

# Journeys



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# Journeys

JUDSON BIBLE LESSONS | SPRING 2023 | VOL. 2.3

About the Quarter / About the Writers 2

DATE LESSON THEME: TITLE (SCRIPTURE)

03.05	1	<b>ABIDING:</b> can we stay a little longer? (Matthew 17:1-9) . . . . .	3
03.12	2	<b>PERSECUTION COMPLEX:</b> “is the LORD among us or not?” (Exodus 17:1-7) . . . . .	9
03.19	3	<b>DISCERNMENT:</b> knowing what is pleasing to God (Ephesians 5:8-14) . . . . .	16
03.26	4	<b>POWER:</b> is there a God like unto our God? (Psalm 130) . . . . .	21
04.02	5	<b>CRISIS:</b> who is this man? (Matthew 21:1-11) . . . . .	27
04.09	6	<b>IMPARTIALITY:</b> God has no favorite children (Acts 10:34-43) . . .	34
04.16	7	<b>VERACITY:</b> God honors skepticism (John 20:19-31) . . . . .	41
04.23	8	<b>DISPLACEMENT:</b> God is our home (1 Peter 1:17-23) . . . . .	48
04.30	9	<b>RENEWAL:</b> God revives the weary soul (Psalm 23) . . . . .	55
05.07	10	<b>DELIVERANCE:</b> trust in God (Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16) . . . . .	62
05.14	11	<b>UNITY:</b> community in Jesus (John 14:15-21) . . . . .	69
05.21	12	<b>ASCENSION:</b> new beginning (Acts 1:6-14) . . . . .	76
05.28	13	<b>INCLUSIVITY:</b> the Lord’s people (Numbers 11:24-30) . . . . .	83

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## About the Quarter

We begin this spring quarter within the reflective mode to which the Lenten season beckons us.

Our opening lessons lead us down a Socratic path of asking hard questions concerning how we live out our faith.

This swath of the liturgical season is meant to prune and purge us of encumbrances that cloud our spiritual judgment and hinder our forward progress toward the cross. As we move into Eastertide, culminating at Pentecost, we are reminded of the power we have in God to face the demands and challenges of each day.

Our lessons call us to an active discipleship lived out in community, as we seek to welcome all into the household of God. We are invited to grow in the Spirit and be transformed daily into the image of Christ, whose resurrection power has already given us the victory.

## About the Writers

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### Vol. 2.3

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# ABIDING

## can we stay a little longer?

Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

—MATTHEW 17:4

### Introduction

The Transfiguration is one of the most important events in the life of Jesus, and it continues to have a powerful impact on the spirituality of practicing Christians. Taking Peter’s desire to remain on the mountaintop of human experience seriously, we ought to ask ourselves where we can experience God in the flux and change of our spiritual, emotional, and embodied lives. In doing so, we might find that while we are not promised an easy life, we are promised that God will accompany us throughout it all.

### Lesson Objectives

- To develop an understanding of the Transfiguration and its importance in theology and spirituality.
- To practice self-reflection about God’s presence in your life.
- To learn to see God as present in your life in good times and bad.

### Matthew 17:1-9 NRSV

1 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” 8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

## Into the Scripture

Matthew's gospel was written around 80 to 90 CE by an unnamed author. Ascribed to Matthew by long-standing tradition, scholars do not know who wrote the Gospel, but some think that it was not Matthew the disciple. Matthew's gospel forms part of the Synoptic Gospels, with Mark and Luke. Both Matthew and Luke use Mark as a source, along with another document referred to as Q, likely a sayings Gospel that has never been found by scholars. The author of the gospel of Matthew cleans up Mark's Greek and makes it less difficult to read.

Additionally, Matthew is highly concerned with showing continuity between the teachings of Jesus and Judaism, and the author avoids using the name of God in formulations such as the "Kingdom of God," instead opting for the "Kingdom of Heaven," out of deference to the Jewish tradition of not writing the name of God. Apart from the introduction and conclusion of the Gospel, Matthew is organized around five great discourses or sermons in which Jesus teaches at length. Matthew was highly prized by the early church, and it is for this reason that it is the first book of the New Testament.



The event described in this week's scriptural selection is called the Transfiguration, and it appears in all the Synoptic Gospels with very little variation in the narrative. In it, Jesus appears next to the figures of Moses and Elijah, two of the most important figures in the Jewish tradition. In doing so, Jesus both physically

and metaphorically takes his place among the great prophets of Judaism and gives physical representation to his claim in Matthew 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." In this understanding, Moses, the leader who led the Israelites out of Egypt and received then Ten Commandments, represents the Law, while Elijah, whose story is told in the books of Kings, represents the Prophets. Elijah's presence is also felt throughout Jesus' ministry, as the Messiah was



Matthew is highly concerned with showing continuity between the teachings of Jesus and Judaism.

foretold to only arrive after the second coming of Elijah (see Malachi 4:5-6).

For Christians, that second coming is distinctly related to John the Baptist, as Jesus confirms in the verses immediately following this week's selection: "Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.' Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist" (Matthew 17:11-13). The Transfiguration is also significant in that it features the voice of God's affirmation of Jesus: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5). God's affirmation directly mirrors and augments God's statement at Jesus' baptism (see Matthew 3:17). In doing so, the text makes a strong argument for Jesus' status as the Son of God, as God directly says as much twice in Matthew.

## Into the Lesson

The Transfiguration is one of the most important moments in Jesus' life and has been the subject of theological reflection since the very beginnings of the





church. For instance, the desert fathers and mothers, a group of ascetics and spiritual teachers in the third and fourth century CE that fled cities in search of silence and solace, were quite focused on the ways that the light that illuminated Christ might be experienced through spiritual practices in this world: Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him: Abba, as much as I am able, I practice a small rule, a little fasting, some prayer and meditation, and remain quiet and as much as possible I keep my thoughts clean. What else should I do? Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven, and his fingers became like ten torches of flame, and he said to him: If you wish, you can become all flame. That quest to “become all flame” had direct links to the desert fathers and mothers’ reflection on the Transfiguration, where Christ is illuminated by light and receives the blessing of God for the second time, with the first being his baptism.

A prayer used by today’s Orthodox Christians in the Feast of the Transfiguration’s liturgy states, “You were transformed on the Mount, O Christ God, / Revealing your glory to your disciples as far as they could bear it.” Jesus’ transformation is not simply a historical or theological reality with little relevance to today’s Christians. On the contrary, the light of transfiguration ought to have a direct impact on our lives of faith, as we too hope for God’s glory to be revealed, as far as we can bear it.

That last part—as far as we can bear it—is the most important phrase here. People were not made to experience the light of the mountaintop experience of Transfiguration for all time. We are people of ebb and flow. We journey in this world from mountaintop to

valley, never ceasing to change and hopefully grow. That unceasing change is the sole thing we can count on in life. But that does not mean we do not long for safe repose in the light of God in the same way that Peter desires to stay on the mountaintop. A witness to the Transfiguration, Peter makes that desire known in verse 4: “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” But just as swiftly as it began, the Transfiguration is over. The voice of God interrupts their reverie, and they are thrown to the ground in shock and fear. From there, they must venture down the mountain, where Jesus will eventually face persecution and death. The mountaintop experience cannot last.

This is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that scholars are unsure where exactly the famed mountaintop of the Transfiguration is. Most identified it as Mount Tabor; yet, there was likely a Roman fortress during Jesus’ time that would have made it impossible to be the site of the Transfiguration. There are several candidates for the “high mountain” mentioned in Scripture, but none are conclusive. In the same way, we cannot remain on a mountaintop or even go back to experience it—we must keep moving forward, ceaselessly in motion, and the mountaintops we visit are rarely the ones from our past.



We must keep moving forward, ceaselessly in motion, and the mountaintops we visit are rarely the ones from our past.



## Into Discipleship

The Transfiguration and Peter's response to it ought to give us pause to consider the ways that we have been accompanied by God through both the "high mountain[s]" of life and its dark valleys. One of the great benefits of age is that we can look back on our lives and see distinct times when we were guided or accompanied by a God whose love will not let us go. What seemed like chaotic or ill-fated experiences might give way to a more nuanced perspective as we see the ways that we were held by God throughout it all.

But to gain such perspective, we must first dedicate ourselves to the process of self-reflection. Can you recall a mountaintop moment in which you felt spiritually, emotionally, and physically exalted—a point of safety and gratitude for all the valleys that have come before it? Often when we have such experiences, we are not particularly focused on where and how God is acting in our lives, but in looking back, we might find that God was right there exulting with us or was a constant source of encouragement.

Likewise, can you recall a moment in which you felt spiritually, emotionally, and physically abandoned—a valley-point in your life's journey? In the same way that God can feel absent to us during jubilation when we are so focused on our own experience, God can feel equally absent in desolation. But in looking back we can see clearly that God was with us every step of the way. We are promised that God is with us even in "the valley of

the shadow of death" according to Psalm 23. That is an enduring promise that we can count on even when it feels as if all hope is lost. We are not promised that life will be easy, but we are promised that whatever we do, we will not do it alone.

There is a reason that so many medieval mystics moved to the mountains and to the desert to experience God's presence more fully—our word is loud, and unless we strive to pay attention to where God is working in our world, we are likely to miss God entirely. But we need not build a house on a mountaintop to visit God—we can illuminate our spiritual world with the light of Transfiguration by prayer practices that encourage reflection and that move us to consider the ways that God has been there for us and always will be.

It can be easy to think that our faith is a once-a-week affair—to imagine that we built God a house so that we can visit God there. But Barbara Brown Taylor invites us to consider the wrongheadedness of such an approach when she questions, "Do we build God a house so that we can choose when we go to see God? Do we build God a house in lieu of having God stay at ours?" This week's reflection ought to make you ponder when God is invited in your life, and when you make yourself available to God. If you take that challenge seriously, you might just find that we live in a God-drenched world, and that through all the changes that will doubtlessly attend your life, God is with you—always.



## Closing Prayer

Living God, we know that we oftentimes lose sight of your presence in our lives. Open our hearts and minds to be able to witness your splendor in the ups and downs of life, as we strive to wake to the hidden wholeness of life. Fill us with gratitude at the presence of your Spirit. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

- **Into the Scripture:** What is important about God’s affirmation of Jesus at his baptism and the Transfiguration? How did Jesus fulfill the Law and the Prophets, instead of abolishing them?
- **Into the Lesson:** What can we learn from the desert fathers and mothers and their insistence on quiet for finding God? Does it matter where the Transfiguration took place?
- **Into Discipleship:** How can you incorporate self-reflection into your prayer life? What are some ways we can encounter God outside of Sunday?



## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “The Transfiguration” by Sufjan Stevens:  
<https://youtu.be/9JsaE2yZ1Rs>
- “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus” by The Glorious Christ/SovereignGraceMusic:  
<https://youtu.be/F2tKVqZZiI4>
- “Surely the Presence of the Lord is in This Place” by The Woodlands Methodist Church:  
<https://youtu.be/c6ZOVBYxBJk>

### Media Options

Seeking to grow deeper in your spirituality? *“There’s a resource for that.”* The resources collection put together by the ABCUSA spiritual direction leaders includes a plethora of options that can help you grow in the love and light of God. Click on the resources tab at <https://www.abcspiritualformation.com/resources.html>.

### Activity Ideas

- **Group Study:** With other participants, review the resource list that is referenced above and consider choosing a book to study together as a group or with a partner.
- On a sheet of paper, chart the mountaintops and valleys of your life. Next to them, note where you did or did not experience God. Share your findings with the



other members of your Bible study group. When did you feel God was most present? When was God most absent? Compare your findings with one another.

## Poetry

“Transfiguration” by Malcolm Guite

“For that one moment, ‘in and out of time’,  
 On that one mountain where all moments meet,  
 The daily veil that covers the sublime  
 In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.  
 There were no angels full of eyes and wings  
 Just living glory full of truth and grace.  
 The Love that dances at the heart of things  
 Shone out upon us from a human face  
 And to that light the light in us leaped up,  
 We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,  
 A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope  
 Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.  
 Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar  
 Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.”

## Devotional Scriptures Year A Second Sunday in Lent Week of 03/05/23

### Sunday 03/05/23

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17;  
 John 3:1-17 or Matthew 17:1-9

### Monday 03/06/23

Psalm 128; Numbers 21:4-9; Hebrews 3:1-6

### Tuesday 03/07/23

Psalm 128; Isaiah 65:17-25; Romans 4:6-13

### Wednesday 03/08/23

Psalm 128; Ezekiel 36:22-32; John 7:53–8:11

### Thursday 03/09/23

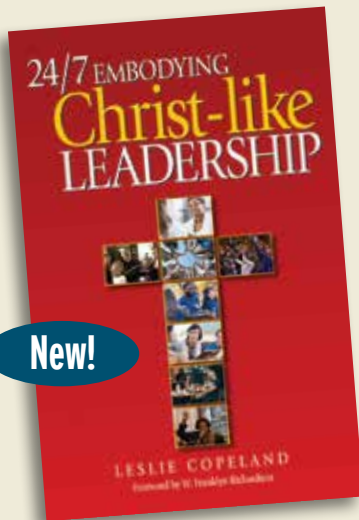
Psalm 95; Exodus 16:1-8; Colossians 1:15-23

### Friday 03/10/23

Psalm 95; Exodus 16:9-21; Ephesians 2:11-22

### Saturday 03/11/23

Psalm 95; Exodus 16:27-35; John 4:1-6



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# PERSECUTION COMPLEX

“is the LORD among us or not?”

The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?”

—EXODUS 17:2

## Introduction

After wandering in the desert and lacking water, the Israelites were at the end of their rope. They needed water, and they needed it now. Moreover, the lack of water had become emblematic of their questioning whether God actually cared for them and was with them on their great journey out of Egypt. Eventually, the place where they got water was named after their pivotal question, “Is the LORD among us or not?” You may ask the same question, and this reflection will help you find an answer to it.

## Lesson Objectives

- To understand the book of Exodus and its significance in the Hebrew Bible.
- To gain clarity about Christian privilege in America.
- To ask key questions about the American Christian desire for persecution.

### Exodus 17:1-7 NRSV

1 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2 The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” 3 But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” 4 So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are



almost ready to stone me.” 5 The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7 He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

## Into the Scripture

The book of Exodus comprises the second of the first five books of the Bible commonly referred to as the Pentateuch. While both Jewish and Christian tradition contends that Moses is the author of the book, scholars now argue that the text arose out of the Babylonian captivity of the sixth century CE. A religious minority in a foreign land, the Israelites were under extraordinary pressure to codify their most important stories and teachings, a process that resulted in the compilation of many books of the Tanakh, also called the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. In English, the book’s title refers to the flight from Egypt, but in Hebrew the name of the book is Shemōt, meaning “names,” a reference to the

first line of the book which refers to the names of the sons of Israel.

The book of Exodus has a strong claim to being the most important book in the Tanakh. In it, the foundational events of Israelite history take place—the ten plagues and the Passover feast, flight from Egypt, the Ten

Commandments establishing a covenant between God and Israel, the wandering in the desert, God’s dwelling in the tabernacle, and the Golden Calf—all appear in the text. As such, it tells the story of God’s relationship with the people of Israel, a story that continues to be told in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Throughout it all, God remains steadfastly committed to the Israelites, even as they often falter in keeping their portion of the covenantal agreement.



The Israelites were under extraordinary pressure to codify their most important stories.

Moses is the central figure in Exodus, and the book traces his beginnings as an infant, his miraculous deliverance from death by an Egyptian princess, his first acts in defiance of his upbringing in the murder of an Egyptian master who was beating an Israelite slave, eventual exile and marriage, and rise to leadership with his brother, Aaron, and sister, Miriam. A complicated figure, Moses leads the Israelites through their initial journey into the wilderness, all the while dealing with his “stiff-necked people” as they grumble, exult, and eventually find the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering in the desert. Crucially, that Promised Land was not uninhabited, and the Israelites wage war and commit genocide on the Canaanite population that was there. We must be careful that our holy stories do not obscure this central fact—the Israelites’ journey to Israel





was filled with bloodshed that they perceived as blessed and commanded by God.

Even so, Exodus offers a powerful narrative of a God who is on the side of the downtrodden and oppressed and who acts in history on behalf of their liberation—a fact that liberation theologians like James Cone and Gustavo Gutierrez would build on in their development of liberation theology. Having gone through all of that, one might think that the book of Exodus's leading man would finally be allowed to enter the Promised Land. Instead, Moses is barred from ever setting foot in Israel, but is granted a glimpse of it from Mount Pisgah before he dies. The prophet who leads the people to their ultimate goal does not himself get to attain it.

## Into the Lesson

Moses' striking of the rock to produce water for thirsty Israelites has a few parallels in the Pentateuch, most notably a later narrative that scholars believe is a retelling of the same story in which Moses is instructed to speak to the stone in order to receive water, but instead strikes it. In Numbers, this event is what makes Moses ineligible to enter the Promised Land, with God stating, "Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them."

But it also has a deep connection to questions of how to lead people who doubt that same leadership. Time and time again, the Israelites lose their nerve and begin to doubt God's faithfulness. When they are getting ready to cross the Red Sea as they are pursued by the Egyptians, the Israelites complain, "Was it because

there were no graves in Egypt that you have led us out into this wilderness to die?" (Exodus 14:11). Confronted with hunger, they complain that they would rather have stayed in Egypt, where at least they could eat and be filled (see Exodus 16:1-3).

When confronted with the reports of the twelve spies, they again complain with bitter lament, "If only we had died in Egypt or in the wilderness. Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword and watch our wives and children become victims?" (see Number 14:2-3a). Needless to say, the Israelites were not beyond doubting their future and God's presence in their lives. In each instance, God shows up despite the grumbling—providing food from heaven in the form of manna and quail, and water from stones, parting the Red Sea, and giving them the land of Israel.

But the grumbling of the Israelites takes on a more personal and relatable tone in Exodus 17:1-7, where in addition to the typical set of questions—"Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"—Moses also appends a relatable question to the naming of Massah and Meribah: "Is the LORD among us or not?" That question has a direct relevance to our spiritual experiences today, where we may feel that God is not accompanying us on the great journey of life, cheering our endeavors and granting success in the same way that the Israelites experienced.



Exodus offers a powerful narrative of a God  
who is on the side of the downtrodden.



But where the Israelites of the Bible were quick to see God's hand in genocide, so we have to ask how good we are at spotting God's activity in the world. Just because it feels as if God is fighting on our behalf does not necessarily mean that it is true. In the same way, just because we feel that God is not with us in our current endeavors does not mean that it is true. In the biblical example, we have the benefit of several thousand years' worth of distance and perspective that helps us understand that God would not have delighted in the genocide of the Canaanites. In our own lives, getting that distance and perspective can be harder, but it is very much worth it.

## Into Discipleship

One of the ways that Christians often identify God's presence is through persecution. In John 15:18, Jesus instructs his followers, "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you." And the author of 2 Timothy writes, "All who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (3:12). Likewise, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:11-12 gives the ultimate foundation for this belief: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." With the biblical mandate for persecution so present in the New Testament, it is no wonder that Christians in the richest country on earth and who enjoy vast privilege

for their religion sometimes feel pressure to play into the persecution complex where there may be none.

Christians often seem to take any perceived persecution as a sign that they are doing God's will. That view can wrongly incentivize feelings of persecution and "othering," even when they are completely manufactured. Their thinking is "to be persecuted means to be close to God." Thirty-three percent of Americans, regardless of their religious affiliation, believe that Christians face discrimination due to their religion according to a 2017 PRRI poll. At the same time, some 45 percent of Americans want America to be a "Christian nation," although there is some disagreement about what such a term means, according to a 2022 PEW Research poll.

That combination—a manufactured sense of being discriminated against combined with a desire for America to be a Christian nation—is a dangerous one. Christians hold much power in this country, which takes their holy days as its national holidays, expects others to be literate in their rituals, and is majority Christian. Too often, what Christians mean when they feel persecuted or discriminated against is that their views are rejected, debated, or ignored. When Christians are used to having profound privilege in society, rejection of their ideas feels like persecution when, in reality, it means that Christians are free to present their views and others are free to accept or reject them.

The desire to wrongly label events as persecution ought to give us pause. Why do some Christians feel like they need to suffer for the faith in order to be close to



God? Is it that wealth and privilege that make it difficult to come into God's presence? Whatever the reasons, if we hunger and thirst for narratives of Christian persecution, we must ask ourselves why, and commit ourselves to serious introspection and a search for the truth about why some Christians may seem focused on presenting themselves as an embattled religious minority, when there is considerable evidence to the contrary in the United States.

Scripture tells us the real way to know the answer to the question at the heart of this text and the Christian experience: "Is the LORD among us or not?" It is

through service to the least of these and compassion not only for our co-religionists but also for the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden—those who are truly persecuted in this world. Scripture teaches us that if we want to be close to Christ, then we must first give up any false delusions of persecution and instead advocate on behalf of (and dwell with) those who are truly persecuted. For American Christians, that is the only way forward—not persecution complexes and delusions of Christian nationalism. Only by embracing a vocation centered on the least of these can we move beyond misapprehension and into the love and light of God.

“

Only by embracing a vocation centered on the least of these can we move beyond misapprehension and into the love and light of God.

## #InThisTogether: Ministry in Times of Crisis

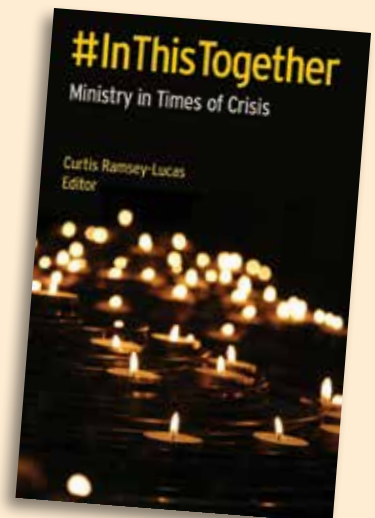
Curtis Ramsey-Lucas, Editor

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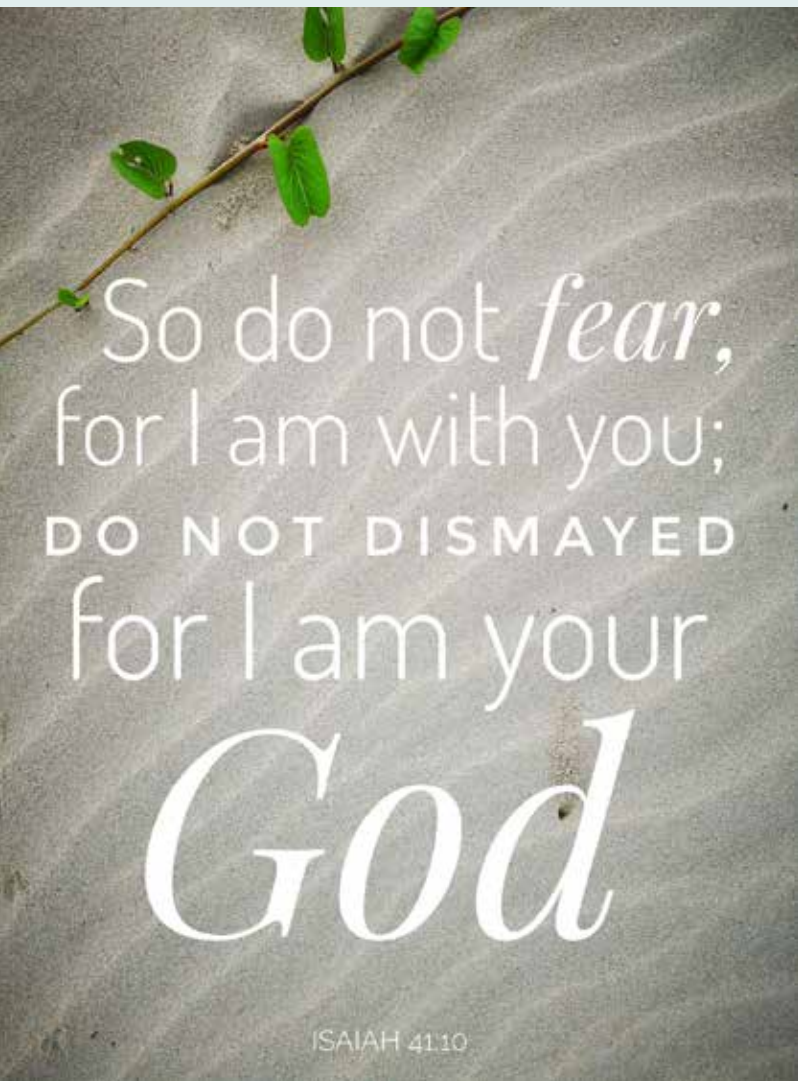


## Closing Prayer

God of the Desert, help us to know in our hearts that we are accompanied by you, no matter the difficulties we face. Draw us closer, not to delusions of persecution, but to the task that you set before us—service to others. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

- **Into the Scripture:** How can we know God is present in history? Do you find God’s endorsement of the slaughter of Canaanites problematic? Why or why not?
- **Into the Lesson:** How reliable are our feelings when it comes to spirituality? Just because it feels that God has abandoned or advocated for us, does that make it true?
- **Into Discipleship:** What are some ways that other religions are persecuted in America? What are some of the ways that Christianity is privileged in America?



## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “So You Wanna Go Back to Egypt” by Keith Green: [https://youtu.be/o\\_No9sI69oQ](https://youtu.be/o_No9sI69oQ)
- “Asleep in the Light” by Keith Green: <https://youtu.be/6KVoThupkPA>
- “To Obey Is Better than Sacrifice” by Keith Green: [https://youtu.be/\\_xNHlRXnFyg](https://youtu.be/_xNHlRXnFyg)

### Activity Ideas

- Keith Green’s lyrics in the three songs above are very compelling. Take time to listen together to all three selections back-to-back as they are listed. Then discuss aspects of his message about discipleship.
- Take a look at the “Watch List” maintained by Open Doors that details places where Christians are persecuted for their faith in the world. Choose a country, and share with your group what you learned about actual Christian persecution and whether it gave you perspective about Christianity in America. <https://www.opendoors.org.au/world-watch-list/>

### Poetry/Song

“The Song of the Sea” – Exodus 15:1-18  
(One of the oldest parts of Scripture, noted for its archaic Hebrew)

- “I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.  
2 The LORD is my strength and my might,  
and he has become my salvation;  
this is my God, and I will praise him;  
my father’s God, and I will exalt him.  
3 The LORD is a warrior;  
the LORD is his name.  
4 Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he cast into the sea;  
his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea.  
5 The floods covered them;  
they went down into the depths like a stone.  
6 Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power—  
your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy.  
7 In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your  
adversaries;  
you sent out your fury; it consumed them like

- stubble.
- 8 At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up;  
the floods stood up in a heap;  
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.
- 9 The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake,  
I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of  
them.  
I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.'
- 10 You blew with your wind, the sea covered them;  
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.
- 11 Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?  
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,  
awesome in splendor, doing wonders?
- 12 You stretched out your right hand,  
the earth swallowed them.
- 13 In your steadfast love you led the people whom you  
redeemed;  
you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.
- 14 The peoples heard, they trembled;  
pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia.
- 15 Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed;  
trembling seized the leaders of Moab;  
all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away.
- 16 Terror and dread fell upon them;  
by the might of your arm, they became still as a stone  
until your people, O LORD, passed by,  
until the people whom you acquired passed by.
- 17 You brought them in and planted them on the moun-  
tain of your own possession,  
the place, O LORD, that you made your abode,

the sanctuary, O LORD, that your hands have  
established.  
18 The LORD will reign forever and ever."

## Devotional Scriptures Year A Third Sunday in Lent Week of 03/12/23

### Sunday 03/12/23

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

### Monday 03/13/23

Psalm 81; Genesis 24:1-27; 2 John 1:1-13

### Tuesday 03/14/23

Psalm 81; Genesis 29:1-14; 1 Corinthians 10:1-4

### Wednesday 03/15/23

Psalm 81; Jeremiah 2:4-13; John 7:14-31, 37-39

### Thursday 03/16/23

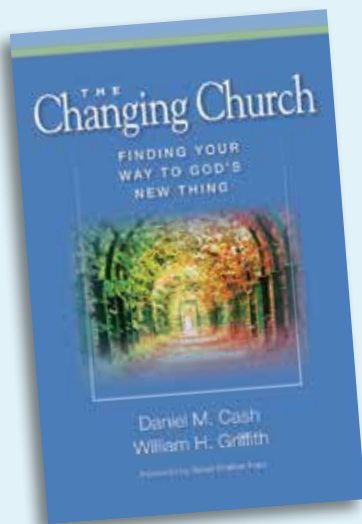
Psalm 23; 1 Samuel 15:10-21; Ephesians 4:25-32

### Friday 03/17/23

Psalm 23; 1 Samuel 15:22-31; Ephesians 5:1-9

### Saturday 03/18/23

Psalm 23; 1 Samuel 15:32-34; John 1:1-9



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by Daniel M. Cash and William H. Griffith

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# DISCERNMENT

## knowing what is pleasing to God

... for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

—EPHESIANS 5:14

### Introduction

Ephesians is an epistle with many spiritual strengths, but it also includes more difficult passages, such as those condoning slavery. As such, it is a case study for how to wrestle with an ancient text full of wisdom that also has aspects that can disappoint us. One of the concepts that Ephesians 5:8-14 introduces is that of discernment. How do you practice it? How do you listen for God’s guidance in your life? In this study, readers will be introduced to basic ideas about discernment and receive tips on how to hear God’s still, small voice.

### Lesson Objectives

- To learn to hear God’s voice better in daily life.
- To learn about discernment.
- To better understand how to wrestle with difficult parts of Scripture.

### Ephesians 5:8-14 NRSV

8 For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— 9 for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. 10 Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; 13 but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, 14 for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

## Into the Scripture

The Epistle to the Ephesians is clear about who wrote it and where it was sent. The first verse of the book states clearly that it was from “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus.” Recent scholarship is less sure of Paul’s authorship, calling the epistle “Deutero-Pauline,” which leaves open the possibility that Paul authored the letter while at the same time noting the fact that his authorship is contested within the scholarly community. If it was not written by Paul, it was certainly written by someone who revered his ministry. Authorship was a more fluid notion in antiquity than it is now, and while one might call such works forgeries, the term that scholars use is pseudepigrapha. That term denotes that in the ancient world there were several reasons why one might claim to be Paul, including honoring his theological tradition and reverence for his legacy after his passing. Most scholars date the epistle to between 80 and 100 CE.

Paul writes to the church at Ephesus a message of unity in the body of Christ: “but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:15-16). In doing so, he instructs the church to work together and move towards sanctification—not as an individual endeavor, but as a corporate one.

And that makes sense because the format of the letter—or more fancily, epistle—is not a solo endeavor, either. These letters were meant to be read out loud to the entire congregation, to be heard audibly from a speaker. Indeed, the concept of silent reading itself did not gain popularity until the seventeenth century. In Augustine’s Confessions, the author makes a point of noting that Ambrose read silently. Scholars think that the fact that Augustine felt the need to point out Ambrose’s habit of silent reading as



Paul instructs the church to work together and move towards sanctification.

strange means that almost all readers of texts spoke the words aloud as they read them.

While Ephesians contains much edifying material, there is one verse that deserves mention for the ways that it supported the despicable institution of slavery: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ” (Ephesians 6:5). Not only does it support the institution of slavery through its lack of criticism of the institution, but it also sacralizes it, instructing the enslaved to obey slaveholders in the same way that they ought to obey Christ. Reading this passage ought to make someone pause and consider the ways that Scripture can err—in this case, slaveholders and Christ are laudably commended in a single sentence. Such statements would go on to have a major effect, as ministers and laypeople in the Confederacy cited the Scripture as biblical support for slavery.

## Into the Lesson

When I was serving as the master of ceremonies for a charity event in the town in which I pastor, I wrote some brief remarks but decided to give them as I do a sermon—extemporaneously. In those remarks, I used one of the oldest images that human beings have for good and evil: I thanked those who were gathered there for being “a light in the darkness.” As soon as it left my lips, I wish I could have had it back. I apologized for using that image because, while it might seem like a small thing, the connection of “light equals good and





dark equals bad” shapes our language in ways that can contribute to harm. Darkness comes to represent sin, despair, dirtiness, and a host of other scourges. Symbols rarely stay symbols, and in a country wrestling with white supremacy, the lazy use of such symbols only serves to reinforce the denigration of blackness and celebration of whiteness that is our nation’s original sin.

So, when I read this text in Ephesians, I wonder about the symbolism of light and dark that lies at the center of it. The author tells the church at Ephesus to “take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness,” while light is made synonymous with Christ in the closing verse. That should not surprise us, as the metaphor appears time and time again in Scripture. Even before Scripture was written down, the ancient near eastern religions of thousands of years ago also deployed the light-dark dichotomy.

With such a long history and the obvious power of such an image, are there ways that we might begin to think about alternative metaphors that celebrate darkness and therefore blackness? How can we celebrate the holy darkness in our experiences? These are all open questions for me—and I hope for you—as we think about our tradition and the ways that it continues to shape language and reality in many parts of the world. Beyond Scripture reading as a spiritual practice—our interpretations have real implications.

We have already seen how one part of Paul’s letter to Ephesians is plainly wrong—its support for the institution of slavery. But one question that I often ask myself is this: what happens to Scripture when we start questioning it and acknowledging the ways that it does not

live up to the standards to which we hold it? Does that mean that it lacks power, or that I am saying Scripture is not inspired? Far from it—Scripture must be read with an understanding of the context in which it was written.

Being a reader of an ancient text like the Bible means that we make meaning along with what the actual words say. Instead of merely receiving them, we are part of a great tradition of wrestling with the text, searching out meaning, and asking searching questions. Asking the questions is part of what it means to be a Christian. Indeed, as we gather around the great campfire of Scripture, we are most often informed on how to ask better questions, as opposed to finding concrete answers. Faith ought to make us more interesting, nuanced truth seekers.

## Into the Discipleship

Seeking truth is no easy thing. Indeed, to seek truth, Christians must practice discernment, which John of Damascus, a seventh-century monk, called “greater than any other virtue and . . . the queen and crown of all the virtues.” But how do we discern the truth in a world that is often chaotic and has seemingly taken a post-truth turn? While many seem to think that whether something feels true or not is the ultimate test of its



Beyond Scripture reading as a spiritual practice—  
our interpretations have real implications.





veracity, the discernment of what is actually true is a spiritual discipline. That is what the author of Ephesians is trying to get to when he writes, “Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.” Try—make an effort. There is no guarantee of success, but the only way to find any success is through discernment as a spiritual practice.

One of the tests for truth that I use is the following: does it make me uncomfortable? The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has one of the best characterizations of the openness that discernment requires: “Usually when we hear or read something new, we just compare it to our own ideas. If it is the same, we accept it and say that it is correct. If it is not, we say it is incorrect. In either case, we learn nothing.” Discernment is the opposite of merely confirming a previously held belief. Jesus tells us that the truth will set us free, but that truth will first make us uncomfortable, in my experience.

Many of the truths that we are called to discern and name fall under this category: the devastation of our environment, the white supremacy at the heart of American life, and the fact that Christian virtue and practice have not protected churches from becoming hotbeds of discord and division. We can cultivate that openness through prayer, asking God to help us in

discerning things large and small. Do you pray when a major decision is before you, such as a change in career or family life?

But discernment also takes time. One of the facts of being human is that we do not like to inhabit the in-betweenness of decision making or awaiting outcomes for too long. We would like to act, but God does not operate on our time schedules. We must make time to hear the still, small voice of God. Do you make time for discernment, to cultivate the openness that you need to hear God’s voice? In making time every day to be still and listen in a prayer, meditation, or mindfulness practice, we can more accurately hear a God who is still speaking. Are we listening?

It might help to think about a decision or change as opening a discernment period in your life. Discernment periods are unbounded time slots in which we commit to not decide, to dwell in the in-betweenness of life, and listen for God. Ideally, our whole lives would be lived in a cycle of discernment, but many times we need this explicit framing for a month, year, or more to make the best decisions possible. With God, we might choose slower, but we know that we are accompanied in whatever choice we make.

## Closing Prayer

Living God, speak into our lives a word of power. Embolden us to pursue your purpose for our lives; help us to seek justice, and to be followers of the Way, wherever that leads us. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

- **Into the Scripture:** What do you make of Ephesians' condoning of slavery? How do we wrestle with a text that has wisdom and can also make us feel repulsed?
- **Into the Lesson:** Where do you use light/dark images for good and evil? Can you think of alternatives?
- **Into Discipleship:** How can you change your life to better hear God's voice?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- "Here I Am, Lord" by Eric Tom: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcXOkht8w7c>
- "Draw Me Close" by Michael W. Smith: [https://youtu.be/7d\\_oYr-P16M](https://youtu.be/7d_oYr-P16M)
- "Be Thou My Vision" by Audrey Assad: <https://youtu.be/Optrm7lF16s>

### Activity Ideas

Take a snapshot of your day. Is there any fallow time where you can sit and hear God's voice? How might you structure your day to allow for God to speak into your life? Share your ideas with others in your group.

### Poetry

"Meditation for the Silence of the Morning" by Adam Clay:

I wake myself imagining the shape  
of the day and where I will find  
myself within it. Language is not often  
in that shape,

but sentences survive somehow  
through the islands of dark matter,  
the negative space often more important  
than the positive.  
Imagine finding you look at the world  
completely different upon waking one day.  
You do not know if this is permanent.  
Anything can change, after all,  
for how else would you find yourself  
in this predicament or this opportunity,  
depending on the frame? A single thought  
can make loneliness seem frighteningly new.  
We destroy the paths of rivers to make room for the sea.

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year A Fourth Sunday in Lent

### Week of 03/19/23

#### Sunday 03/19/23

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14;  
John 9:1-41

#### Monday 03/20/23

Psalm 146; Isaiah 59:9-19; Acts 9:1-20

#### Tuesday 03/21/23

Psalm 146; Isaiah 42:14-21; Colossians 1:9-14

#### Wednesday 03/22/23

Psalm 146; Isaiah 60:17-22; Matthew 9:27-34

#### Thursday 03/23/23

Psalm 130; Ezekiel 1:1-3; 2:8-3:3; Revelation 10:1-11

#### Friday 03/24/23

Psalm 130; Ezekiel 33:10-16; Revelation 11:15-19

#### Saturday 03/25/23

Psalm 130; Ezekiel 36:8-15; Luke 24:44-53  
*Annunciation of the Lord:* Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 45 or  
Psalm 40:5-10; Hebrews 10:4-10; Luke 1:26-38

# POWER

## is there a God like unto our God?

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,  
and with him is great power to redeem.

—PSALM 130:7b

### Introduction

Psalm 130 invites us to consider our lowest points, but it is also a psalm of hope. Originally written as a communal song, this text belongs to a category of psalms called Songs of Ascent, which had specific ritual uses in ancient Israel. Today, these psalms continue to be a vibrant part of liturgies. But how ought we think about the power of God to save? Is God strong like a tank or any other weapon of war? Or are there better images for thinking about God's power?

### Lesson Objectives

- To learn more about Songs of Ascent.
- To think creatively about God's strength and power.
- To reaffirm that God is always with us despite how we may feel.

### Psalm 130 NRSV

1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. 2 Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! 3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? 4 But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. 5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; 6 my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. 7 O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. 8 It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.



## Into the Scripture

The book of Psalms was meant to be sung and often contains musical annotations and attributions to who wrote each psalm. The name of the book comes from the Greek and indicates both the instrumental nature of the Psalms and the words that would accompany the music. You can think about the book of Psalms as an ancient compendium of lyrics of top hits, or a hymnbook with the musical notes missing. These songs make use of several different techniques to convey their message poetically and beautifully, but the most important of these is parallelism, in which the Psalms repeat an idea using different words in sequential lines. For instance, Psalm 27:1 is emblematic of this technique: “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” While many have ascribed the authorship of the Psalms to David, this is probably pseudepigraphal. If not, some psalms are either unattributed or indicate an authorship other than David.

Psalm 130 belongs to the category of Psalms called Songs of Ascent or Pilgrim Songs. These songs may have been sung when ascending steps in the Temple or on the road to Jerusalem during important religious ceremonies. One of the characteristics that Psalm 130

shares with other psalms in this category is its focus on hope. Nothing is impossible for God, and even in the darkest of situations, God is present, ready to redeem.

The Talmud, a collection of rabbinical commentaries on the Hebrew Bible and Jewish Law, says

that David composed the songs of ascent to calm waters that threatened the foundation of the Temple: “He wrote the sacred name on an earthenware shard and cast it into the depths, and the waters in the depths subsided sixteen thousand cubits. When he saw that they subsided excessively, he said: The higher the waters in the aquifers, the moister and more fertile the soil of the world. He recited the fifteen Songs of the Ascents and elevated them fifteen thousand cubits, and established them at a



Even in the darkest of situations, God is present, ready to redeem.

depth of one thousand cubits” (Sukkah 53b).

Songs of Ascent continue to have an impact on Jewish and Christian worship and practices. For instance, many Jews place Psalm 121 in the labor and delivery room in a petition for mercy and place it in the newborn’s carriage after delivery. Songs of Ascent are also used in Christian liturgies in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic liturgies, where they continue to be sung in a tradition dating back thousands of years in which the faithful recited the Psalms on an ongoing and comprehensive basis. Indeed, books of the Psalms, called psalters, were one of the most common books in medieval Europe. Richly illuminated, these texts contain great beauty and were not only used for religious devotion but were also how pupils learned to read. As such, they placed the Psalms at the center of Christian devotional and literary life during the Middle Ages.

## Into the Lesson

Psalm 130 starts with a cry “out of the depths.” According to Mitchell Dahood, those depths are meant to stand in for the “nethermost regions of Sheol,” and he notes that similar appellations are used in both the Psalms and the Prophets. Sheol is a flexible concept in ancient Jewish thought, but it most commonly refers to the abode of the dead—both the righteous and unrighteous—but it also sometimes seems to indicate a place of punishment. Needless to say, the author of Psalm 130 is not in a good place, and that makes sense because from Sheol only





God can intervene in the author's situation—a fact that is reiterated time and time again in the text.

Even though the author is in the depths and in Sheol, he does not give up. He raises his voice, and asks God to listen in humble supplication. Note the parallelism in verse 2 that emphasizes the voice of the author and the hope that God will listen to him: “Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!” Even in the greatest depths of our lives, we may still cry out to God for succor and help. In another parallelism in verse 6, the author explains the way that they hunger for God's salvation, even more than those who await the dawn: “my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.” Those who have been in the depths of suffering like the author need no explanation of what it means to “wait for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning”—it is an all-consuming need for God's presence.

And that call, that waiting, is answered! While trapped in Sheol, there is only one being that comes to the aid of the psalmist—God. God is revealed to be the one who possesses the “great power to redeem” (verse 7). Psalm 130, like all songs of ascent, is a song of hope, and the psalmist instructs readers and singers to “hope in the LORD” because in God there is “steadfast love” (verse 7). That love is unconditional and never fails. Unlike human love, it can be counted on to rescue us even in the depths of Sheol. Crucially, that power is not used for ill. As the psalmist puts it, “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?” (verse 3). Praise be to God that power is not used against us; instead, God acts as

our Savior, our friend, our bulwarks against danger. In this psalm, God is strong to save, and that power is used to pluck the psalmist out of Sheol. That act of divine mercy shows us the character of a God who is filled with love for God's creation. Thanks be to God!

## Into Discipleship

On March 16, 1897, in Chicago, a curious scene was taking place. There were two people standing near one another, with one pointing a gun at the other. Everyone is watching these two Polish immigrants, including the chief of police, investors, and a priest. You could be forgiven for thinking that it was an honor duel or an attempted execution. The would-be executioner fires a shot, and the victim keels over as if dead, but miraculously gets back up again. The scene did not demonstrate anything nefarious—indeed, it was a demonstration of a new, life-saving technology: the bulletproof vest. The thing that I find most interesting about this bulletproof vest is that it is made of silk and only about a centimeter thick. This property was discovered earlier in the century when a breast-pocket handkerchief was shown to have slowed the impact of a bullet significantly in an autopsy.



Praise be to God that power is not used against us; instead, God acts as our Savior.



One might think that steel or some other thick metal would do a better job, but the key part is that silk, while appearing flimsy and unable to do much, is in fact flexible in just the right ways to stop bullets. Its strength cannot be overstated, and it led to the use of fibers to stop bullets, like Kevlar. It was strong but in ways that people did not expect—unconventionally strong.

That story is an introduction to how we might think about God in our lives. Because we read time and time again of the strength of the divine, we see that God is strong to save, that God will save with God's strong right hand, that God created everything, that the wicked will perish, that the righteous prevail, and that God is in control. But I do not see those stereotypical characterizations of God's strength in our world. Do you? Perhaps I am a pessimist, but when I look out into the world, I see chaos, I see the strong abuse the weak, I see a world on the brink. And so, where is this strong God that we are seeking? Where is that God that can drag the psalmist up out of the pit in our reading today?

God is not a tank or other weapon of war, rolling through our lives—such a conception of God's power gives the wrong optics. I would suggest to you that

God is strong like that silk in the story. God is flexible, nimble, surprising, but vulnerable—not like steel or rock. God needs our hands to come into being. Dorothee Sölle, a feminist theologian in post-war Germany, tells a story after the Holocaust of trying to think through where God was. She was attending a conference where one person said that God must have willed the Holocaust because God is powerful and in control, and that is how this person understood God. You see, if we map our visions of strength onto God, it can get us into trouble. But Dorothee Sölle said that she thought that God was weak during the Holocaust because God had no friends through which God might have acted. There was no one to be the hands and feet of the Spirit, no one to make manifest the strength of God. God's strength is never about the individual strong man on horseback. God's strength is shared and corporate, and communal.

So, instead of wondering where God is, we might ask ourselves where WE are. Are we doing all we can to bring people up from the depths of despair? Is our faith moving us to pursue God's vision—the Kingdom of God?



