remember Christ's sacrifice for all of us, and thus choose to be there for others in need. Amen.

Reflection Questions

- In what ways does Jesus' parable shift the paradigm of what we may believe matters about an individual? Are there any parallels to lessons from the Naaman story?
- As we critique ourselves, what are ways that we can make sure our actions are motivated by the Holy Spirit and our hearts versus our engaging in rote religious rituals?

- One critical question we can ask ourselves is whether we are loving our neighbors—all our neighbors—or only our like-minded neighbors. Remember Luke 6:33: "Even sinners do the same."
- In what ways have you acted like the priest, Levite, or legal expert in any situations you can share? Are there any times when you have learned Godly lessons from your assumed enemy on how to care for your neighbors?

Resources

Songs to Consider

Here are two inspirational selections sung by Josh Groban.

- "You'll Never Walk Alone":
<https://youtu.be/G1WpGqEOCOg?t=1>

When you walk through a storm
Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark
At the end of a storm
There's a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of the lark
Walk on through the wind
Walk on through the rain
Though your dreams be tossed and blown
Walk on, walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone

- "You Raise Me Up":
<https://youtu.be/aJxrX42WcjQ>

Baptist Connections

- Inspiration often comes from hearing the story of other ministries that are making strides in their neighborhood. Consider some ABHMS Community Outreach Ministries and the work they are doing. Do their stories spark any new ideas for ministry that your church might consider? <https://abhms.org/ministries/healing-communities/neighborhood-action/>
- Read the inspiring history of Rauschenbusch Metro Ministries and how Walter Rauschenbusch's promotion of social justice became the rallying call for a local church. <http://rmmnyc.org/about-us/our-history>



Media Options

- *When Helping Hurts* by Steve Corbett, Brian Fikkert, and John M. Perkins <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6595233-when-helping-hurts>. How could our traditional form of short-term missions be protecting us and preventing Gospel work?
- *In the Name of Jesus* by Henri J. M. Nouwen. Though this book is a reflection on a priest's ministry at L'Arche, this small book will open any Christian's eyes to ministry possibilities. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2520.In_the_Name_of_Jesus?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=bFkrlnQrQg&rank=1

Undercover Service Project

Find places to serve as a class or with your families but keep it a secret. Help others, but do not let Instagram or TikTok know! What will you choose? A homeless shelter? A food pantry? A senior living facility? A local school? The possibilities are endless. Seek to complete such an act of compassion on a consistent basis. Perhaps start with the commitment once a quarter (or once every season) and then attempt to increase your efforts to bi-monthly or monthly.

Devotional Scriptures

Year C Fifth Sunday after Pentecost Week of 07/10/22

Sunday 07/10/22

Amos 7:7-17 and Psalm 82; Deuteronomy 30:9-14 and Psalm 25:1-10; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

Monday 07/11/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 7; Amos 3:9-4:5; James 2:1-7
Complementary: Psalm 25:11-20; Job 24:1-8; James 2:1-7

Tuesday 07/12/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 7; Amos 4:6-13; 1 John 3:11-17
Complementary: Psalm 25:11-20; Proverbs 19:1-17; 1 John 3:11-17

Wednesday 07/13/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 7; Amos 5:1-9; Matthew 25:31-46
Complementary: Psalm 25:11-20; Ecclesiastes 9:13-18; Matthew 25:31-46

Thursday 07/14/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 52; Amos 5:10-17; Hebrews 5:1-6
Complementary: Psalm 15; Genesis 12:10-20; Hebrews 5:1-6

Friday 07/15/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 52; Amos 5:18-27; Ephesians 3:14-21
Complementary: Psalm 15; Genesis 13:1-18; Ephesians 3:14-21

Saturday 07/16/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 52; Amos 6:1-14; Luke 8:4-10
Complementary: Psalm 15; Genesis 14:1-16; Luke 8:4-10

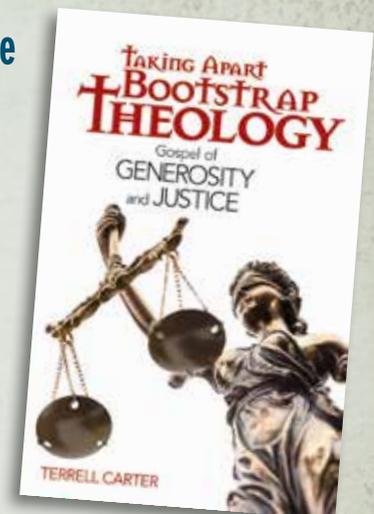
Taking Apart Bootstrap Theology: Gospel of Generosity and Justice

by Terrell Carter

This book exposes the racist and classist assumptions entangled in the rugged individualism of what the author calls "bootstrap theology." Dismantling both the impossible idiom of "pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps" and the social theory of Marx's Protestant work ethic, Carter challenges the reader to advance a more faithful gospel, one that extends a spirit of generosity and a call to social justice for all God's people.

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JUDGMENT

what makes me worthy?

Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart; . . .

—PSALM 15:2

Introduction

Thor from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) could be the perfect connection to our Scripture today. Yes, superheroes can be stories of God's truth. Within the MCU, Thor goes through a major character development journey. Originally, Thor was a warrior who thought like a warrior and used brute force to solve any diplomatic problem. Thor's father, Odin, strips him of his weapon and power while telling him that his arrogance has made him unworthy (*Thor*, 2011). Odin sends Thor to Earth to learn humility. However, his banishment is not permanent. Odin sends Thor's hammer to Earth in the chance that Thor may learn humility and be worthy of his powers and weapon again.

Worthiness is a large theme throughout Thor's stories within the MCU. Perhaps we all resonate with Thor's story and his efforts to become a nobler character. As we dive into our psalm for today, we will consider worthiness from God's point of view. Perhaps we will experience some humility, or perhaps we will experience God's lifting our chin from a downcast perspective to find that we are still worthy even after the battles we have faced.

Lesson Objectives

- To find our worthiness in Jesus, not in our own merits.
- To stop being the judge and gatekeeper of the worthiness of others.
- To support a culture of welcome and inclusivity in the church.

Psalm 15 NRSV

1 O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? 2 Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; 3 who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors; 4 in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the LORD; who stand by their oath even to their hurt; 5 who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent. Those who do these things shall never be moved.

Into the Scripture

Worship Worthiness

David is credited as the author of Psalm 15 although he does not give us details about what stirred him to write this psalm nor at what point in his kingly duties he wrote it.

Traditionally, Levites used this psalm in worship as people entered the Temple. The contents of the psalm would also suggest it was used to teach wisdom. The alternating list of *dos and don'ts* is reminiscent of the Ten Commandments by instructing actions to engage and actions to avoid.

Psalm 15 opens with two questions that both point to one big question: Who is worthy to enter the presence of God? The psalm continues with a response to that big question by unfolding the specific characteristics that make a person worthy to be in God's presence. However, the answer does not contain a single metaphor.¹

The psalmist leaves no room for interpretation by giving several standards by which to live: walk blame-

lessly, do right, speak the truth, keep your oath, etc. God's expectations are clear. God desires those with clean hands and clean hearts to lift their praises. It is easy for all of us to fall into the routine of going to church without thinking critically concerning our attitude and mindset. We must remember we are

entering God's holy presence and should prepare ourselves to be acceptable in God's sight.

Living the Law

It is important to notice not only the metrics that are present in this psalm but also the details left off of this rubric of worthiness. The Israelites developed 613 laws to detail a pathway to righteousness. Much like amendments to our American constitution further define the intent of the original law, these 613 laws expanded on God's original Law to Moses. But Psalm 15 does not cover all 613 laws—nor does it cover all Ten Commandments. Why were these instructions listed for worthiness



God desires those with clean hands and clean hearts to lift their praises.

to enter God's presence? David's list includes instructions on the morality of speech, conduct toward our neighbors, association with wickedness, integrity of our promises, and ill-gotten gains.

This is a short list in comparison to the entirety of Jewish Law. Yet, the challenge in these instructions alone would disqualify many of us. Who is worthy? When we acknowledge the difficulty we have in meeting the standards set in this short psalm, it humbles us as we enter God's presence. We are reminded that God is holy and desires a people who seek righteousness and truth. Through humility and contrition, we can get right with God and boldly come before the mercy seat in a time of need.

Into the Lesson

Society's Rubric

Righteous living and worthiness are not just topics for the days of Solomon's Temple or Herod's Temple; those topics continue to apply to us today. Though we may not use the same rhetoric as David, we talk about worthiness and righteousness using our own coded languages. Humans fold the conversation of worthiness and righteousness into our politics. They are prevalent both within the church and within our government.

- We consider the worthiness of our political and religious leaders.
- We consider the worthiness of refugees and immigrants to enter our country.



- We consider the worthiness and righteous possibilities for redemption of those in the justice system.

When we judge these and other groups, we often paint pictures of honor and righteous living skewed toward our personal preferences. As Christians, we need to juxtapose our determinations with God's definitions to define worthiness. Perhaps those last sentences made you defensive: *"Surely, I know what God requires. Surely, I know the pathway to righteousness. God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow! Society is trying to change God's standards, not me."* As was conveyed in the two prior lessons, sometimes we have a biased opinion of who is worthy, who is our neighbor, and who is qualified to belong to God's family. Each of us from our own perspective build expectations of who is in or out. We qualify our perspective and sometimes disqualify those with whom we differ or disagree. Nonetheless, everyone is held to the same stringent standard under the Law, and everyone has the same grace available through Jesus. None of us are worthy by the Law. None of us can boast about our accomplishments. BUT God makes us worthy through Christ.

Through the salvation and grace we have in Christ, we are made joint-heirs with him. As the writer of Ephesians puts it, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:4-6). As we emulate Christ



and follow his teachings, we live congruently with Psalm 15, and we do so as much from our heart as our head. We are able to abide in the presence of God and enjoy fellowship through the Holy Spirit. As we live and walk in God's light, we can be a witness to others by sharing God's love unconditionally.

A House Divided

June finished a month of diverse celebrations and observances, including Father's Day, Flag Day, summer solstice, Gay and Lesbian Pride, and Juneteenth. Now we are in July, the month we celebrate our American independence. There are many other observances in July, but they are often overshadowed by the 4th. Some Christians take part in certain celebrations of one month and others of the church take part in different celebrations of the other month. Unfortunately, some in these two groups have decided to have little interaction with each other. Our differences have formed chasms between us and the polarization in our country has driven us all farther apart.

Within the body of Christ, sometimes we have a divided reaction about who belongs in God's family



None of us can boast about our accomplishments.
BUT God makes us worthy through Christ.

or who is *allowed* to take part in worship, leadership, or ministry. I think every angle of the church is guilty. My favorite example of this divide comes from Nadia Bolz-Weber in her book *Pastrix*. At the time of writing that book, Nadia Bolz-Weber served an ELCA church in Colorado named House for All Sinners & Saints (HFASS: <https://houseforall.org/>). They specifically planted this church as a space for the outcast. The congregation of HFASS contains people predominantly from the LGBTQ+ community or those who have felt wounded by the mainstream church. In her book, she expressed her struggle with the *pleated pants and loafer-wearing* crowd trying to attend HFASS. She was mad because she knew they could enter any church and be welcomed without question, but they chose to attend *her* church of misfits.

One of her young congregation members helped her see the importance of welcoming even the pleated pants and loafer-wearing middle-class Christians into the church. Who are the people you are hesitant to include? Who would push your comfort limits if they arrived at your worship space? Despite the many issues Christians may view differently from each other, our agreement on Christ's being Lord and Savior of the world is enough to help us grow together spiritually as we all seek to understand and embrace fully what it means to be his disciples.

Into Discipleship

We want to be accepted as worthy and exceptional even in our imperfection but sometimes hesitate to accept others: *"God, qualify my worthiness by granting me grace and the benefit of the doubt, but please judge the worthiness of others against the Law."* Moreover, it is easy to give ourselves accolades for including the people we like while excluding the people we do not—but God expects something more (Luke 6:32-38). That is why worthiness is a difficult subject to approach. We all fit somewhere on the spectrum of humility between imposter syndrome and arrogance. Each of us is on separate journeys of spiritual self-awareness. Throughout David's lifetime, a reader could place David at multiple locations on said spectrum of humility. David was named 'a man after God's own heart,' but he did not always behave in a manner fitting this title—just ask one of his eight wives or numerous concubines. David had his own journey with humility and worthiness.

It can be our goal to emulate the humility of Christ, and in thus doing so grow in our own self-awareness. There is something about seeing ourselves honestly and soberly that helps us be less judgmental of others. And as we walk in God's light, the Holy Spirit can uncover those weights and sins that keep us bound. As we bask in God's unconditional love, we are able to unabashedly seek God's forgiveness and direction. When we recognize that Christ is our righteousness, we are less likely to expect other persons to have their *own* righteousness. We are all sinners saved by grace.

Prepare for Worship

David's psalm spoke about preparing to enter into the presence of God. His words were about reflecting on our words and actions. If we are honest, how often does that cross our minds on a Sunday morning on our way to church or while we are in worship? Church culture at times seems to be more interested in polishing our appearance and our behavior than looking at our heart. We put on our "church" clothes and change the language we use because we are in the church building (or near the pastor). We tell kids not to yell or run in church. But are we preparing our hearts and minds to interact with God?



There is something about seeing ourselves honestly and soberly that helps us be less judgmental of others.



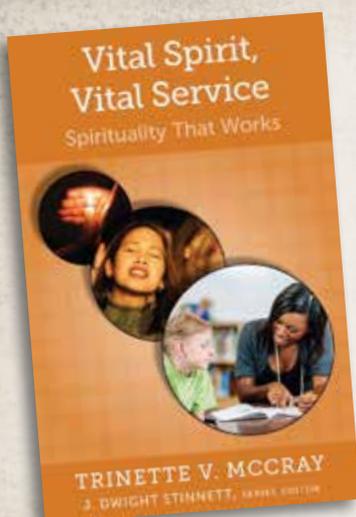
Hosea 6:6 reads, “I desire faithful love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God instead of entirely burned offerings” (CEB). God is not looking for us to be filtered-Photoshop-perfect, Instagram versions of ourselves. He does not want to be invited in only when our house is perfect. God wants to be there with us in the messy living room, kids-running-through-the-house real moments.

We started this month reading the story of Naaman’s receiving healing through unexpected means. He almost missed the work of God because it did not fit his expectations. **Are there people who are leaving the church because of the worthiness expectations we**

have placed on them? What expectations do we need to let go of in order to place the worthiness expectations back in God’s hands? God wants genuine connection. God wants active and faithful participation. *Worthy, worthy, who’s got the worthy?* Only God. And God desires YOU. God wants a relationship with you exactly as you are. Hear God saying, “My Beloved, I am worthy. I will cover you with my grace.”

