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The Printed Scriptural Texts used in the 2017–2018 Townsend Press Sunday School Commentary are arranged here in the order in which they appear in the Bible. Opposite each reference is the page number on which Scriptures appear in this edition of the Commentary.

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The Townsend Press Sunday School Commentary, based on the International Lessons Series, was developed consistent with the curriculum guidelines of the Committee on the Uniform Series, Education Leadership Ministries Commission, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Selected Christian scholars and theologians—who themselves embrace the precepts, doctrines, and positions on biblical interpretation that we have come to believe—are contributors to this publication. By participating in Scripture selection and the development of the matrices for the Guidelines for Lesson Development with the Committee on the Uniform Series, this presentation reflects the historic faith that we share within a rich heritage of worship and witness.

The format of the Townsend Press Sunday School Commentary lessons consists of the following: the Unit Title, the general subject with age-level topics, Printed Text from the King James Version and the New International Version of the Bible, Objectives of the Lesson, Unifying Lesson Principle, Points to Be Emphasized, Topical Outline of the Lesson—with the Biblical Background of the Lesson, Exposition and Application of the Scripture, Concluding Reflection (designed to focus on the salient points of the lesson), and the Home Daily Bible Readings. Each lesson concludes with a prayer. New this year are the following features: The Chronological Setting of the Lesson, The Geographical and Cultural Setting of the Lesson, Prominent Characters in the Lesson, and Key Terms in the Lesson.

The Townsend Press Sunday School Commentary is designed as an instructional aid for persons involved in the ministry of Christian education. While the autonomy of the individual soul before God is affirmed, we believe that biblical truths find their highest expression within the community of believers whose corporate experiences serve as monitors to preserve the integrity of the Christian faith. As such, the Word of God must not only be understood, but it must also be embodied in the concrete realities of daily life. This serves to allow the Word of God to intersect in a meaningful way with those realities of life.

The presentation of the lessons anticipates the fact that some concepts and Scripture references do not lend themselves to meaningful comprehension by children. Hence, when this occurs, alternative passages of Scripture are used, along with appropriate content emphases, that are designed to assist children in their spiritual growth. There will, however, remain a consistent connection between the children, youth, and adult lessons through the Unifying Principle developed for each session.

We stand firm in our commitment to Christian growth, to the end that lives will be transformed through personal and group interaction with the Word of God. The challenge issued by the apostle Paul continues to find relevance for our faith journey: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15, NRSV). May we all commit ourselves to the affirmation expressed by the psalmist: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Psalm 119:105, NIV).
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Townsend Press Sunday School Commentary is recognized as the centerpiece of a family of church-school literature designed especially to assist teachers in their presentation of the lessons as well as to broaden the knowledge base of students from the biblical perspective. Our mission has been and will always be to provide religious educational experiences and spiritual resources for our constituency throughout this nation, as well as many foreign countries. To achieve this end, the collaborative efforts of many people provide the needed expertise in the various areas of the production process. The editorial personnel, too numerous to list, approach their respective tasks with the dedication and devotion of those who serve God by serving His people. This Commentary is presented with gratitude to God for all those who desire a more comprehensive treatment of the selected Scriptures than is provided in the church-school quarterlies, and it is intended to be a complementary resource to the quarterlies.

This Commentary came into being as a result of employees with expertise in their assigned areas whose self-understanding is that of “workers together with God” and partners with those who labor in the vineyard of teaching the Word of God in order to make disciples and nurture others toward a mature faith.

Our gratitude is expressed to Dr. Michael Minor, expositor for the Fall Quarter, Dr. Christopher Jackson, expositor for the Winter and Spring Quarters, and Dr. Cleo LaRue, expositor for the Summer Quarter, for their devotion to the development of the respective lessons. These three writers bring diversity and a broad spectrum of ministerial, theological, and educational experience to bear on the exposition and application of the Scripture.

The task in which we are all involved would be meaningless and fruitless were it not for the many readers for whom this publication has been so diligently prepared. The faithfulness of our constituency has been enduring for more than a century, and we consider ourselves blessed to be their servants in the ministry of the printed Word—exalting the living Word, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We pray that God’s grace will complement our efforts so that lives will be transformed within and beyond the confines of classroom interaction as the Spirit of God manifests Himself through the intersection of teaching and learning.
Dr. E. Christopher Jackson is a native of Chattanooga, Tennessee, the second son of Andrew and Christine Jackson. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Tennessee–Knoxville. He completed his Master of Divinity degree at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and his Doctor of Ministry degree at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio.

His ministry experience includes serving in campus ministry at the University of Tennessee–Knoxville, and the University of Louisville. Full-time professional campus ministry positions include nine years at Lincoln University in Missouri and ten years at Tennessee State University, Fisk University, and American Baptist College in Nashville. He co-founded Creative Ministry Consultants, which provides seminars, counseling, and ministry consulting on a national basis. He served as Minister of Nurture at the Temple Church and as Adjunct Professor in Sociology at Tennessee State University, where he taught Courtship & Marriage and the Family. He currently serves as senior pastor of Nashville’s Pleasant Green Missionary Baptist Church.

Dr. Jackson is an accomplished writer and the author of two books, internationally published by Zondervan Publishing House: Straight Talk on Tough Topics, and The Black Christian Single’s Guide to Dating and Sexuality. He has also written extensively for the Sunday School Publishing Board and for LifeWay. He has been referenced in Ebony magazine and Essence magazine, and his newspaper column, “The Relationship Coach,” appears weekly in the Tennessee Tribune.

He is married to Dr. Coreen D. Jackson, who is

Additionally, Dr. Minor is the president of the North Mississippi Baptist State Congress of Christian Education, co-chair of the One Mississippi National Baptist Unity Conference, dean of the Hammond Hill District Congress of Christian Education, and chair of the Mississippi Faith-based Health and Wellness Network.