## Closing Prayer

Holy One, you are strong to save, but teach us how to think of that strength in new ways. Give us some of your power as we seek to help others. Make us like silk. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

- **Into the Scripture:** How does understanding psalms as music change how you approach them?
- **Into the Lesson:** When have you been “in the depths”? Did you feel accompanied by God?
- **Into Discipleship:** What are some of your images for the power of God?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “Rock of Ages” by Chris Rice:  
<https://youtu.be/CuYhZS7zlhM>
- “My Hope Is Built” by Adam Wheatley:  
<https://youtu.be/16vEKk3UXYQ>
- “There Is a Redeemer” by Sara Groves:  
<https://youtu.be/n2WYMiwxafE>

## Activity Ideas

- Take a sheet of paper and fold it in half five times. Ask a group member to try to rip it. You probably could not. Consider the ways that paper is strong. What makes it strong? In what context is it strong? What are ways that we can be spiritually fortified?
- Close the class session by listening to the Choir of Kings College of Cambridge perform the “Anglican Chant: Psalm 130 (De profundis)”:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJvZ8qzW0e8>

## Poetry

“Out of the Depths” by Charles Hughes  
(January 29, 2021, Agere contra) —Ignatius of Loyola  
(For an understanding of Agere contra:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLvKmGV-Cok>)

God isn't love or isn't God. This is,  
For doubt, its royal flush: God can't be both.  
I'm caught up in the logic and the mood,  
Hemmed in by facts, one fact, the world's abyss  
Of suffering and injustice, how it's loath  
To love: no God or else one far from good.  
Pray, then, to learn love's work from Christ, to trust  
The rumored beauty of this world renewed,  
Which—like some long-lost heirloom tablecloth,  
Once wedding gift, lace linen, still discussed—  
Doesn't show up but should.



## Devotional Scriptures

### Year A Fifth Sunday in Lent

### Week of 03/26/23

#### Sunday 03/26/23

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

#### Monday 03/27/23

Psalm 143; 1 Kings 17:17-24; Acts 20:7-12

#### Tuesday 03/28/23

Psalm 143; 2 Kings 4:18-37; Ephesians 2:1-10

#### Wednesday 03/29/23

Psalm 143; Jeremiah 32:1-9, 36-41; Matthew 22:23-33

#### Thursday 03/30/23

Psalm 31:9-16; 1 Samuel 16:11-13; Philippians 1:1-11

#### Friday 03/31/23

Psalm 31:9-16; Job 13:13-19; Philippians 1:21-30

#### Saturday 04/01/23

Psalm 31:9-16; Lamentations 3:55-66; Mark 10:32-34

“

God will save with God’s strong right hand.

### Rest in the Storm, 20th Anniversary Edition: Self-Care Strategies for Clergy and Other Caregivers

by Kirk Byron Jones

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# CRISIS

## who is this man?

The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

—MATTHEW 21:9

### Introduction

Most parades are usually small-town affairs filled with civic pride. However, parades sponsored by hate groups pit those who agree with their bigotry with counter-protests by those who deplore it. Similarly, inauguration parades both evoke joy from those who celebrate the newly elected and bitterness from those who mourn it. In 2000, the New York Yankees reveled in a ticker tape parade for their World Series victory, while the vanquished Mets felt disdain. A parade’s effect is determined by what the crowd thinks of the people or values being honored. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, some attendees exhibited unrestrained joy, while others seethed with contempt. Christ’s arrival forced everyone into a crisis to decide how they would respond to him. We face that same crisis as we examine Christ’s processional and are asked, “Who is this man?”

### Lesson Objectives

- To clarify Matthew’s description of the identity and purpose of Jesus.
- To explain how Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday forced a crisis of decision upon all who witnessed it.
- To reveal the crisis of decision that arises for all people when faced with Matthew’s depiction of Christ.

### Matthew 21:1-11 NRSV

1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” 4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 5 “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” 6 The disciples went and



did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” 10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” 11 The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

## Into the Scripture

Matthew probably composed his gospel around AD 80, some ten to fifteen years after Jerusalem fell to Roman armies. By then, Christians understood that the synagogue would not be their spiritual home. Rather than co-opting many Judaic traditions, they rightly sought to form new faith traditions. Matthew was therefore intent on explaining the life of Christ in ways that gave support to the new movement but also reaffirmed Jesus’ scriptural and liturgical ties to the Jewish faith. Matthew presents Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, prophesied throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, who was ready to



welcome Jews and Gentiles into a new community of faith. Matthew knew this way of presenting Jesus would force people throughout Israel and the Mediterranean world into a crisis. They had to decide whether to embrace Jesus as Messiah and Lord or reject his claims and

relegate him to the long list of Messianic pretenders who were to be scorned.

In keeping with this purpose, Matthew describes Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as fulfilling the ancient prophecy of Zechariah. Around 538 BC, Zechariah arrived in Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon to help rebuild the Jewish faith community. The first eight chapters of his book call those returning from exile to reconstruct the Temple, put the worship of God in the center of their communal life, and treat one another with respect, truthfulness, justice, and compassion. Zechariah’s sermons

“

Matthew presents Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, prophesied throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

were effective, and the community was rebuilt. He then envisioned a coming day when the new community of faith would be ruled over by a king who would descend from the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:4) while riding on a humble donkey (Zechariah 9:9).

Matthew references Zechariah’s prophecy in his description of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Evidently, Matthew misread Zechariah to think Jesus would arrive on the backs of both a female donkey and her colt. Probably Zechariah used Hebrew parallelism and meant the Messianic king would arrive on a “donkey, even a colt,” not “a donkey and a colt.” Regardless, Matthew’s intention was to connect Jesus’ arrival with the ancient prophecy. Matthew described that the people’s response to Jesus’ descent into Jerusalem began as a joyful

celebration for the deliverance that Christ would bring to massive turmoil on the part of the leaders in the city.

The crowd that accompanied Jesus into town announced his arrival with shouts of “Hosanna” and sang out “Son of David, the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” The joyful proclamation of praise was drawn from Psalm 118:25-26, a liturgy expressing gratitude for deliverance from an enemy. The crowd also threw their own cloaks on the ground before Jesus as recognition of his Messianic status (2 Kings 9:13).

Once the crowd was in town, however, the response to the Lord’s arrival changed drastically. The processional threw the entire town into turmoil. The word translated as “turmoil” was the Greek word *seio*, from which we get the word *seismic*. Matthew uses the same word to describe the rumbling of the earth at the crucifixion (see Matthew 27:51) and the earthquake that occurred when the angel rolled away the stone on Easter morning (see Matthew 28:2). The gospel writer does not mean that a physical earthquake occurred but that those who opposed Jesus shook in rage and fear to see him arrive to such acclaim.

When the less-informed citizens of Jerusalem saw both the celebration in the triumphant entry and the shaken reaction of their leaders, they asked those who seemed to know, “Who is this?” The crowd answered with a slightly less majestic identity for Jesus. They simply called him a prophet from Nazareth in Galilee. In describing the drama of the moment, Matthew presents the listeners of his day and the readers down through the ages with a crisis. Is Christ the Messiah, the son of David that comes in the name of the Lord, or simply a prophet from Nazareth, or a false prophet who threatens to lead the gullible astray?



## Into the Lesson

The world remains in crisis over the identity of Jesus. Increasingly, people in the United States consider Jesus to be a good man with some good things to say who stood for peace and love. Rarely does anyone dislike Jesus (though they may have animosity for Christ’s church), but they lack faith in him as Savior and Lord. Even within the church, opinions are varied. Many view Jesus as a protector of the nation who stands for conservative values, Republican politics, and the rights of evangelicals to spread their faith in all arenas of life. Other equally devout believers describe Jesus as espousing liberal values, siding with the Democrats, requiring tolerance of diverse viewpoints and resolute against nationalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and war. Still others argue that Jesus was a spiritual teacher, interested in solely spiritual matters. Their Jesus saves souls, then directs the redeemed to tithe, pray, attend worship, serve the church, read the Bible, and share their faith with other lost souls. All other pursuits, they claim, are beyond Christ’s interest and purview.

Matthew presents his own view of who Jesus is by describing Christ’s entry into Jerusalem as what Dr. Douglas R. A. Hare called an “acted parable.”<sup>1</sup> Matthew



The world remains in crisis over the identity  
of Jesus.

argues that every component of the Triumphal Entry was designed by Christ to reference passages from the Hebrew Bible to reveal his true identity. Matthew reports that the crowd who accompanied Jesus as he entered Jerusalem shouted “Hosanna . . . Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” This phrase, drawn from a liturgy of Thanksgiving in Psalm 118:25-26, declares that Jesus has been sent from God. Jesus did not dream up his vocation or generate his own mission; he comes in the name of the Creator of the Cosmos.

“Hosanna” means “save us now.” When the people in Jerusalem shouted the word, they probably hoped Jesus would liberate them from Roman rule—but the plea is not meant to secure a national victory. Nations are not usually communities of faith. They can be complex entities full of ambition, violence, materialism, idolatry, self-interest, and power. They may give lip service to God but when it comes to making decisions about the resources in their land, nations rarely pursue God’s agenda. A generation ago, Reinhold Niebuhr said it best when he wrote, “It is a question whether nations, as such, can ever have any other but a semi-pagan arrogance.”<sup>2</sup>

The enemies Christ came to deliver us from are universal, institutional, personal, and spiritual. They include hatred, bigotry, death, physical and sexual abuse, deceitfulness, genocide, oppression of the vulnerable, addictions, anxieties, the ruination of the planet, and our passion for retaliation rather than forgiveness and reconciliation. Matthew says that by riding a donkey into Jerusalem, Jesus referenced Zechariah 9:9 as revealing more about his identity; Zechariah wrote (in essence), “Behold your King coming on a humble colt.” Jesus rode into Jerusalem as one with magisterial authority over our lives. We cannot take Jesus as Savior and reject Christ as Lord. Without Christ’s authority in our lives, we cannot be delivered from the habits and group behaviors that threaten to wreck our lives as well as all creation. To be truly set free, we must submit to the rule of the One who rode into Jerusalem as our sovereign.

Nonetheless, Christ did not come with the arrogance and violence of the kings and queens of the earth. He rode a donkey—not a powerful steed. He carried no sword. His followers waved palm branches, not weapons. Matthew accents this theme when he leaves the words “triumphant and victorious” out of his quote from Zechariah to paint our Lord as gentle and humble. Jesus was a gentle and humble ruler who came to do what

Zechariah preached was needed. Jesus came to build a new community of faith—one not focused on the feasts and fasts of the legalistic religion that prevailed in both Zechariah and Jesus’ day, but one that was to “administer true justice, show mercy and compassion to one another, protect the widow, orphan, poor and immigrant and refuse to plot evil toward one another” (see Zechariah 7:9-10).

Every theme and image Jesus referenced during his ride into Jerusalem was chosen to give us a definite understanding of who Jesus was—not a national defender, not a Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal, nor primarily a political activist or a spiritual guru. Jesus declared in an “acted parable” that he was sent from God to deliver us from our sins (individually and corporately) through new birth and obedience to his Lordship, which will create a new community of faith to implement the teachings of Jesus by the power of the Spirit.

## Into Discipleship

About seven years ago, a seminary intern serving our church by the name of Carmella Jones told me that God wanted her to serve the Lord as a missionary. When Carmella, an African-American woman, later told me God was calling her to work with children in Hungary, I replied, “That can’t be true; you will be the only black person in the whole country.” She went anyway.

Five and a half years have passed since then and Carmella completed a wonderful ministry with the International Ministries of the American Baptist Churches USA in Hungary. She taught English, ministered to



We cannot take Jesus as  
Savior and reject Christ  
as Lord.





children with disabilities as well as to children with terminal illnesses. Recently, the school she served received their first black child. The warm welcome the classmates gave the new student may not have occurred had Carmella not followed the Lordship of Christ in her life.

I have a friend who has allowed a homeless man to live for an entire year on her porch. When I expressed dismay over why she would do that, she replied, “Because Christ asked me to do so.”

I know a pastor who has been treated horribly by his two brothers. Today, they will not speak to him or acknowledge his presence in the room. He has tried numerous times to reconcile but the brothers will not allow it. Recently, his sister died. I asked him if his brothers would be at the funeral, and he said they would. “How will you respond to them?” I asked. He said he would love them and work for reconciliation once again. “How can you keep doing this after all they have done to you?” I asked. “I can do it because this is the way the Lord saves me and saves the world,” he replied.

Jesus entered Jerusalem in an intentional way to announce that he was both our Savior and Lord. That clear announcement puts us into a crisis. We cannot pretend that Jesus claimed merely to be a nice guy, a wise rabbi, a spiritual guru, or a teacher of peace and love. Jesus claimed to be our Lord and our Savior. Now we must respond. We have several options. First, we could conclude that Jesus was wrong and treat him as a benevolent force in the world with whom we can agree or disagree. We can embrace some of his teachings while

rejecting others that seem to stress us out. Second, we could claim that we are special and do not need a Savior or a Lord. “There are those whose lives are such a mess that a radical faith in Christ might be needed” we might profess, “but I have been raised right and chosen well, and are free of bad behaviors. I do not need a Savior. And I do not like anyone telling me what to do. I am the expert on my own life and do not need anyone lording over me.”

What we can no longer do after reading of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is pretend we do not know who he claimed to be. He claimed to be our Savior and Lord. Now we must respond to that claim. Hopefully, we will recognize our need for a Savior, repent of our sins, embrace Christ as our deliverer, and receive his forgiveness and new birth. Then, out of love for our Savior, we will follow the living Christ as our Lord and allow him to transform us and other believers into a community of faith that implements his teachings in the world. Maybe that does not mean that we will go to Hungary, allow a homeless man to sleep on our porch, or easily forgive bullheaded brothers. However, it will mean that our desires, appetites, reactions, and plans will be radically shifted to meet the loving demands of our Lord. May all who read this lesson make this choice.

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#### Notes

1. Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 238.
2. Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Conflict between Nations and God,” *Christianity and Crisis*, August 5, 1946.

## Closing Prayer

**Leader:** Lord, you have been clear in your announcement of who you are.

When we are tempted to seek your forgiveness but reject your call to forgive others,

**People:** Help us remember you are our Savior and Lord.

**Leader:** When we want mercy for ourselves but judgment for others,

**People:** Help us remember you are our Savior and Lord.

**Leader:** When we want you to do what we ask but refuse to do what you ask of us,

**People:** Help us remember you are our Savior and Lord.  
Amen.

## Reflection Questions

- **Into the Scripture:** If you had been in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, do you think you would have more likely been among those celebrating Jesus' arrival, raging against the disruption he was causing, or asking, "Who is this man?" Why?

Do you believe Christ is the Messiah, the son of David that comes in the name of the Lord, or simply a prophet from Nazareth, or a false prophet who threatens to lead the gullible astray? Upon what do you base your belief?



- **Into the Lesson:** Do you agree or disagree with Reinhold Niebuhr's observation, "It is a question whether nations, as such, can ever have any other but a semi-pagan arrogance"?<sup>2</sup>

From what enemies did Jesus come to deliver us?  
From what enemies in your personal life has Christ rescued you?

- **Into Discipleship:** How do you respond to the choices Carmella Jones, the writer's friend, and the pastor he referenced in this section made? Have you made similar decisions in your efforts to follow Christ as Savior and Lord?

Have you accepted Christ as your Savior and Lord?  
If not, what is keeping you from doing so?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- "Rise Again," sung by Dallas Holm:  
[https://youtu.be/w9F1ch7\\_txo](https://youtu.be/w9F1ch7_txo)
- "Jerusalem," sung by John Starnes:  
[https://youtu.be/pvej6Hudp\\_k](https://youtu.be/pvej6Hudp_k)
- "Calvary," sung by Richard Smallwood & Vision:  
<https://youtu.be/gl7kCi2MUsg>

### Media Options

- "Hosanna" video: Hosanna - 2000 Film | Jesus Christ Superstar - Bing video
- "John-Triumphal Entry" video: John - Triumphal Entry - Bing video
- "Oh Bless the Lord My Soul" Godspell video: Oh Bless the Lord Godspell Lyrics - Bing video

### Activity Ideas

- Show the three videos referenced above. Ask participants which video best represents the emotions of Jesus' Triumphal Entry, which seems to diminish Christ, and which presents Jesus as Savior and Lord.
- Assign each participant one of three perspectives:
  1. Celebrate the arrival of our Lord and Savior.
  2. Rage against the arrival of the one claiming to be the Messiah.
  3. Clear up confusion about who this man is who is evoking such extreme emotions.



- Ask participants to write a “diary entry” for Palm Sunday according to what they might have thought and felt given their assigned perspective. Invite participants to share their entries with the larger group.

## Poetry

“The Outlaw” by Larry Norman

Some say he was an outlaw that he roamed across the  
land  
With a band of unschooled ruffians and few old  
fishermen  
No one knew just where he came from or exactly what  
he'd done  
But they said it must be something bad that kept him  
on the run  
Some say he was a poet, that he'd stand upon the hill  
That his voice could calm an angry crowd and make  
the waves stand still  
That he spoke in many parables that few could  
understand  
But the people sat for hours just to listen to this man  
Some say he was a sorcerer, a man of mystery  
He could walk upon the water, he could make a blind  
man see  
That he conjured wine at weddings and did tricks with  
fish and bread  
That he talked of being born again and raised people  
from the dead  
Some say a politician who spoke of being free  
He was followed by the masses on the shores of  
Galilee  
He spoke out against corruption, and he bowed to no  
decree  
And they feared his strength and power, so they nailed  
him to a tree  
Some say he was the Son of God, a man above all men  
That he came to be a servant and to set us free from  
sin  
And that's who I believe he is, 'cause that's what I  
believe  
And I think we should get ready, 'cause it's time for us  
to leave

## Baptist Connections

Learn more about Rev. Carmella Jones (the ABCUSA missionary referenced in this lesson) from the global servant page of the International Ministries ABCUSA website: <https://www.internationalministries.org/author/c-jones/>

## Devotional Scriptures Year A Liturgies of the Palms and Passion Week of 04/02/23

### Sunday 04/02/23

*Liturgy of the Palms:* Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29;  
Matthew 21:1-11

*Liturgy of the Passion:* Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16;  
Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66 or  
Matthew 27:11-54

### Monday of Holy Week 04/03/23

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15;  
John 12:1-11

### Tuesday of Holy Week 04/04/23

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 71:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31;  
John 12:20-36

### Wednesday of Holy Week 04/05/23

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70; Hebrews 12:1-3; John 13:21-32

### Maundy Thursday 04/06/23

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19;  
1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

### Good Friday 04/07/23

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25 or  
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

### Holy Saturday 04/08/23

Job 14:1-14 or Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24;  
Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16; 1 Peter 4:1-8; Matthew 27:57-66 or  
John 19:38-42



# IMPARTIALITY

## God has no favorite children

Then Peter began to speak to them:  
“I truly understand that God shows no partiality.”

—ACTS 10:34

### Introduction

When Queen Elizabeth II died, there was no question as to who would become king. The monarch had four children at the time of her death: Charles III, Anne, Andrew, and Edward—but only Charles III was fitted for the crown. Elizabeth II was required to serve as Queen when her father, King George VI, died, even though she did not desire to be the monarch; and some argued at the time that her sister Margaret was more suited for the role. The royal line of succession gives preferential treatment to some children and denies it to others. God plays no favorites, however. As Peter eventually learned, God shows no partiality.

### Lesson Objectives

- To demonstrate that God shows no partiality to anyone based on external characteristics.
- To learn how the Gospel applies equally to all people.
- To celebrate the risen Lord's willingness to forgive all who seek forgiveness.

### Acts 10:34-43 NRSV

34 Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37 That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40 but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the

one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

## Into the Scripture

In contrast to Paul, Peter first struggled to accept Gentiles into the church. Paul writes in Galatians that “God shows no favoritism,” so Paul preaches the Gospel to the “uncircumcised” (see Galatians 2:6-7). In the same passage, Paul reports that Peter was called to preach to the circumcised (see Galatians 2:8). Later, Paul criticizes Peter for eating with Gentiles when there were no Jewish brethren around and then refusing to do so when fellow Jews witnessed his habit (see Galatians 2:11-13).

God designed a special revelation to convince Peter to include believers of all races in the church. God visited Peter in a dream and told him that all food made clean by God was fit to eat. Then God applied the lesson to people. The Spirit said when God redeems people, regardless of race, Peter should receive them as his brothers and sisters in the faith (see Acts 10:9-28).

Peter’s new understanding was immediately tested when messengers from a Roman centurion named Cornelius sent for Peter, asking him to come to Cornelius’s home and share the Gospel. The Holy Spirit told Peter to accept the invitation. Peter knew it was against Jewish Law to visit a Gentile home but went against that law and obeyed the voice of the Spirit. When Peter arrived

at Cornelius’s home and saw evidence of God’s presence, he made an astonishing observation. He said, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35).

God had a lot of entrenched theology to overcome to persuade Peter of this truth. The notion that the Jewish people were “God’s favorites” had been deeply implanted in him. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God chose certain people at the expense of others. Jacob is chosen,

“

“Chosen” brings  
responsibility, suffering,  
and sacrifice.

Esau is not. Joseph is selected, while his brothers are not. David is anointed, not his older brothers. And the Jewish people repeatedly claim the title of “chosen people.” However, to be chosen is not the same as to be God’s favorite. “Chosen” brings responsibility, suffering, and sacrifice. To be chosen is to be integral to God’s plan but not preferred by God to all other people.

Sometimes, the Scripture announces that a person has found favor with God. Mary the mother of Jesus was told she had “found favor with God” (Luke 1:30). The phrase meant she had been selected for precious responsibilities that would break her heart and save the world; it did not mean God liked her better because she was from Nazareth. God’s favor is always given because of God’s grace and purpose—not because the Lord prefers one group of people over another. All the “favored ones” were called into service so that God’s gospel could eventually reach everyone on the earth.

Peter realizes that in his visit to Cornelius. He is further converted by his interaction with Cornelius. He finally understands the resurrected Lord’s words when Jesus told his disciples to be witnesses in “Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth” (see Acts 1:8). Peter says that Christ’s story began in Galilee, where





he was baptized and anointed by the Spirit. Then the ministry of Jesus continued in Jerusalem and all Judea. Conflict arose there and Jesus was put to death by “hanging on a tree” (a phrase that meant he died like a common criminal). (See Deuteronomy 21:22.) However, God raised Jesus from the dead and the risen Christ commissioned Peter and all the disciples to preach to all people that “everyone who believes in [Christ] receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). To fulfill that command, Peter and others would need to go to “Samaria and the ends of the earth.”

Peter’s understanding was transformed from a narrow view of who Jesus would accept to understanding that Jesus died so that the whole world could have salvation. The Holy Spirit had convinced him that Jesus is Lord of all—God has no favorite children.

## Into the Lesson

Not a single word of the book of Acts has been changed in almost 2000 years. The words we read today were exactly the same in 1099 when Christian crusaders killed as many as 20,000 Egyptians to “honor Jesus Christ” at the battle of Ascalon.<sup>1</sup> These words were the same in 1520 when the Spanish conquistadors slaughtered thousands of Aztecs because they were a pagan people.<sup>2</sup> Acts was in its current form when King Leopold ordered the death of hundreds of Congolese because they were in the way of Christian “progress.”<sup>3</sup> Not a word was different in 1864 when Christian army officers massacred the Arapahoe and Cheyenne people at Sand Creek, Colorado, because they saw them as savages.<sup>4</sup> And Acts

was read in every church in this country when black and brown people were excluded from white churches because they were seen as unequal to European Americans. Even though he struggled with the concept, Peter got the message that God has no favorites much more quickly than the Church did throughout history.

Hopefully we have that message now. The Gospel of Jesus Christ provides the Church with the possibility to bring people together from all over the world in the name of Christ. When Peter announces that God shows no partiality, he uses a Greek word that means “God judges no one by his/her face.” The Gospel is based on an understanding that we all—regardless of the color, shape, or attributes of our face—have a heart, not a skin problem. We have turned away from God, in every land on Earth, and pursued our self-centered desires.

As a result, all people have barriers they have built between themselves and God. But thanks be to God that the Lord sent Jesus to break down those barriers. Peter preaches, “in every nation, anyone who fears the Lord and does what is right is acceptable to him.” “What is right,” Peter explains, is to accept Christ as Lord of all. Then the apostle tells of how Jesus went about doing good in the land in which he was born. He healed the sick, delivered the oppressed, loved the outcast,



Jesus Christ provides the Church with the possibility to bring people together from all over the world.



welcomed little children, had mercy on sinners, and forgave even those who crucified him.