Note:

1. Robert Alter, “Psalm 15:2 Note,” Essay, in *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, The Writings (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 50.



Vital Spirit, Vital Service: Spirituality that Works

by Trinetta V. McCray; Series Editor J. Dwight Stinnett

In a society where we’re inundated with 24-hour news, unfiltered social media, hundreds of TV channels, and more, McCray urges the people of God to seek a vital spirituality—not a contemplation that withdraws from the world, but a spirituality that inspires us to answer Jesus’ call to service and social justice.

Vital Spirit, Vital Service explores the teachings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King Jr., and Jitsuo Morikawa, and determines seven principles of formation and transformation ministries.

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Closing Prayer

Dear God, you alone are our righteous judge. We are so grateful that you see us through the blood of Jesus—that his sacrifice makes us worthy to fellowship in your presence. Help us to run to you as children to a loving parent. And help us to welcome everyone into your arms. There is enough room at the cross for everyone and an infinite abundance of your love and grace to go around. Amen.

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “There Is Power in the Blood” sung by Alan Jackson: <https://youtu.be/PBqUwpCvCL8>
- “Room at the Cross,” Symphonic Praise 2019 at the Cape Town City Hall 9/15/19: <https://youtu.be/wa8aMSkzE4A?t=2>
- “Here I Am to Worship/The Call” sung by Hillsong Worship: <https://youtu.be/6CKCThJB5w0>
- “We Are One in the Spirit” sung by James Jackson and Chauntelle Hall on Spotify

Baptist Connection

Plan a Zoom conversation with Rev. Salvador Orellana (Salvador.orellana@abhms.org), who leads the Intercultural Leadership Institute for ABHMS. Learning to cross cultural bridges with our neighbors is becoming ever so important as the world shrinks into a global village. Many of our congregations now have new neighbors from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds of varying nationalities. What are the growing edges for your congregation as it comes to being all things to all people in order that you might win some?

Poetry Interpretation

Read the poem *Do It Anyway* by Mother Teresa and discuss how aspects of the poem reflect the words in Psalm 15.

“Do It Anyway”

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered.

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you.

Be honest and sincere anyway.



What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.

Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten.

Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.

Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God.

It was never between you and them anyway.

—Mother Teresa

Media Option

Pastrix by Nadia Bolz-Weber—a book not for the faint of heart. Pastor Nadia tells a raw story of her faith journey as a comedian turned ELCA pastor in a predominately LGBTQ+ congregation. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/17333440-pastrix?ac=1&from_search=true&qid=cUBsKZp6yd&rank=1

Devotional Scriptures Year C Sixth Sunday after Pentecost Week of 07/17/22

Sunday 07/17/22

Amos 8:1-12 and Psalm 52; Genesis 18:1-10a and Psalm 15; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Monday 07/18/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 119:17-32; Amos 7:1-6;

Colossians 1:27-2:7

Complementary: Psalm 119:97-104; Exodus 18:1-12;

Colossians 1:27-2:7

Tuesday 07/19/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 119:17-32; Amos 8:13-9:4;

1 John 2:1-6

Complementary: Psalm 119:97-104; Proverbs 9:1-18;

1 John 2:1-6

Wednesday 07/20/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 119:17-32; Amos 9:5-15;

John 6:41-51

Complementary: Psalm 119:97-104;

Deuteronomy 12:1-12; John 6:41-51

Thursday 07/21/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 85; Hosea 4:1-19; Acts 1:15-20

Complementary: Psalm 138; Esther 2:19-3:6;

Acts 1:15-20

Friday 07/22/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 85; Hosea 5:1-15; Acts 2:22-36

Complementary: Psalm 138; Esther 3:7-15; Acts 2:22-36

Saturday 07/23/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 85; Hosea 1:11-2:15;

Luke 8:22-25

Complementary: Psalm 138; Esther 4:1-17; Luke 8:22-25

To Live in God: Daily Reflections with Walter Rauschenbusch

by Dennis L. Johnson

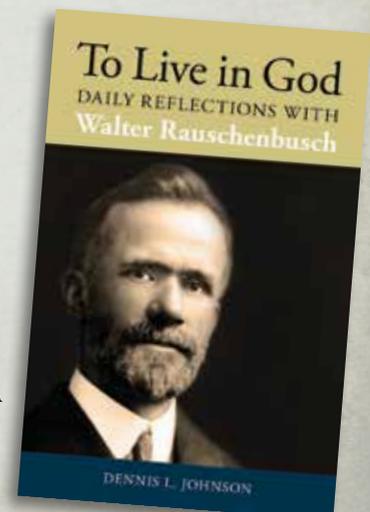
From Walter Rauschenbusch, the founder of the Social Gospel, comes this inspirational collection of 180 daily reflections about the spiritual life.

“Johnson has created a spiritual resource for the ages. Not for the faint of heart who crave only devotional ‘baby formula,’ *To Live in God* invites us to a robust feast of prayer and reflection to strengthen us in courage and compassion for the way of the cross to which Jesus calls us.”

—Rev. Dr. A. Roy Medley, General Secretary Emeritus, American Baptist Churches USA

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CHRISTOCENTRICITY

the one true way

He destroyed the record of the debt we owed, with its requirements that worked against us. He canceled it by nailing it to the cross.

—COLOSSIANS 2:14 (CEB)

Introduction

In January 2015, Lin-Manuel Miranda published a play that would become a pop phenomenon by 2020. Disney released *Hamilton* on Disney+ July 2020. However, Disney originally did not intend to release the live stage filming until October 2021. They chose to move the release date forward because of COVID-19 and Broadway's shutting down for the foreseeable future. *Hamilton* is a Broadway musical focused on Alexander Hamilton and his role in the foundation of America. Miranda told this historical story through contemporary music and a cast predominantly of people of color. Lessons of history have come to life across generations as this unprecedented format has drawn attention from all different groups. Did the story of Alexander Hamilton change because it was portrayed through rap, R&B, and pop music by Black, Latino, and African actors? No, the details of Hamilton's story remained consistent while the audience interested in the story expanded.

For the early church, many voices began adding to the story of Christ and what Christianity meant. But unlike the telling of *Hamilton*, those diverse first-century voices changed the story and revised the history of the new faith. What Miranda did was spectacular in using diversity to tell a true story in such a dynamic way that everyone wanted to hear it. But the Judaizers of Paul's day subverted the truth and shaped the true account of Christ into a fable.

Lesson Objectives

- To build our confidence in the truth of Christ.
- To recognize and remove the extra burdens we have added to the Gospel.
- To get back to the basics as reflected in Christ's teachings.

Colossians 2:6-19 NRSV

6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. 8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy

and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. 11 In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; 12 when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, 14 erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it. 16 Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. 17 These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 18 Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, 19 and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

Into the Scripture

Paul's Penmanship

The Epistle to the Colossians is usually attributed to Paul and his companion Timothy—howbeit some scholars dispute Paul's authorship because of stylistic differences in Colossians when compared to Paul's other letters. Nonetheless, let us approach this Scripture as having been written by Paul, who refers to his imprisonment within the letter. The dating of the missive depends on the location of Paul's imprisonment—possibly Ephesus if in the early to mid 50s, possibly Caesarea if in the late 50s; or Rome if in the early 60s (Acts 24–26; 28:16). While the dating is not completely consequential to understanding the text, it can give insight into Paul's ministry and influences as he composed this letter.

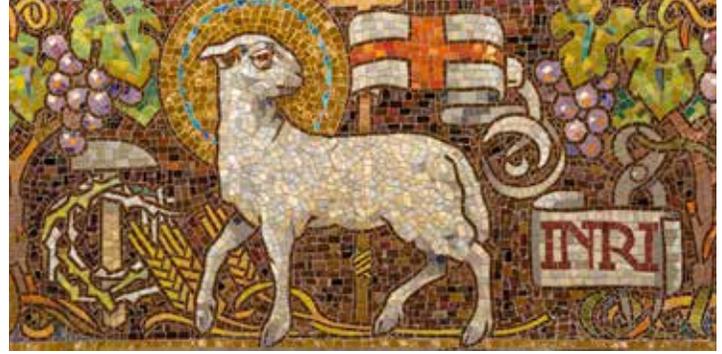
Colossae

The town of Colossae is located in Phrygia in Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey, close to Laodicea and Hierapolis. Paul assumes that the church in Colossae has a relationship



Colossae is located in Phrygia in Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey.

with the church in Laodicea, perhaps even sharing letters (Colossians 2:1). The Colossians have inherited their faith from Paul indirectly. Some scholars debate about the size of this city compared to that of Colossae's neighbors. One scholar would even say, "Without doubt Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul was



addressed.”¹ There is the possibility that the size of Colossae deterred Paul’s visit—for at the point of this letter, Paul had not visited the church in Colossae.

Epaphras, a travelling companion of Paul’s, was the one that first shared the Gospel with Colossae.² It is because of Epaphras that this letter was composed. He brought a report to Paul which causes concern for the faith of this new church.

Culture

While Paul’s ministry contained tension from not only Rome but also a group of Jews whom Paul calls Judaizers, we do not see those particular influences directly impacting the Colossians. It is unclear if the false teachings circulating were from one source or many. The Colossians received teachings from a form of Jewish-inspired Gnosticism that modified the Gospel.

Gnosticism is a heretical belief in the ability to receive special knowledge from God or celestial beings in a way that changes the message of the Gospel. These Gnostics told the Colossians that they needed to be Jewish and perform *special* Jewish practices to receive *special* knowledge about Jesus. These false teachers did not represent Christianity, nor did they represent Judaism—they were a group on their own with a twisted message. Though Paul writes this letter to the Colossians because of the false teachers, he does not imply that they have bent to this tainted message.

Preventative Care

Paul wrote to the Colossians to ensure the stability of their faith. Throughout the letter, Paul takes time to provide a detailed defense against the false teachers.

He makes clear that the Gospel requires no special knowledge or practices outside of belief in Christ. Paul contrasted the ‘philosophy and foolish deception’ that was circulating with specific points concerning our faith:

- Baptism has joined us in death and resurrection with Christ.
- The Cross paid the debt of sin; thus, no additional payments were required.

In contrast, the philosophers, false teachers, or Jewish Gnostics were adding requirements to the Gospel message. Instead of finding the Christian hope only in Christ, these false teachers said hope was found in festivals, rituals, *special* knowledge, and angel worship.

Antibiotics

Paul corrects the false teachings on Christian practice but also provides the antibiotics needed to fight the festering misconceptions about Christ. Some scholars question Paul as the author because of his grand statements about Jesus in this letter compared to other letters. However, Paul’s grand statements seem a fitting contrast to the accusations that Jesus was not really divine or that his actions on the cross accomplished nothing. Some of Paul’s comments include, “The future hope for the whole universe (1:20), and everyone in it (1:27-28), is known in Christ. Freedom



Epaphras was the one that first shared the
Gospel with Colossae.

from enslaving powers (1:16) and transformed lives that please God (3:1-17) are known only in Christ. The death and resurrection of Christ decide the fate of the universe.”³ Thus, Christ is the nexus of all that we believe.

Into the Lesson

Messiah Multivitamin

Paul is fending off not only heresies on Christian practice and salvation but also Christology (beliefs about Christ). The Colossians have a defense against the false teachers and Gnostics trying to sway their beliefs. Knowledge of Jesus, the one true Christ, is all they need. Paul uses the analogy of a body to depict the folly of the false teachers. They are disconnected from the head. “[S]o the body grows with a growth that is from God” (verse 19b, CEB). Everything in our Christian faith is supposed to point back to Christ. Paul outlines how Christian life and practice point towards Christ. “Consequently, the Colossians, who have experienced in Christ spiritual circumcision, death and resurrection via baptism, and forgiveness of transgressions (vv. 11-15), ought neither to succumb to the pressures nor subscribe to the perspectives of those who fail to hold fast to the Head (vv. 16-22).”⁴ While the false teachers wanted to add pounds of pressure, Jesus was shedding the burden of weight. Jesus is more than a multivitamin that sustains our lives. Jesus is the source of our lives.

Added Expectations

Paul’s ministry points back to Jesus and Jesus’ ministry points to God’s original design for creation. The Gospels portray the legal experts, Pharisees, and Sadducees as full of pride in their proficient display of faithfulness to the Law. With self-importance, these Gospel characters look down on their fellow Jews and especially Gentiles. By the time of Jesus, the burden of the Torah was becoming unbearable. How could anyone ever be worthy of God’s love, nonetheless worthy enough to enter God’s presence? This passage reminds us of Psalm 15. And these false teachers are adding requirements to an already exhausting list? *Enter Jesus, the Messiah and Great Burden Lifter*: Jesus simplified the Law of Moses to two commands: love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:25-37).

This month, we have learned that Jesus’ gradebook is not about fancy clothes, law-abiding believers, or ritual cleanliness. Jesus’ rubric for eternal life was and is to love God and love people. Jesus has not only simplified the rubric, but he has also curved the grades.

Into Discipleship

Salt of the Earth or Just Salty?

Our natural train of thought for Colossians 2 may put us in the place of the church in Colossae—*Build up your defenses!* Know the Bible! Protect yourself from wayward teachers! This appears to be the common operative for churches in America. We claim persecution when we meet someone with differing views of faith practices, especially in public spaces.

An extreme example of this would be Westboro Baptist Church. They are more known for their protests at soldiers’ funerals than sharing the love of Christ with their community. Consider for a moment placing yourself in the shoes of the false teachers.

Shedding Pounds

As we reflect on the requirements we have added to Christianity, we can also take time to consider what was handed down to us. The majority of Americans carry a couple extra pounds, but what about extra religious weight that God never planned for us to carry? Church seekers frequently will look on a church website



Jesus’ rubric for eternal life was and is to love God and love people.



in order to find out what written or unwritten rules are part of that particular congregation's culture:

- Can you wear jeans or flip flops to church?
- Can you bring coffee into the sanctuary?
- Is my child welcome to wiggle and worship alongside adults?
- Does the church have a preferred translation of Scripture?
- What are the church's thoughts on LGBTQ+ individuals?

Some of these stipulations have more serious connotations than others, but they all make the same point: we place added expectations on fellow Christians that make Christianity too big of a burden to bear.

Time to Diet

Let us release the added burdens—burdens we have picked up along our journey and burdens that have been added to our shoulders by others. The church needs to turn back to Christ and leave questions of worthiness or redemption to God. We must ensure that we are truly pointing towards Christ and not missing

the point by claiming persecution when our comfort zone changes.

A trivial example would be the uproar from the Christian community over the design of Starbucks holiday cups. Starbucks redesigns their holiday cups each year. One particular year, snowmen and Christmas trees were absent from the design, and Christians exclaimed Starbucks was taking Christ out of Christmas.