Dr. Minor has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics from Harvard University, a Masters in Business Administration in Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate, a Master of Science in Real Estate Development, and a Doctorate in Higher and Adult Education from the University of Memphis.
Dr. Cleophus J. LaRue, Princeton Theological Seminary’s Francis Landey Patton Professor of Homiletics, received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from Baylor University, and his M.Div. and Ph.D. degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary. He specializes in the theory and method of African-American preaching and worship. An ordained minister in the National Baptist Convention of America, LaRue is the former pastor of two churches in Texas as well as the former interim pastor of churches in Harlem and Jamaica Queens, New York. He is a frequent speaker at churches, seminars, and conferences throughout the country and is a member of the Academy of Homiletics.

A prolific author, Dr. LaRue has published several major publications. His latest work, Toward a Deeper Understanding of Celebration in African American Preaching, was released in Spring 2016. He has also written and/or edited the following works:

- The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), Co-editor with Paul Scott Wilson, Jana Childers, and John M. Rottman
- This Is My Story: Testimonies and Sermons of Black Women in Ministry, editor (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005)
- The Heart of Black Preaching (Westminster John Knox Press, 1999)

LaRue is currently researching a volume entitled Colored Preaching: The Shape of Proclamation in the Global South.

LaRue received an honorary doctorate in 2003 from Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and in 2012, Baylor University named him a Distinguished Alumnus of the school.

He has taken Princeton students on travel study courses to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. His most recent trip was to Salvador, Brazil, in May of this year. Plans are currently under way for students to travel with LaRue to India in 2017.

He is in his twentieth year on Princeton’s faculty and currently serves as the chairperson of the Practical Theology Department.

LaRue continues to lecture and preach throughout the United States. He has also spent time teaching homiletics in various settings on five continents.

He is married to Lori Neff LaRue and they reside in Princeton, New Jersey. His daughter, Coryell, resides in Houston, Texas.
Covenants with God

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This quarter considers the major covenants that God made with people on behalf of the earth and the human community. Beginning with Noah, God promised benevolence toward creation. Similar commitments were made with Abram, Phinehas, and Ezekiel. Ultimately, the covenant formed the foundation for the coming Messiah and salvation for the world.

Unit I, “Signs of God’s Covenants,” a four-lesson study drawn from the books of Genesis and Ezekiel, celebrates four signs of God’s covenant. Promising to renew the cycle of seasons, God created the rainbow as a permanent reminder of the covenant with every living thing. Circumcision is the sign of the covenant with Abraham and the sabbath is the sign of the covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. The last sign is the Spirit-filled heart.

Unit II, “Called into Covenant with God” is a five-lesson unit drawn from the books of Genesis, Exodus, 2 Samuel, and Nehemiah that illustrates God’s partnership with people who respond and agree to obey God’s voice. God entered into covenant with Abraham, Moses, and David to work through history establishing a kingdom that will ultimately bring forth the Messiah. Based on the covenant with God, Israel was chosen as God’s special people.

Unit III, “An Everlasting Covenant,” develops four lessons, drawn from the books of Numbers, 1 Samuel, Jeremiah, Hebrews, and 1 Corinthians, that examine the components of the covenant God made with the priest, Phinehas, and the divine promise to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah. The unconditional divine promises are to maintain a perpetual priesthood, forgive the unfaithful, and establish a new covenant with Israel. God sealed this covenant of pure grace through Christ as mediator and by writing the law in the hearts of God’s people.
**THE RAINBOW**

**ADULT/YOUTH**
**ADULT/ YOUNG ADULT TOPIC:** Making a Promise  
**YOUTH TOPIC:** Promise of Hope

**CHILDREN**
**GENERAL LESSON TITLE:** An Awesome Rainbow  
**CHILDREN’S TOPIC:** Keep Your Promise

**DEVOTIONAL READING**  
Isaiah 54:1-10

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**Print Passage**  
Genesis 8:20-22; 9:8-17

**Key Verse**  
Genesis 9:11

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**Print Passage**  
Genesis 8:20-22; 9:8-17—NIV

**Key Verse**  
Genesis 9:13

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Genesis 8:20-22; 9:8-17—KJV

20 And Noah builded an altar unto the Lord; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar.  
21 And the Lord smelled a sweet savour; and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done.  
22 While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.

8 And God spake unto Noah, and to his sons with him, saying,  
9 And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you;  
10 And with every living creature that is with you, of the fowl, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth with you; from all that go out of the ark, to every beast of the earth.

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Genesis 8:20-22; 9:8-17—NIV

20 Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it.  
21 The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.  
22 “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him:  
9 “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you  
10 “and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth.  
11 “I establish my covenant with you: Never again
11 And I will establish my covenant with you, neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth.

12 And God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations:

13 I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth.

14 And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud:

15 And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.

16 And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth.

17 And God said unto Noah, This is the token of the covenant, which I have established between me and all flesh that is upon the earth.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: After tragedy strikes, there are possibilities for people to seek renewed hope and strength to rebuild their lives. Is there a reliable source human beings can turn to for rebuilding and protecting their lives? As an act of benevolence, God used the rainbow to assure Noah that neither humankind nor the earth would ever again be destroyed by water.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Comprehend the significance of the rainbow as an assurance of God’s grace.
2. Appreciate God’s ability and willingness to renew their lives following difficult times.
3. Worship God gratefully in light of God’s continued promises of mercy and grace.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—Noah, grateful to God, offered sacrifices of praise to God for his gratitude.
—God accepted Noah’s sacrifices and promised to liberate the ground of the curse (see Genesis 3:17-19; 4:11-13; 5:29).
—Through the covenant, all humanity and other forms of life were extended, by the grace of God, another chance.
—The covenant covered all humankind and all of earth.
Covenant is a key theological concept here. God made a covenant with Noah, his offspring, and every living creature that accompanied them off the ark.

Covenants are accompanied by a symbol or sign—a rainbow in this case—for ratification and reminder.