After God raised Christ on the third day, Jesus visited people like Peter who were chosen by God to be witnesses to tell the world about his life, death, and resurrection. These witnesses were to tell all people on Earth that they would be judged by Christ—not based on their skin color, national origin, gender, or contours of their face, but by whether they believed in the risen Christ and yielded to his Lordship. If they did, they would be forgiven of their sins and live forevermore in communion with the risen Lord. “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness through his name.”

Frank Stagg, a Baptist scholar from a previous generation, wrote a brilliant commentary on the book of Acts published by Broadman Press in 1955. Dr. Stagg argued that the entire book of Acts is a story of how the Gospel broke through every barrier erected by Christians to keep some people out of the church. The key word in the book according to Stagg was “unhindered.” When the Ethiopian man believes the Gospel preached by Philip, he asks what could hinder him from being baptized. Phillip says nothing and baptizes him into the body of Christ (see Acts 8:36-39).

At the end of Peter’s interaction with Cornelius, the apostle declares surely no one could hinder these Gentiles from being baptized into the church of Jesus Christ (see Acts 10:46-48). The theme of an unhindered gospel arises repeatedly in Acts and is included in the narrative’s closing words. Luke writes, “Paul proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and unhindered” (see Acts 28:31). Acts does not say Paul was unhindered (he was under house arrest at the time) but that the Gospel had burst every boundary that tried to give preferential treatment to some and deny it from others.<sup>5</sup>

When our prejudices convince us that God prefers our race, our age, our intellect, our politics, our gender, our nation to all others, we create huge barriers to the spread of the Gospel. We hinder the Gospel and restrict the power unleashed on Resurrection morning. When we preach the Gospel freely to all people, however, affirming all people as equal in value to God, we add our voice to all the witnesses in history to help proclaim “everyone who believes in Christ receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”



Every one of us can find forgiveness before we face the judgment of Christ.

## Into Discipleship

Part of the reason Jesus was crucified was because of his acceptance of people from all races and nationalities. Christ almost died three years before Good Friday. Luke tells us that Jesus’ first sermon in Nazareth was going well (“all spoke well of him,” Luke 4:22) until he affirmed God’s willingness to accept a woman from Sidon and a man from Syria. When the people heard Jesus’ declaration that God was inclusive, they tried to “throw him off a cliff.” Thankfully, God intervened because it was not yet Jesus’ time to die (Luke 4:16-30).

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus battled the bigotry of people. The Crucifixion was the final attempt of hateful people to silence the Lord’s message of inclusiveness. If Jesus would have backed down from his stance or if evil could have kept Jesus in the grave, then the Church would continue to believe God shows partiality. The Resurrection proved to believers that God endorsed Jesus’ mission to accept all people. Jesus was hardly out of the grave before he told his disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) and be my witnesses to “Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The Church has much to celebrate on this Easter Sunday. The promise of eternal life and anticipation of a home in heaven are worthy of all the jubilation we can muster. Included in this celebration is the truth that every one of us can find forgiveness before we face the judgment of Christ.

Peter preached that Christ would judge the living and the dead. What a dismal prospect that would be if



we had to first become perfect in attitude and behavior or prove to Christ that we are worthy of his grace. We would be even more disheartened if the Gospel declared that we first had to become Jewish to please God or that regardless of our best efforts, we \_\_\_\_\_ (*fill in the blank with Irish, women, disabled, Africans, Latinos, high school drop outs, Texans, or group of your choice*) had no hope of pleasing God because God felt disdain for us due to one external characteristic or another. If God showed partiality for one kind of people over another, those of us who were the “wrong kind” would be hopeless.

Praise the Lord that God overcame the power of all evil on Easter and declared through the risen Son that all people can find forgiveness through belief in Christ. That is a proclamation worth celebrating. World Communion Sunday is the first Sunday in October. The church I pastor has members from more than thirty nations, so World Communion Sunday is one of the most exciting services of the year. We hang flags from every nation represented in our church along the walls of the sanctuary. We sing hymns and songs from a variety of cultures. The Bible is read in several languages, and we pray for Christians in the home countries of our membership. Communion is celebrated with bread from

different parts of the world. When we join our voices to sing “In Christ There Is No East or West,” the church’s joy is abundant.

Churches continue to proclaim the inclusiveness of God when they celebrate diversity within their membership and denomination. The American Baptist Churches USA claims to be the “most racially diverse protestant denomination.”<sup>6</sup> We celebrate that reality in our national gatherings and regional times of worship. Church mission statements, web sites, Facebook pages, and other public platforms can celebrate God’s forgiveness for all people in how they present the church to the outside world. The Easter message is proclaimed daily as a church offers a welcome to people of all races, ethnicities, and nationalities as the risen Lord has asked them to do. The joyful work of telling the world that God is inclusive and has no favorite children never ends.

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#### Notes

1. <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-crusades-battle-of-ascalon-2360711>
2. <https://www.thoughtco.com/massacre-at-the-festival-of-toxcatl-2136526>
3. <https://medium.com/lessons-from-history/the-tyrant-king-leopold-ii-and-his-atrocities-on-congolese-e5b012e9db04>
4. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sand\\_Creek\\_massacre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sand_Creek_massacre)
5. Frank Stagg, *The Book of Acts: The Early Struggle for an Unhindered Gospel* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1955), 263–266.

## Closing Prayer

Lord, if you showed partiality to women over men, half of us would be lost. If you showed partiality to brown people over other skin colors, two thirds of us would be lost. If you showed partiality to the rich over the rest, ninety percent of us would be lost. If you showed partiality to the Japanese over all other nations, almost all the world would be lost. If you only loved the perfect, all of us would be lost. Thank you for loving us all without any partiality and for offering your wondrous forgiveness to the entire world. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

- **Into the Scripture:** What is the difference between being chosen by God and being God’s favorite? Have you, like Peter, had any experiences that helped you recognize that all people are equally loved by God and should be so loved by God’s church? If so, describe one.
- **Into the Lesson:** What caused Christian people to massacre large numbers of people different from them in the name of Christ? Why did not more people, down through the ages, believe Peter’s testimony that God shows no partiality? What hinders the Gospel from reaching the world today? What are the obstacles that keep the proclamation of God’s love for all people from getting through now?



- **Into Discipleship:** Fill in the blank left by the writer in this section with an external characteristic of yourself (age, place of birth, race, gender, skin color, income level, health condition). Read the sentence aloud with your characteristic inserted. What emotional reaction do you have to the sentence? What does your church do to announce to your community that you welcome all people to worship God and participate in the full work of the church?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “My Redeemer Lives” by Nicole C. Mullen: [https://youtu.be/XRW-jr\\_PnbQ](https://youtu.be/XRW-jr_PnbQ)
- “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today” by Islington Baptist Church/Joslin Grove Choral Society: <https://youtu.be/nzy7jFNUc3w>
- “Because He Lives”: Gaither Vocal Band: [https://youtu.be/2Oz\\_caE8oQE](https://youtu.be/2Oz_caE8oQE)

### Media Options

- “Everything Is Beautiful” by Ray Stevens: (1) Ray Stevens—Everything is Beautiful (1970) - YouTube
- “In Christ There Is No East or West” by Mavis Staples: “In Christ There Is No East or West” - Bing video
- “Jesus Loves the Little Children”: Jesus loves the little children (2020) HD - Bing video
- “It’s Not Easy Being Green” by Ray Charles: Ray Charles – “It’s Not Easy Being Green” (1991) – Bing video

### Activity Ideas

- Invite participants to share stories of when they were “chosen” for some award, academic assignment, or duty. Ask if they felt the chosen recognition made them better than others or that it gave them a responsibility that others were not asked to fulfill.
- Ask half of the participants to write content for the church’s web page that subtly or not-so-subtly states that not everyone is welcomed to attend. Ask the other half of the participants to write content for the church’s web page that clearly indicates that all people were welcomed and loved by God. Discuss how we can be intentional about our views through our online presence.



- Play “It’s Not Easy Being Green” by either Ray Charles or Kermit the Frog. Ask participants to describe the struggle the singer is communicating about the color of his skin. Ask, “How can the church add to people’s negative feelings about their skin color?” and “What can the church do to help all people see their skin color as beautiful and beloved in God’s sight?”

## Poetry

“The Beauty of Black” by Margaret Burroughs (May 22, 1965)

When we look at ourselves  
 We see ourselves through eyes  
 Which have been schooled  
 To see comely only the opaque,  
 Comely to us skin that is fair,  
 Comely to us eyes that are light,  
 Comely to us hair that is straight,  
 Comely to us lips that are thin,  
 Our gods and goddesses  
 Glow in opalescent whiteness  
 And daily we worship at this shrine.  
 Ugly to us our satin black skin,  
 Ugly to us our fulsome lips,  
 Ugly to us our midnight eyes,  
 Ugly to us our crisping hair  
 Thus we have rejected our image.  
 But this is not as it should be  
 We black people must be born again.  
 Know that the black people like other races  
 Have their own distinct beauty,  
 Know that the Stygian night too is beautiful.

## Baptist Connections

American Baptist Churches USA *celebrates the racial, cultural, and theological diversity witnessed within its membership*: American Baptist Churches USA today is the most racially inclusive Protestant body. Represented in our churches are equally diverse worship styles, cultural mores, and approaches to scriptural interpretation. The resulting challenges and opportunities have made us stronger—through fellowship, respect, mutual support, and dialogue—all based on a belief that unity in Christ involves growth and understanding. (From the American Baptist Churches USA website.) Discuss the importance of these values around diversity as it relates to you as a denominational participant.

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year A Easter

### Week of 04/09/23

#### Sunday 04/09/23 *Easter Vigil*

*Old Testament Readings and Psalms:*

Genesis 1:1-2:4a and Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26

Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13 and Psalm 46

Genesis 22:1-18 and Psalm 16

Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21 and Exodus 15:1b-13,  
 17-18

Isaiah 55:1-11 and Isaiah 12:2-6

Baruch 3:9-15; 3:32-4:4 or Proverbs 8:1-8, 19-21;  
 9:4b-6 and Psalm 19

Ezekiel 36:24-28 and Psalms 42-43

Ezekiel 37:1-14 and Psalm 143

Zephaniah 3:14-20 and Psalm 98

*New Testament Reading and Psalm:*

Romans 6:3-11 and Psalm 114

*Gospel:* Matthew 28:1-10

*Resurrection of the Lord:*

Acts 10:34-43 or Jeremiah 31:1-6; Psalm 118:1-2,  
 14-24; Colossians 3:1-4 or Acts 10:34-43; John  
 20:1-18 or Matthew 28:1-10

*Easter Evening:* Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 114;

1 Corinthians 5:6b-8; Luke 24:13-49

#### Monday 04/10/23

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21;

Colossians 3:5-11

#### Tuesday 04/11/23

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Exodus 15:1-18;

Colossians 3:12-17

#### Wednesday 04/12/23

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Joshua 3:1-17; Matthew 28:1-10

#### Thursday 04/13/23

Psalm 16; Song of Solomon 2:8-15; Colossians 4:2-5

#### Friday 04/14/23

Psalm 16; Song of Solomon 5:9-6:3;

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

#### Saturday 04/15/23

Psalm 16; Song of Solomon 8:6-7; John 20:11-20

# VERACITY

## God honors skepticism

Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

—JOHN 20:27

### Introduction

Questioning the veracity of another person is admittedly risky business. Such inquiries anger bosses, spouses, children, friends, and pastors. Relationships are usually in trouble if evidence must be produced to convince a loved one that one is telling the truth. Yet, because of the untrustworthy nature of social media, Internet sites, deceitful politicians, and biased news outlets, checking the veracity of reported stories is wise. When Thomas began hearing that Jesus had risen from the dead, he asked for proof and Christ honored his request.

### Lesson Objectives

- To understand why Thomas sought more evidence before believing Christ was alive.
- To examine Christ’s response to skepticism.
- To support one another in revealing our skepticism on matters of faith.

### John 20:19-31 NRSV

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” 24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the

nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” 26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 27 Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” 28 Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 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.

## Into the Scripture

By this point in John’s Resurrection narrative, Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John have witnessed the empty tomb where Jesus was laid after his death. Mary has also had a conversation with two angels and a face-to-face encounter with the risen Christ (see John 20:1-18). Yet, these experiences did not remove the fear the disciples felt after the killing of Christ. They concluded that if the power structure would kill Jesus, then they would come after Christ’s followers as well. So, they barricaded themselves in a house until they could verify that it was safe to go about town.

As they quavered behind closed doors, Jesus appeared and pronounced “peace” upon their assembly.



The pronouncement was a common greeting which conveyed both good intentions on the part of the visitor and an observance from the visitor that all was well in the home of the hosts. Both Christ’s appearance and his expression that all was well unnerved the disciples. Seeing their startled faces, Jesus

immediately showed them his hands and his side. When they witnessed the evidence that it was Jesus, the disciples rejoiced.

“

The wounds in Jesus’ hands and side proved he was the crucified one.

The wounds in Jesus’ hands and side proved he was the Crucified One, but their presence raises a question for us today: When God brought Jesus back to life, why did he not heal his wounds? Richard Rohr offers a perspective in his book *The Universal Christ*. Rohr writes that Jesus had to show his disciples that he could be resurrected and wounded at the same time. Christ wanted his followers, ourselves included, to know that they would experience the resurrected life through faith in Christ and suffer the wounds of this life at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

A second understanding of the persistence of Jesus’ wounds is that the wounds were the proof that the one standing before the disciples was indeed Christ. How were the disciples to verify that this person was not an





imposter, phantom, trick of the devil, or figment of their imagination? The injuries of his crucifixion were the evidence offered by Christ to inspire faith. Notice that Jesus voluntarily provided this evidence so the disciples could know with certainty that he was their beloved rabbi, friend, and Lord raised from the dead. Jesus followed the revealing of his wounds with an even greater proof of his identity. Christ breathed on the disciples, and they received the Holy Spirit. No common person could grant others the gift of the Spirit. Only a risen Lord could do that.

This bestowal of the Spirit has more in common with the anointing of the Spirit in the Old Testament than with Pentecost. God sent the Spirit upon people in the Hebrew Scriptures to empower them for a specific task. Bezalel received the Spirit to create art pleasing to God (see Exodus 31:3). Moses and seventy elders received the Spirit to prophesy (see Numbers 11:24-25). Gideon received the Spirit to vanquish Israel's enemies (see Judges 6:34). In this case, the disciples received the Spirit so they could take God's offer of forgiveness to the world. At Pentecost and thereafter, the Spirit comes upon all believers as a sign of their conversion as well as to enable them to serve God.

Thomas was not with the disciples when the risen Christ visited them. When told that Christ was alive, he demanded verification before believing. He wanted to touch the wounds of Jesus. One week after his first visit, Jesus returned to the disciples and Thomas was present. Christ offered the verification Thomas requested and Thomas believed. Christ never criticized Thomas for seeking verification but did say those who can believe without physically seeing Jesus were blessed. John further endorsed the wisdom of seeking evidence for faith when he wrote that the purpose of his gospel was to provide signs or evidence to inspire the faith of future generations.

## Into the Lesson

"In Scripture, the opposite of faith is not doubt—it is anxiety." The Catholic priest Ronald Rolheiser wrote these words in his book *Prayer: Our Deepest Longing*.<sup>2</sup> John seems to agree. Disciples riddled with anxiety—huddled behind closed doors, fearing for their lives—are presented as lacking faith. The one disciple who was not in hiding, Thomas, is affirmed for honestly expressing his doubt and seeking verification before believing.

Of course, there is no such thing as proof for faith. The nature of faith is to trust in someone or something that cannot be fully verified. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Proving the claims of Jesus is not possible, but John encourages us to seek evidence for faith before placing it in any person or profession. "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). The opening of John's first epistle offers the evidence (if not the proof) that Christ is the Son of God. "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1).

We can imagine many good reasons why Thomas did not accept the witness of his fellow disciples. They were a grieving, confused group of individuals who were immobilized by anxiety and overwhelmed by the guilt of



The opposite of faith is not doubt—it is anxiety.

their cowardly response to Christ's arrest and crucifixion. Amid all their distress, they were not the best people to validate a preposterous claim of resurrection.

Also, Thomas knew the ramifications of accepting this news. Thomas recognized that following Jesus was going to cost the disciples their lives much earlier than the rest of the apostles. John reports in the story of the raising of Lazarus that Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16). Bravery was never Thomas's problem. He just did not want to risk his life for a false claim. If Jesus was alive again, Thomas knew the disciples would have to respond with a lifetime of faith that might require their deaths. Before making such a commitment, Thomas wanted verification that the disciples had not simply seen a ghost or a delusion.

Jesus understood and approved the request. The question "Where was Thomas?" has begun many post-Easter messages that express the pastor's frustration with vacant pews and missing parishioners. "Could Thomas have been sleeping in? Was he relaxing back on the lake? Was he engaged in some commercial venture or visiting old friends? What was Thomas doing instead of gathering with the saints to worship the living Christ?" Although possibly clever, such sermons do not reflect the teaching of this passage.

Thomas's absence might have indicated he had more faith or at least less anxiety than the other disciples. He was at least able to leave their hideout and move back into life to some degree. He had not abandoned the disciples. One week later, he was meeting with them again, presumably, in the hope that verification would arrive. When Christ does appear, the Lord seems happy to give Thomas the evidence he sought. There is no word of criticism for either his former absence or his current skepticism. Christ is quick to supply what Thomas needed. In fact, it seems to be the purpose for Jesus' second appearance.

The risen Christ gives each disciple what he or she needs to be able to commit to do his work in the world. When Mary Magdalene wants to touch her risen Lord, Jesus tells her not to do so. Christ knows that Mary must learn to relate to Christ as a spiritual presence in her life, and so negates her request to keep him physically by her side. Thomas, in contrast, needed verification for his faith—so Jesus invited him to touch him.

Later in the gospel, Jesus and Peter have an honest conversation that leads to forgiveness and renewal to

service. In that dialogue, Jesus also clarifies that what he will demand of Peter will be different from what he will demand from John (see John 21:15-23). In each encounter, Christ tailors his guidance to the need of the disciple. John concludes this passage by telling skeptical readers that his purpose in writing his gospel was to offer evidence for faith in Christ. In what might have been the original ending to the gospel, John writes, "these [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God." John continues to honor the request of doubting Thomas.

## Into Discipleship

Jesus said, "My sheep will know my voice" (see John 10:27)—and we do. When Jesus said those words, though, Jesus' sheep did not have to battle the voices of CNN and Fox News, ESPN and HBO, podcasts and blogs, YouTube and Tik Tok videos, Facebook posts, Instagram images, Twitter feeds, televangelists, text messages, emails, robocalls, Internet click bait, and political ads.

About all Jesus' sheep had to deal with were bleats, breys, howls, chirps, and a little thunder from time to time. Our struggle to discern truth from fiction has become a monumental task. To seek validation of another's claims requires disciples to be skeptical of what we hear. The loudest or most redundant voices are not always the most reliable. Experts can lie, leaders can deceive, preachers can mislead, media outlets can propagandize, and politicians can seduce. Without skepticism, disciples can be taken in by the sound and fury of modern life.

Thankfully, Christ's encounter with Thomas demonstrates that he honors our skepticism and will provide us with verification for the truth while revealing what is false. One of Christ's ongoing ways of providing



Christ tailors his guidance  
to the need of the disciple.



evidence for faith is through the fellowship of believers. By sharing the numerous claims that we hear in the world with one another and comparing them with the careful and informed study of Scripture, genuine prayer, and sincere listening to the Holy Spirit, we can help one another separate truth from deception.

Many prominent voices in Christian broadcasting boast that faith in Christ always brings riches, good health, and happy families. Although an attractive message, it is not supported by Scripture. A Bible study group in the church can test the veracity of these prosperity claims by examining Job, the life of David, the suffering of Peter and Paul, and the sacrifice of Jesus to demonstrate that such absolute claims are false.

A growing number of believers find the benefits of meditation so rich; they argue that the entire purpose of faith is to grow in private communion with Christ. Church members—studying the Scripture together—can debunk the notion that growing closer to Christ through inner contemplation is the only worthy way to express one’s faith. An examination of the Gospels by a group of believers will reveal numerous calls of God to serve our neighbors, the least of these, and even our enemies. Skepticism towards the claims of some believers can lead to a more complete vision of the Christian life that includes both meditation and activism to meet the needs of others.

In the passion of election season, Christians of all political persuasions can confuse their choice in candidates with God’s choice of candidates. When that

happens, everything their chosen political leader says, believes, or advocates becomes the voice of God to them. If they are selective in their source of news, they can find a community that wholeheartedly confirms their idolatrous opinions. Christian prayer groups, however, can check one another’s fanatical support of flawed people and remind one another that God is the source of our hope, strength, truth, and power—not any earthly ruler or political party.

The benefits of open inquiry are lost, however, when the most intimidating voices in a community of faith demand that their fellow believers accept their views without question or exploration. When people are condemned for asking “How do I know what you are saying is true?” or “Would you show me in the Bible where you get this view?” the attitude Jesus affirmed in Thomas is squelched in favor of blind acquiescence.

Convictions that are tested and validated by evidence and the testimony of others are far more reliable than those which are protected from skeptical followers of Christ. When we are required to back up what we believe with Scripture, careful reasoning, and respectful dialogue with those who see matters differently, our faith is strengthened, not threatened.

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#### Notes

1. Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ* (New York: Convergent Books, 2021), 111.
2. <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/24756396-prayer-our-deepest-longing>



## Closing Prayer

Dear gracious God, regardless of how hard we try to rid ourselves of it, how often we scold ourselves for having it, how often we hide it in shame, we struggle to believe some of the claims of Scripture. We long for more evidence, additional testimony, thoughtful debate, deeper contemplation. Thank you for accepting our need for verification and for offering yourself and the trustworthy account of Scripture to validate your sacred claims. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

- **Into the Scripture:** If you had been a follower of Christ immediately after his resurrection, what kinds of evidence would you have wanted to see before believing Christ lived again?

Richard Rohr theorized that the wounds of Jesus that persisted after his resurrection were to show that we can know the resurrected life of Christ and feel wounded at the same time. Does that reflect your experience in life?

- **Into the Lesson:** Do you believe everything you hear? If not, what do you seek to determine the truthfulness of another's claims? Do you criticize or commend Thomas for seeking validation that Christ was alive?

If you could talk with Christ today face-to-face, what do you think he would offer you to encourage your faith and discipleship?

- **Into Discipleship:** What are some of the sources of information, entertainment, views, and opinions that

are difficult to tune out when trying to hear God? Do you find them distracting? Dangerous? Helpful?

Would a prayer group that helped believers seek verification of views, convictions, and beliefs be helpful to you? Could such discussions be conducted in mutual respect, or would they turn into shouting matches between the loudest voices in the room?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “Now Behold the Lamb” by Kirk Franklin:  
<https://youtu.be/7CK1R1suY6U>
- “I Believe (Island Medley)” by Jonathan Nelson:  
<https://youtu.be/vDLByAnQ93Q>
- “My Jesus, I Love Thee” by Casting Crowns:  
<https://youtu.be/1xkR8Zm31Yo>

### Media Options

- “He’s Alive” by Don Francisco:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NyPBVwOCYmM>.
- “The Master’s Calling” by Deborah Joy Winans:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-fW383OmgQ>
- “I Believe in You” by Melbourne Mass Gospel Choir:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJ5CGEFV19I>

### Activity Ideas

- Give each participant a copy of Bob Dylan’s *Every Grain of Sand* (refer to the next page). Ask, “Which aspect of his struggle with faith expresses skepticism that they, too, have felt?”