The Starbucks holiday cup fiasco reveals that Christians are clinging to the wrong things as symbols of our faith. Our faith is not in a red disposable coffee cup with a cute reindeer design. Our faith is in Jesus Christ.

Notes:

1. J. B. Lightfoot, Essay, in *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon: A Revised Text with Introductions, Notes and Dissertations* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 16.
2. Tremper Longman III and David E Garland, eds., Essay, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, revised ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 266.
3. J. R. Daniel Kirk, "Colossians: Introduction," Essay, in *The CEB Study Bible*, edited by Joel B. Green, 382 NT (Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2018).
4. Tremper Longman III and David E Garland, eds., "On Living in Christ and Avoiding Captivity Through 'Philosophy' (2:6-3:4)," Essay, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord, we celebrate that in Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead body and that we are complete in him! We thank you for his power that gives him authority over all creation in heaven above and on the earth below. We thank you for his grace that welcomes us into eternal fellowship as we commune with you through the Holy Spirit. Help us to hold fast to the teachings of Jesus and be authentic disciples, living out his words and commands. We want to be true. Amen.

Reflection Questions

- Are we aiding in the church's death by the requirements we add?
- How could we be adding requirements, expectations, or checkpoints to Christianity? Have we created a form of Christianity that is impossible for new believers to follow with the added weight of our expectations?

- What expectations are you putting on worship?
- When looking globally, do American Christians really know persecution?

Resources

Songs to Consider

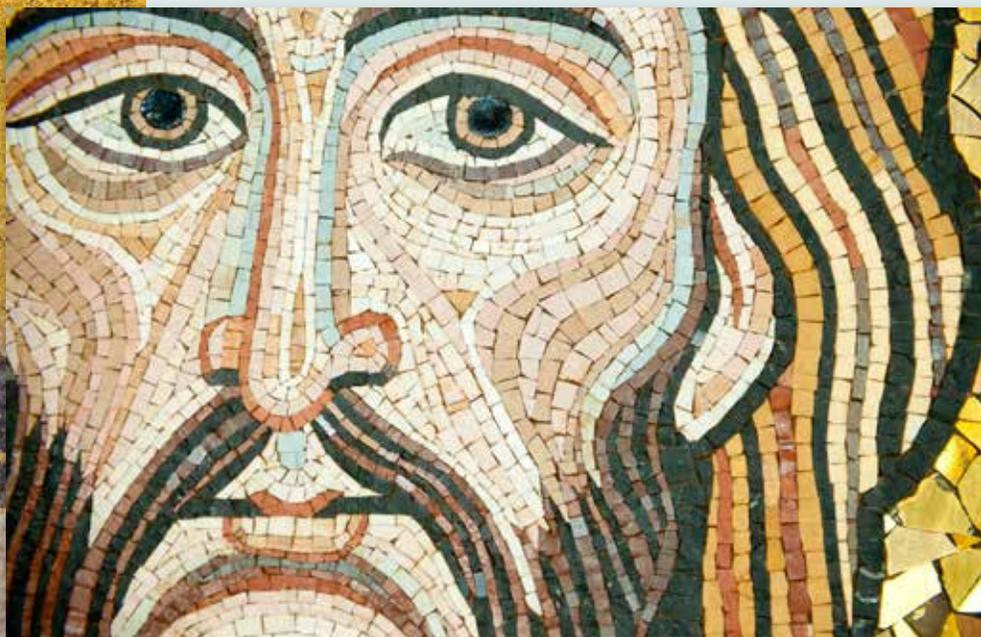
- "How Firm a Foundation" sung by Hymns of the People: <https://youtu.be/i8ggmPVZQKQ>
- "The Church's One Foundation" sung by Northern Baptist Association: <https://youtu.be/jotNbcFelX4?t=1>

Baptist Connection

Who We Are: As Baptists, we have a strong rich heritage that undergirds why we practice our faith within our particular denomination. Visit <https://www.abc-usa.org/what-we-believe/> and discuss our American Baptist distinctives and why they are important to the way we live out our Christian witness. What difference does being an American Baptist make in your life?

Come Out of Your Comfort Zone

- The Colossians faced a temptation to either listen to the surrounding voices that were adding false details to the Gospel or stick to the message they originally received from Epaphras. As you discuss this passage, consider how our preferences and biases can affect how we interpret and present the Gospel. What are the greatest challenges today



to living the Scripture, even to the extent of being challenged to come out of our comfort zones?

- Have coffee, soda, or tea with a friend who thinks, votes, loves, or worships differently from you. Spend time with this person with the intent to see them through God's eyes. Your goal is not to change their mind but to listen with cultural humility, seeking to understand why they feel the way that they do.

Media Option

Cultural Humility: In these times of political polarization, it is important for us as Christians to be able to engage in meaningful dialogue with persons from diverse backgrounds. There are several tenets of cultural humility that we can apply to how we engage others and promote healthy, meaningful conversation. Two socio-healthcare professionals, Dr. Melanie Tervalon and Dr. Jann Murray-Garcia, coined the term and fleshed out the corresponding tenets. View this short video that is an overview of what it means to exercise cultural humility. If you are interested, there are many more videos that pursue the topic in greater depth. Cultural humility is a path we can all use to strengthen our relationships and understanding of one another. https://youtu.be/_Mbu8bvKb_U

Devotional Scriptures

Year C Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Week of 07/24/22

Sunday 07/24/22

Hosea 1:2-10 and Psalm 85; Genesis 18:20-32 and Psalm 138; Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19); Luke 11:1-13

Monday 07/25/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 44; Hosea 2:14-3:5; Colossians 2:16-3:1
Complementary: Psalm 55:16-23; Esther 5:1-14; Colossians 2:16-3:1

Tuesday 07/26/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 44; Hosea 6:1-10; Romans 9:30-10:4
Complementary: Psalm 55:16-23; Esther 6:1-7:6; Romans 9:30-10:4

Wednesday 07/27/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 44; Hosea 6:11-7:16; Matthew 5:43-48
Complementary: Psalm 55:16-23; Esther 7:7-8:17; Matthew 5:43-48

Thursday 07/28/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Hosea 8:1-14; Romans 11:33-36
Complementary: Psalm 49:1-12; Proverbs 23:1-11; Romans 11:33-36

Friday 07/29/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Hosea 9:1-17; Ephesians 4:17-24
Complementary: Psalm 49:1-12; Proverbs 24:1-12; Ephesians 4:17-24

Saturday 07/30/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Hosea 10:1-15; Mark 10:17-22
Complementary: Psalm 49:1-12; Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; Mark 10:17-22

To Live in God: Daily Reflections with Walter Rauschenbusch

by Dennis L. Johnson

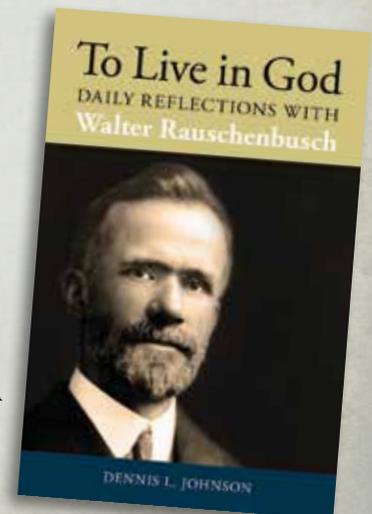
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PROVISION

scared of scarcity

And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

—LUKE 12:15

Introduction

The BBC Masterpiece show *Victoria* is a beautiful dramatization of Queen Victoria in her early years as monarch. In each episode, Victoria grows in confidence as a queen and increases in wisdom and awareness of the world. “Faith, Hope, & Charity” is an episode that depicts the Irish Potato Famine when Queen Victoria has to wrestle with the government to find solutions. The Prime Minister and Parliament feared that aid to the Irish would show a partiality. Parliament’s hesitation and inactivity led to one million Irish deaths and more than one million Irish people immigrating to America. Millions of Irish suffered because of the Irish Potato Famine. Unfortunately, immigrating to the United States did not solve all the problems for the Irish. They may have had food here but, in addition, they faced extreme racism, prejudice, and inequality. The fear of scarcity can make people do foolish things even when there is enough to share. This lesson challenges us as Christians to lead the way in showing generosity to all and trusting that God can make up the difference.

Lesson Objectives

- To recognize our own fears, insecurities, or anxieties connected to ministry.
- To ask questions about cultural norms.
- To stand up for the vulnerable, even at risk to ourselves.

Luke 12:13-21 NRSV

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” 14 But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” 15 And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” 16 Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ 18 Then he said, ‘I

will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ 20 But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Into the Scripture

The Rabbi Is In

Jesus and his disciples have been travelling, teaching, casting out demons, and healing people on his way toward Jerusalem. Crowds formed everywhere Jesus went. Some came for entertainment and some because of miracles and genuine faith. Until this point, Jesus’ ministry was predominantly around Galilee, but now Jesus was expanding his ministry as he traveled toward Jerusalem. In today’s Scripture, Jesus is in a crowd teaching and a young man approaches the crowd and asks a question in front of everyone. When you think about this episode it almost feels like getting public opinion on private family affairs. Shall we post our family disputes on Facebook and let our audience be

the judge? This man asks a public question about a private matter. Though Jesus responds to the man, Jesus’ full response is to the crowd.

Barns and Bank Accounts

On the surface, it looks like Jesus is chiding the little brother for desiring an inheritance. “Man, who appointed me as judge or referee between you and your brother?” (verse 14, CEB). But then Jesus turns to the crowd and teaches a lesson on greed and materialism. Jesus uses language about farming and storehouses to discuss these issues of life—wealth and scarcity. Luke sandwiched this parable



We can trust that
God will provide for
God’s children.

about greed between two lessons on trusting in God. Jesus has just told the crowd that if God will provide for sparrows, then we can trust that God will provide for God’s children. After this passage, Jesus will continue by pointing to ravens and lilies. Jesus is not only fighting off greed through this parable but also fighting anxiety. Jesus is using a series of teachings to encourage the audience to depend on God.

This young man has interrupted a lesson on dependence on God with a question about inheritance. Is this young man off base or could this be a question rooted in God’s character? What does Jesus’ answer say about the type of Messiah that Jesus was versus what the crowd may have initially thought of him?

- Is Jesus a miracle worker like Elisha?
- Is Jesus a judge like Deborah?
- Is Jesus a wise king like Solomon?
- Or is Jesus the Messiah they have been waiting for?





The surrounding lessons together with this parable give hints to how God would order the world. Remember the Exodus? God provided manna and quail for the Israelites as they wandered in the desert. They could never gather too much. And what they did gather was always enough. God would resolve the imbalance of scarcity and excess. The young man's question seems expectant of Jesus to deliver justice.

Into the Lesson

The Real Problem

Based on the context of the parable, one would assume that Jesus is speaking through this story to the younger brother about his financial situation. Tradition has taught us from this angle for decades if not centuries—Jesus gives the young man a moral bedtime story about materialism: *God will provide*. This perspective is incomplete because it assumes that only the poor could benefit from lessons on scarcity, anxiety, and materialism. Could not wealthy people also benefit from hearing words about reliance on God? There are two sides to every story and there are two sides to Jesus' lesson: the lesson for the poor and the lesson for the rich. Could Jesus possibly be fighting the system that makes younger siblings vulnerable and protects the firstborn son?

Blessed Are the Poor

Throughout Scripture, God consistently protects the vulnerable and chooses the unlikely to serve God's purpose. So perhaps the most common interpretation of this parable is not complete without additional perspectives. What if, instead, Jesus is challenging the system?

We do not know the circumstance that led this young man to speak out. We do not know about his father or mother or any details about his brother, except that he is older and will inherit the family wealth. We assume that the older brother is following the customs for inheritance and not thinking of his brother's well-being. The older brother is following the status quo. The younger brother wants his family to break customs so that he may receive material wealth and stability. Therefore, he turns to Jesus for help.

Justice League Jesus

Though Jesus' direct response to the young man is a statement about not being a judge or referee, Jesus responds by talking about greed. Jesus focuses on the very system that everyone listening perpetuates—which makes younger siblings, women, widows, etc., vulnerable. The cultural system of inheritance does not really fit with the essence of Torah. Torah calls for protecting the vulnerable, the poor, and the destitute. Inheritance was supposed to be a responsibility to care for the vulnerable. God gave Adam and Eve dominion over the earth not to bleed its resources dry for their entertainment but to be stewards, providing stability, protection, and nurturing care.

We do not have all the details of this family's affairs. This young man may have been greedy like the prodigal



Torah calls for protecting the vulnerable, the poor,
and the destitute.

son, who demanded his inheritance early and squandered it on extravagance (Luke 15:11-32), or this young man could be pointing to an unjust system and looking for a liberator.

Into Discipleship

Churches, Memorials, and Endowments

One of the biggest struggles a church may ever experience is receiving a large sum of money. What originally seems like a blessing can quickly become a curse in a game of greed. Surplus tends to bring out our fears of scarcity. Ministry is at risk of failure when a fear of enough is present. Ministries die under the ruse of scarcity. We do not have enough—time, volunteers, money, safety. Is there enough room in the budget? Does God have enough love? Is there enough room in Heaven for everyone?

Shifting the Narrative

If we can push past ourselves and set our focus back on Christ, we have a chance of providing justice. The church's default justice ministry has looked like short-term mission trips to a third-world country or a poor neighborhood in which to paint a house or build a church. While short-term mission trips can deliver justice, more frequently they are providing the participants with great photos for their Instagram. Consider small, local, long-term ministry efforts that through their consistency can have major impact. Sometimes there are little things we know that we can do, yet we overlook them while complaining about not being able to do the big things. But when we are faithful with the little, then God can give us more resources and more opportunities to be a blessing.

There was a church with a large building and a very small elderly congregation. The building needed work, including a new roof. They received insurance money that would cover the cost. However, they went for years without spending it because having a little money in the bank made them feel secure. Meanwhile, the roof continued to leak (into the sanctuary). When a new pastor convinced them to get a new roof, they also had to pay for replacing rotted wood and the interior damage to the sanctuary. In addition, instead of spending what was needed on a new furnace, they had attempted to cut



Surplus tends to bring out
our fears of scarcity.

corners with a bargain-priced one that ended up giving them issues and no heat for the next two years. Sometimes, a scarcity mentality can cost you more than simply paying for what you need and trusting that God can and will provide. A congregation can be so paralyzed by a scarcity mentality to the point that it lives myopically in fear. Their goal is survival, not growth or thriving. That type of thinking lacks faith and may expand their survival days for the few who remain but does nothing to invest in the church's ministry efforts that can draw many to become a part of their fellowship. In God, there are no shortage of resources.