The Flood story concluded with three theological affirmations: (1) Apart from their relationship with God, humans are hopeless; their sinful inclination has not changed (8:20-22). (2) God will continue to work with humankind; their rebelliousness will not be allowed to thwart God’s plans for creation (9:1-7).

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**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

Noah (“rest, comfort”): a righteous man during the time of extreme wickedness on earth before the Flood. Following God’s commands, Noah built an ark and God saved him and his family.

Noah’s Sons: Shem (Abraham was his descendant), Ham, Japheth.

Yahweh (Lord): God’s personal name and Jewish national name of God translated as Jehovah or Lord, meaning “self-existent or eternal.”

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**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The estimated time of today’s lesson is before 2500 or 3000 BC. Tracing the age of the first patriarchs Adam through Noah, we have approximately 1,656 years. Now that does not take into account the time before the creation of humankind. We also know that Noah departed the ark in his 601st year, 2nd month, and 27th day (see Genesis 8:14).

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The ark came to rest on Mount Ararat, which tradition holds is located in the Tigris-Euphrates region of the extreme eastern part of modern-day Turkey. After the Flood, the only humans left alive were Noah and his family, so they went about repopulating the earth. They also continued some of the traditions brought forth from the time of Adam while establishing new ones. We learn much about the customs of the time through how Noah offered sacrifices to God (see Genesis 8:20) and the types of vocations of Noah and his sons (see Genesis 9:18-20).

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**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

Altar (8:20)—Hebrew: *mizbeach* (*miz-bay’-akh*): formed from the verb for “slaughter” and means literally, “slaughter place.” Altars were used primarily as places of sacrifice.

Covenant (9:12)—Hebrew: *beriyth* (*ber-eeth’*): covenant; divine ordinance with signs or pledges; alliance, pledge.

Establish (9:9)—Hebrew: *quwm* (*koom*): to raise; to rise up or stand up; to accomplish.

Harvest (8:22)—Hebrew: *qatsiyr* (*kaw-tseer’*): time of harvest; to reap.
I. INTRODUCTION

A. Promises, Promises

Our first unit of the quarter focuses on “Signs of God’s Covenants.” Really, we are talking about evidence of God’s promises to Noah, Abraham, and His chosen people Israel. For God’s promise to Noah (and all humankind), God chose the rainbow as His sign. For Abraham (and his natural descendants), it was circumcision. Finally, for Israel, it was the Sabbath. We know that God always keeps His promises. It has been through these signs that humanity has learned this truth and affirmed it through the ages.

However, we know that human history is littered with broken promises. Some would argue that the American dream is undercut by broken promises.

In a society where church attendance is declining more and more, we are faced with a generation that only knows broken promises. The good news is that the Bible is filled with nothing but God’s kept promises. Today’s lesson about God’s promise to Noah still holds true. Yes, whenever we see a rainbow we can shout, “God keeps His promises!”

B. Biblical Background

The Bible is really God’s “promise book.” God formalized His promises in the form of a covenant. From a biblical perspective, what is a covenant? According to the Revell Bible Dictionary, “a covenant is a formal, binding agreement defining relationships and responsibilities between two or more parties.” The basic concept of covenant undergirds both Testaments. The Hebrew word for “covenant” is berit. Between nations, a berit was a treaty (see 1 Kings 15:19). Between individuals, it might be a business contract or pledge of friendship (see 1 Samuel 18:3). Between a ruler and subjects, a berit served as a constitution, spelling out the rights and responsibilities of each party. Because the berit was a formal, legally binding instrument, God chose to express His commitments to human
beings in a readily understood way. So, biblical covenants defined the relationship between God and His people as expressed through binding statements of His plans and purposes.

Today’s lesson focuses on the second covenant, the Noahic Covenant. The first covenant was the Adamic Covenant (see Genesis 2:16-17). An unconditional covenant, the Noahic Covenant was made between God and Noah (and all humankind) (see Genesis 9). In it, God promised that He would not destroy life on earth again as He had done with the Flood. God gave us the rainbow as the sign of His promise. The long, extended narrative of Genesis 6:9–9:28 reflects the longevity of God’s commitment to a relationship with God’s creation.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Noah Built an Altar

(John 8:20-21)

And Noah built an altar unto the Lord; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the Lord smelled a sweet savour; and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man’s sake; for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done.

Moses recorded the actual flood in Genesis 7. The Flood was God’s punishment for the extreme wickedness on the earth (see Genesis 6:1-8). Including the forty days and forty nights of rain and the time the water began receding, the earth was flooded for 150 days (see Genesis 7:12, 17, 24; 8:1). In Genesis 8, we read about the aftermath of the Flood. In verse 1, God “remembered” His promise to Noah and every other living creature on the ark to deliver them from the Flood. So God caused a great wind to blow over the earth to allow the water to recede (see verse 1). A couple months later, the waters had receded enough for the ark to come to rest on Mount Ararat (see verses 3-4). The tops of the rest of the mountains became visible a few months later (see verse 5). Forty days after the mountaintops came into view, Noah began sending out two birds, a raven, and a dove initially, followed by two doves for fourteen days (see verses 10, 12). Finally, on the first day of the first month of Noah’s 601st year of life the water, except for the oceans, had dried up (see verses 12-13). Still, Noah, his family, and the animals did not leave the ark. They waited until God told them to leave (see verses 15-19). So from the first drop of rain until the waters receded, it was one year and ten days.