## 8 Questions Jesus Asked: Discipleship for Leaders

by Daniel M. Cash and William H. Griffith

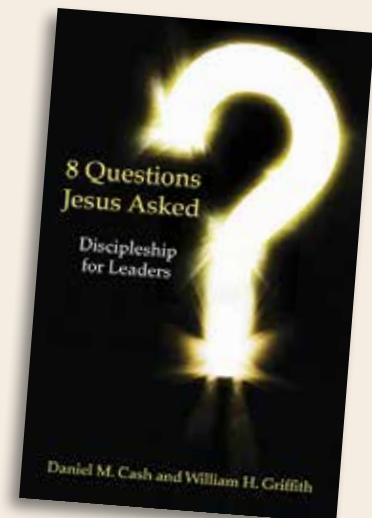
Some leaders believe you must have all the answers; a wise leader knows when to ask the right questions. Selecting eight of Jesus’ powerful questions from the Gospel, the authors explore their significance for us as leaders in this generation.

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- Write the following six sentences on separate sheets of paper:
  - I have been wondering if God truly hears my prayers.
  - I have been wondering if God protects those who love the Lord.
  - I have been wondering if good people are always blessed by God and bad people are always punished.
  - I have been wondering if I am going to go to heaven when I die.
  - I have been wondering if God has a favorite political party or not.
  - I have been wondering if God has really forgiven me for my sins.

Divide the class into small groups and give each group one or two of the sentences. Ask them to think of ways a person who felt that way might get further information to help with what is making him or her wonder. How might you respond to that person?

- Ask participants to write a paragraph expressing their personal view of Thomas's need for further evidence before believing Christ was raised from the dead. Ask, "Was his request for additional evidence a positive sign of faith or a negative? Why?"

## Poetry

"Every Grain of Sand," by Bob Dylan

In the time of my confession, in the hour of my deepest need  
 When the pool of tears beneath my feet flood every newborn seed  
 There's a dying voice within me reaching out somewhere  
 Toiling in the danger and in the morals of despair  
 Don't have the inclination to look back on any mistake  
 Like Cain, I behold this chain of events that I must break  
 In the fury of the moment, I can see the master's hand  
 In every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand  
 Oh, the flowers of indulgence and the weeds of yesteryear  
 Like criminals, they have choked the breath of conscience and good cheer

And the sun beat down upon the steps of time to light the way  
 To ease the pain of idleness and the memory of decay  
 I gaze into the doorway of temptation's angry flame  
 And every time I pass that way I always hear my name  
 Then onward in my journey, I come to understand  
 That every hair is numbered like every grain of sand  
 I have gone from rags to riches in the sorrow of the night  
 In the violence of a summer's dream, in the chill of a wintery light  
 In the bitter dance of loneliness fading into space  
 In the broken mirror of innocence on each forgotten face  
 I hear the ancient footsteps like the motion of the sea  
 Sometimes I turn, there's someone there, at times it's only me  
 I'm hanging in the balance of a perfect finished plan  
 Like every sparrow falling, like every grain of sand

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year A Second Sunday of Easter

### Week of 04/16/23

#### Sunday 04/16/23

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9;  
 John 20:19-31

#### Monday 04/17/23

Psalm 114; Judges 6:36-40; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

#### Tuesday 04/18/23

Psalm 114; Jonah 1:1-17; 1 Corinthians 15:19-28

#### Wednesday 04/19/23

Psalm 114; Jonah 2:1-10; Matthew 12:38-42

#### Thursday 04/20/23

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; Isaiah 25:1-5; 1 Peter 1:8b-12

#### Friday 04/21/23

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; Isaiah 26:1-4; 1 Peter 1:13-16

#### Saturday 04/22/23

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; Isaiah 25:6-9; Luke 14:12-14

# DISPLACEMENT

## God is our home

If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.

—1 PETER 1:17

### Introduction

What do freshmen in college, military personnel, immigrants, the newly married, folks in new jobs, inmates, retirees, new home owners, the evicted, nursing home residents, transfers to a new town, the quarantined, refugees, the promoted, graduates, recovering addicts, new parents, orphans, people living with mental illness, stroke victims, recently unemployed, widows and widowers, criminals on the lam, defeated politicians, traveling salespeople, empty nesters, boomerang parents, those who lost their homes to fire or natural disaster, migrant workers, and converts to Christianity have in common? They all feel displaced for at least a little while. Displacement is a reality for every human being at some point in life. Regardless of whether the reason for displacement was chosen by or forced upon us, the solution is to find our home in God.

### Lesson Objectives

- To recognize how displacement affects followers of Christ.
- To appreciate the home God has created for believers.
- To help believers make their home in God.

#### 1 Peter 1:17-23 NRSV

17 If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. 18 You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. 20 He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. 21 Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God. 22 Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that



you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. 23 You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

## Into the Scripture

The epistle of 1 Peter begins with these words: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:1-2a). The “exiles of the Dispersion” were Jews who had fled Israel due to Roman occupation and mistreatment. Some of these displaced people returned to Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost and heard the followers of Christ speak in languages they had never learned (see Acts 2:5-11). Many of those who were in Jerusalem that day returned to their adopted homes professing faith in Christ.

The Spirit’s conversion of these transplanted Jews created churches throughout Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). The members of these churches were therefore

doubly displaced. They had moved away from the land, culture, and families to which they were born and into a foreign land. And, once there, they experienced a conversion to a faith that separated them from their Jewish expats, non-converted members of

their family, and from their new neighbors with whom they had just begun to build relationships.

By the time Peter wrote this letter, the churches begun by the Jewish converts had included Gentile members. They, too, were experiencing disorientation as they left their Greek gods and rituals to follow Jesus and the God whom Christ called “Father.” Peter addressed both the Jewish and Gentile converts with the phrase, “If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.” “Exile” is Peter’s word

“

“Exile” is Peter’s word to describe the reality of displacement.

to describe the reality of displacement. Peter states that regardless of what you feel exiled from, if you have now learned to call God “Father,” then you must live in awe and reverence of this God you now know.

These inclusive words would have never come from Peter before his encounter with Cornelius. Because the Spirit converted Peter to understand that God does not show partiality to any race, nation, or person (see Acts 10:34), Peter was able to see these communities of faith composed of Jews and Gentiles as equals in the sight of God. This reverence Peter called the believers to demonstrate was due God because of all God had done to create a new spiritual home for these displaced people. God redeemed both Jew and Gentile from the “futile way of life inherited from your ancestors” with the “precious blood of Christ.” Both groups came from well-established teachings about how to please God. Both groups relied on blood (either in temple or pagan sacrifices) to placate their gods. Peter taught the entire assembly of believers that God had rescued them from the inadequate teachings of their foreparents by the crucifixion (shedding of blood) of Christ.





The apostle claimed that God had created a new spiritual home for both Jew and Gentile through faith in Christ. The Creator had designed this abiding place to be the way humanity experienced life from the “foundation of the world.” However, God could not reveal this divine plan until Christ had been crucified and raised from the dead. Peter announced that their new spiritual home included a deep level of trust, faith, and hope in God. And this new home provided these displaced people a new community that had “genuine, mutual love for one another,” a love Peter said came “deeply from the heart.”

Peter assured both Jew and Gentile that they would never be separated from their spiritual home because this home was not based on geography, race, or nation—but in God. He reminded them they had been born again by an imperishable seed into a new spiritual home secured by the “living and enduring word of God.” Never again would these new believers be displaced. Wherever they lived—for as long as they lived and beyond, they would have a home in God.

## Into the Lesson

Displacement occurs when people either choose or are forced to leave common patterns, familiar surroundings, and known relationships and settings in which they had achieved some competency. They must enter realms that are new, challenging, unsettling, and confusing to them. Peter wrote to Jewish people who, because of forced displacement, had to learn new languages, eat new foods, follow new laws and cultural practices, live in new neighborhoods, and submit to new authorities. When they converted to faith in Christ, they also had to learn new patterns of worship and devotion and develop new spiritual communities.

Peter also addressed his letter to Gentiles who had been displaced from their way of life as well. Although they had not physically moved anywhere, they had been rejected and, in some cases, mistreated because they had left their worship of Greek or Roman gods for faith in Christ. Because they no longer participated in the bloody rituals meant to placate their gods or goddesses or the sexual practices intended to attract the good will of their culture’s deities, the Gentiles were treated by their neighbors as “godless.”

People experience discomfort when displaced physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially, or occupationally. Peter recommended that people who feel exiled from significant and familiar life situations should find their true home in God. He would have agreed with St. Augustine, who wrote, “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and thou heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”<sup>1</sup>

God provides the “home” that all people need through an eternal relationship of love and support. In stubborn resistance to what God had provided, however, the recipients of Peter’s letter kept seeking their “home” elsewhere. Peter challenged their rejection of God as the spiritual center of their lives by reminding them that this home was created at incredible cost to the triune God. Christ was crucified by people who pursued prosperity, ambition, ego, achievement, greed, desire, notoriety, power, or prestige as their ultimate destination. The



God provides the “home” that all people need through an eternal relationship of love.

desire to create a home of their own choosing caused them to reject the One who came to guide them to a resting place in God.

Rather than cling to a home that is always at risk, vulnerable to the assault of evil, constantly shaken by the inevitable changes in life, Peter called believers to appreciate and embrace the home God had provided. Peter said this dwelling place was centered around trust, faith, and hope in God, not in human abilities or decisions. The apostle knew that God would not fail, abandon, or weaken with changing times. As David wrote, “My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. . . . The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore (Psalm 121:2-4, 7-8).

Peter added that a home in God also provided a spiritual family wherever a believer chose or was forced to live. As a pastor, I have always been called to churches that were located some distance from my family of origin. My children grew up with their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins living more than a day’s drive away. Yet, they did not grow up without extended family. God provided spiritual grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins who attended their birthday parties, rooted for them at athletic events, applauded their artistic recitals, and celebrated Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter with them. This “family” prayed for them, celebrated their baptisms, encouraged them, forgave them, challenged them, and cried with them and for them. God provided spiritual kinships with whom they could share mutual love from the deepest place in their hearts. That spiritual family is available to all.

The home God provides has one other advantage over any home secured by human endeavor. As Peter points out, it is imperishable. I recently visited the childhood home of a good friend. All the way to the residence, he told me of the fond memories he had of the yard, the porch, his bedroom, and the dining room where his family gathered every evening. When we drove by the house, however, we found it in a state of disrepair. The roof was missing shingles, the porch was in shambles, the yard was covered in litter and weeds, and the windows were out. It was no longer a house for anyone much less the home of his memory.



## Those who make their home in God always have a place to abide.

God’s home never deteriorates. We never have to be displaced from the eternal and enduring love and support of God. For all of this life and the next, those who make their home in God always have a place to abide.

### Into Discipleship

Regardless of how comfortable, familiar, well-appointed, or cozy our physical home may be, there is a longing in us all for an eternal place of abiding with God. Peter taught that the death of Christ provided access to that home. We simply need to learn how to live there. To address this reality, Peter calls on us to take five actions to root ourselves in a home from which we can never be displaced. First, he says to live in awe and gratitude that we have the option to make our dwelling place in God. To be able to call God “Father” is a spectacular privilege. We have done nothing in life to earn it. Yet, God has graciously invited us to lean into God’s love and support. We can never thank God enough for that standing invitation.

Second, Peter calls on us to accurately assess the futility of abiding in any other place but God. Our culture, career, and possibly family often recommend building a home on achievement, accumulation, and activity. We are told that by getting the right job, by acquiring the biggest house we can afford (or maybe more than we can afford), and by running from activity to activity as fast as we can, we will find the good life. Yet, changes are always happening in employment, economic climates, physical abilities, and emotional stability. No job, bank account, or agenda is secure.





My mother had to move six times after the age of 90. Each time she settled into a new environment, changes beyond her control forced her to travel to a new city and take up residence in a new facility. If her home had not been in God, she would have suffered unmanageable displacement. Instead, God sheltered her wherever she went. Our placing the center of our lives any other place but God is futile.

Third, Peter calls us to remember what it cost God to give us access to this home. Christ had to die to bring us to repentance and faith and ransom us from sinful ties to inadequate and possibly destructive ways of life. When we contemplate the fact that Jesus gave his life to bring us to God, how can we do anything but embrace this costly spiritual provision?

Fourth, Peter encourages us to immerse ourselves in the mutual love that all those who make their homes in God share. A very small percentage of Christians are called and gifted to reside in solitude. Many of us need the support, modeling, correction, forgiveness, and encouragement of other Christians to put our roots down into the living God.

Lastly, Peter calls on us to trust that our home in God is imperishable and enduring. My wife and

I recently bought a retirement home on a mountain that looks down on a river. I find peace, beauty, and relaxation there. For months, I have counted on being able to move there full-time when I retire. However, six weeks ago, while visiting my ENT, I was told that I had a “large mass” in my nasal passage. He immediately scheduled me to see a surgeon at the premier hospital in our region. I only had to wait two days but in those two days, I envisioned myself dying and never enjoying that home. When I saw the surgeon, joyfully, I was told it was only a cyst that had to be removed. The scare reminded me that only my home in God is eternal. Every other place is temporary.

Some displacement in life is inevitable, but it is not the prevailing circumstance for those who trust and hope in God. Instead, we can receive a home in God from which we can never be evicted, transferred, or relocated in this life or the next. As Paul promised in Romans 8, nothing can separate us from our home in Christ (see verses 38-39).

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Note

1. “50+ St Augustine Quotes from the Philosopher and Theologian of Hippo,” Kidadl.com. <https://kidadl.com/quotes/st-augustine-quotes-from-the-philosopher-and-theologian-of-hippo>

## Closing Prayer

**Leader:** When we finally move into the house of our dreams,

**Participants:** Remind us, dear Lord, that our true home is in you.

**Leader:** When we are promoted to a new job in an unfamiliar place,

**Participants:** Remind us, dear Lord, that our true home is in you.

**Leader:** When the bad times come and our independence and security are threatened,

**Participants:** Remind us, dear Lord, that our true home is in you.

**Leader:** When it comes time to leave this world behind,

**Participants:** Remind us, dear Lord, that our true home is in you. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

- **Into the Scripture:** In what ways were both Jewish and Gentile Christians living in Asia Minor, displaced from significant aspects of their former lives? What are some of the “futile ways” embraced by your ancestors? How has Christ set you free from those ways?



- **Into the Lesson:** Have you ever been displaced from a home or setting that you thought was secure? How did God help you through that time of “exile”? In what ways has your community of faith been like family to you and your household? Have they ever helped you feel at home in an unfamiliar place?

- **Into Discipleship:** When you think about what it cost God to provide us with a spiritual home, what emotions fill your heart and mind? What characteristics of our spiritual home in God are superior to any other home we have known?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “Feels Like Home” by Linda Ronstadt:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCmz3ZgET4w>
- “Abide with Me”:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEts6GbRL2k>
- “My Life Is in Your Hands” by Kirk Franklin:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_EmrVQjja74](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_EmrVQjja74)

### Media Option

**Movie Night:** There are many serious dramas about displacement in times of war and as many movies that are lighthearted treatments of what it means to return home after life has changed you while you were in another place. One such film for a fun movie night would be *Sweet Home Alabama* (with Reese Witherspoon, Patrick Dempsey, John Lucas, and Candace Bergen). PG. 2002.

### Activity Ideas

- Invite participants to describe the home in which they were raised. If they have pictures of that home on their phones, encourage them to share them. Ask what made that place a home. Ask if anyone has tried to return to the home of their childhood and found it to be different than they remember. What happened to their home?
- Show pictures of luxury homes. Ask, “What would you have to do to be able to afford such a home? What would it cost you? What would you have to give up to have the money to buy such a home? What could happen to cause you to lose that home once you obtained it? Then ask what it cost Christ to provide us with a home in God. What do we have to give up to live in

that home? What could happen to cause us to lose that home?

- Read the poem by Richard Shindell listed below. What is it saying about home? Do you identify with his feelings about what was once his home?

## Poetry

“Wisteria” by Richard Shindell

Let's not drive away just yet  
Give me a moment more  
To walk through those rooms again  
To walk through that door

If we turn off the radio  
I've only to close my eyes  
And the wind in the sycamores  
Will carry me home

The vine of my memory  
Is blooming around those eaves  
But it's true it's a chore to tame wisteria

I'm tempted to ring the bell  
Maybe they'd let me in  
Or maybe it's just as well  
To let just be

Remember the price we paid?  
It seemed like a lot back then  
Remember the love we made  
The day we moved in?

The vine of my memory  
Is blooming around those eaves  
But it's true it's a chore to tame wisteria

## Devotional Scriptures Year A Third Sunday of Easter Week of 04/23/23

### Sunday 04/23/23

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; 1 Peter 1:17-23;  
Luke 24:13-35

### Monday 04/24/23

Psalm 134; Genesis 18:1-14; 1 Peter 1:23-25

### Tuesday 04/25/23

Psalm 134; Proverbs 8:32-9:6; 1 Peter 2:1-3

### Wednesday 04/26/23

Psalm 134; Exodus 24:1-11; John 21:1-14

### Thursday 04/27/23

Psalm 23; Exodus 2:15b-25; 1 Peter 2:9-12

### Friday 04/28/23

Psalm 23; Exodus 3:16-22; 4:18-20; 1 Peter 2:13-17

### Saturday 04/29/23

Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34:1-16; Luke 15:1-7

## Tempted to Leave the Cross: Renewing the Call to Discipleship

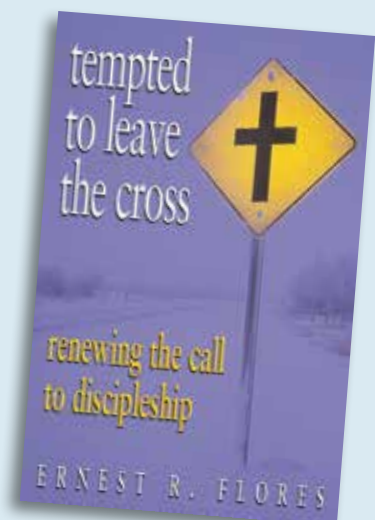
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# RENEWAL

## God revives the weary soul

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

—PSALM 23:5

### Introduction

When playing any number of popular video games, your avatar often dies. Sometimes that means “game over”—but only in a virtual context: you can use a magic elixir or hidden power to bring your character back to life and play on. Real life can be exhausting, even endangering to mind, body, and soul. When Christians gather, we often put our best foot forward and try to act like we have everything under control when we really are running on fumes. Rev. William Sloan Coffin put our dilemma this way: “We put our best foot forward, but it’s the other one that needs the attention.”<sup>1</sup> The Psalmist has something to teach us all in that he knew how it felt to be drained by life and to ultimately experience the renewal of God’s Spirit.

### Lesson Objectives

- To prompt Christians to share honestly with other believers when spiritually exhausted.
- To identify the character of God as one who renews weary souls.
- To plan for spiritual renewal.

### Psalm 23 NRSV

1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.



## Into the Scripture

The 23rd Psalm is usually attributed to King David, but we have no way of knowing for sure who composed the most famous psalm of all. There were numerous challenges in David's life that would have left him spiritually exhausted: King Saul's attack on his life (2 Samuel 19 and 23), the death of his friend Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:19-27), his sinful affair with Bathsheba, his participation in her husband's death (2 Samuel 11), the death of his son in infancy (2 Samuel 12:18), the death of his son Absalom as he tried to take David's kingship (2 Samuel 18), and other horrible family problems (2 Samuel 13)—as well as battles that ended in defeat.

David's need for spiritual renewal—along with his gift for poetic expression and his love for God—lead many biblical scholars to accept that he is the author of the psalm. The psalm reads like a retrospective from a believer looking back over a challenging life. More than likely, it was not any one event that precipitated this spiritual masterpiece but a lifelong journey that cycled from spiritual vitality to episodes of exhaustion to renewal. The concept of “shepherd” is central to the

psalm. On one level, a tender of sheep provided a fitting analogy for the way God watched over David. God guided him to places of refreshment like a shepherd led his flock to green pastures and still waters. God tried to lead David to make righteous choices and actions like a shepherd tried to lead his flock on safe pathways. When trouble arose either due to David's sins or others, God attempted to protect him from all evil like a shepherd fended off predators with

his rod and staff. The rod was a club that shepherds used to drive threatening animals away; the staff (the iconic crooked stick of many a Christmas pageant) was used to rescue sheep who had fallen or strayed into danger.

“

The psalm reads like a retrospective from a believer looking back over a challenging life.

The King James Version translated Psalm 23:4a as “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” The Hebrew word translated as “death” literally means darkness. It could therefore refer to the dark days of grief surrounding the loss of someone cherished. Or, in similar fashion, it could refer to the mysterious darkness that all people face when they approach death. The word could also refer to those somewhat lesser terrors of family problems, destructive choices, enemy attacks, and anxieties brought with advanced age that plagued David's life.

In verse 5, the imagery of the psalm seems to change from a shepherd to some kind of wealthy host. Sheep do not eat at a table or drink from an overflowing cup. They do not dwell in houses. The apparent conflict of metaphors is resolved by a broader understanding of the use of “shepherd” in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Numbers 27:15-21, Joshua is anointed “shepherd of Israel.” In Jeremiah 23:1-4, the prophet refers to all the corrupt leaders of Israel as shepherds who need to be removed from office. In Zechariah 11, the prophet Zechariah claimed that God asked him to be the shepherd of the nation after they returned from exile. “Shepherd” also referred to any leader who had responsibility over the lives of others in Israel.

The psalmist leaned into the idea of shepherd as king and compared his relationship with God to the relationship of a subject to a sovereign. God as regal





shepherd prepared him a banquet with overflowing wine. The Lord showed him great hospitality by anointing his head with assuaging oil and showing him goodness and mercy throughout his life. The kingly shepherd gave him a home in the palace his whole life long. David accented God's graciousness to provide him with benefits and blessings he neither earned nor could demand. Like a peasant brought into the house of the king to feast and rest in palatial luxury, David claimed God had blessed him extravagantly.

## Into the Lesson

The first sentence of Psalm 23 can be read as a statement of belief or a pledge of devotion. As a proclamation of faith, it means "because God is my shepherd, I will not lack for anything." God will provide everything we need in this life. For David, this did not refer to physical needs. He was the king, after all. Poverty, homelessness, unemployment, bankruptcy, and hunger were not a part of his worries. However, emotionally and spiritually, David battled a variety of desires and wants.

He wanted a peaceful kingdom but, instead, had to stay vigilant for the coups that tried to unseat him from within his kingdom and the constant attacks of enemies from outside his realm. He wanted a healthy family but, instead, had to deal with incest, adultery, sibling rivalry, conflict in his own marriages, and fratricide. He wanted to be righteous but, instead, broke God's commandments by committing adultery and killing an innocent man. He wanted to express his devotion to God by building a temple but was such a warrior that God denied him that opportunity and instead gave it to Solomon, a man of peace (1 Chronicles 22:6-10). Somewhere through all of this, he had to let go of all his desires and trust God to provide him with what he truly needed.