Center for Student Missions (CSM) is a mission organization fighting the typical short-term mission routine. They plug mission groups in with active ministries in the area. Your service helps with the ongoing care of a community, not just painting a fence. On top of supporting local ministries, CSM also provides education for the participants in the communities they serve. For example, if you traveled to Chicago, you would have a morning volunteer responsibility and then an afternoon educational activity along with an ethnic supper matching the demographic you served. Sometimes that could include small groups' taking the subway, meeting a homeless person, and inviting them to eat supper with you. For many, the idea of a meal with a homeless person is terrifying at first. *What if they are mentally unstable? What if they try to rob me or hurt me? Am I safe?*

But spending time with different populations helps us all to have a more realistic understanding of what people are going through. We can begin to see them as our brothers and our sisters. We can see God in them,



and hopefully, they can see God in us. We have to be careful that our fears do not hold us back from being God's hands and feet in this world.

Justice Ministry

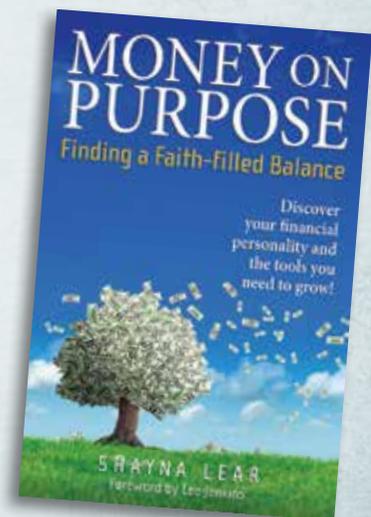
In today's Scripture, we do not learn what else happens in the young man's story. Jesus does not solve the young man's inheritance problems, nor does Jesus immediately break the system of poverty. God wants to use us to continue ushering in his kingdom and breaking down

systems of oppression and inequality. Thinking of the Lord's Prayer, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," in what ways can we as individuals and congregations help usher in the age of Jesus' justice? Jesus is not calling us into our comfort zone. Jesus is calling us into ministry. When Jesus sent out his disciples to prepare towns for his arrival, he told them not to take extra clothes or even a walking stick (Luke 9:1-6). They were to expect God to provide for them each step of the way.

Money on Purpose: Finding a Faith-Filled Balance

by Shayna Lear

Are you a Saver, Spender, Giver, or Investor? Financial advisor and minister Shayna Lear presents a quiz to help you discover your own financial type and offers practical and faithful strategies to restore a healthy and faith-filled balance to your financial life.



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Closing Prayer

Dear God, the earth is yours and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein. Help us to rely on you as a faithful parent. You have promised to provide for our every need as we need it. Help us to patiently wait on you, and when you have blessed us, help us to be generous in blessing others—knowing that the well shall never run dry. In you, there is no shortage of resources. Give us your wisdom and counsel to be conscientious stewards of all that you provide. Amen.

Reflection Questions

- How often do we follow the status quo and never ask questions about if this is the right course of action? Could things be different, better? Paul calls Jesus our liberator. Jesus has set us free from the bondage of sin. How do finances have anything to do with liberation from sin? How would liberation change the way we approach our finances?



- What things do you worry will run out: Is there enough _____? What are the things that hold your congregation back from ministry?
- How can we learn to trust God more in our private lives and in our congregations?
- Are there any diverse demographic groups that are relatively new to your neighborhood to whom you can reach out and show God’s hospitality?
- Can we today summon the courage to step into the mission field so boldly?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Waymaker” sung by Michael W. Smith (featuring Vanessa Campagna and Madelyn Berry): https://youtu.be/SE_M9noEhNE
- “The Lord Is My Shepherd” sung by Keith Green: <https://youtu.be/MFLRMWICOow?t=2>
- “It is Well with My Soul” sung by Chris Rice: <https://youtu.be/9HLyhEdh92E?t=2>

Baptist Connections

- Edna Martin Christian Center: <https://ednamartincc.org/>. The mission of the Edna Martin Christian Center is to bridge cultural, racial, and economic differences in order to support and nurture the people in the community by providing holistic programs that empower, encourage, and engender a vision of hope.
- In Support of Excellence and the Center for Continuous Learning (<https://ccl.ministrelife.org/>) has a multitude of resources for individuals and congregations seeking their next level in service. Discuss the resources that are available and revisit the site as it continues to be expanded.

It’s a Family Affair

- America—inheritance of wealth, land, or property—is a privilege of the middle and upper classes. No one is guaranteed material inheritance from their ancestors. However, inheritance of knowledge is often an under-acknowledged gift. Whose knowledge or

wisdom could you inherit? Were there any special areas of knowledge your family shared with newer generations—any legacies of learning that your family passes down?

- Read about other sibling disputes in Scripture and discuss how the themes of abundance, scarcity, and inheritance are reflected in these stories.
 - Cain and Abel – Genesis 4
 - Jacob and Esau – Genesis 25:19-33:17
 - Joseph and brothers – Genesis 29:14-24; 35:16-21; 37; 39–45

Devotional Scriptures

Year C Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Week of 07/31/22

Sunday 07/31/22

Hosea 11:1-11 and Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23 and Psalm 49:1-12; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

Monday 08/01/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 60; Hosea 11:12–12:14; Colossians 3:18–4:1
 Complementary: Psalm 127; Ecclesiastes 2:1-17; Colossians 3:18–4:1

Tuesday 08/02/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 60; Hosea 13:1-16; Colossians 4:2-6
 Complementary: Psalm 127; Ecclesiastes 3:16–4:8; Colossians 4:2-6

Wednesday 08/03/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 60; Hosea 14:1-9; Luke 12:22-31
 Complementary: Psalm 127; Ecclesiastes 12:1-8, 13-14; Luke 12:22-31

Thursday 08/04/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23; Isaiah 9:8-17; Romans 9:1-9
 Complementary: Psalm 33:12-22; Job 21:1-16; Romans 9:1-9

Friday 08/05/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23; Isaiah 9:18–10:4; Acts 7:1-8
 Complementary: Psalm 33:12-22; Ecclesiastes 6:1-6; Acts 7:1-8

Saturday 08/06/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23; Isaiah 1:2-9, 21-23; Matthew 6:19-24
 Complementary: Psalm 33:12-22; Genesis 11:27-32; Matthew 6:19-24



God wants to use us to continue ushering
 in his kingdom and breaking down systems of
 oppression and inequality.

EXPECTATION

journeying in faith

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.

—HEBREWS 11:1

Introduction

Our lives are journeys in faith in which we do not always have a glimpse of the destination. Like Abraham and Sarah, we are also “strangers and foreigners on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13b) on our journey to the home God has prepared for us. How do we find our way? By looking to the accounts of our ancestors in the Scriptures, stories, and people we know and trust. Leaning on the foundation of our faith, we may become open to different understandings and interpretations from others. Our own faith can grow stronger when we learn from those who differ from us.

Lesson Objectives

- To explore the concept of faith as a journey with questions, rather than a destination with a set of answers.
- To understand how Christian interpretations of Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish practices can at times be problematic without careful reading and understanding.
- To know that our faith is our foundation, looking to our ancestors for inspiration, to continue this journey to learn and grow in our relationship with God.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 NRSV

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. . . . 8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was

too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” 13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Into the Scripture

A Sermon or a Letter?

Hebrews is the first of the “General Epistles” in the New Testament, letters that were not written by Paul or one of his companions, and whose audience is unknown. The title “Hebrews” does not mean it is to all Hebrew people, but most likely Jewish followers of Jesus. The author assumes the readers know who Abraham and Sarah are, among other figures such as Cain and Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah’s descendants, the heroes of Judges, and many others.

While this is grouped with the Epistles, it reads more like a sermon, addressing the concerns of the next generation of believers of Jesus, for whom the promised return of Christ has stretched on, leading to doubts and misunderstandings of Jesus’s role on earth. The main argument in Hebrews, laid out in chapters 4–10, is that Jesus is both the high priest and the atoning sacrifice for sins. Jesus is our priest

forever, interceding on behalf of humanity, and there is no more need for sacrifice. In Jesus, we have a new covenant with God, and we must keep the faith.

However, despite the sermonic quality, the end of Hebrews contains personal appeals for prayer. There



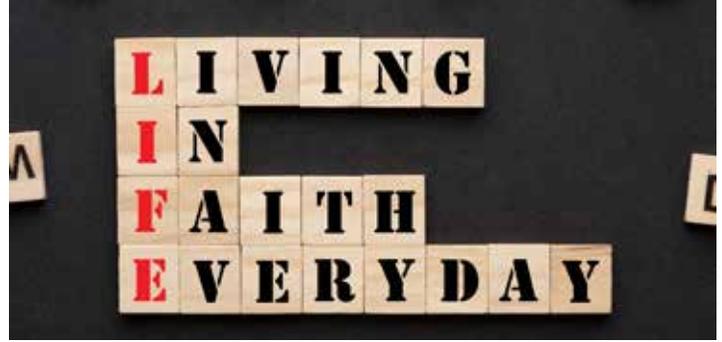
Faith can grow stronger
when we learn from those
who differ from us.

is also mention of Timothy, one of the early leaders of the church, and an inclusion of “Those from Italy send you greetings” (Hebrews 13:24b), suggesting the letter’s origin in Rome. For all its preaching, Hebrews at least ends like many of the other letters in the New Testament, hence its inclusion among the Epistles.

Beginning and Ending

Hebrews begins with “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Hebrews 1:1-2a). Chapters 1–3 speak to what struggles our ancestors went through up until the time of Jesus. Chapter 3 ends with a focus on the people in the wilderness with Moses.





While God had made a covenant with the people, the people disobeyed and rebelled against God and Moses' leadership in that time of waiting. However, there are ancestors worthy of mention, whose lives are examples of what it means to keep the faith while waiting. The aforementioned chapters 4–10 speak of the work of Jesus on earth, but chapter 11 returns to the faith of our ancestors. In this way, chapters 1–3 and chapters 11–13 bookend the sermon: Jesus was faithful in the way Moses was faithful, and believers have a choice—to be faithful to God in their waiting, or rebellious in their impatience.

A Word of Caution

Because the central argument of Hebrews is that Jesus not only is our high priest and sacrifice, but also ended the need for the sacrificial worship, Hebrews has long been interpreted in supersessionist ways.¹ Supersessionism is the idea that Christianity replaces Judaism, sometimes to the extreme that everything in the “Old Testament” is no longer relevant. However, due to the emphasis on the ancestors of the faith, the writer of Hebrews does not intend to do away with the Hebrew Scriptures, including the prophets and the Torah. Rather, Hebrews offers an interpretation of Jesus' work on earth for those who believe and follow Jesus.

Nonetheless, Christian readers must be careful to understand that Judaism offers explanations and understandings beyond Temple worship, for in 70 C.E. the Romans destroyed the Temple, bringing an end to that form of worship. Judaism and Christianity have both evolved in two thousand years, and Christians would do well to read carefully where the writer of Hebrews is critical of Jewish practice. Regarding chapter 11 on heroic ancestors, both Jews and Christians regard Abraham,

Sarah, and their descendants as worthy examples to be exemplified in their faith in God, for a future hope.

Into the Lesson

The lesson is split into two parts: 11:1-3 wraps up the author's main argument and steers toward its conclusion: to remain faithful to Jesus' teachings and the assurance of Christ's return. The writer defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” As the first generation of believers passed away, the second generation had to hold on to promises passed on to them of Jesus' return. The certainty of God's promises to their ancestors is the anchor of faith for the second generation of believers in Jesus. This certainty is not something that is tangible proof, such as evidence in a courtroom. Instead, it is the faith that assures us what we know in our hearts of God's love through Jesus is true. This is how we understand how all of creation was made, from Genesis 1:1, when God created out of nothing. For readers in the twenty-first century, this does not negate all of what we know in science—and what we do not know—about the creation of the universe.

Abraham and Sarah

Models of Faith: Verses 8-16 focus on the example of the ancestors Abraham and Sarah, who left the home of their father and traveled to a land God promised them, even though they did not know where they were going. Though



It is the faith that assures us what we know
in our hearts of God's love.

God promised them that their descendants would be more numerous than the stars or grains of sand on the beach (verse 12), they gave birth only to one son, Isaac, and in their old age. They did not see the fulfillment of this promise in their lifetime, but those who were hearing or reading these words would understand how God had fulfilled that promise through Sarah and Abraham's descendants. This example shows the endurance of faith beyond the lifetime of the first generation of believers: God began fulfilling the promises made to their ancestors long ago and will complete the promise in the future.

Though Abraham and Sarah lived in tents, traveling from one place to another, the author of Hebrews writes of the city of Jerusalem in verse 10. Jerusalem, as these early Christians knew it—even as King David a thousand years before knew it—did not exist in Sarah and Abraham's time. It was known as Jebus, where the Jebusites dwelled. The writer links Abraham and Sarah's journey as travelers from their father's land to a future where their descendants will live in a glorious city, a city identified with the people—and in King Solomon's time, where the temple of God would be built. The prophets and other writers in the Hebrew Scriptures saw Jerusalem as a metaphor for the heavenly realm of God, and Christian writers such as John of Patmos believed that there will be a new Jerusalem along with the new heaven and new earth when God's reign is complete (Revelation 21:1-2).

Earth and Heaven

Digging deeper, in verses 13-16, the writer explores Sarah and Abraham's identities as "strangers in a strange land." Even though this was the home God had promised for them, they still identified as foreigners, not quite belonging. The writer of Hebrews uses this identity as an example of how faithful believers do not belong to this world, but to the kingdom of heaven God has promised. Abraham and Sarah never longed to go back to where they came from, but even when they arrived at the place God promised them, the journey was not complete.

The author of Hebrews understands God to have promised all believers an eternal home with God. Our dwelling in this world, like Sarah and Abraham living in tents, is only temporary. Our eternal home is in the reign of God, which has drawn near, according to Jesus (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15; Luke 10:9-11). Scholars call this the "already, not yet" concept of the kingdom or reign of God. While we wait for the fulfillment of God's



“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for.”

reign, we are already participating in it on earth. It is not complete, but we have a glimpse of it now.