Certainly, Noah was grateful. Who wouldn’t be? Noah, his family, and the animals had been inside a space a little smaller than two 747 airplanes for just over a year. So to show how grateful he was for God’s goodness, Noah built an altar to offer sacrifices of praise to God (verse 20). Although the Mosaic Law was still in the distant future, Moses, in his description of the offering, indicated that Noah only offered “clean” animals and birds (verse 20). These burnt offerings (verse 20) were a sweet savor to God (verse 21). The “soothing aroma” represented God’s pleasure with humankind as opposed to His displeasure before the Flood. That is why God easily accepted Noah’s sacrifices (verse 21). Why? The sacrifices were of “clean” animals, and Noah had a sincere heart. “The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma” (verse 21a, NIV) is a figurative way of saying that the Lord takes delight in all God’s children’s sincere offerings. We may liken Noah’s act of worship...
to Jesus’ words to the woman at the well (John 4:23). God wants us to worship Him in spirit and in truth. In turn, God made two promises to Noah and all humankind.

First, God promised to liberate the ground from the curse of the Fall in the Garden (see Genesis 3:17-19; 4:11-13; 5:29). God would do so, knowing that humankind would continue to sin (verse 21). After the Fall, sin became part of every human being’s spiritual (and physical) DNA. David summarized our sinful state in Psalm 51:5 (NKJV): “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.” Although Noah’s family was upright before God, they were still stained by sin. That is why God offered the evaluation that human beings’ hearts are evil from youth (verse 21).

Second, God promised never to destroy every living creature as He had done with the Flood (verse 21). Now God was not saying that He would never destroy the world. At the end of the age, God will transform heaven and earth through fire (see 2 Peter 3:10). God was laying the foundation for the second major covenant in the Bible—His covenant with Noah and all humankind. Through this covenant, all humanity and other forms of life were extended, by the grace of God, another chance. This covenant covered all humankind and all of earth. We note the comparison of God’s heart and human hearts.

B. The Seasons
(Genesis 8:22)

While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.

In verse 22, God’s words to Noah “while the earth remains” reflected the reality that one day the earth as we know it will no longer exist. John saw a glimpse of the new heaven and new earth in his revelation (see 21:1). He told us that the existing earth will pass away. In that time to come Jesus will be the source of light, not the sun and moon. Before the Flood there was no rain. Moisture seeped up to the surface from underground. With the Flood, that underground water and the “blanket” of water vapor covering the earth were now part of a cycle that transferred water from bodies of water and plants to the sky in the form of clouds. So the seasons came into being. There would no longer be one uniform temperature year-round. God told Noah that the seasons would continue until the end of the earth (verse 22). We call “seedtime and harvest” spring and fall, respectively. The winter would be a time of cold and the summer a time of heat. While it was raining those forty days and nights, the storm clouds made the entire twenty-four hours of the day look like night. The earth was dark, both literally (no sunlight) and spiritually (sinful deeds of humankind). Since there had been no inclement weather before the Flood, the approaching storm clouds must have been a scary sight for everyone, including Noah and his family. The thick clouds would have made the day look like night. For the only time in history, everywhere on the planet looked the same.

To fully understand God’s words to Noah about the seasons, we have to consider the agriculture-based society of the day. Grain crops were a staple of the Palestinian region and that time period. So the seasons could be easily marked by planting and harvesting wheat. From the time of the end of the Flood to now,
God has not intervened in nature in a way that upset the natural cycle of seasons and day and night. Sure, we have experienced climate change in which our overall temperatures are warmer, but we still have distinctions among the seasons.

God’s words in verse 22 reflected God’s work on the fourth day of creation: “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years” (Genesis 1:14, NKJV). When God spoke about the permanence of His covenant with His chosen people in Jeremiah 33:25, He likened it to the seasons.

Since after the Flood human beings experienced variation in the seasons, it led to decreasing life spans. No longer would human beings live to be nearly a thousand years old. Modern research supports the notion that wide variations in temperatures contribute to shorter life spans.

C. Establishing a Covenant
(Genesis 9:8-11)

And God spake unto Noah, and to his sons with him, saying, And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you; And with every living creature that is with you, of the fowl, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth with you; from all that go out of the ark, to every beast of the earth. And I will establish my covenant with you, neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth.

The long, extended narrative of Genesis 6:9–9:28 demonstrates the longevity of God’s commitment to a relationship with God’s creation. The Flood story concluded with three theological affirmations: (1) Humankind is hopeless their sinful inclination has not changed (verses 20-22). (2) God will continue to work with humankind; their rebelliousness will not be allowed to thwart God’s plans for creation (see 9:1-7). (3) The post-Flood situation is decisively different; God declares that “never again” will such a flood destroy the world (see 9:8-17). There are many parallel flood stories from the ancient Near East. The Genesis account is unique in its monotheistic focus and its emphasis on human sinfulness as the reason for the Flood. Yes, God had to destroy the world, but after the Flood it was a time for a new beginning. When Noah and his family stepped out of the ark, they surveyed a landscape void of life. They were the only human beings. The only animal life was what had been taken aboard the ark. Some Bible scholars refer to Noah as the second earthly Adam (with Jesus as the second spiritual Adam), as his job would be to repopulate the earth. The major difference was that Noah had his family. He was not alone. So now that the Flood was over God spoke not only to Noah but also to “his sons with him” (verse 8).

Possibly, there was some lingering fear about whether God would destroy the earth again by flood. To overcome such fears and to adequately secure His relationship with humankind, God established a covenant with not only Noah, his sons, and their descendants (verse 9), but also every living creature that accompanied them on the ark (verse 10). God was making it clear that all of His creation is important. So God expects humankind to be good stewards of the earth (see Genesis 1:28-31; 2:15). It was time for God to establish a new everlasting covenant with humankind (verse 9) along with “every living creature on earth” (verse 10), called the Noahic covenant.
“Covenant” is a key theological concept that continues here in Scripture. God made a covenant with Noah, his offspring, and every living creature that left the ark with them. God had initiated the development of a covenant with Noah and his family in Genesis 6:18. It was now time to bring this covenant to fruition. After judgment, God offers hope for a new beginning through His abundant grace. This would become part of a continual pattern throughout the Bible. God’s promise never to destroy the earth by flood again (verse 11) was a unilateral promise. It was independent of whether humankind was obedient or not.