If the first verse is a pledge of devotion, then it becomes an exercise of self-discipline. "Because God is my shepherd, I will not allow myself to want" would capture the meaning. This interpretation acknowledges that David struggled with wanting more than the Lord provided and had to rein himself in to find contentment. Because David knew himself and his capacity to yearn for what God prohibited him to have, he had to practice being content. Whether the statement is about God's provision or David's tendency toward discontentment, the outcome is the same. He will let God be the true shepherd of his life and trust God to calm his restless desires and meet his needs.

David could do this because he had discovered God to be nurturing. Nurture is not always welcomed. Nurturing parents are often rebuffed by their children when they try to get them to eat better, develop healthier sleep patterns, stay away from risky activities, and wear a coat in the cold and sunscreen in the hot sun. David had to be "made" to lie down in green pastures and had to be led to still waters. His nature was to keep churning into the wee hours while neglecting his own health and seeking excitement in exotic places. Like a loving parent, however, God's nurturing character kept prodding him toward self-care, and David finally realized that God's prodding was in his own best interest.

The king had also learned that God is a restorer of drained souls. The Hebrew word for "soul" in verse 3 is



God will provide everything we need in this life.

*nephesh*. It is the same word found in Genesis 2:7 stating, “then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a [nephesh] living being.” Without God’s restoration in our lives, we return to dust and ashes. Life takes its toll and uses up all the resources we can muster. Thankfully, God breathes into our weary flesh new life and vitality.

The psalmist further saw God as being full of wisdom. God knew the right paths for David to take and led him along those paths. The Lord led David not merely for David’s well-being, but because God wanted those who knew David to see how good the guidance of the Lord was. When David obeyed God’s direction, his life improved, and those who witnessed this improvement had greater respect for the name of God.

Even in his most wayward moments, David came to understand that God was still with him. The One who showered David with “goodness and mercy” “all the days of his life” did not abandon David when he sinned. Whether David was running for his life or hiding in shame, God walked with him through his darkest days, protecting him from his enemies and redeeming him from his own sins. Lastly, David saw that God is extravagant with blessing even through the imperfections of life. The Lord provided David with a banquet of blessings even as he sat in the presence of his enemies. God did not remove the challenges of David’s life; he restored him with power and faith to live contentedly even when life was difficult.

Major portions of the Old Testament claim that if we do well, we shall be blessed—but if we do not, we shall be punished. If God welcomes only the righteous and rejects sinners, then none of us have a hope for renewal. The 23rd Psalm contends that God renews us through nurture, wisdom, forgiveness, companionship, mercy, and joy even when our lives are far from perfect.

## Into Discipleship

After forty-five years of pastoring churches and youth groups, I estimate that I have sat in at least five thousand prayer meetings. I have heard thousands of requests for God to help people with every sickness known to humanity. Hundreds of times parents have asked for prayer for troubled children or aging parents. Petitions for God’s help in finding a job, passing a test, finding

a companion, or giving birth have been frequent. Only rarely, however, has anyone in these five thousand prayer meetings said, “My soul is depleted. I am weary of my life, of myself, of my responsibilities. I keep wanting things that do not help. I need God’s renewal.”

David confessed to all of eternity that he had wants that were counter to what the Good Shepherd desired for him. Depending on how the 23rd Psalm is interpreted, David either told God (and himself) he did not lack anything so he could stop being discontent, or he committed to God (as well as himself) to stop wanting more than the Lord provided. Either way, he was admitting that he had desires that kept him restless instead of resting beside the still waters. How can we live in our times without being restless? We are barraged with messages that we need to buy something, eat something, try something, see something, vote for someone, or go somewhere. There are no still waters; there are no green pastures in which we can rest in our world.

That is why we so desperately need our community of faith. When we are gathered in big and small groups, one on one or in congregation, we can help one another admit our restlessness and turn each other’s focus back to the God who restores our souls. Spiritual restoration takes a plan; however, it will not happen accidentally. First, we need to schedule downtime in our weeks. If we do not discipline ourselves to stop, rest, turn off all interruptions, and create a quiet place, then someone or



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admit our restlessness and  
turn each other’s focus  
back to God.





something will fill up every moment of every day with noise and demands. God still leads his children to still waters and green pastures—the Spirit simply needs space in our days to take us there.

Second, we need to look for God’s rod and staff as we journey along. Spiritual predators attack us daily, but God gives us the Scripture, the support of other believers, prayer, worship, the hymns of the faith, and the power of the Spirit to drive them back into the darkness. And when we inevitably fall to deception, a designated time to confess to God and seek God’s deliverance will access God’s power to rescue us from what has entangled us.

Lastly, we can feast on the banquet God provides while dwelling in the house of the Lord rather than seeking false sources of nourishment. We chase after these depleting diets, often with our children in the car, in an expanding array of activities, practices, events, and responsibilities. Our work life, which now often takes place in the home where there is no closing time

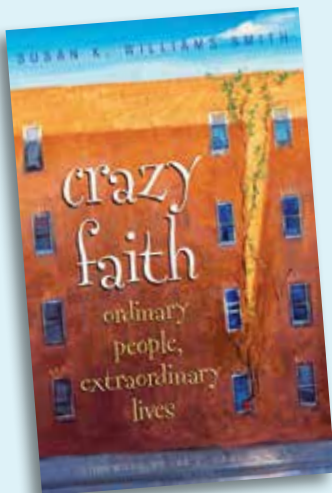
or punching out, requires more and more of us so that we can experience “the good life.” Tom Sine put it well when he wrote, “Millions of suburbanites seem to find that the ‘good life’ is only endurable under sedation.”<sup>2</sup>

Renewal requires gratitude for what we have. A practice of counting our blessings and incorporating new phrases like “this will do fine,” or “I can let this go,” or “we do not need to add this to our schedules,” and “that’s enough work for today” will rewire our brains for contentment. Appreciation to God for the life the Lord has given us restores us with the recognition that surely goodness and mercy truly will follow us all the days of our lives.

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#### Notes

1. “We put our best foot forward, but it’s the other one that needs the attention.” Quote by William Sloane Coffin, QuotesLyfe.com, <https://www.quoteslyfe.com/quote/We-put-our-best-foot-forward-but-1164897>.
2. Tom Sine, *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1981), 8.



## Crazy Faith: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives

by Susan K. Williams Smith; Edited by Rhoda McKinney-Jones

“Susan Smith has given us a mighty work that retells the stories of those who have turned vision, faith, and action into marvels of human accomplishment. *Crazy Faith* reminds us that faith is not a destination, but a journey, and along the way, each of us can become an instrument of God’s miracles.”

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## Closing Prayer

Good Shepherd, we admit that we want and want and want. Many of our desires take us away from the green pastures and still waters. We confess that we often stray into the valley of darkness instead of walking the paths of righteousness. Thank you, oh merciful God, for calling us back to the banquet you prepare for us and giving us a place in which to dwell with you forever and ever. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

- **Into the Scripture:** How was God like a shepherd/king to David? How has God been like a shepherd/king to you? Which is more important to you at this stage in your life—the rod of God which drives away your enemies or the staff of God that rescues when you stray and fall?



- **Into the Lesson:** How do you interpret David’s statement “The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want”? Is he professing his faith that because God is his shepherd, he does not want any more than the Lord has given him, or is he saying “because you are my shepherd, Lord, I will stop wanting things you do not provide”? Even though the Lord is your Shepherd, do you still want for things you don’t have? If so, what?

What were some of David’s desires that were not fulfilled in his days on Earth? Do you have desires that have not yet been fulfilled? Do you talk to God about these unmet desires? Do you share them with other believers? Have you ever rejected nurture from someone who loved you? Why? Do you ever reject the nurture of God? Why?

- **Into Discipleship:** How can you find time in your week to allow God space to lead you beside still waters and into green pastures to restore your soul? If the Lord prepares us a banquet **in the presence of our enemies**, we can be both blessed and stressed at the same time. When has God provided you a banquet even as life’s difficulties remained?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “Healing” by Richard Smallwood: <https://youtu.be/5GwOrVpudXI>
- “There Is a Balm in Gilead” by Deborah Liv Johnson: <https://youtu.be/YDmrgcLzEPk>
- “The Lord Is My Shepherd” by Keith Green: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yFH3Ffdgc4>

### Media Option

- “The Lord Is My Shepherd” by The Mormon Tabernacle Choir: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KTdkWnbj7s>

### Activity Ideas

- Divide the class into groups of three. Assign one of the following episodes from David’s life to each group. Ask each group to read the passage and discuss how their assigned episode would create a need for renewal.

Invite each group to share with the larger group.

- King Saul's attack on his life (1 Samuel 19 and 23)
  - The death of his friend Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:19-27)
  - David's sinful affair with Bathsheba and his participation in her husband's death (2 Samuel 11)
  - The death of his son in infancy (2 Samuel 12:18)
  - The death of his son Absalom as he tried to take David's kingship (2 Samuel 18)
  - Incest and fratricide among his children (2 Samuel 13)
- Invite participants to draw a timeline of their own lives from birth up to today. Invite them to mark key episodes of their own lives that created a need for renewal. Invite them to share if or how they found renewal in such difficult times.
  - Write the following quote from Dr. William Sloane Coffin Jr. on a dry-erase board or chalkboard: "We put our best foot forward, but it's the other one that needs the attention." Ask participants to share why we have such difficulty talking about spiritual exhaustion, unmet desires, and restlessness in the church.
  - Give each participant a pencil and a sheet of paper. Ask each person to draw up a plan for renewal based on findings from the 23rd Psalm.

## Additional Teaching Resource Ideas

Refer to W. Phillip Keller's book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* for further teaching material.

## Devotional Scriptures Year A Fourth Sunday of Easter Week of 04/30/23

### Sunday 04/30/23

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

### Monday 05/01/23

Psalm 100; Ezekiel 34:17-23; 1 Peter 5:1-5

### Tuesday 05/02/23

Psalm 100; Ezekiel 34:23-31; Hebrews 13:20-21

### Wednesday 05/03/23

Psalm 100; Jeremiah 23:1-8; Matthew 20:17-28

### Thursday 05/04/23

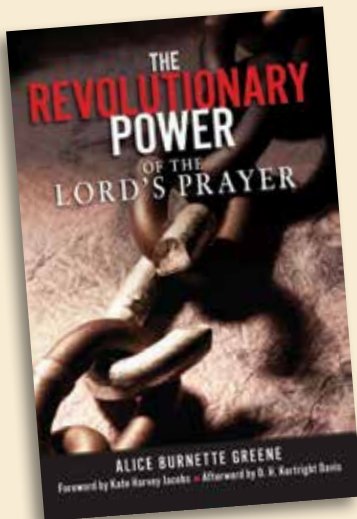
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; Genesis 12:1-3; Acts 6:8-15

### Friday 05/05/23

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; Exodus 3:1-12; Acts 7:1-16

### Saturday 05/06/23

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; Jeremiah 26:20-24; John 8:48-59



## The Revolutionary Power of the Lord's Prayer

by Alice Burnette Greene

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# DELIVERANCE

## trust in God

Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me,  
O LORD, faithful God.

—PSALM 31:5

### Introduction

No one's life is perfect and smooth. Every day we go through problems, difficulties, tears, sorrows, along with our joys and happiness. During the COVID-19 pandemic, hearing of the death of loved ones by the virus brought sadness to many families around the world, and many people are left behind with trauma because they could not be present when their loved ones died. In the post pandemic era, the world is facing wars among and within countries, which leave many refugees around the globe. Natural disasters have hit many parts of the world and left people with nothing. Where is our Lord, the faithful God to help us against visible and invisible enemies? Today's lesson focuses on the psalmist's trust in the Lord, the faithful God, in whom he laments, prays, and takes refuge. The psalmist believes that God is faithful to deliver him from his enemies.

### Lesson Objectives

- To trust that God is faithful to God's covenantal people not to destroy, but to love and deliver them from their enemies.
- To submit ourselves to receive the deliverance of God.
- To have confidence in our prayers.

### Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 NRSV

1 In you, O LORD, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. 2 Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. 3 You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me, 4 take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge. 5 Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God. . . . 15 My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. 16 Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

## Into the Scripture

The genre of Psalm 31 is an individual lament. The psalm is a combination of three different laments: 1-8 is a lament to protect the psalmist; 9-13 is the lament of a sick man; and 14-18 is a lament of an unjustly accused person. The psalm ends with thanksgiving for the deliverance of God from such troubles mentioned in the three laments. The lament includes a mixture of prayers and confession. Today's lesson emphasizes Psalm 31:1-5 and 15-16.

Psalm 31 is possibly dated after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE; the city was destroyed, the temple was burnt, and the last Davidic king was exiled into Babylon. The lament seems to be located in the destroyed city of Jerusalem. In Psalm 31:12-13, the use of phrases "a broken vessel" and "terror all around" by the psalmist are quotes from the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 22:28; 48:38 (for "a broken vessel"); and 6:25; 20:3, 10; 46:5; 49:29 (for "terror all around").

When the Babylonian destroyers came to Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah said, "For I hear many whisperings; 'terror is all around!'" (Jer 20:10 and Psalm 31:13). Jeremiah 20 gives the background history of the phrase "terror all around"; it can be concluded that the phrase is Jeremiah's own. The psalmist, therefore, quoted the phrase from Jeremiah when he dealt with the same situation during the time of the ruin of the city and the temple. Although Babylonians destroyed the temple, the city, and exiled Israelites and their king, the psalmist in the ruined city did not throw away his faith but had confidence in the Lord.

### The Prayer

Psalm 31 opens with the psalmist's prayer with affirmation that in the Lord, he is seeking refuge, because the psalmist knows that the Lord is a righteous God, who is able to deliver him from enemies. The phrase "in your righteousness" refers to God's act of deliverance as a covenant God. "Righteousness" is God's character, and the psalmist affirms that God can set all things right in the midst of his personal suffering and distress.

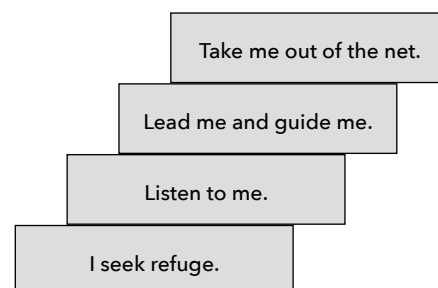
The psalmist also uses powerful metaphorical terms, such as "a rock" and "a strong fortress," for God. He believes that God is the source of protection. Divine protection includes deliverance for the psalmist from all kinds of calamities (cf., Psalm 18:1-3; and the wilderness



The psalmist prays for leadership and guidance for the sake of God's name.

narrative in Exodus). After using the words, "rock" and "fortress" for God, the psalmist prays for leadership and guidance for the sake of God's name (cf., Psalm 23:3). The two verbs "lead" and "guide" occur in Exodus 15:13, in which Moses and the Israelites sing a song to God for their exodus from Egypt and for guidance, effected by God's steadfast love (cf., Psalm 31:16). The psalmist knows God's deliverance of his ancestors in the Exodus tradition. Thus, by calling God and using the words "to lead" and "to guide," the psalmist expects to have his own, personal exodus.

The prayer of the psalmist continues in verse 4: "Take me out of the net that is hidden from me." The prayer sounds like the psalmist is entrapped in the net of enemies. While holding onto his belief that God is his refuge, the psalmist requests God's deliverance (cf., Exodus 3:7). There is a structural development of the prayer in this Psalm 31:1-5. The psalmist has never thought of giving up his prayers and laments until God has delivered him.







## God's Characteristics

There are two characteristics of God in Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16: God is righteous, and God is faithful. The righteousness of God links to God's saving action in the Books of Psalms and Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-66). When the psalmist cries out for God's righteousness, he is sure that none of his enemies will be able to harm him. No evildoers can touch him because God's righteousness is with him. The psalmist believes that his deliverance depends on God's righteousness.

Psalm 31:5 mentions that God as a faithful God. In the Exodus tradition, the faithful God appears to Moses at Mount Sinai and proclaims the name in Exodus 34. One of the divine attributes is "faithfulness" in verse 6. God's self-revelations also includes faithfulness. The psalmist's use of "faithful God" urges God's self-revelations in the deliverance. These two characteristics of God are crucial for the psalmist to deliver him from "terror all around."

## Into the Lesson

When COVID badly hit my country Myanmar in 2021, I woke up every morning hearing of friends and families being sick, dying, and dead. There was no morning that I woke up without crying. Tears were my breakfast; sadness and crying were my morning devotion. From that time on, I sometimes ask myself these questions: Where is God? What is God doing? Why does not God see our people suffering not only by military dictators but also by the deadly virus? What is God's faithfulness? Why do we say that God is righteous? Where is God's deliverance? There are five lessons in this Scripture Psalm 31:1-5; 15-16:

**1) *Let there be justice:*** Since Psalm 31 is an individual lament Psalm, the psalmist initiates calling God and confirming what God is for him; God is righteous in verse 1. The psalmist seems to know that as a righteous God, God is going to do the right thing; therefore, when deliverance comes, the psalmist must do the right thing, too. There were not enough medicines, medical equipment, or facilities to prevent the deadly contagious virus in my country; however, on the other hand, this part of the world had enough of everything, and even more extras to prevent this virus in 2021. Many of us are stubborn; our hearts are hardened. Even with our hardened hearts, God's deliverance from the pandemic has come. Just like the psalmist, let us affirm that we will do the right thing to each other among our communities for our righteous God in this post-pandemic era. Romans 14:8 says, "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

**2) *My rock and my fortress:*** Refugees of war or of natural disasters, migrant workers, jobless or homeless feel and understand how important it is to have shelters, stability, safety, and protectors. The psalmist represents one of these people in the context; he is an Israelite, left in the ruined city Jerusalem, surrounded by Babylonians or maybe others called his enemies. The psalmist trusts in God that God is a rock and fortress to give stability



The psalmist believes that his deliverance depends on God's righteousness.

and protection. Let us trust in God like the psalmist, to take refuge in God.

**3) Lead me and guide me:** When we have questions of where God is, why God is silent, where God's faithfulness and deliverance are in the midst of all the tragedies around us, we remember the psalmist, who, instead of wondering with all the questions that we have, admits that God is his leader and guide. Thus, he, with full confidence, puts his life (in Hebrew, *ruah*, meaning "breath") into God's hand. Not only does the psalmist take refuge in God, but he is ready to be led and guided by God to get out of "terror all around."

**4) O Lord, faithful God:** The term "faithful God" is typically used after God's redemption of the righteous (cf., Isa 25:1; Psalm 40:9-10). In the individual lament psalm, the psalmist calls to God in his distress; God delivers him. Therefore, the psalmist calls for praise to acknowledge God's action of deliverance. The psalmist in Psalm 31:5 confesses that after he commits his life into God's hands, "[God] has redeemed him, O Lord, faithful God." When we are confused or we think that we have no way to get out from our calamities, we remember the psalmist, who declares boldly that our God is a faithful God. Isa 59:1 says, "See, the Lord's hand is not too short to save." God is faithful to bring deliverance to the ones, who trust and put their lives into God's hand.

**5) God's steadfast love:** Psalm 31 mentions "God's steadfast love" three times in verses 6, 16 and 21; moreover, the phrase occurs in about fifty psalms. In Exodus 34:6-7, the God of Moses is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness; then Exodus 34 continues by describing the shining of Moses's face after he talks to God on Mount Sinai. In Psalm 31, the psalmist requests that he would see God's revelation like Moses, saying "let your face shine upon your servant"; however, the psalmist acknowledges that God's steadfast love can save him from his enemies.

Considering these five lessons from Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16, we have an affirmation that God is righteous, our refuge, our guide, a faithful one and abounding in steadfast love. Just like the psalmist, we can call out to God in our sorrows, pains, distress, and calamities; then God will bring deliverance to the faithful ones. In 1 Cor 10:13, the Apostle Paul says, "God is faithful, and God will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing God will also provide, the way out, so that you may be able to endure it."



This psalm teaches us to trust in God both in living and in dying.

## Into Discipleship

To believe in God's deliverance, we must first trust in God fully, then we must not be afraid of any circumstances that we might face in our lives by knowing that God is the one who will do things right. As God is righteous and faithful to us, let us put our trust in God like the psalmist in the Old Testament, Jesus in the New Testament, and early Christians in the early churches; and wait patiently for God's deliverance. Psalm 31 frequently expresses how much the psalmist trusts in God with various vocabularies. In his time, the things that Israelites treasured most were gone; their own city destroyed, their Jerusalem Temple burnt, their families gone into exile. From feeling alone with all around terror, the psalmist puts his trust in God. This psalm teaches us to trust in God both in living and in dying.

In Jesus' time, Jesus trusts in God completely. Psalm 31 is quoted in Luke's Gospel when Jesus is on the cross experiencing the darkness over the whole land, meaning he is left alone—there is no one around him, only pain and agony. The quotation from the psalm is one of the seven sayings of Jesus on the cross. Luke 23:46 says, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Psalm 31:5). "Having said this, he breath his last." As Jesus quotes Psalm 31 when he is dying, we can see that the psalmist and Jesus put their trust in God whether they are living or dying.

In the Book of Acts, Steven quotes the words of the psalmist and Jesus before he dies. Steven prays in Acts 7:59: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Steven holds



onto his trust in God until his painful death in the first century CE. By the fourth century, the Psalms are memorized and used as liturgical songs in the worship at early Christian churches. In the *Letter to Marcellinus* of Athanasius (295-374 CE), bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius interpreted Psalm 31 for Christians to find themselves in their individual situation. He said, “When you see that you are despised and persecuted for the truth’s sake by all your friends and relatives, do not give up concern either for them or for yourself. And if you see your acquaintances turning against you, do not be alarmed, but separate yourself from them and turn your mind to the future and sing Psalm 31.” In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther the reformer recited Psalm 31:5 four times before he died on the night of February 18, 1546. There were so many other saints who admitted their trust in God by using Psalm 31:5 until they died.

We are here today hearing all our predecessors, who have put their trust in God no matter what situation they face with their contemporaries. In our time today, the pandemic has left sadness and trauma to many

families around the world; and people are facing inflation in economics, wars among and within the countries, and refugees around the globe. In addition, natural disasters are increasing and bringing more damage to the people everywhere.

While there are “many terrors all around,” let us think of our predecessors, how they have overcome distress and calamities through trust in God, who is righteous and faithful; how they have committed their lives into God’s hand to receive God’s deliverance. Finally, we will share their practice with our next generation. Trust in God brings God’s deliverance as learned from the psalmist, to Jesus, to Steven, to the early Christians, and now down to us. Let us be ready to keep our trust in God and pass it on to the younger generations.

---

#### Notes

1. J. Clinton McCann, Jr. “The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and the Reflections, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. IV (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 797–803.
2. William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Yearbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).
3. John J. Scullion, “God,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1041–48.



## Closing Prayer

Dear God, we praise and worship you because we know we can always put our trust in you. Your strong arm will deliver us from our enemies, your loving hand will pluck our feet out of the net and place us upon a rock. Your love for us is unconditional and so is your willingness to save us whenever we call upon your holy name. Amen..

## Reflection Questions

- **Into the Scripture:** Put yourselves in the shoes of the psalmist. Will you question God about why bad things have happened to good people, or will you simply ask God for help? How do you understand God the righteous and faithful one? God’s deliverance for an individual and communal situation is always different. Please explain your own understanding of God’s deliverance for yourself.
- **Into the Lesson:** How is your soul? What are the problems, difficulties, and distresses that you are having these days? How will you overcome those?