Into Discipleship

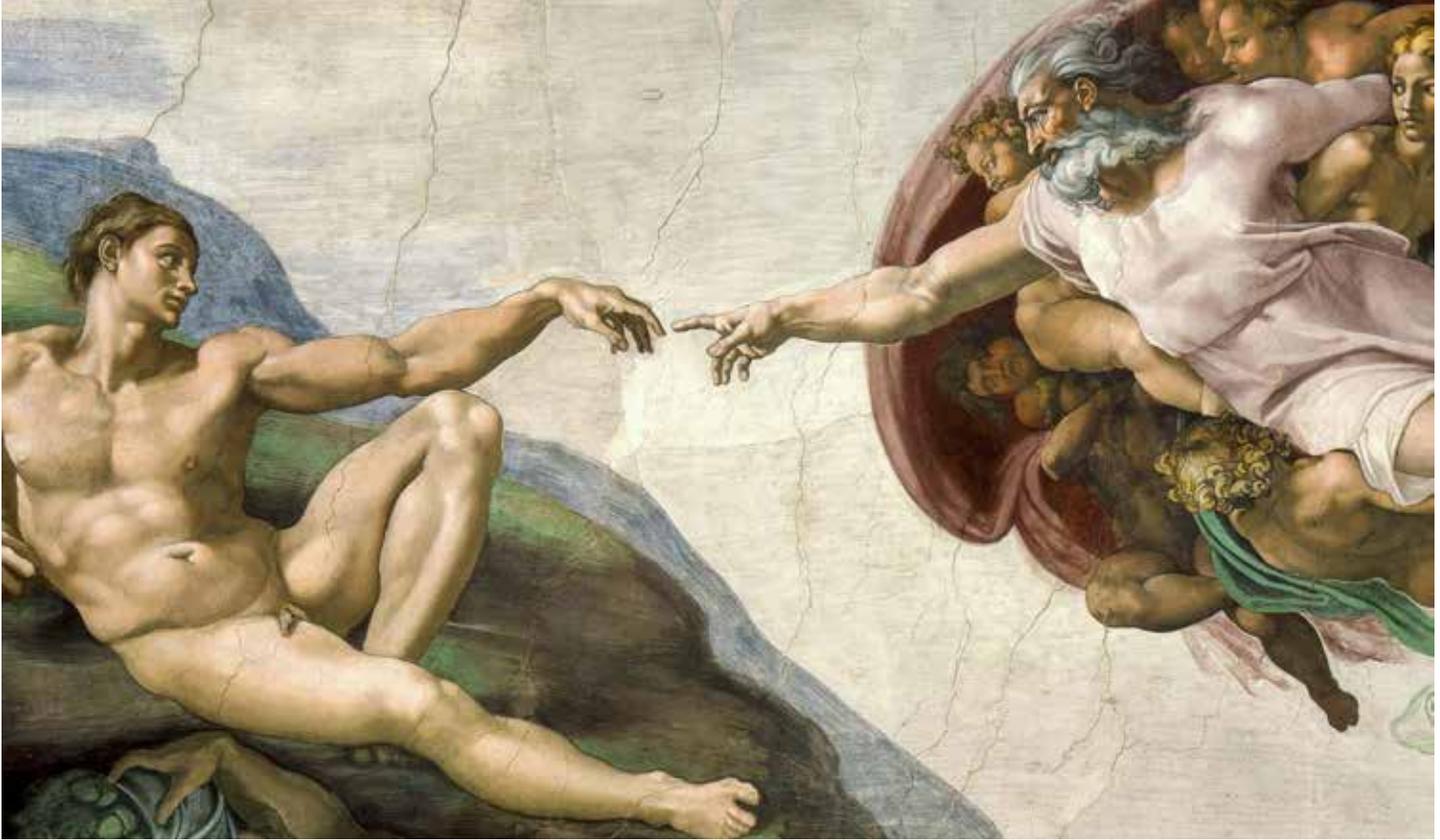
Holy Waiting

As Christians, we have waited for two thousand years for the fulfillment of what the Gospel writers wrote of Christ's return (Matthew 24:29-31; Mark 13:24-27; Luke 21:25-28). Many people have looked to earthquakes and other natural disasters, along with government collapses as signs of the end times, but perhaps we are waiting for the wrong thing, and in the wrong way. The author of Hebrews teaches us that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for.” While we still wait for the fulfillment of Christ's reign and Christ's return, in this “already, not yet” understanding we are participating in the reign of Christ now on earth.

We do so when we live out our faith. Waiting in faith is not a passive but an active waiting. In the Christian liturgical calendar, Advent is the season that reminds us that while we wait each year to celebrate the birth of Christ, we are actively watching and waiting for signs of Christ's return to our world and our lives in new ways. We do this by participating in the work of justice and mercy on earth.

Finding Inspiration in the Scriptures from Over the Centuries

Both the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and Christian Scriptures (New Testament) share examples with us of faithful people who lived into God's ways, while not seeing all the promises come to fulfillment—the example in this letter of Sarah and Abraham being a prime one.



We can appreciate these stories of our ancestors of the faith without assuming they understood the fulfillment of God's promises to them in the same way we understand Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise to us.

This is important to remember. Abraham and Sarah hoped for descendants to which to pass on their property and inheritance (Genesis 15:1-6). Later, their descendants understood the fulfillment of the promises to Sarah and Abraham as the land promised by God and their identity as God's people (Genesis 17:1-7). For the writer of Hebrews, the fulfillment is a homeland (11:14-16), an eternal, heavenly home with God.

However, the concept of resurrection of the dead, and even the view of a heavenly Jerusalem, was not understood in the time of Abraham and Sarah nor in the time the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) was composed. The author of Hebrews writes of Jesus as "the mediator of a new covenant" (9:15), and while the author draws on the prophet Jeremiah's vision of a new covenant with God, it is not the same. The new covenant in Hebrews refers to the death of Jesus that redeems us, interpreting the language of covenant and sacrifice through the lens of Jesus, rather than the covenantal language of the Hebrew Scriptures. The first step in engaging interfaith dialogue and living in a multi-faith world is recognizing that we are interpreting through different lenses what we have been taught and what we have experienced.

The Tension of Holding Space for Multiple Views

As Christians in a multi-faith, multicultural world, we know that at times our views and understandings of all the Scriptures may come into conflict with the beliefs of others. This lesson challenges us to wait for the fulfillment of God's promises, while also understanding that our view of God's promises through the lens of Jesus Christ is different than the view of our Jewish siblings, though we worship the same God and have the same ancestors of faith. Abraham and Sarah are also important figures in Islam, and as the Abrahamic faiths, we have much in common, though we have different views.

It is far too easy to accept that we have the correct view and others are incorrect. Instead, if we have the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen, we have a firm foundation. Our faith in Christ roots us as we explore the different understandings of our Jewish and Muslim siblings of how God has fulfilled the promises made to all our ancestors, knowing that we are on a journey in which we still have not reached our destination.

Note:

1. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2017), 461.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, we are grateful for Jesus who is our high priest, our Lord and Savior. He is the express image of your person and is perfect in every way. Give us steadfastness as we travel up the King's highway. We need your guidance, your patience and strength. We draw encouragement from the saints that have gone on before us. Every day we look to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. To Christ be glory forever. Amen.

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Old Ship of Zion” sung by Bishop G. E. Patterson: <https://youtu.be/QSFwkCVa1xE?t=11>
- “Highway” sung by Tramaine Hawkins: <https://youtu.be/oRm9MBelACI?t=1>
- “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name” sung by Oasis Worship: <https://youtu.be/60gyjEaBtII?t=2>



Baptist Connections

- **The American Baptist Historical Society (ABHS)** is a treasure trove of interesting stories and accounts of our ancestors of this faith tradition. Take time to peruse the website and get a sense of the richness of the information there. You will not be able to stop reading. <http://abhsarchives.org/>
- Rosalie Hall Hunt’s **Bless God and Take Courage: The Judson History and Legacy** (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2005) is an engaging and in-depth tale of the people whose vocation led to the birth of American missions—this well researched book documents the Judson legacy.
- Jeffrey D. Jones’ **Keepers of the Faith: Illustrated Biographies from Baptist History** (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999) contains one-page stories of eighty important Baptists told through captioned illustrations.

Media Options

For Further Reading

- *The Bible with and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Harper One).
- *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, Second Edition*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine (Oxford University Press USA). There are many excellent articles and essays provided in this edition along with explanatory notes.

Activity Ideas

- **What has your journey of faith looked like so far? Draw a “Faith Journey Map.”**
 - What have been your mountaintop experiences, places where you have known and experienced God in fullness and joy?
 - What have been your “Valley of the Shadow” experiences, where you have been afraid, felt lonely, or experienced death drawing near?
 - What have been your “Still Waters and Green Pastures,” where you have experienced God’s faithfulness and compassion? Perhaps there are bridges you have crossed, walls you have faced, or other metaphors for your faith journey.

- Use colored pencils and large sheets of paper. It may be helpful to write out a list of experiences that come to mind: first time at church, baptisms, youth group, church camp experiences, small groups, worship experiences, funerals, along with life experiences such as broken friendships and new friends, beginning high school, going to college, starting a new job, etc.

- With that list, what metaphors come to mind for each event, such as mountains, valleys, rivers, etc.?

■ **Arrange a visit with a local synagogue** or invite a rabbi to come and speak to your group to share about Judaism and Jewish practices. Do the same with a local mosque and imam. You might also consider asking them to share their understanding of who Abraham and Sarah are in their holy texts, teachings, and traditions.

Devotional Scriptures

Year C Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Week of 08/07/22

Sunday 08/07/22

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 and Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23;
Genesis 15:1-6 and Psalm 33:12-22; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

Monday 08/08/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 11; Isaiah 2:1-4; Hebrews 11:1-7

Complementary: Psalm 89:1-18; 2 Chronicles 33:1-17; Hebrews 11:1-7

Tuesday 08/09/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 11; Isaiah 24:1-13; Hebrews 11:17-28
Complementary: Psalm 89:1-18; 2 Chronicles 34:22-33; Hebrews 11:17-28

Wednesday 08/10/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 11; Isaiah 24:14-23; Luke 12:41-48
Complementary: Psalm 89:1-18; Jeremiah 33:14-26; Luke 12:41-48

Thursday 08/11/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19; Isaiah 2:5-11; Hebrews 10:26-31
Complementary: Psalm 82; Joshua 7:1, 10-26; Hebrews 10:26-31

Friday 08/12/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19; Isaiah 3:1-17; Hebrews 10:32-39
Complementary: Psalm 82; 1 Samuel 5:1-12; Hebrews 10:32-39

Saturday 08/13/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19; Isaiah 3:18-4:6; Matthew 24:15-27
Complementary: Psalm 82; 1 Samuel 6:1-16; Matthew 24:15-27

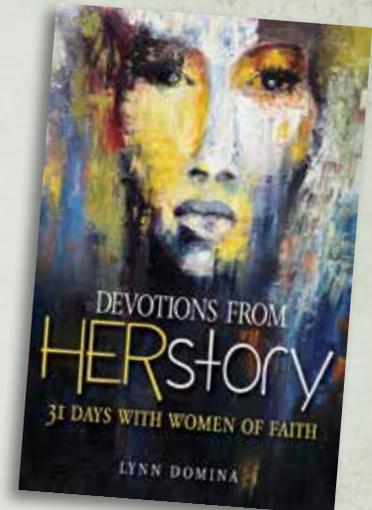
Devotions from Herstory: 31 Days with Women of Faith

by Lynn Domina

Featuring a biblical woman of faith or woman from history, these daily devotions offer an illustration and brief biographical sketch, Scripture that connects the biblical woman's story with a more recent "HERstory," a prayer or poem, and questions for personal meditation or group conversation.

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CONSEQUENCES

blighted hopes

[God] expected justice, but saw bloodshed;
righteousness, but heard a cry!

—ISAIAH 5:7b

Introduction

The prophet Isaiah shares a parable in poetic fashion: the Song of the Vineyard. God's intention for the people of Israel and Judah was for the people to grow strong, to bear fruit, and to live in God's ways. However, the people chose leaders who worshipped other gods, made poor political alliances, and neglected the poor. The people of Israel grew into wild grapes. (The Common English Bible uses the descriptor "rotten grapes.") God asks the people through the prophet what God should have done differently to expect grapes that were not wild. Because the people had abandoned God's ways, the hedge and walls that protected the vineyard were removed. The pruning would not take place. God's instructions cannot protect the people when the instructions are ignored.

Lesson Objectives

- To learn how the prophets in their warnings to people in the past can still warn us of the consequences of ignoring God's intention for our lives.
- To differentiate the ways that the world defines success versus how God leads us into meaningful lives.
- To curate a list of spiritual practices, Scriptures, and other helps we can use to refocus our lives on God when we find ourselves astray from God's intentions for us.

Isaiah 5:1-7 NRSV

1 Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 2 He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. 3 And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? 5 And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will

remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. 6 I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. 7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Into the Scripture

Which Isaiah?

Isaiah is often split into two sections by scholars: First Isaiah (chapters 1–39) and Second Isaiah (chapters 40–66); sometimes, this second section is split again, with chapters 56–66 as Third Isaiah. First Isaiah was written during and after the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrian Empire around 721 B.C.E. (Before Common Era). Assyria turned its attention to the Southern Kingdom of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, but Jerusalem survived the siege of 701 B.C.E. Nonetheless, the prophet Isaiah warned the people of Judah that they would suffer the same fate as the tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, if their kings of Judah continued to make poor political alliances, follow other gods, and fail to care for the poor among them.



Subsequently, the Southern Kingdom of Judah did fall to Babylon in 587 B.C.E., with the devastation of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. More than a generation later around 520

B.C.E., under Persian rule the exiles in Babylon were able to return to their homeland. Second Isaiah covers the return and rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple.

God's Intentions versus Ours

In First Isaiah, the prophet laments often and declares oracles against Israel and Judah. God's intention for the people of Israel was to be God's people, to look to God



God's intentions were not
for the people to suffer.

as their Sovereign, and to live into God's ways. When they had cried out demanding a king like other nations, God relented and gave them Saul (1 Samuel 8:6-22). However, the kingdom of Israel, after David and Solomon's reign, split into Israel and Judah, and the kings turned away from God, along with many of the religious leaders—turning to the gods of other lands.

God's intentions were not for the people to suffer or to fall into the hands of enemies and be taken into exile. Nonetheless, when the people turned from God, prophets such as Isaiah and others recognized that the consequences of their actions would cause tremendous suffering and loss. The intention of First Isaiah, after the fall of the northern capital of Samaria, was to warn Judah and Jerusalem that the same fate would befall them if they did not turn from evil and turn back to God's ways.

Where Is the Hope?

While there are many oracles against Israel and Judah and proclamations of doom, there are also glimpses of hope. The reason why God appointed prophets was



to declare what God would do if the people did not turn from their ways. God promises to save a remnant (Isaiah 4:3). Nonetheless, the purpose of these prophetic passages is to tell what will happen as a warning to the people, should they not change their ways. Sadly, throughout the prophetic books, the political and religious leaders failed to heed the warnings, and only a few survived.

Scholar Gene M. Tucker writes, “The prophecies—as the creative word of God—have been effective and that their goal was the purification of Jerusalem and its inhabitants.”¹ To imply that a remnant will be saved also works to affirm to later generations that God’s word through the prophets is trustworthy. Those who survived are witnesses of God’s faithfulness.