D. The Rainbow Sign
(Genesis 9:12-17)

And God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud: And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth. And God said unto Noah, This is the token of the covenant, which I have established between me and all flesh that is upon the earth.

God’s promise would be throughout “all generations to come” (verse 12). That includes us today. In Near Eastern culture, covenants were accompanied by a symbol or sign for ratification and reminder (verse 12). More than a person’s word was needed. Both parties needed a symbol as a continual reminder of the promise made. Although God had made a one-way promise, He still provided a mutual symbol reminding humankind of God’s promise. This symbol was a rainbow (verse 13). We should not underestimate the powerful symbolism of the rainbow. A bow was a military weapon. It was part of open conflict between two parties. Before the Flood, humankind had been in open conflict with God. The Flood ended this conflict. Now that it was over, God hung the bow in the clouds. It was His promise not to make war against the world again (see Psalm 7:12-13; Habakkuk 3:9-11). There would be no waiting period. God’s promise was already in effect. This is not unlike our acceptance of Jesus. We enter into that new covenant immediately upon our acceptance of Him. And our enemy status with God ends immediately.

Additionally, unlike some material symbol that would wear or rot away, the rainbow would be a perpetual reminder of God’s promise. We still see the rainbow today, a continuing reminder of God’s promise. Remember that before the Flood there had been no rain (see Genesis 2:5). Instead, God provided moisture through the dew and rivers (see Genesis 2:6, 10). The world’s first ever rain was associated with mass destruction. God reiterates His connection with and care for all creation in verse 13 when He states that the rainbow will be the sign of the “covenant between me and the earth.” This would not be the last rain. Clouds would gather again and again for generations to come preceding the rain. So the rainbow would be a “fear reliever.” Keep in mind that future generations would hear about the Flood and fear every rainstorm. Would this be another flood? Whenever rain clouds would come in the future (verse 14), the rainbow would appear as a reminder of God’s promise. The rains
would also mark the seasons and set the stage for planting and harvesting seasons. Although there would never be another flood, the earth will be destroyed to be remade by fire (see 2 Peter 3:3-13). God did not place the rainbow because He is forgetful, as suggested by “I will remember” in verse 15. He was really anticipating how humankind would fear that God had forgotten. We should be grateful that God is not like us!

Before God sent Noah and his family forth to repopulate the earth, He repeated His promise to them and all creation. Verses 16 and 17 actually seem repetitious. God has already stated what He said in verses 16-17 in the preceding verses. God used repetition throughout the Old Testament as a means to reassure His chosen people Israel. Repeatedly, we see the phrase or related phrases, “God the father of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Such repetition was continual assurance of God’s commitment to His Word. God never breaks His promises. He never lies (see Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2). Because God’s covenant with Noah and to all humankind was made between a superior and a servant, this covenant was a type of royal grant treaty (verse 16). The difference, though, is that when humans make such an agreement among one another, the heirs of the servants would only reap benefits if they remained in service to the superior (see Esther 8:1).

Our flesh is weak (see Romans 8:3). We cannot rely on ourselves to keep promises. We have to rely on God. The promise of verse 16 is to us and our succeeding generations. When we consider how the word for “remember” as the verb, it is recognition that God does something about it. When the children of Israel were suffering in Egypt, God “remembered” His promise to them (see Exodus 2:24), calling Moses to deliver them (see Exodus 3:1-4:31). Verse 17 closes as a summary of the Noahic covenant. Since Noah was now the world’s leader just as Adam was in the Garden, God spoke directly to Noah: “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth” (verse 17, NIV).

Notice the repetition of God’s promise. The Flood had to have been a traumatic experience for Noah’s family and the animals. Prior to the Flood, there was no rain. The earth was watered by subterranean rivers (see Genesis 2:5-6). Whereas today we associate the rain with life as it nourishes the earth, then it was associated with death and destruction. Even for the animals this was traumatic. Yet even the animals could see the myriad-colored rainbow and find assurance that the rain would not destroy the earth again. For the nonbeliever, the rainbow is just another pretty natural phenomenon; but to believers it is a sign of God’s unconditional promise.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

God’s rainbow is awesome! For generations upon generations, we nearly always associated the rainbow with God’s promise to Noah. However, in 1978 that changed. To promote gay pride in San Francisco, artist Gilbert Baker designed a rainbow flag. The flag has now become a gay pride symbol. The banner has eight colors. What were the original colors and what did they represent? Originally, there
were eight colors: hot pink (sexuality), red (life), orange (healing), yellow (the sun), green (nature), turquoise (art), indigo (harmony), and violet (spirit). Later versions had seven then six colors. Today, the banner represents diversity, hope, and social action in the LGBT community.

Well, the rainbow still has biblical roots. Its nine colors (3 times 3) represent a totally different perspective from the gay pride banner. The color red represents Jesus’ blood that was shed for our sins. Yellow represents God’s perfect light. Orange represents coming from night into life through Jesus. Green represents new life, reminding us of God’s created world. The color of water, blue represents the oceans and other bodies of water as well as the waters of baptism. The color purple represents Christ as King of Kings and our crown of life in heaven.

With the changing landscape of our society, it is important for us to restore and reaffirm the “awesome rainbow” as a symbol of God’s covenant to humanity. This hijacking of application for the rainbow is further proof as to why God made His covenant with Noah (and all humankind) unilateral. He knows the heart of human beings.