- **Into the Discipleship:** What kind of practices help you cope with and overcome problems? What kind of resources do you need for you to teach the younger generations to hold on to their trust in God when they face “terror all around” them?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “How Firm a Foundation” by Hymns of the People: <https://youtu.be/i8ggmPVZQKQ>
- “Waymaker” by Michael W. Smith, featuring Vanessa Campagna and Madelyn Berry: [https://youtu.be/SE\\_M9noEhNE](https://youtu.be/SE_M9noEhNE)
- “Jireh” by Elevation Worship and Maverick City: <https://youtu.be/mC-zw0zCCtg>

### Media Option

Two great movie choices that focus on faith in God in overcoming adversity.

- “Miracles from Heaven,” starring Jennifer Garner. Sony Pictures. Trailer: <https://blog.outreach.com/top-christian-movies-church-movie-night/>
- “Soul Surfer,” directed by Carrie Underwood and Dennis Quaid. It also stars Helen Hunt and Anna-Sophia Robb. Trailer: <https://blog.outreach.com/top-christian-movies-church-movie-night/>





## Activity Ideas

Read Psalm 31:1-5; 15-16 as a poem, from *The Psalter* by Carroll Stuhlmueller, (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995). Since it is an Individual Lament Psalm, please do it on your own: think about your worries, sorrows, and hardships, then read the poem and meditate as you are praying.

*For the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.*

Shelter me, Lord,  
save me from shame.  
Let there be justice:  
save me!

(Pause. Take a deep breath. Think of all your burdens. Then continue.)

Help me! Listen!  
Be quick to the rescue!  
Be my fortress, my refuge.

You, my rock and fortress,  
prove your good name.  
Guide me, lead me,  
free me from their trap.  
You are my shelter.

(Pause. Take a deep breath. Think how much you trust in God. Then continue.)

But I trust in you, Lord.  
I say, "You are my God,

my life is in your hands."  
Snatch me from the enemy,  
ruthless in their chase. (Amen.)

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year A Fifth Sunday of Easter

### Week of 05/07/23

#### Sunday 05/07/23

Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10;  
John 14:1-14

#### Monday 05/08/23

Psalm 102:1-17; Exodus 13:17-22; Acts 7:17-40

#### Tuesday 05/09/23

Psalm 102:1-17; Proverbs 3:5-12; Acts 7:44-56

#### Wednesday 05/10/23

Psalm 102:1-17; Proverbs 3:13-18; John 8:31-38

#### Thursday 05/11/23

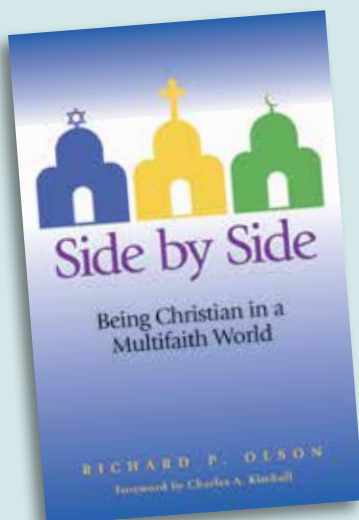
Psalm 66:8-20; Genesis 6:5-22; Acts 27:1-12

#### Friday 05/12/23

Psalm 66:8-20; Genesis 7:1-24; Acts 27:13-38

#### Saturday 05/13/23

Psalm 66:8-20; Genesis 8:13-19; John 14:27-29



## Side by Side: Being Christian in a Multifaith World

by Richard P. Olson

“How can committed Christians embrace other faiths while deepening our own encounter with God? With scholarship, story, and practical tips, Richard P. Olson’s journey points us to the holy ground toward which all faiths beckon.”

—Vern Barnet, DMin, Founder, Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council, and President, World Faiths Center for Religious Experience and Study

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# UNITY

## community in Jesus

“On that day you will know that I am in my Father,  
and you in me, and I in you.”

—JOHN 14:20

### Introduction

We live in a world where diversity is crucial, not only in words, but also in action. Many workplaces recently have committed to “diversity, equity, and inclusion” to embrace pluralistic cultures, learn from each other, and bring in new ideas, practices, and experiences. This commitment of our workplaces is not foreign to us since our Christian theology depends on a trinitarian God, as in culturally different, characteristically different, and chronologically different. God the creator, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God, as “unity in diversity.” Before we enter the Pentecost season, we will learn from the Gospel of John 14:15-21, which expresses the concept of trinity like a household culture; God the creator is the Father of Jesus Christ and the sender of the Advocate/Holy Spirit.

### Lesson Objectives

- To learn social context of the Book of John.
- To understand the meaning of advocate.
- To realize the value of the community of God.

#### John 14:15-21 NRSV

15 “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. 18 I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21 They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

## Into the Scripture

The Gospel of John portrays a completely different picture of **Jesus** from the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John opens with Jesus' incarnation instead of the genealogy and the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke. John 1 says, "In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and lived among us." Thus, John focuses on Jesus' incarnation and humanity, which can be explained by studying the social context of John's Gospel.

In the first century CE, Jews who followed Jesus and who practiced traditional Judaism worshiped together at the Synagogue. John mentions the conflicts between these two groups in John 8:31-59. The Gospel portrays Jesus and Jews who follow traditional Judaism as having an argument about the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God; he was not recognized by them as having come from God the Father. As the result of the conflict, followers of Jesus were thrown out of the Synagogue. This episode reflects the situation faced by John's own community around the year 90 CE. Those who were expelled then formed the Johannine community outside the Synagogue, and the **Gospel** had contributed to this community and focused on the identity of Jesus as the one sent from God.

When Jesus was talking to the Johannine community, John's Gospel expresses the language of the household, but it is not the earthly household; it is the household of God. During the Passover

festival, Jesus talked to the community that the hour of his departure from the earth to go to the Father had come (John 13:1). Jesus wanted to make sure that the community still followed him and was united on the earth even after he had left. Therefore, John 14:15 said, "If you **love** me, you will keep my **commandments**." Loving Jesus does not stand alone; action is required. Jesus calls on people to act to keep his commandments. In John 13:34-35: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should have loved one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."



## Love is the primary source of unity in the community of Jesus' followers.

Love is the primary source of unity in the community of Jesus' followers. This command is very different from the form of the saying as it appears in the Synoptic Gospels, where we read, "You shall love the Lord, your God . . . and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:27; Matthew 22:36-40). "Love your neighbor" in the Synoptic Gospels is more inclusive than the saying in the Gospel of John, which involves "loving one another" in the Johannine **community**.

### Holy Spirit

As Jesus' followers kept the commandment of loving one another in the community, Jesus would pray for them, asking the Father to send another Advocate, which is the Spirit of truth/Holy Spirit to the community. Jesus was making sure that the community understood what the Spirit of truth meant. During the Passover period, Jesus was talking to his disciples about his pending death and departure, but promising that they would not be **orphans**, and that he still would come to them. What did it mean for his followers? How would they understand it? Because of their love for Jesus and each other, they would not be orphans; moreover, God the Father would give the Spirit of truth/Holy Spirit, which in essence is Jesus coming back to the community in a characteristically different form.

### In Me

When the Holy Spirit came to Jesus' followers, it would be forever. The Holy Spirit would continue Jesus' mission in the community permanently. However, the Spirit





does not function the same way as Jesus did since the Spirit is not in a physical form. Jesus left the community, and the **Holy Spirit** was sent there. Jesus said that they would see him, but the world would no longer see him. (The Scripture gives a complicated statement about Jesus' coming back. Jesus said, "because I live . . . you will also live.") In John's context, the **world** is meant to refer especially to the group of people who expelled Jesus' followers from one of the Synagogues. Those Jews disagreed with the followers' view of Jesus, and they were thus expelled as punishment—perhaps because the Jews wanted to avoid the creation of a permanent faction within the group. Therefore, Jesus' living, whether in a physical or in a spiritual form, could not be seen or understood by the world.

For the Johannine community, when love for Jesus and each other lived in their hearts, they would characteristically experience Jesus in their midst—thus, Jesus said, "you, 'in me'." The word "in" occurs three times in John 14:20: "I am in my **Father**, and you in me, and I in you," expressing the unity of the household of God. Jesus is the mediator between God the Father and the Johannine community. After Jesus' departure, the Holy Spirit would disclose the **truth** of Jesus' life, practices, and mission to the community. Furthermore, God's love would be manifest to them and through them.

## Into the Lesson

The Book of John addresses two groups of Jewish people: the traditional Jews, and the Jews of Jesus' followers. We learned from the book that Jesus' followers in the Johannine community were kicked out from one Synagogue; they were not kicked out from all the Synagogues in the land. They were kicked out only from the Synagogue

where the Johannine community and the traditional Jews had a conflict. Today's lesson, John 14:15-21, addresses the **community** of Jesus' followers, and a small group of traditional Jews, called "the world" in verse 19. There are three points to highlight in this lesson.

### Jesus' Revelation

On the day that Jesus ascended to his Father, he would **reveal** himself to his followers (John 14:21). How would that be possible since Jesus was physically gone? This is where and how Jesus emphasized unity of his followers with God the Father, himself the Son, and the Advocate/ the Spirit of truth. John's mention that "Jesus reveals to them," does not indicate that Jesus or the Advocate would repeat the passion and resurrection events for the community. After Jesus' departure, the community was given the Spirit so that they could live in the Spirit of Jesus.

Yet, in the time of the Johannine community, Jesus' revelation was to the group of Jewish people who followed Jesus, having received the Spirit. By the Spirit's guidance, they could subsequently give witness to the reality of the living Jesus and God the Father—not just in their own Johannine community but to the larger world. It becomes beneficial to all of us today that although we do not see Jesus in person, we can embrace this message, love each other, and walk in the Spirit and light of Jesus. Meanwhile, God's love is shed abroad in our hearts.



The community was given the Spirit so that they could live in the Spirit of Jesus.



## Unity at Home

Today is the sixth Sunday of Easter. If we were Jesus' followers in the first century, this time would be the most enjoyable time for us to be with Jesus in person. Jesus was resurrected and with us in unity for 40 days. Whatever things Jesus told us in the Passover would be happening to and in us as all his words would be coming to fruition. Now was the time to move forward while knowing that in the next few days, Jesus would depart from us. Momentarily, the unity between Jesus' followers and Jesus would be in suspended animation of sorts but not broken. Even though Jesus was personally separated from his followers, the Comforter came on Pentecost and codified their unity—and ours—perpetually. We are sealed with his Spirit (Ephesians 1:13).

Although Jesus' departure from this earth and the community could have been a sad thing; it, however, finally brought joyful unity at home. Jaime Clark-Soles, the New Testament professor from Perkins School of Theology, uses the term "the Quattrinity," which means, in John, Jesus emphasizes the intimate unity between him, God, the Spirit, and Jesus' followers. "On that day, . . . I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you, . . . those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself (which is the Holy Spirit) to them."

## Unity in Diversity

Christians believe in a trinitarian God: the Creator, Savior, and Advocate, which are within a divine unity. Each one has its own identity; "each is also and most frequently identified in relation to the others." In John, the Spirit sent by God represents God's active and dwelling presence on earth, and yet it is also Jesus' successor as a witness of Jesus' exaltation. According to John, "Quattrinity," as Clark-Soles calls it, includes the trinitarian God and the community with its own humanistic Jewish identity. John's Gospel expresses how beautiful it is to have diverse identities even in divine unity.

## Into Discipleship

### Community of God

John emphasizes the community of Jesus' followers, who should keep the commandments if they love him. In the Old Testament, this kind of command was given to the Israelite community. In Deuteronomy 6:5-6, it is a



A community of God  
should be for everyone who  
needs sanctuary.

covenantal thing to keep the commandment for loving God with all their hearts, their soul, and their might. And God would be faithful to the Israelite community. However, Deuteronomy 7:9 extends this covenant of love and faithfulness from the community of the Exodus tradition to a thousand generations (Ex 20:6).

In New Testament times, the Synoptic Gospels express the commandment of love in its own social location and community. Mark 12:28-34 and Matthew 22:34-40 mention not only to love your God, but to love your neighbors; however, these two Gospels do not specifically mention who the neighbors are. Giving the same commandment in Luke 10:25-28, loving neighbors becomes more specific toward Samaritans (e.g., the Good Samaritan parable follows the command in Luke 10:29-37). The community of God is not limited only to the people of Israel, but extends to their neighbors; in Luke, it extends to the Gentiles.

In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, John emphasizes only the Johannine community, who holds love to Jesus and each other; moreover, John focuses on loving Jesus instead of God. The reason is that although Jesus' identity is the Son, he identified himself so closely to his Father. After Jesus' departure, the Johannine community received the Spirit and became the community of God. According to John, the world is not included in the community of God; however, when the world receives the Spirit, it is no longer "the world" in the Johannine sense. Then the world is no longer alienated from God. The community of God ultimately encompasses Israelites, their generations that follow and all



Gentiles—God’s love is extended without restraint to the whole world.

Today, the community of God is the body of Christ that is the Church. The Eurocentric culture of the United States is very individualistic in the perspective of diasporas and immigrants. In contrast to the individualistic culture, the Bible is full of passages on building community (e.g., creation story, flood narrative, patriarchal narratives, and so on). In his book, *The Community of God: A Theology of the Church from a Reluctant Pastor*, Douglas S. Bursch said that God is a community; and it is God’s nature to create community to share God’s love. The community holds each other with love, even with their differences and conflicts. Community is a gift from God to make us human and to help us understand who we are. In the community, we learn from each other, share our new ideas, practices, and find a common goal that is always greater than our own individual objectives.

### Love and Action

The local church in which we are members can support the ecumenical movement for Christian **unity** regardless of our denominations and practices. It is important for each local church to understand itself in its context of the whole of Christianity and to understand the way individual churches may work with other Christians to build the kingdom of God, the household of God on this earth. Love can be expressed among Christians, and we can act in an ecumenical way to show that we are

the community of God—the “Church” universal spelled with an uppercase “C.” Jesus prayed that his followers in later generations would become one: “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:23).

Since the larger Church, as the community of God, is founded on the trinitarian God, we should move on to the next level so that we open our doors to the wider society to embrace diversity. A community of God should be for everyone who desires sanctuary and fellowship in God, regardless of denominational background, color of the skin, gender identity, social status, and cultural background. As American Baptists, we respect the expression of faith of others; therefore, the community of God should accept and welcome all who want to share in this unity. By doing so, the love of God and Jesus will extend from the **Church**, and the Spirit will guide the community of God into ushering in God’s kingdom.

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#### Notes

1. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-1415-21-2>
2. Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit: The Pentecostal Experience and the New Testament Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1970).
3. Norman H. Maring, and Winthrop S. Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*, 2nd revised version (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2012).
4. Douglas S. Bursch, “The Community of God: A Theology of the Church from a Reluctant Pastor,” *Fairly Spiritual Pub*, 2017.



## Closing Prayer

Dear God, we are all yours—made in your Imago Dei. Into our nostrils you breathed the same breath of life. And today you offer us the breath of your Holy Spirit to walk in your love, light, and truth. Bind us together in your love and help us to embrace each other as sisters and brothers of one human family. Help us to all live in Christ and receive of the abundance you promised us as joint heirs with him. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

■ **Into the Scripture:** How does each Gospel portray Jesus in his historical time and context? How relevant to our own contemporary period is the picture of the

Jesus described in John? Can you think of a way you can characterize Jesus in your own context without having conflict with people of different faiths?

- **Into the Lesson:** Explain how differently “the commandment of love” is expressed in each Gospel? How important is it for you to understand the doctrine of the Trinity as it works in your life according to the Gospel of John? What does Church with an uppercase “C” mean to you?
- **Into the Discipleship:** How does the diverse community work for you? Do you have a way to engage the community of God/Church, which has diverse ethnicities, languages, cultures, and genders? How do you see your church going into the world, spreading the love of Jesus, and expanding to become the inclusive community of God?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “Oh, How He Loves You and Me” by Grace Larsen Brumley: <https://youtu.be/CCQ8vChOziI>
- “Love Each Other” by Graham Kendrick: <https://youtu.be/xtkROEDMTbY>
- “His Eye is on the Sparrow” by Lauryn Hill and Tanya Blount: <https://youtu.be/k7Pk5YMkEcg>



## Activity Idea

Take five to seven minutes to look for the words that you have encountered in the lesson. Think how chaotic it is to look for the words that you have learned. A diverse community can be like a chaotic crossword puzzle, but

love holds everyone, and the Spirit of truth leads each and everyone's life under God's household. There are fifteen words to find in this puzzle. The **bold** words in the lesson are the answers to this crossword puzzle.



## Devotional Scriptures

### Year A Sixth Sunday of Easter

### Week of 05/14/23

#### Sunday 05/14/23

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22;  
John 14:15-21

#### Monday 05/15/23

Psalm 93; Genesis 9:8-17; Acts 27:39-44

#### Tuesday 05/16/23

Psalm 93; Deuteronomy 5:22-33; 1 Peter 3:8-12

#### Wednesday 05/17/23

Psalm 93; Deuteronomy 31:1-13; John 16:16-24

#### Thursday 05/18/23

*Ascension of the Lord:* Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 or  
Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

#### Friday 05/19/23

Psalm 93; 2 Kings 2:1-12; Ephesians 2:1-7

#### Saturday 05/20/23

Psalm 93; 2 Kings 2:13-15; John 8:21-30



# ASCENSION

## new beginning

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

—ACTS 1:8

### Introduction

The day of Jesus’ ascension is sometimes overlooked by the Christian tradition. We quickly move forward from Easter to Pentecost and forget to think about the forty days in between when Jesus gave instructions about how his disciples should live until he returned. Today’s lesson will focus on Acts 1:8-14, where Jesus’ ascension takes place and Jesus’ disciples anticipate their new beginning as empowered witnesses to the world. Based on that, the lesson will teach us how important it is to be inspired by the power of Jesus’ ascension and to witness the good news into the world by our continuous work.

### Lesson Objectives

- To acknowledge the new beginning of life as the continuous witness of Jesus Christ in this world.
- To understand the significance of hospitality from Luke’s Gospel to the Book of Acts.
- To recognize how the focus of our Christian hope has changed historically overtime.

#### Acts 1:6-14 NRSV

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” 12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount

called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

## Into the Scripture

The Book of Acts was written by Luke the Evangelist, who also wrote the Gospel of Luke. Therefore, Luke-Acts is the composite work by Luke in the New Testament. Luke is believed to be a Gentile aware of the apocalyptic time for which Jesus' disciples waited (see Mark 13). The disciples wanted to know the time of restoring the kingdom of Israel while they were living under the authority of the Roman Empire. They were waiting for the time of reversal—when Rome would be subjected to a restored kingdom of Israel.

Luke apparently wished to avoid any discussion about this ideological time of political reversal, so he

wrote in Acts 1:7: “[Jesus replied to his disciples], it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” Since he himself is a Gentile, Luke does not want these disciples to undermine the Gentiles in his time. Despite believing and talking about the apocalyptic

time of political reversal, Luke wanted Jesus' disciples to work, witness, and spread the gospel continuously. Thus, witnessing and spreading the gospel could be started from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria, and then to the ends of the world.

## The Beginning of the New Chapter

Both for Jesus and for the disciples, this is the beginning of a new chapter. For the disciples, their new chapter

“

The disciples wanted to know the time of restoring the kingdom of Israel.

begins in Acts 1 following the narrative about Jesus' ascension in Luke's Gospel. Luke narrated the resurrection and ascension of Jesus in chapter 24, in which there are two remarkable episodes about the Messiah:

- In Luke 24:13-35, two of Jesus' apostles invited him (in the form of a stranger) to stay with them in their hometown Emmaus, extending hospitality to him with a dinner meal. At their table, Jesus blessed the meal, broke a loaf of bread, and then “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, ‘were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.” These two disciples had a new beginning in their lives when they offered hospitality to the stranger, which in this case happened to be their leader Jesus.

- Another episode is in Luke 24:36-49, where Jesus appears to his disciples while they gathered together, and Jesus asks for the hospitality of food. While Jesus ate the meal in their presence, he gave the last words that the disciples had witnessed: “the Messiah is to suffer, and to rise from the dead.” They would proclaim the repentance and forgiveness of sin in Jesus’ name to all nations beginning in Jerusalem. They would be the witnesses of all these things. The new beginning of their lives in these two episodes is based on the disciples’ hospitality to the stranger; subsequently, they will step forward to witness and spread the gospel of Jesus’ messiahship to the ends of the world.



## Into the Lesson

### The Consequences of Hospitality

The ascension of Jesus occurred in Luke’s Gospel and the Book of Acts. According to Luke’s Gospel, after the two episodes about Jesus’ messiahship and his disciples’ hospitality, “Jesus was carried up into heaven” while he was blessing them. “They worshipped [Jesus], and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God” (Luke 24:52-53).

The ascension in the Book of Acts begins with the disciples being with the Lord, who visited them and instructed them for forty days. The Christian mission should practice in this way so that we should be guided by the Lord, once we have invited him in and given him hospitality. We, current Christians believe that the disciples in Acts received the power of the Lord through the Holy Spirit, along with seeing visions and angels, which intervene in their actions and their lives. In Acts 1:9, the disciples were eyewitnesses of the Ascension, when Jesus was enveloped by a cloud, which represented the power, authority, sovereignty and the glorification of God (see Exodus 24: 12-18).

Luke the author describes Jesus like Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus, in which the glory of the Lord settled on the mountain, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day, Moses entered the cloud



Jesus’ kingdom of God was not the immediate restoration of the kingdom to Israel.

and went up the mountain. Before he went up into the cloud, Moses told the elders, “Wait here [at the foot of the mountain] until [he] comes back to [them].” The disciples saw that Jesus went into the cloud, just like the elders of the Israelites saw that Moses went up into the cloud. But then suddenly the disciples were accompanied by two men in white robes, which is how angels are represented in Luke’s writing (see Luke 24:2-4).

In Luke 24, the women came to the tomb to wash Jesus’ dead body with spices and oil; however, consequently, two angels robed in dazzling clothes stood beside them and asked them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen.” Acts 1:11 also gives a similar rhetorical question to the disciples, saying, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” The consequences of hospitality are that the disciples have seen the glory, the angels, and the promise given by the angels.

### Christian Hope

The disciples of Jesus had certain hopes about their physical kingdom of Israel, which they thought would be restored by removing the Roman authority to which they were subject; however, Luke has made them to stop this hope. Instead, their hope is first fulfilled when the two disciples give hospitality to Jesus in their town Emmaus in the end of Luke’s Gospel. Second, their hope is to continue witnessing and spreading the gospel in this world according to the Book of Acts.

Although Acts 1:11 talks about Jesus’ coming back in the same way as he goes into heaven, Luke does not focus on the imminent Parousia (the imminent arrival of Jesus’ second coming), which the early Christian community had already dealt with as a “nonfulfillment of their hopes.” Rather, Luke emphasizes the practicing of the gospel in the lives of the disciples. Therefore, Acts 1:8 says, “When the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth.” The Christian hope is that, instead of waiting for Jesus’ second coming, the gospel will be spread from the Jews in Jerusalem to the Samaritans in Samaria, then to the Gentiles in Rome, and to the ends of the world.

Today, Christian churches need to take the lesson from Acts 1:6-11 that we can be witnessing and living out the gospel into this world. We talk so much about



Focus on what happens  
in the end times is called  
“eschatology.”

Jesus’ second coming or Parousia; however, giving hospitality to strangers, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and living according to the Gospels are the primary mandates. Sometimes these are difficult to follow; we would often prefer to worship God without any concrete or costly practices in this world.

### Into Discipleship

Jesus’ ascension and promise of his return teach us about good discipleship. Three topics related to waiting are introduced for our new beginning of our life witnessing Christ to the world.