Into the Lesson

A Song or Parable, or Both?

The beginning of Isaiah 5:1-7 starts off claiming to be a love song in which one party sings a song on behalf of the other party and the vineyard the other party owns. A similar method is used in Song of Songs—a song between two lovers. As the Song of the Vineyard unfolds, it is the prophet singing on behalf of God, and the vineyard is a metaphor. The writing is poetic in its use of repetition. In the NRSV, verse 2 has three statements of God’s actions: “he dug,” “he built,” and “he expected.”

God’s intentions for the vineyard are clear. In verses 5-6, the response to what God will now do—because of the rebellion of the vineyard—begin with four “I will” statements after “and now I will tell you what I will do”: “I will remove,” “I will break down,” “I will make it a waste,”

and “I will also command the clouds.” If this is a love song, it is a love song with a twist that is meant to shock and horrify the listener. Hebrew Bible scholar Robert Atler writes in the introduction to his translation of Isaiah, “The bulk of the prophecies are cast in poetry,” because by the rhythm and imagery of poetry, we commit “the words to memory.”² So while this passage masks itself as a love song, the mask is unveiled halfway through, and it is indeed a prophecy for the reader to remember.

The story told in the song is what rises to the surface for the listener. Very quickly it becomes clear that this is no ordinary song. If this was a wedding and the groom decided to sing a song to the bride, it would be as if the bride decided to grab the microphone and tell her own story. God steps in to speak through the prophet. This is a story with a specific goal for the listener to understand: God created a vineyard and cared for it. God did all one could—removing the stones, planting choice vines, and building a watchtower and a wine vat.

Everything was set up and prepared to produce good grapes and good wine, but the vineyard produced wild, or “rotten,” grapes. God removed the protective hedge and wall so that the vineyard could be reclaimed by the wild and overrun. God would not tend or prune it anymore, and the clouds would refrain from providing rain. God was giving the vineyard back to the world



God removed the protective hedge and wall so that the vineyard could be reclaimed by the wild.

because it chose to grow in the ways of the world despite God's intentions.

Wait for the Punch

In the last verse, the vineyard is revealed to be the people of Israel and Judah, and the question is put to the listener, What more could God have done? God presented their case: God did all that was possible, and still, God's people turned away. This is similar to the parable that the prophet Nathan told King David in 2 Samuel 12:1-13 of an unjust man who exploits a poor man and kills a beloved lamb from the poor man's flock. David is outraged at such a thing, and in verse 7, Nathan points out that this is exactly what David did when he sent for Bathsheba and murdered her husband, Uriah. Such parables with a twist open the reader or listener's eyes. David was the perpetrator, and in the Song of the Vineyard, the people of Israel and Judah are the perpetrators, the rotten grapes who have spoiled the vineyard.

A Second Chance?

The Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-7 is echoed in The Pleasant Vineyard of 27:2-6. However, God sings of the later vineyard that God will protect and take care of. If it grows wild, God is the one who will struggle against it, but God calls for the vineyard to turn back to God for protection and peace. Though the Song of the Vineyard is a warning of what would happen to the people when they turned away from God, there is always a plan for restoration. There is always a new hope. Though the prophets often proclaim destruction, there is not a single book of the prophets that does not contain a glimmer of hope that God can still find a way for a people who turn back to God's ways.

In the context of Isaiah 5:1-7, the hope is in listening to the song and understanding that God loved the people, and God's intention for the people was to thrive and grow good fruit. God provided the Torah and the prophets to guide the people, but the people chose to ignore them and instead listen to the ways of the world. Therefore, nothing God intended will be helpful to those who choose to run wild and grow rotten.

Into Discipleship

In what ways has God provided for you? How has God shown care for you? Think of the people in your life who have led you into God's ways and how they have helped: teachers, coaches, pastors, youth leaders—all the people who have helped shape and mold you. What they have taught you by word and by example has somehow stayed with you. The people of Israel had their teachers, priests, prophets, and kings; yet, they worshipped other gods, they abandoned the practices they had been taught, and they neglected those among them in need.

As we grow and mature, we have a choice to either take what has been shared with us or to reject it. If we choose to take what we have been taught, what has been passed down, it does not mean we have to accept everything exactly as we were taught. We can grow with understanding and wisdom. Far too often, when the simpler lessons and interpretations of Scripture begin to break down as our worldview expands, there is a temptation to reject it all, instead of understanding that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6b). The spirit of what we have been taught through our ancestors and elders is trustworthy and true, though our understanding of the word of teaching changes over time as our culture and worldview expand.

Nonetheless, the temptations of the world can lead us to becoming rotten fruit. Whether we deliberately ignore God's ways, or inadvertently slip, we fall from God's intentions for us from the first of creation: to be



The temptations of the world can lead us to becoming rotten fruit.



God’s children, to care for the earth and all of creation, to love God, and to love one another. When we fail to live into God’s intentions and instead turn to satisfying worldly desires and worldly measures of success such as wealth and notoriety, the goodness of God’s intention for us from the first chapter of Genesis is lost.

What can help guide us back?

Sometimes, the world gets us down and we are drawn away from God unintentionally. The hedges and fences that God has put in place for us fade from view, and we are caught up in the loneliness and bitterness of the world’s ways. There are spiritual practices that can help us refocus our lives on God and remind us of what God

has provided for us. Prayer and meditation, devotional reading of Scripture, singing hymns and praise songs, fellowship with other believers, sharing a meal together, reading a book from an inspiring author, taking a nature walk that reminds us of what our Creator has made— these are just a handful of practices that can assure us that God is in our lives and has provided so much for us. Think about what practices or activities have drawn you close to God in the past.

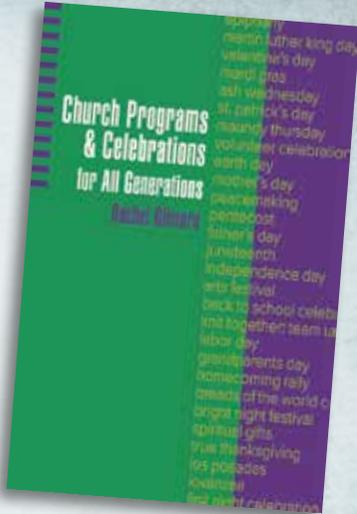
Notes:

- 1. *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 83.
- 2. *The Hebrew Bible*, Volume 2: Prophets (Nevi’im) A Translation with Commentary, Robert Adler (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 618.

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by Rachel Gilmore

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Closing Prayer

Creator God, how great is your faithfulness to us! Day by day you graciously provide us all that we need to grow and flourish in the abundant life that Christ has promised. But “prone to wander, Lord, we feel it. Prone to leave the God we love. Take our heart, O Lord, and seal it. Seal it for your courts above.” Amen.

Reflection Questions

- In what ways have your beliefs, your faith life, changed and grown over time? Where have you grown closer to God? Where have you perhaps fallen away?
- What worldly definitions of success have been a stumbling block for you in your faith life?
- What Scriptures do you hold close in your heart? What stories of the Bible remind you to trust in God and turn back to God’s ways?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Great Is Thy Faithfulness/Great Is Your Mercy” sung by Donnie McClurkin & CeCe Winans: https://youtu.be/BNiKt_5WH-8?t=11
- “O How He Loves You and Me” sung by Richard Smallwood and Vision: <https://youtu.be/ayT6jf3Lxz4>
- “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” sung by Fernando Ortega: <https://youtu.be/FU1u6Lmz27A?t=1>

Activity Ideas

■ Right-brained Rumination

- *Draw a simple picture of a vineyard*, or it could be a farm or field. The vineyard (or farm or field) is you.
- *On one side, draw a fence*. The fence keeps wild beasts out of the vineyard. What sort of wild or worldly dangers do you desire God to protect you from (consumerism, idolatry, drugs, gambling, etc.)?
- *Next, draw a hedge*. If the soil is what you are planted in, what nourishes you and gives you life—how does the hedge keep your soil from eroding (Bible study, attending worship, fellowship with good friends, prayer, singing songs, etc.)?
- *Next, draw a watchtower*. In what ways does God watch out for you? Where do you notice God’s light in your life?



- *Lastly, draw a barrel in your field to be your winepress* where grapes are squeezed to produce wine. What are the good pressures in your life that bring out your best self? Sometimes, we need a nudge to do well, to give our best, to pay attention. In what ways is God at work in you to produce good fruit?

- *After you are finished with your drawing*, think of how difficult it would be to grow without the fence, the hedge, the watchtower, and the winepress. How would you grow? How would you be protected? What would happen if there was never any pressure, good or bad, in your life?

- **“Thy Word Have I Hid . . .”** Can you think of a verse of Scripture that has remained in your heart? Perhaps it is something you memorized years ago or something you read later in life that has stuck with you. What verses or stories from Scripture continue to guide you today? Create a poster with your Scriptures and stories that remind you of God’s presence in your life.

Media Options

Spiritual Practices. Try exploring a different spiritual practice, one that is less familiar to you. Here are some examples.

- **Lectio Divina:** a focused reading/meditation on a Scripture passage. <https://bustedhalo.com/ministry-resources/lectio-divina-beginners-guide>
- **Christian Meditation:** breathing exercises that help to clear the mind and draw one closer to God. <https://jdanatrent.com/one-breath-at-a-time-skeptics-guide-christian-meditation/>
- **Mindful Nature Walking:** taking notice of God at work in creation. <https://www.mindful.org/take-a-mindful-hike/>
- **Breathing Prayer:** another form of meditative prayer centering on our breath. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/women-leaders/2018/february/take-time-for-breath-prayer.html?paging=off>

Devotional Scriptures

Year C Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Week of 08/14/22

Sunday 08/14/22

Isaiah 5:1-7 and Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19; Jeremiah 23:23-29 and Psalm 82; Hebrews 11:29–12:2; Luke 12:49-56

Monday 08/15/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 74; Isaiah 5:8-23; 1 John 4:1-6
Complementary: Psalm 32; Jeremiah 23:30-40; 1 John 4:1-6

Tuesday 08/16/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 74; Isaiah 5:24-30; Acts 7:44-53
Complementary: Psalm 32; Jeremiah 25:15-29; Acts 7:44-53

Wednesday 08/17/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 74; Isaiah 27:1-13; Luke 19:45-48
Complementary: Psalm 32; Jeremiah 25:30-38; Luke 19:45-48

Thursday 08/18/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 71:1-6; Jeremiah 6:1-19; Hebrews 12:3-17
Complementary: Psalm 103:1-8; Numbers 15:32-41; Hebrews 12:3-17

Friday 08/19/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 71:1-6; Jeremiah 6:20-30; Acts 17:1-9
Complementary: Psalm 103:1-8; 2 Chronicles 8:12-15; Acts 17:1-9

Saturday 08/20/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 71:1-6; Jeremiah 1:1-3, 11-19; Luke 6:1-5
Complementary: Psalm 103:1-8; Nehemiah 13:15-22; Luke 6:1-5

DELIVERER

God rescues again and again

For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust,
O LORD, from my youth.

—PSALM 71:5

Introduction

In times of trouble, we turn to God in prayer. Psalm 71:1-6 calls upon God to rescue the psalmist from his enemies, to provide safety and refuge. The author acknowledges his dependence upon God his whole life—for it is God who delivered him into the world, and God who would deliver him from his enemies. The psalmist calls upon God with assurance that God hears his prayer, and that God will act out of righteousness, because righteousness is God's way of being.

Lesson Objectives

- To remember the assurance of faith in Scripture and that our feelings are valid, even when we despair or feel hopeless.
- To understand that being faithful also requires our being open to ask for help when needed.
- To know the struggle for justice in this world is lifelong, but God is with us, and God provides helpers for us.

Psalm 71:1-6 NRSV

1 In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. 2 In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. 3 Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. 4 Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel. 5 For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth. 6 Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you.

Into the Scripture

A Prayer for Help

Psalm 71 is similar to Psalms 22 and 31—a prayer for help from God. The selection for this lesson is only the first six verses, but the whole psalm is worth noting because of its repetition of the common pattern for similar psalms. Three times, the psalmist shares his petition to God—his concern, his longing, his despair—and then turns to praise and trust in God.¹

Like Psalms 22 and 31, the author of the psalm is in distress. In these psalms, the author looks back on his life and remembers the times when God had been faithful to them. God had delivered them from their enemies in the past, and though this crisis is new and his fear is as real as ever before, the writer still puts his trust in God. In addition, throughout these passages the psalmist recalls the mighty acts of God toward his ancestors: God’s deliverance of the people from Egypt and the Red Sea; God’s leading the people in the wilderness. God had proven trustworthy to his ancestors, so the psalmist put his trust in God, assured that God would deliver him from his current situation.

Lifelong Hope

In both Psalm 22:9 and 71:6, the author uses the image of God as the one who delivered the psalmist from the womb. God had been there since the very beginning of the author’s life and had been a constant presence. Even though Psalm 22 begins with “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” the psalmist still trusts that God is with him. This also echoes the message of Psalm 139:13: “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” This

is not a God who is a far-off observer, but a God who knows us intimately and has been present from the very beginning of our lives. God knows all the struggles the psalmist had faced, and the psalmist knew that God would not abandon him in his present strife.



The psalmist put his trust in God, assured that God would deliver him.

We’ve Heard This Before

This passage is paired in the Revised Common Lectionary with Jeremiah 1:4-10, when Jeremiah is called as a young boy. In verse 5, God tells Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” This theme of God’s knowing who we are to become at a young age is repeated, as well as God’s continuing to be made known to us throughout our lives, especially during difficult times.

Another repetition is the connection of Psalm 22 with Jesus’ crucifixion—where Jesus quotes 22:1 upon the cross. Psalm 31:13 contains the psalmist’s distress as his enemies “plot to take my life.” Because of the similarities between these two psalms and Psalm 71, they are often read during Holy Week.² Because the Psalms are a collection of songs used in worship and prayer for the Hebrew people, they draw on the collective literature of the people: the stories, songs, and experiences that they know. They echo each other. God has been present our whole lives, but also was present among our ancestors; we remember that while our situation may be unique, our experience of struggle—especially against injustice—is not. We are not alone.