**PRAYER**

Lord God, we thank You for never breaking Your promises. When we see Your rainbow in the sky, it is a reminder of Your unmerited faithfulness toward us. We thank You for always keeping Your word. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

**HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

*(August 28–September 3, 2017)*

**The Rainbow**

**MONDAY, August 28**: “Noah Found Favor with the Lord” (Genesis 6:1-8)

**TUESDAY, August 29**: “People and Creatures Enter the Ark” (Genesis 7:1-10)

**WEDNESDAY, August 30**: “People and Creatures Return to Earth” (Genesis 8:13-19)

**THURSDAY, August 31**: “Be Fruitful, Multiply, Fill the Earth” (Genesis 9:1-7)

**FRIDAY, September 1**: “Nobody Knows the Day and Hour” (Matthew 24:36-44)

**SATURDAY, September 2**: “Under the Rainbow the Angel Speaks” (Revelation 10:1-7)

**SUNDAY, September 3**: “The Bow, Sign of God’s Promise” (Genesis 8:20-22; 9:8-17)
Genesis 17:1-14—KJV
AND WHEN Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.
2 And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.
3 And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying,
4 As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations.
5 Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.
6 And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.
7 And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.
8 And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

Genesis 17:1-14—NIV
WHEN ABRAM was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless.
2 “Then I will make my covenant between me and you and you will greatly increase your numbers.”
3 Abram fell facedown, and God said to him,
4 “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations.
5 “No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.
6 “I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.
7 “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.
8 “The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”
9 And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. 10 This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. 11 And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. 12 And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. 13 He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. 14 And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.

9 Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. 10 “This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 “You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 “For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. 13 “Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. 14 “Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Humans have an innate desire to support their children and ensure their future. What is required to make this possible? God used circumcision to ratify an everlasting covenant between God and Abram to make him and his descendants prosperous, provided they walked with God and lived blameless lives.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Explore the promises God made to Abraham and the obligations Abraham was expected to fulfill in response.
2. Reflect on the value of outward signs or expressions of membership used by God’s people.
3. Respond in faith to God’s call to “walk before [God] and be blameless.”

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—The covenant established with Abram was not limited by race or social status, as all in Abram’s household were included.

—Abram means “exalted father” while Abraham means “father of many.”

—Sarah was involved in the promise because the promised child had to be borne through her.

—God is faithful to the covenant, regardless of whether humans are faithful to the covenant.

—“The Lord” appeared to Abram and revealed
a new divine name, “I am God Almighty” (‘el shadday, 17:1). “The Lord” also gave Abram (exalted father) a new name, “Abraham” (father of a multitude). The new names marked a significant turning point in God’s relationship with Abraham. God also gave Sarai a new name, Sarah (17:15), and promised that she would become the mother of “nations” and “kings” (17:15-16).

—God confirmed the promise of land to Abraham and added the element of time to this promise. God’s covenant was an “everlasting covenant” and the land would be “a perpetual holding” (17:8). In addition, God promised an enduring relationship with Abraham and his family: “I will be their God” (17:8).

—Just as the rainbow was a physical sign of the “everlasting covenant” God made with all creatures after the Flood (9:12-17), circumcision became the physical sign upon the body of every male that he was part of God’s covenant people (17:9-14). God’s covenant was not only with Abraham, but also with the generations that followed him.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**

—God has the right to require obedience from God’s creations.

—A covenant between God and humankind has to be initiated by God.

—God changed Abram’s name to Abraham to indicate a change in his future.

—In exchange for Abraham’s faithfulness and obedience, God promised to abundantly bless Abraham.

—God promised to give Abraham many descendants.

—The command to keep the covenant extended to the generations after Abraham.

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**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The events of today’s lesson took place around 2067 BC. Abram was ninety-nine years old about thirteen years after Ishmael was born. This was the year before Isaac was born and the same year Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed.

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

Abram was actually in the land of Canaan. Because the Phoenicians who frequented the area were famous traders, the region took on this name because “Canaanite” was synonymous with the word merchant in the time of Abram. God’s renewed covenant with Abram took place during the era of the strong pharaohs (2050–1800 BC) in the early part of the Bronze Age. Near Eastern culture had moved from the Copper Age (before 3300 BC) to the Bronze Age (3300–1200 BC).

**THEMATIC SETTING OF THE LESSON**

—God has the right to require obedience from God’s creations.

—A covenant between God and humankind has to be initiated by God.

—God changed Abram’s name to Abraham to indicate a change in his future.

—In exchange for Abraham’s faithfulness and obedience, God promised to abundantly bless Abraham.

—God promised to give Abraham many descendants.

—The command to keep the covenant extended to the generations after Abraham.

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**PROLIFIC CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**Abram** (“exalted father”): Terah’s oldest son’s name at birth.

**Abraham** (“father of many nations or multitudes”): the name God gave to Abram. Friend of God and founder of the Hebrew nation via God’s elective covenant; “father of a multitude.”

**Descendants**: reference to Abraham’s natural (Hebrews) and spiritual (Christians) lineages.

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

**Circumcise** (verse 11)—Hebrew: namal (naw-mal’): to circumcise, become clipped, be circumcised, be cut off; “undergo circumcision” (NIV).

**Nations** (verse 6)—Hebrew: gowy (go’-ee): nation; people; of descendants of Abraham.

**Possession** (verse 8)—Hebrew: ‘achuzzab (akh-ooz-zaw’): rightful owner by inheritance; property; land.
Talked (verse 3)—Hebrew: *dabar* (daw-bar'):
spoke, declared, conversed, commanded, promised,  
warned, threatened, sang; “said” (NIV).
Walk (verse 1)—Hebrew: *halak* (haw-lak'):
to go; walk; to proceed.

**TOPICAL OUTLINE**  
OF THE LESSON

I.  **Introduction**
   A.  A Father’s Promise
   B.  Biblical Background

II.  **Exposition and Application of the Scripture**
   A.  El Shaddai  
      (Genesis 17:1-2)
   B.  Abram’s Response  
      (Genesis 17:3)
   C.  Name Change  
      (Genesis 17:4-8)
   D.  Circumcision Initiated  
      (Genesis 17:9-14)

III.  **Concluding Reflection**

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**I.  INTRODUCTION**

A.  **A Father’s Promise**

Since God’s initial call of Abram, the only child born to him was not to Sarai but to her handmaiden, Hagar. God, as Abram’s father, had made Abram a promise. Grant MacDonald shared a story of an earthly father who kept his promise to his son (skywriting.net/inspirational/stories/fathers.promise.html):

In 1989 an 8.2-magnitude earthquake almost flattened Armenia, killing over 30,000 people in less than four minutes. It’s hard to imagine the anguish, the pain, and the suffering that began in those four brief minutes of time—people’s worlds were shaken and lives crushed. In spite of the devastation, such tragedies often bring out the best in people—at least it provides a window to peek at the contents of each heart. Let me show you the loving heart of one father.