### Waiting in Patience

The statement, “the end is near,” is so popular among Christian church communities in this era. Whenever we hear about the wars among nations, the violent earthquakes, storms, wildfires, and other natural disasters or the pandemic, Christians without having any second thoughts conclude that “the end is near.” Focus on what happens in the end times is called “eschatology.” Among evangelical and fundamental Christians, the rapture is an eschatological term referring to the end time. Christians believe that the living and dead will rise into heaven to join Christ.

Does “waiting patiently” work when we do not know the time of Jesus’ coming back? Shall we wait patiently only for our exaltation into heaven to join Christ; or, to receive the benefits from waiting, should we worship, witness, and work by the help of the Holy Spirit





until Jesus returns, as Jesus instructed his disciples to do? People have widely varying views concerning the order and logistics of events we associate with the end time. Whether it is Jesus' second coming or the rapture or some other apocalyptic event, we can live out our faith being witnesses and doing our best to usher in the kingdom with our acts of compassion and justice in the world. Waiting patiently does not mean being passive. We can interpret the time that God gives us as a luxury and a gift to allow us to participate in God's work in the world. Whenever we are physically joined with Christ, we want to hear him say "Well done."

### Waiting with Working

Before Acts 1, Luke the writer provides two stories of hospitality in Luke 24. The lesson today infers that to follow Jesus' command and to exercise true discipleship, we should wait patiently for Jesus' return by continuously offering hospitality to strangers. The Gospel of Luke focuses on almsgiving as a form of hospitality. In Luke 12:33 we have the challenge to let go of some of our stuff in order to bless others. We are also reminded of the compelling words in Matthew 24:34-45. Our discipleship must involve active engagement in efforts to help others. As they say, angels can appear to us in any form—including the form of a stranger—in this world. So we are responsible to work while we wait for Jesus' return.

With wars among countries and having more violent natural disasters and deadly viruses around the globe, humans should take responsibility for caring for both people and nature. While offering our hospitality to people, we should also include the nature that God has created for us. We can impact some of the impetus for global warming and climate change. When the Church prays to build the kingdom of God on this earth, we can also have an awareness of our planet, its ecology, all animals and plant life, the waters—all of creation which we share. As stewards of this beautiful creation, we can live into what it means to be one global family with responsibility and connectedness to everyone and all things living.

### Waiting with Witnessing

When Luke the writer wrote in the Book of Acts, he focused on waiting with witnessing. The very first action of the apostles after seeing Jesus' ascension—a cloud took him out of their sight—was that they must go back to Jerusalem and wait for the power of the Holy Spirit. It would be difficult for the disciples to go back witnessing about Jesus in Jerusalem given the post-resurrection animosity of Rome and some of the leaders; yet they went back, received the Holy Spirit, and embraced the great commission just as Jesus had commanded them.

American Baptists take seriously being Christ's witness in the world. In the ten facts to know about

American Baptists, number 8, 9 and 10 say that we have been called (1) to be “Christ’s witness for justice and wholeness within a broken society,” (2) to embrace “racial, cultural, and theological diversity,” and 3) to “seek renewal and revitalization.” Therefore, we will bring a transforming witness to an uncertain future. As a statement of our American Baptist denomination, we will respond to Christ’s call to “make disciples of all nations” by waiting while witnessing of Christ’s love

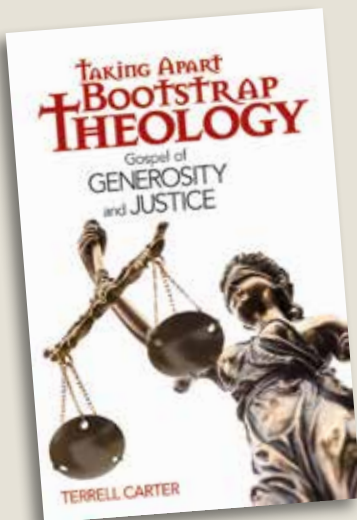
around the world. Becoming witnesses is a new beginning after Jesus’ ascension in the Book of Acts. So, “look around, look around!” Are you witnessing while you wait? Let us be Christ’s witness through the power of the Holy Spirit!

Notes

1. Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971).
2. <https://www.abc-usa.org/10facts/>.

“

Waiting patiently does not mean being passive.  
We can interpret the time that God gives us  
as a luxury and a gift.



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by Terrell Carter

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## Closing Prayer

Dear God, it is so easy for us to live out our Christian witness focused solely on acts of worship and devotion. We know they are both important in helping us to stay tethered to you and to the community of faith. Nonetheless, we want to have balanced Christian lives and participate in the great commission. Help us to also actively engage in acts of compassion and justice in order that we may help usher in your kingdom while we patiently wait for Christ's return. We count it a privilege to be able to share in the Christian mission. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

- **Into the Scripture:** When is the time that we turn ourselves to do good things for strangers and for the world? What do you do in that turning period?
- **Into the Lesson:** How do you understand the glory of God in your life? What is your Christian hope in this volatile world?
- **Into Discipleship:** What is the Christian practice you use the most that helps you cope with difficulties and stressful situations? How important is it for you to aid in evangelizing someone by witnessing Christ's love to them? Who first shared Christ with you? Is your church open to offering hospitality indiscriminately and accepting someone regardless of their identity?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “Go Make of All Disciples” sung by St. Francis DeSales Parish, Ajax ON, Canada:  
<https://youtu.be/XrHmgGJrMI8>



- “Go Ye into All the World” sung by Victory Outreach Center: <https://youtu.be/R85NGoYhiSs>
- Go Ye Therefore and Teach all Nations” sung by Shirley Caesar: <https://youtu.be/rA5d836aYyg>

### Media Option

- Go Ye Teach All Nations video. Produced by LittleBird Praises. Music: The Way Home by Wang Leehom: <https://youtu.be/5FglhyU1qpA>
- Ascension of Jesus video. From AD the Bible Continues: <https://youtu.be/RD0LNtc1UE4>
- Road to Emmaus video.  
<https://youtu.be/07GCSW1CQUg>

### Activity Ideas

Have participants discuss their perceived depictions of the road to Emmaus story, the giving of the Great Commission, and the ascension. Then view the videos above and compare how the videos present these biblical moments.

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year A Seventh Sunday of Easter

### Week of 05/21/23

#### Sunday 05/21/23

Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

#### Monday 05/22/23

Psalm 99; Leviticus 9:1-11, 22-24; 1 Peter 4:1-6

#### Tuesday 05/23/23

Psalm 99; Numbers 16:41-50; 1 Peter 4:7-11

#### Wednesday 05/24/23

Psalm 99; 1 Kings 8:54-65; John 3:31-36

#### Thursday 05/25/23

Psalm 33:12-22; Exodus 19:1-9a; Acts 2:1-11

#### Friday 05/26/23

Psalm 33:12-22; Exodus 19:16-25; Romans 8:14-17

#### Saturday 05/27/23

Psalm 33:12-22; Exodus 20:1-21; Matthew 5:1-12



# INCLUSIVITY

## the Lord's people

“Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!”

—NUMBERS 11:29b

### Introduction

Who are the Lord's people? We as Christians sometimes categorize ourselves separate from “all people,” although we say that we *all* are created in God's image. And sometimes we have biases about who we include as being within in our Christian community. We must be careful not to consider ourselves better than others because we confess that Jesus died for us. We are saved only because we have faith in Jesus, who died for all people. Yet sometimes there is not equity in the effort we put into reaching all people. That is sad for the people on the margins who are not considered to be part of any community, for the people with different beliefs that we tend to exclude from God's salvation, and for the people with different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds from us. Today's lesson focuses on thinking about who are those who are included in the Lord's people. Would all the Lord's people be prophets, and would the Lord put God's spirit on all of them?

### Lesson Objectives

- To learn what inclusivity is according to the book of Numbers and Acts.
- To acknowledge that the Lord's people include everyone.
- To realize that Pentecostalism requires good deeds with social justice.

### Numbers 11:24-30 NRSV

24 So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. 25 Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again. 26 Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. 27 And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” 28 And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said,



“My lord Moses, stop them!” 29 But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!” 30 And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

## Into the Scripture

Today’s lesson focuses on Numbers 11:24-30; however, behind this lesson there is a dialogue between Moses and the God of Israel in Numbers 11:10-23. Because the Israelites complained and wept in the wilderness, the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. When people are not happy with their situation, they come and talk to their leader; here in the text that leader is Moses.

We should remember that God is always faithful to the one whom God chooses. Although Moses was angry, he listened to God’s instruction and did what God commanded him to do. Moses gathered seventy elders of the people in the camp, placed them outside the camp—all around the tent. “Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on Moses and put it on the seventy elders.”

### Exclusion and Inclusion

Before God took the Spirit of Moses and placed it on the seventy elders, Moses was the only one sharing the spiritual character with God—only Moses among all



the Israelites; the others were excluded. After seventy elders were chosen in Numbers 11:24, they were separated from the people at the camp. God’s Spirit extended from Moses to the seventy elders by the sharing of Moses’ spiritual gift. The rest of the people were still

excluded from Moses and the seventy elders; moreover, God’s glory appeared at the Tent of Meeting, from which most of the people in the camp were excluded.

When Moses came to God, he voiced the people’s complaints that there was not enough meat, but the



God’s Spirit extended  
from Moses to the  
seventy elders.

Lord spoke to Moses with a rhetorical question, saying, “Is the Lord’s power limited?” in Numbers 11:23. Therefore, God showed that the Lord’s power is not limited to only Moses; it extended to the seventy elders. Does it stop there with Moses and the seventy elders by the tent? No, the Lord’s power is not limited. Numbers 11:26 describes the inclusivity of the power of the Lord. “Two men remained in the camp, named Eldad and Medad; the Spirit rested on them” too. Although they were first chosen with the other elders, they remained in the camp with others; the Lord’s power did not lead them to separate themselves from the rest of the people in the camp.

After they received the Spirit that rested on them, Eldad and Medad started prophesying in the camp. There are some assumptions why these two men were left in the camp. Although they were registered to go out to the tent (Numbers 11:26), the Lord needed only seventy elders (Numbers 11:16); therefore, Moses intentionally left them in the camp in accordance with God’s command. The text does not mention any details about why these two were left behind. The only thing we know

about them is in the text—that Eldad and Medad were registered as elders but had not gone out to the tent yet. Nonetheless, the Spirit rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. Moses responds to Joshua’s prohibition to Eldad and Medad saying, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”(28).

It is a sure thing that the Lord’s power is not limited. The Lord’s Spirit reached out to Eldad and Medad, who were left behind in the camp because everyone in the camp would hear the word of God. By that, we assert that the Spirit, which is the power of the Lord or the glory of God, did not exclude the people and the location. The Lord’s people included all the people from both locations in the camp and by the tent. All the Lord’s people were able to hear the prophecies.

## Into the Lesson

On this Pentecost Sunday, Numbers 11:24-30 tells us that when the Lord poured out the Spirit on the Israelites, they began to prophesy. It seems that people understood what Eldad and Medad had prophesied in the camp. They all were speaking in the same language. In the New Testament, Acts 2:1-21 describes that in Jerusalem, there were many devout Jews and proselytes from many places such as Mesopotamia, Asia, Egypt, Rome, and elsewhere in verses 9-10. On the day of Pentecost, they were filled with Holy Spirit and began to speak in their own native languages.

In Numbers, Eldad and Medad’s prophesying in the camp took observers by surprise. Acts also portrays that the men of Judea and people who live in Jerusalem were amazed and puzzled at what was happening among



them. Just like Moses, Peter responds in support of what God was doing through the Spirit. Peter reminds the people of a prophecy from long ago—that according to the word of the prophet Joel, “in the last days, it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18).

In Numbers, the Israelites came out from slavery in Egypt, so they were basically the same group of freed people who spoke the same language and to whom the Lord poured out the Spirit; and the people who actually prophesied were all men. In the time of the New Testament, Acts includes various groups of Jews and proselytes, who spoke different native languages; moreover, there was gender inclusivity, and we assume different ages and social status. This can be inferred from the saying “your sons and daughters shall prophesy,” and “my slaves, both men and women . . . shall prophesy.” Therefore, according to both the Old Testament and the New Testament, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit of the Lord does not exclude different locations, genders, different ages, and social statuses. All the Lord’s people can receive the Spirit, and “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21).



When the Lord poured out the Spirit on the Israelites, they began to prophesy.

## Pentecostals with Social Action

As Baptists, when we talk about Pentecostalism, we begin to think about the Spirit's movement by speaking in tongues—the angelic languages, baptism with the Holy Spirit, and divine healings. The Pentecostal denomination itself has made a point of helping others to understand that they also embrace social justice, caring for the poor, and people with social needs. Pentecostals agree with the Protestant principle that the Bible is the sufficient rule of faith and practice, or words and deeds. The authority of the Bible is the gift of prophecy, which extends within and beyond the Church.

The Spirit movement, called the Full Gospel movement, is commonly practiced among Burmese diaspora churches in the United States—including my own church, Milwaukee Myanmar Christian Church (MMCC). We tended to avoid the social gospel, which is the idea that Christians could reform society by doing good deeds. Instead, we focused only on worship and prayers, and by doing so when the Holy Spirit came, we would be speaking in tongues and bless each other with divine healing miracles. In his article, “Stories of Grace: Pentecostals and Social Justice,” Douglas Petersen states, “since the overwhelming majority of Pentecostals were to be found near the bottom of the social and economic scale, it would argue that they didn't need a social program—they were a social program.” As refugees, immigrant, and diasporas in the foreign lands, we ourselves are a social program; therefore, we did not favor focusing on changing the society by our spiritual movement.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic made difficulties for all our families across the globe, it was a time to rethink our spiritual gifts and how we could bring those gifts into our practice of worship. Just as Eldad and Medad did in today's lesson, we looked around at our neighbors, where we could share our gifts with the needy during the lockdown. The inclusion of seeing people on the street without homes and families caught our attention. For many of us from our Church, MMCC, it was the very first-time experience of letting our children feed any strangers on the street in the Christmas of 2020. When the Spirit falls, all the Lord's people—young and old, men and women, slaves and free—become prophets by bringing the love of God out in practice by sharing our gifts with the needy.

## Into Discipleship

“Prophet” in the Hebrew language is *nabi*, and in Greek *prophētēs*; both have the same meaning that he/she is assigned to be a responsible person to bring the message to the others. He/she is also known as an important mediator between God and human beings. Since they were spokespersons for God, the usual messages of the prophets were the warning to the people to return from their own way to God. If the people did not listen to the prophets' voices, they would perish. If the people repented, they would be kept away from doom. One thing to remember is that the message of the prophet is always conditional, because the plan of God or the will of God for human beings is not to destroy them. Thus, the duty of the prophet is crucial.

Another duty of the prophets is bringing social justice to their contemporary situation because God has a concern for a fair and equitable human society. In Numbers 11, God appointed Moses to lead the Israelites coming out from slavery and wandering in the wilderness. God gave the Spirit to Moses to be God's prophet for the people. Once the people were not satisfied with their situation, Moses had to take on all the responsibilities to take care of them. As a human, Moses the prophet would be exhausted by people's complaints and his work, thus saying to the Lord, “you lay the burden of all these people on me,” in Numbers 11:11.

Not only did Moses the prophet become worn out by these people's complaints, but God also was very angry in verse 10; however, God did not have any desire to



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destroy them. Instead, God liberated them from slavery, led them and fed them during their wilderness wandering. When Moses alone could not bear the burden, God shared his duties with the other seventy elders; moreover, God did not forget the other two, who previously registered with the elders. In that sense, Moses was no longer a lone prophet; he had seventy elders, who became prophets in the tent, and Eldad and Medad, who also became prophets in the camp.

In the current era, there are two duties for ministers, pastors, and churches, which are like these prophets' responsibilities. The two duties are (1) our ministry and (2) our mission. These two duties need to have a balance in lives of ministers, pastors, and churches. Ministry includes activities carried out by us or inside the church. For example, at our Church, MMCC, we have a pastoral ministry (Ephesians 4:10-14), worship ministry, education ministry for the children, and seasonal outdoor ministry. The scripture today has portrayed Moses' engaging in a leadership ministry for the Israelite people. When the elders received his Spirit, they also became part of the leadership ministry by prophesying. In Acts 2, everyone in Jerusalem on that day was in ministry to speak in their own native language when the Holy Spirit came. For that reason, every Christian can

be called to be in the ministry in the life of church or in our own lives.

The word "mission" came from the Latin language, *missio*, meaning "the act of sending out." When God knows that one leader is not enough, God sends out more leaders to work for the mission into the world. Since the Church is the body of Christ, she is sent out into the world as she must perform the mission to the world. Moses and the seventy elders gathered in the tent to receive the Spirit to prophesy (i.e., God's mission); on the other hand, Eldad and Medad received the Spirit to perform God's mission in the camp. God's mission is not limited to a particular people or location. Therefore, when we go out to perform God's mission to the world, we need to put on the awareness of inclusivity—the Lord's people include all people, whom God loves and never desires to destroy. May the Holy Spirit fill our hearts and minds to carry on God's mission to the world!

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#### Notes

1. Rev. Dr. Simon Pau Khan En, *Theological Essays*, သို့မိတ်ဘေ...သို့မိတ်ဘေ သို့သြလော်လို့ဆောင်းပါးများ (in Burmese) (Yangon, Myanmar: Baptist Press, 2017).
2. Douglas Petersen, "Stories of Grace: Pentecostals and Social Justice," in *Spirit of God: Christian Renewal in the Community of Faith*, edited by Barbeau, Jeffrey W. and Jones, Beth Felker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 211–226.



## Closing Prayer

Dear God, open our hearts to everyone for we are all your people, saved by your grace. Help us to see each other through the light of your unconditional love. Assure us of your will for us to be in mission and ministry by activating our gifts and the anointing of your Spirit upon our lives. Let us not waste your gifts and grace. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

- **Into the Scripture:** When you are the leader of the group or the pastor of the church and are not satisfied with the situation that you are in now, what will you do? Will you quit your job? Will you complain to the others, or will you pray to God and look for the answer? How shall we understand that it is God's will?
- **Into the Lesson:** As a Christian, how do you understand inclusivity for our Christian Church and Christian community? What is our inclusive message for all people? What is your understanding of doing a good deed by the Spirit of God?
- **Into Discipleship:** As a good follower in the Church and the community, what is your vision for yourself to become a good leader in your situation? Do you believe that the Church can make social change with our Christian message of social justice? What is the very first or next step you need to take to help bring about social change?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “Draw the Circle Wide” sung by Apex High School Chorus: <https://youtu.be/RKpV0ZvSJWo>
- “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” Lyric Video. Live At Mosaiek Theatre, South Africa: <https://youtu.be/z8g5gSbrSiw>
- “I’d Like to Teach the Word to Sing” sung by The New Seekers: <https://youtu.be/SyODONEY8Ls>

### Media Option

- **Cultural Humility:** View this video on the tenets of *Cultural Humility* and discuss how living out the tenets can help us be more welcoming and inclusive in

the Church. By M. Tervalon and J. Murray-Garcia: <https://youtu.be/SaSHLbSIV4w>.

- **Book Recommendation:** *Fierce Love* (Harmony Publishers, 2021) by Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, pastor of Middle Collegiate Church, NYC. The description reads as follows: “We are living in a world divided. Race and ethnicity, caste and color, gender and sexuality, class and education, religion and political party have all become demographic labels that reduce our differences to simplistic categories in which “we” are vehemently against “them.” But Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis’s own experience—of being the first female and first Black minister in her church’s history, of being in an interracial marriage, and of making peace with childhood abuse—illustrates that our human capacity for empathy and forgiveness is the key to reversing these ugly trends . . .”

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year A Day of Pentecost

#### Week of 05/28/23

##### Sunday 05/28/23

Acts 2:1-21 or Numbers 11:24-30; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 or Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23 or John 7:37-39

##### Monday 05/29/23

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Joel 2:18-29; Romans 8:18-24

##### Tuesday 05/30/23

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Ezekiel 39:7-8, 21-29; Romans 8:26-27

##### Wednesday 05/31/23

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Numbers 11:24-30; John 7:37-39  
*Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth:* 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Psalm 113; Romans 12:9-16b; Luke 1:39-57

##### Thursday 06/01/23

Psalm 8; Job 38:1-11; 2 Timothy 1:8-12a

##### Friday 06/02/23

Psalm 8; Job 38:12-21; 2 Timothy 1:12b-14

##### Saturday 06/03/23

Psalm 8; Job 38:22-38; John 14:15-17

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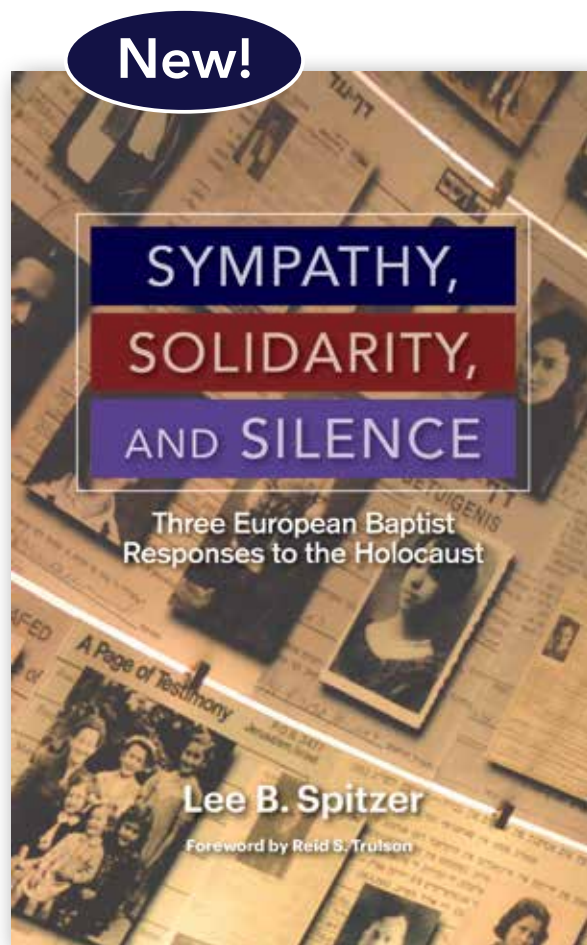
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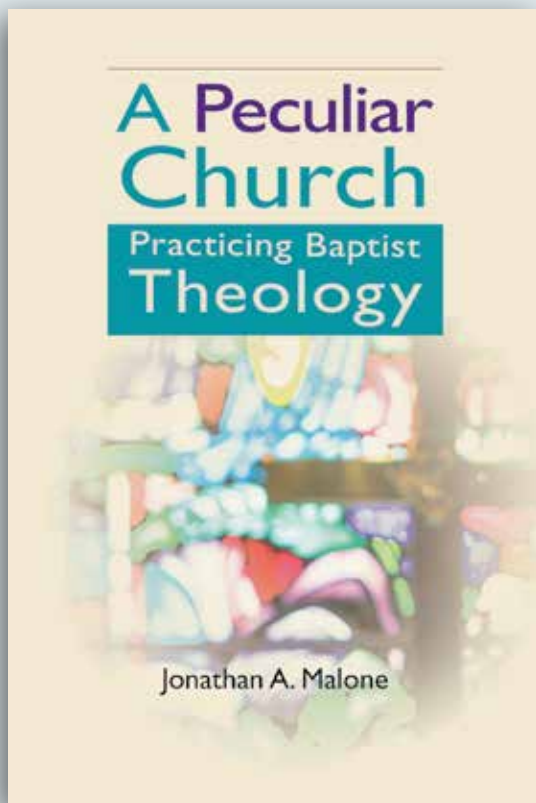


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