Into the Lesson

Righteousness versus Injustice

The psalmist trusts that God acts in our world in right and just ways. God is the one who will set things right that have been wrong and will deliver the author of this



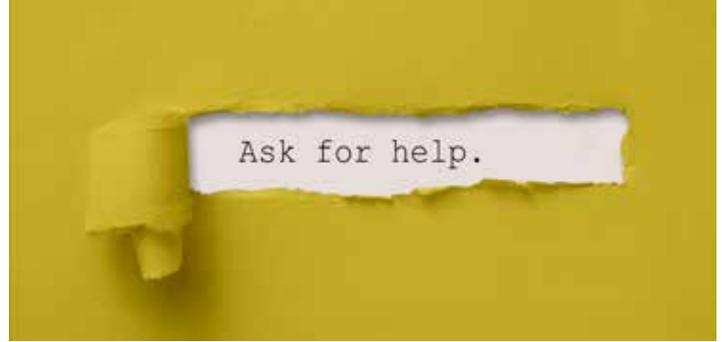
psalm from the injustice that they are facing. The author petitions God to never be put to shame; instead, he was confident that God will do what is right, because God is their hope. God is good and just; God cannot act in any other way than in righteousness. God will deliver the psalmist and make the world right again.

While God's nature and will is righteousness, the world that humanity has built is often the opposite. The psalmist speaks of the wicked and cruel, enemies not only of the author but also of God, for they are against God's ways. The writer calls out to God for deliverance from "the grasp of the unjust"—for their ways dominate in the world, but it is God whom the psalmist trusts for deliverance. God—whose way is righteousness—is the ultimate and final authority, and the psalmist knows this.

Refuge and Rescue

The theme of God as our refuge is present in many of the Psalms, written by authors who were facing real-world enemies and threats. However, we who are reading these songs and poems thousands of years later can understand God as our refuge from the injustice in our world today. In God we know that things will be set right. We are reminded that the divisions in this world do not exist in the reign of God: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

By knowing that in the reign of God injustice and oppression will no longer exist, we have the hope to endure in this world even though humankind has made it flawed and unjust. By knowing God as our refuge,



we have the strength to continue the struggle for justice here and now. We know that poverty, racism, misogyny, violence, and all forms of oppression will be defeated, even if in the present time they seem unbearable.

Leaning on God

The psalmist declares that he has leaned on God from a young age. When you lean, you are relying on something else to support you—otherwise you will fall. The writer was baring his soul, sharing his vulnerability in knowing that without God, he would not be where he is. He had never relied on himself alone; it has never been about his own strength. He had trusted God, and he knew that God would not fail him now. Even in his vulnerability, as he pleads for God's rescue, he also trusts that God will answer.

When the world is against you, when there are enemies—either physical threats to your life or threats to your mental, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being—the psalms remind us not to give up on God. The psalms that are prayers for help like this one express all the range of emotions, including Psalm 22:1, where the psalmist questions if he has been abandoned by God. Yet, the writers of the psalms never give up that God will respond—that God will rescue and deliver them. Faith is not the absence of doubt, but the perseverance in hope. In Mark 9:24, the father of a young girl who has fallen



We have the strength to continue the struggle for
justice here and now.

ill tells Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!” The help in our unbelief is the trust and assurance that God is there to lean on, and that we will not fall.

However, the psalmists also assure us that it is normal at times to feel weak in faith, to question where God is—for God is there regardless of our doubts or misgivings. God has been there since our first breath from the womb. God will deliver us from the unjust world into the reign of God’s righteousness. In the meantime, we lean on God while we struggle against injustice now.

Into Discipleship

Growing with God

As we mature, our faith changes and takes shape. Sometimes, the childhood perception of God we once held falls apart as we discover that God does not magically make everything go our way. The world is unfair and unjust, and sometimes we question where God is when terrible things happen. The Psalms give us the language to express our frustration with the unjust world of human beings, while still clinging to the goodness of God, knowing God will deliver us. God’s reign is not of this world, and yet, we also participate in God’s reign on earth when we live into God’s ways of righteousness and justice. Reading these ancient prayers for help remind us that we, too, can express our own despair at the evils in this world while continuing to rely on God to see us through.

Seeking God’s Help

We do not know the full context of why the psalmist was seeking God’s help. We do not know the circumstance or situation, or even who wrote it. But what we do know is that we have been in similar situations where the world is pressing in on us, and we know that things are not as they should be. The lack of specific details helps us universalize this prayer for any time.

Leaning into Righteousness

Leaning on God calls us to rely on God’s ways. Righteousness is right living. Many of the psalms speak of turning to the commandments, ordinances, and statutes of the Hebrew Scriptures. Grounding ourselves in Scripture, prayer, meditation, and other spiritual practices goes hand in hand with practicing justice. Our



Righteousness does not mean we will not face the struggles of the world.

spiritual traditions lead us into God’s way of life, which challenges the unjust world in which we live.

When we trust that the way we have been taught is the way of life, we know that we will not go astray. Even as we grow and mature in our faith life, we remember that God has always been with us as we have grown and will continue to be there for us to lean on. Righteousness does not mean we will not face the struggles of the world, but we can be assured that we are on the right path for ourselves, even during hardship. It is not our fault that the world is awful at times. All we can control are our own actions and way of life.

No Shame in Needing Help

Throughout the book of Psalms, when the writers are oppressed, they cry out against the anguish and ridicule of their enemies. They ask for God to not let them be put to shame, as in the first verse of this psalm. However, the psalmists know there is no shame when they turn to God. Even the shame they may feel at defeat fades in the glory of God’s righteousness, knowing that they did not deserve what has happened to them. We do not deserve the terrible actions of the world. We do not deserve to be marginalized, oppressed, and silenced. While the world may try to blame and shame people for their misfortunes, in God there is no shame. In the reign of God, oppression will cease.



Asking for help is nothing of which to be ashamed. While the psalmists turn to God, as should all who are faithful, it is a good reminder that there is no disgrace in seeking help from professionals: doctors, counselors, therapists, and coaches. There is no shame in needing medication to correct chemical imbalances and to ease pain and illness. The world may view those who need help as weak, but even Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane turned to God for help in his distress. God has provided helpers in this world: pastors, teachers, leaders, and

also those with skills for healing, counseling, and other providers of care to help us in our need. We do well to remember that God’s deliverance—our refuge in this world of injustice and pain—often comes to us in the love and care of others. We can do our part to remove the stigma surrounding mental health and well-being.

Notes:

1. *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 958.
2. *Ibid*, 960.

A large, white, stylized quotation mark is centered on a background of a sunset or sunrise sky with soft, golden clouds. The quote mark is the opening double quote.

We do well to remember that God’s deliverance—our refuge in this world of injustice and pain—often comes to us in the love and care of others.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, how comforting it is to know that we can come boldly before your throne in a time of need. You are our all and everything. Through Christ, you have been touched with all our infirmity and are always able to meet us at our point of need. You hear our cry, you see our pain, and you come down to deliver us. You pluck our feet out of the net. You place us upon a rock and allow our golden days to roll on. We worship you and bless your name! Amen.

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Jesus Is a Rock in a Weary Land” sung by the David W. Carter Choir: <https://youtu.be/gUh0csSsXkk>
- “El-Shaddai” sung by Amy Grant: <https://youtu.be/8txqw-u4V78?t=1>

- “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” sung by Christian Hymns with Lyrics Choir: <https://youtu.be/8XUYZoguhEQ>

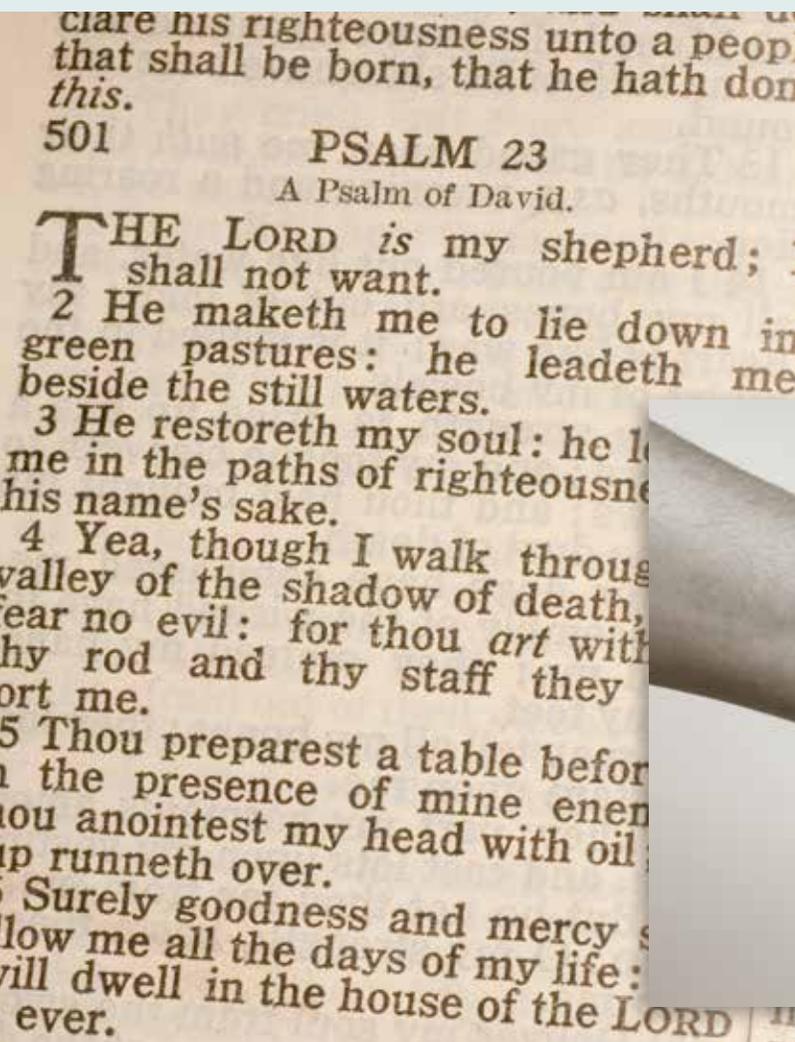
Activity Ideas

■ Building a Support Network

- Who is your support network inside the church?
- Who are the people you can turn to and trust when you are struggling?
- What types of support does church provide? List the people and supports on a sheet of paper.
- What concerns or questions do you have that the church has not addressed?
- Discuss with your group and determine the best way to get concerns addressed.
- What other supports are available to help you outside of church?
- Think of social agencies, coaches, counselors, therapists, doctors, and others who can be a support.
- Come up with a list of community resources, both within the church and outside of the church, that could be of help to you and others in different ways. Put lists together and organize them according to categories and share with the larger church.

■ Making It Personal

Using the formula of petition and praise, write your own psalm of help. What is it for which you are



seeking help? Write out your concerns to God. They can be anything—personal concerns, worries about our world, violence, poverty—anything that causes your heart grief. Then, write your praise. In what ways do you know God will answer you? Describe how God has responded to the prayers of those in the past through Scripture. Conclude your psalm of help with a blessing.

■ **Never Forget**

Can you recall any of your earliest experiences with God when you knew God was real? Write down the details of the experience as much as you can remember. Write a prayer thanking God for this experience that continues to shape your faith.

Devotional Scriptures

Year C Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Week of 08/21/22

Sunday 08/21/22

Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Psalm 71:1-6; Isaiah 58:9b-14 and Psalm 103:1-8; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

Monday 08/22/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 10; Jeremiah 7:1-15; Hebrews 3:7-4:11
Complementary: Psalm 109:21-31; Ezekiel 20:1-17; Hebrews 3:7-4:11

Tuesday 08/23/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 10; Jeremiah 7:16-26; Revelation 3:7-13
Complementary: Psalm 109:21-31; Ezekiel 20:18-32; Revelation 3:7-13

Wednesday 08/24/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 10; Jeremiah 7:27-34; Luke 6:6-11
Complementary: Psalm 109:21-31; Ezekiel 20:33-44; Luke 6:6-11

Thursday 08/25/22

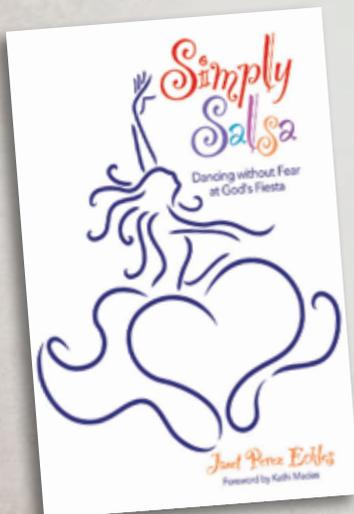
Semi-continuous: Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Jeremiah 11:1-17; 1 Peter 3:8-12
Complementary: Psalm 112; Proverbs 15:13-17; 1 Peter 3:8-12

Friday 08/26/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Jeremiah 12:1-13; 1 Peter 4:7-11
Complementary: Psalm 112; Proverbs 18:6-12; 1 Peter 4:7-11

Saturday 08/27/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Jeremiah 2:1-3, 14-22; Matthew 20:20-28
Complementary: Psalm 112; Proverbs 21:1-4, 24-26; Matthew 20:20-28



Simply Salsa: Dancing without Fear at God's Fiesta

by Janet Perez Eckles

Author Janet Perez Eckles may be the last woman you would expect to dance for joy. She lost her eyesight at age 31, suffered financial devastation, endured infidelity, and faced the incomprehensible anguish of her nineteen-year-old son's murder and the acquittal of the man responsible. No matter the degree of adversity or pain, however, Eckles has discovered an alternative to gloom through the security that is only found in God's love.

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HOSPITALITY

hosting with humility

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

—LUKE 14:11

Introduction

The practice of hospitality should be to show kindness and compassion to strangers. However, Jesus recognized that hospitality was often twisted to gain status and notoriety by inviting those who were considered more important to sit closer to the guest of honor, and by even choosing who was the guest of honor at the table. What are our intentions when we practice hospitality—is it so others will take note of our actions, or is our intention grounded in the actions of kindness and compassion?

Lesson Objectives

- To understand the connection of hospitality with humility as a Christian practice.
- To make the connection between the table of Jesus and our own places of table fellowship.
- To consider whom we have overlooked in inviting others into our fellowship.

Luke 14:1, 7-14 NRSV

1 On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. . . . 7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.

11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” 12 He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors,

in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Into the Scripture

Luke as Master Storyteller

The introduction to the Gospel account in Luke 1:1-4 begins with the writer letting the reader know that he has set out to write an orderly account of the events surrounding Jesus’ life. Luke is known for containing specific details, including names and dates of Roman leaders to point to the accuracy of the Gospel account by providing historical, political, and cultural context to the story of Jesus’ life.¹ The author is not only sharing an account of Jesus’ life but is also attempting to show that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has authority in this world and in heaven. Jesus’ teachings, as recorded in Luke’s account of the Gospel, are to be taken to heart and lived out.

Sharing a Meal

One element that Luke emphasizes in his storytelling is the table. Jesus dines at a table where religious leaders question him three other times (5:29-39; 7:36-50; and 11:37-54). The meal table is a space where lines of division can be erased. Jesus has no qualms about eating with tax collectors and sinners. He was anointed by a woman known as a sinner while eating a meal with others. Moreover, Jesus challenges the religious leaders about how their actions are hypocritical



when they question him and his disciples for not continuing the ritual practice of handwashing before a meal.