In the midst of chaos and destruction, he rushed to his son’s school. But instead of a school, he found a shapeless heap of rubble. Imagine what went through his mind. What would have gone through your mind? Perhaps, shock would have crippled you as it did the other parents who were walking around dazed, clutching at their hearts and calling out their child’s name. But in the case of this father, the sight of rubble and ruin only made him spring into action. He ran to the back corner of the building where his son’s classroom used to be and began to dig. Why? What real hope did he have? What were the chances that his son could have survived such destruction? All he knew was that he had made a promise to always be there for his son. It was this promise that gave strength to his body and motivated him mentally.

As he began to dig, well-meaning parents tried to pull him out of the rubble saying: “It’s too late!” “They’re dead!” “You can’t help!” “Go home!” “There’s nothing you can do!” The fire chief tried to pull him off the rubble by saying, “Fires and explosions are
happening everywhere. You’re in danger. Go home!” Finally, the police came and said, “You’re angry, distraught, but it’s over. Go home.” But this father had made a promise, and he was going to keep it!

The love this father had in his heart for his son kept him digging for eight, twelve, twenty-four, then thirty-six hours. Then, in the thirty-eighth hour, he pulled back a boulder and heard his sons’ voice crying for help. Immediately, he screamed, “ARMAND!”

Back came the words, “Dad!? I told them! I told the other kids that if you were still alive, you’d save me! You promised me, you said you’d always be there for me! You did it, Dad!”

God made that same promise to Abram, which has been fulfilled through our Savior Jesus to include us as well. That is good news!

B. Biblical Background

The Abrahamic covenant is the focus of the lesson for today and lesson 5 (from Genesis 15).

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. El Shaddai

(Genesis 17:1-2)

AND WHEN Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.

Just before Abram hit the century mark, God appeared to Abram once again. In God’s appearance to Abram in Genesis 12:1, Moses referred to God using God’s national name, Yahweh. Yes, God is “I AM THAT I AM.” However, because of Abram’s doubts God identified Himself as El Shaddai for the first time here in 17:1. The Torah identified God as El Shaddai, and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translates it as “God Almighty,” meaning “God, the One of the Mountains.” While “Yahweh” referred more to God’s existence from eternity past to eternity future, “El Shaddai” referred to God as being self-sufficient
to complete any task. It also probably meant a source of “great blessings,” fitting most appropriately for Abram and his descendants. Using the Greek word *pantokrator* to translate “Almighty,” the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament provides the following meaning for El Shaddai: “One who has His hand on everything.”

This name most often appears in Genesis when God promises descendants (see Genesis 17:1-2; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3-4; 49:25). Why would God use this name for Himself in this instance with Abraham? God was, in effect, telling Abraham that no matter how unlikely it seemed that he and Sarai would have a child, it was nothing for God to do. God’s use of El Shaddai was also a way for God to reveal more about who He was.

Knowing that He was El Shaddai, what did God expect of Abram? God told Abram to do two things. First, He told him to “walk before” Him. Now God did not mean that He would be present with Abram as He had been originally in the Garden. No, God wanted Abram to live his life just as Enoch had done (see Genesis 5:21-24). Such a “walk” involved living life in a trusting, obedient relationship with God. Such a relationship was also true with Noah (see Genesis 6:8). In all three relationships, the people had a very close relationship with God without actually seeing the very presence of God.

While the KJV translates the Hebrew word *tamiym* in verse 1 as “perfect,” and the NASB and the NKJV “blameless,” the word actually conveys the idea of being whole. In other words, God wanted Abram’s total commitment. Since God was giving His all, He expected no less from Abram.

We should not let God’s words in verse 2 confuse us. God was not initiating for the first time when He told Abram, “I will make my covenant between Me and you” (NKJV). Instead, God was looking to the fulfillment of His covenant with Abram, which would be evidenced by an “exceeding” great multitude of descendants. Certainly, Abram had some concerns about the passage of nearly twenty-five years without any indication that God would fulfill His promise. Central to this fulfillment was Abram and Sarai being blessed with a son.

**B. Abram’s Response**

*(Genesis 17:3)*

And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying.

Abram must have been more in awe of God now than ever before. Why? First, God used a special name He had never used before to signal a new phase in His relationship with Abram. Second, God was more specific than ever before in what He wanted Abram to do. Third, God had earlier promised Abram that God would make of him “a great nation” (12:2, singular). In 17:3-7, God promised Abram for the first time that he would be the ancestor of not just one nation but “a multitude of nations.” Finally, Abram surely had to be feeling some guilt for having yielded to his wife’s suggestion that he have a child by Hagar.

Abram’s falling on his face is a common ancient Near Eastern practice in worship even today. Abram probably had mixed emotions of both awe and unworthiness to be in God’s presence. Prostration is still customary in the East. Abram has attained a deeper understanding
of God. “God talked with him.” Yahweh, El Shaddai, is here called God. The Supreme appears as the Author of existence, the Irresistible and Everlasting, in this stage of the covenant relation.

Abram’s response was most appropriate. He fell on his face before the high and exalted God. This was the only way for a human being to approach God (see Deuteronomy 9:25).