The final time Jesus gathers at a table with his disciples, he not only shares the Last Supper (that the bread and wine are his broken body and the blood of the new

“

Jesus’ teachings are
to be taken to heart and
lived out.

covenant), but he also teaches them that unlike the kings of the Gentiles, they do not fight over who is greater—for the table has made them equal (22:14-28). After the Resurrection, Jesus makes himself known to two traveling disciples on their way to Emmaus in the breaking of bread at the table (24:28-32). The table is where Jesus is revealed as the Messiah, where divisions are erased, and where the new covenant is established and shared with all.

“Table talk,” as Fred Craddock writes, “was not only a fairly common literary device for gathering and disseminating discussions on a range of topics, but banquets did, in fact, provide occasions for philosophers and teachers to impart their wisdom.”² Jesus uses these moments at the table to teach those gathered, including his own disciples as well as those hosting and other various guests, about the reign of God.

The Heavenly Banquet Table

Following this passage, in 14:15-24, Jesus tells a parable of a banquet of a man who hosted a large dinner but none of the invited guests were able to come; they all



made excuses. Instead, the man instructed his servants to go out into the streets and invite in the poor and disabled. When there was still room, the man instructed his servants to go out to the highways and back alleys—to all the “untouchable” people—and compel them to come to the banquet, for those invited would taste his dinner.

Perhaps this was a reminder of Psalm 34:8a—“O taste and see that the LORD is good.” If people do not accept the invitation to the feast on Earth, then how can they truly experience God’s goodness in heaven? Jesus makes it clear that actions at our own tables—of who we include, how we share our resources, how we care for one another, and how we listen—reflect our participation in the reign of God now as well as at the heavenly banquet envisioned by the prophet Isaiah in 25:6-9.

Into the Lesson

Lesson for the Guests

There are two observations Jesus makes—first in how the guests strive for the best seat at the table (verse 7), and then how the hosts have acted in their invitation (verse 12).

Jesus told a parable about when they give a wedding banquet, a way of sharing a story that was pertinent to their current situation without stating that it was actually about the very meal they were sharing. Jesus is concerned about how the guests all wanted the better seats at the table, all wanting to be seen as important and prominent. In the parable, it is obvious that at a wedding banquet you would not take the seat of a close family member, otherwise you would be told by the host to give up your seat and would get embarrassed. Instead, Jesus paraphrases from Proverbs 25:6-7 and calls for the

guests to assume the least important seat, for then they can be invited to move up higher. Since this is not really about a hypothetical wedding but about how the guests all saw themselves as more important than each other, Jesus concludes his lesson for the guests with “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (verse 11). The point is to not see oneself as more or less than others, but to see everyone as worthy.

Lesson for the Hosts

Jesus had been invited by a prominent leader of the Pharisees to this dinner, and the host had determined who else was to be invited. Jesus continues the lesson with the idea that hosts should not invite the people they know or who have status, who expect to be invited and expect to return the invitation, playing the game of social status. Instead, Jesus invites the hosts to step out of the social status game and invite those who could never invite them back: the poor and disabled, the ones who beg on the side of the roads. Jesus urges that the reward is to be paid in the resurrection for how we treat one another here on Earth. Again, the lesson is that we need to shift our point of view to understanding everyone as worthy, not just those with higher social status.



The point is to not see oneself as more or less than others, but to see everyone as worthy.

Preparing for the Heavenly Table

The table is symbolic of the heavenly banquet table, envisioned by the prophet Isaiah and the invitation extended by Jesus—both the night of his betrayal and the evening after his resurrection. Jesus' purpose for this lesson to the religious leaders who were hosting and those invited to this particular table was to see that every table on Earth is a mini table of heaven. Every time we invite others to the table, we are inviting them to participate in God's reign; when we are hosts, we have been given the call from God to extend the invitation. All too often we limit who is invited, and when we are guests, we place our worth above others. Instead, Jesus calls us to practice being last of all and servant of all (Mark 9:35).

Beyond the Dinner Table

Perhaps it is the board room table, the preschool table, the Communion table, or the church as a whole. To whom are we extending the invitation of God? How are we making the table accessible? It is one thing to state "all are welcome," and it is another to make space at the table. Indeed, Jesus is calling us not only to make space at the table, but also, to those of us with power and privilege, perhaps we may need to give up our seat at the table for others.

In churches, how often do leaders move off the board and allow new leaders to step forward? If no one is stepping forward to the table, it may be that the invitation needs to change, or the job description, or even the mission and vision of leadership in the church needs to be transformed to be more accessible. Each table in our church life needs to be examined for the invitation and accessibility, and who may be taking up space intentionally or out of perceived necessity—and thereby hindering others from participating. Sometimes it calls for a dramatic reimagining of what the table can be. In the stories surrounding King Arthur, he famously created a round table—something unheard of in a hierarchical monarchy—where his knights all had the same status and voice at the table as the king.

Into Discipleship

The Social Status Game

Two thousand years later and we still play the same game. We invite bosses and co-workers to dinner or to special events in order to gain a possibility of promotion



Christ is with us wherever
we sit at the table.

or a new job. We extend invitations to those who can help us get into social clubs or who can fund politics. Similar to the middle school lunchroom dilemma, we often look to who will help us gain in society rather than who is being left out, who is forgotten, or who is most in need or most vulnerable.

How do we stop playing the game? We know that the ways of the world are not God's ways, and yet, we all fall into the trap of playing the game. The first step is awareness. In our society that is built on white supremacy and patriarchy, it may be impossible for some people to not play the game in order to get a job or be able to access services that are needed to survive. Instead, how do we resist? Jesus gives us the way of resistance, whether we are the ones needing a space at the table, or if we have the power and privilege to already have a position of leadership.

The Example of Jesus

Jesus gives the ultimate example of resistance by laying down his own life for us, by sharing of his body and blood. Even then, at the Last Supper, some disciples tried to play the game, arguing over which one of them was the greatest (Luke 22:24-30). Jesus asked which was the greatest at the table—the one who sits at the table or the one who serves? It is the one who sits at the table, and yet Jesus was the one who was serving them. Jesus humbled himself (Philippians 2:8) and shows us the example of how to stop the game. Hospitality can be abused to gain in the social status game, but humility roots us in the reign of God, where all are included.

Humility and hospitality are how we break the rules of the game to give everyone a space at the table. By



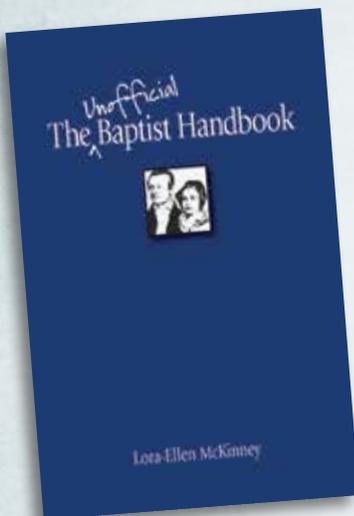
understanding everyone as worthy of participating in the reign of God, when we all do our part to make space, everyone will have room. Jesus quoted Leviticus 19:18 that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves; when we all love our neighbors and put our neighbor's needs as a priority, our own needs are met. When we all extend hospitality out of humility, we will find that there is space at the table for all of us, and that Christ is with us wherever we sit at the table.

However, the ultimate step toward the kingdom of God is to truly invite those who cannot reciprocate in the same way—to invite and include folks experiencing

homelessness, people with developmental disabilities, and others who would not be able to do the same. This is practicing hospitality with humility as Jesus taught and lived out. This is using whatever power and privilege one may have in this world to work against the system of haves and have nots. This is how we can help dismantle the ways of this world and participate in the heavenly reign on Earth.

Notes:

1. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, "Luke," by Fred Craddock (John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 1990), 2-3.
2. *Ibid.*, 175.



The Unofficial Baptist Handbook

by Lora-Ellen McKinney

With a sense of humor and a deep respect for the diverse expressions of Baptist faith and life, *The Unofficial Baptist Handbook* explores matters related to Scripture, to church life, and to Baptist identity. Author Lora-Ellen McKinney writes as one who has grown up in the Baptist church and loves it, with all of its quirks and charms.

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Closing Prayer

O God, you have made room for each of us at your table and in your heavenly fellowship. You anoint our heads with oil and our cups overflow. Help us to reciprocate such lavish love and hospitality to the least, the lost, and the left out. We are one human family, and there is room for everyone at the table—a table where everyone knows our name. Amen.

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Count on Me” sung by Bruno Mars: <https://youtu.be/Msl2ff3h59I>
- “When We All Get to Heaven” sung by Casting Crowns: <https://youtu.be/MDL85-FoJWg>
- “Let Us Break Bread Together” sung by Jessye Norman: <https://youtu.be/ZFQqOWh2aOY>

Baptist Connections

American Baptist Hospitality

As part of the ABCUSA family, we consider ourselves a very hospitable denomination. Read through “We Are American Baptists”: Identity Statement (revised 6/19/98) and discuss what aspects of our identity reflect God’s hospitality, openness, diversity, and inclusion. Determine if there are areas of challenge within your own congregation to live up to these principles. Discuss new ways you may need to reach out and invite the world inside your church and personal lives. As they say, “The doors of the church are open”

<https://www.abc-usa.org/identity-statement-1998/>

Media Options

Five Loaves, Two Fish, Twelve Volunteers: Growing a Relational Food Ministry by Elizabeth Mae Magill (Upper Room, 2020).

Activity Ideas

■ Putting Ourselves in *That Place*

Can you think of a time when you had to sit somewhere else than where you would rather have sat? (Maybe it was a holiday where you had to sit next to a guest you did not know well, or a wedding where you had to sit with people you did not know.) What did it feel like? What could have been done to make you feel more included? Have you ever hosted a party or dinner (or another event) where you recognized that someone was not as included or welcomed as they should have been? What would you do differently?



■ 360 Degree Accessibility

Conduct an accessibility survey of your church. What areas of your church are accessible by wheelchair? What sort of supports are offered for those who are deaf or hearing-impaired, blind, or have other needs? In what ways does the church unintentionally exclude people with disabilities? What recommendations can be made to the church leadership? You can also expand this survey to thinking of the ministries of the church. Are disabled children included in Christian education? Are persons who use wheelchairs able to access the choir loft or pulpit? Are there people with disabilities involved in the leadership of the church?

■ No Judgment Zone

Have you participated in a feeding or table ministry with people experiencing homelessness? What judgments do those hosting such ministries sometimes make about the guests who come? How can churches that participate in such ministries learn from Jesus' example to combine hospitality with humility? Share your experiences and what you learned.

Devotional Scriptures Year C Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost Week of 08/28/22

Sunday 08/28/22

Jeremiah 2:4-13 and Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Sirach 10:12-18 or Proverbs 25:6-7 and Psalm 112; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Monday 08/29/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 58; Jeremiah 2:23-37; Hebrews 13:7-21
Complementary: Psalm 119:65-72; 2 Chronicles 12:1-12; Hebrews 13:7-21

Tuesday 08/30/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 58; Jeremiah 3:1-14; Titus 1:1-9
Complementary: Psalm 119:65-72; Isaiah 2:12-17; Titus 1:1-9

Wednesday 08/31/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 58; Jeremiah 3:15-25; Luke 14:15-24
Complementary: Psalm 119:65-72; Isaiah 57:14-21; Luke 14:15-24

Thursday 09/01/22

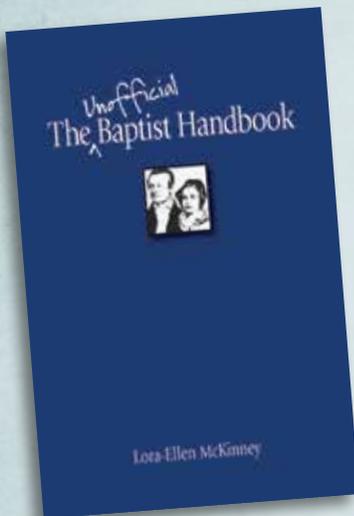
Semi-continuous: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Jeremiah 15:10-21; Philippians 2:25-30
Complementary: Psalm 1; Genesis 39:1-23; Philippians 2:25-30

Friday 09/02/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Jeremiah 16:14-17:4; Colossians 4:7-17
Complementary: Psalm 1; Deuteronomy 7:12-26; Colossians 4:7-17

Saturday 09/03/22

Semi-continuous: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Jeremiah 17:14-27; Matthew 10:34-42
Complementary: Psalm 1; Deuteronomy 29:2-20; Matthew 10:34-42



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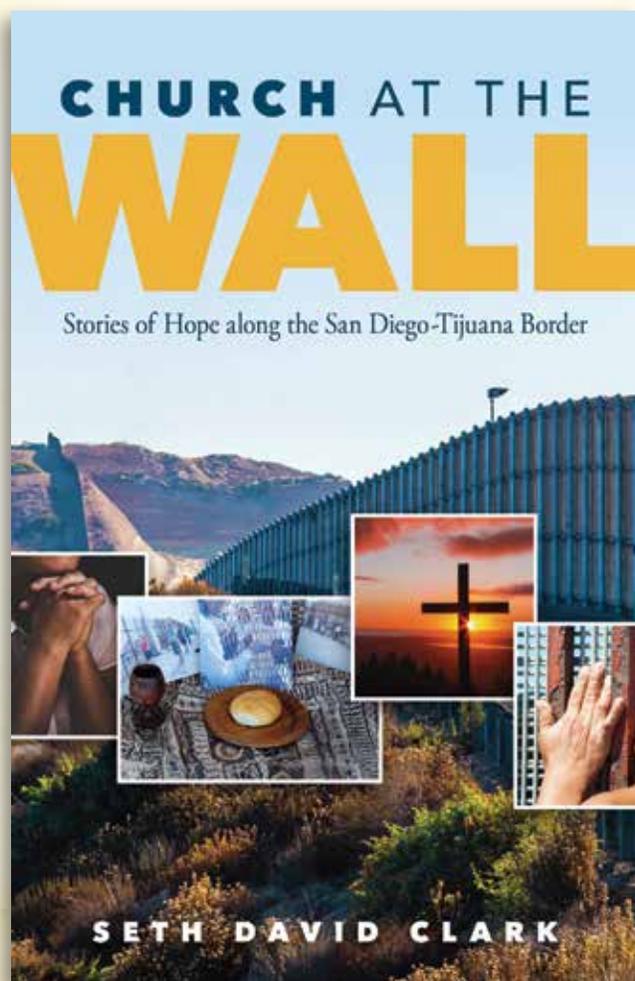
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