C. Name Change

(Genesis 17:4-8)

As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. And I will establish my covenant between me and thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

God continued in verse 4 explaining the terms of His covenant with Abram. Was God making a new promise, still making Abram the same promise, or was He taking action on His existing promise? Bible translators have rendered God’s words in verse 4 in several different ways, with each having a slightly different connotation. Both the KJV and the RSV read, “I will make my covenant between me and thee (you),” as if pointing toward some future time. The NASB yields, “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you,” giving the idea that the covenant is already in place. Perhaps the NIV gives the best translation by saying, “I will confirm my covenant between me and you.” Truly, Genesis 17 is where God begins the full execution of the key component of His covenant with Abram—the long-promised son. We note that the type of covenant between God and Abram was called a Suzerain-vassal conditional pledge. (You may refer to the Biblical Background in lesson 5 for a complete description.)

That take on God’s words in the beginning of verse 4 is further confirmed in His next words: “You shall be a father of many nations” (NKJV). The covenant established with Abram is not limited by race or social status. Truly, history has shown God’s words to be true. In addition to the Jewish people, Abram’s descendants through Ishmael and through his sons with his concubine Keturah (see Genesis 25:1-6) became the peoples of the Arab world.

With the time of the birth of Abram and Sarai’s son about a year away, God made a radical change. He told Abram that his name would no longer be Abram. It would become Abraham. The new name marked a significant turning point in God’s relationship with Abraham. What is the difference? The “Ab” portion in his name means “father” in Hebrew. So when Abram was born, God led Abram’s parents in naming their son so. Its full meaning of “exalted Father” actually makes reference to God. However, when God changed his name to Abraham, the emphasis changed to the fact that he would become the “father of many.” In ancient Near Eastern culture, people’s names represented their very essence. It indicated who they were. So changing a person’s name signified a transformation of that person.

God’s changing Abram’s name was also meant to strengthen Abram’s faith in God’s
promises. For the next year, every time someone called his new name, it would be a continual reminder that he was going to be the father of many nations. Still, the “new” Abraham probably had some reservations about what was going to happen. Also, those calling him by his new name may have thought it was not appropriate since Abram was old and only had one son by his wife’s concubine. Instead of allowing Abram to maintain a low profile until Isaac was born, God was figuratively using a megaphone to remind the world daily of His promise to Abram.

In verse 6, God reminded Abraham that his lineage would be abnormal in size—“exceedingly fruitful” (NKJV). So many would be his descendants that they would become more than families, clans, or tribes. They would become great nations (verse 6). God would make kings through Abram’s lineage (verse 6) like David, Solomon, and ultimately the King of Kings, Jesus Christ. God confirmed the promise of land to Abraham and added the element of time to this promise. God’s covenant was an “everlasting covenant,” and the land would be “a perpetual holding” (verse 8). Presently, Abraham was nothing more than a stranger in Canaan. Ur had been his and his family’s home. In addition, God promised an enduring relationship with Abraham and his family: “I will be their God” (verse 8).

D. Circumcision Initiated

(Genesis 17:9-14)

And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.

God commanded not only Abraham to keep the covenant (verse 9) but also his descendants. Just as God’s blessing would be multigenerational, God expected Abraham’s succeeding generations to be faithful. Ultimately, we, too, are under this command through the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant in the new covenant through God’s Son. Next, God gave a sign to signify the existence of His covenant with Abraham. Just as the rainbow was a physical sign of the “everlasting covenant” God made with all creatures after the Flood (see 9:12-17), circumcision became the physical sign upon the body of every male that they were part of God’s covenant people. God’s covenant was not only with Abraham but also with the generations that followed him. Later Scriptures speak of circumcision not as a physical act but as a symbolic one, applying to both males and females and representing openness and obedience to God (see Deuteronomy 30:6; Colossians 2:11-13). Also, circumcision was a reminder that covenants had to be sealed with blood. Circumcision was not an uncommon practice among Near Eastern peoples, including the Egyptians and the Canaanites. So Abraham would have been familiar with the practice. While it was used as a rite of passage in these other cultures, it
was associated with identifying with God’s covenant with Abraham.

God’s command for this covenant symbol was to every male child in succeeding generations. This act of circumcision was the first significant thing God gave Abraham to do in regards to the covenant since He commanded him to leave Ur. Circumcision would not be Abraham’s and his descendants’ faith in God. Rather, it was to be a symbol of that faith. The true confirmation of the covenant would be through obedience to God’s command. It is not different today. Baptism is symbolic of our conversion, not the conversion itself. Our repentance and faith in Jesus are the basis of our conversion.

Since circumcision involves the cutting away of the foreskin of a male child’s penis, it is rather uncomfortable. Why would God use such an uncomfortable method to symbolize the covenant? Well, there were several reasons. First, it was a familiar practice in that region and that time. Second, the practice had some hygiene benefits even to the point that it has been a contributing factor to the vitality of Jewish people through the centuries. Third, the cutting away of the flesh was symbolic of not putting one’s trust in the flesh. Finally, perhaps the most important reason was that, because of its connection to procreation, circumcision was a reminder of the special seed of Abraham.

How would the practice take place? God instructed Abraham that when a baby boy turned eight days old he would be circumcised (verse 12). Why the eighth day? One medical reason is because a baby’s immune system has reached a point to sustain such a procedure. Before that time, babies are more likely to bleed excessively because necessary blood clotting agents have not formed. The command to circumcise was not limited in scope. It included every male, foreign or otherwise, born in a Jewish household or purchased for servitude (verse 13). By doing so, they symbolized the eternal nature of God’s covenant with Abraham.

Just as a circumcised child would be included in the promises of the covenant, one who was not would be excluded (verse 14). It was another step in God’s evolving dispensation with humankind. In essence, a person refusing to be circumcised was refusing God’s covenant. Circumcision seemed to just be an outward symbol of obedience, much like baptism. However, after their hearts had strayed far away from God, over time the Jews used circumcision and their worship practices as replacements for obedience to God. Paul made it clear in Galatians 5:1-15 that circumcision alone was not enough to save someone. Since baptism is the closest parallel to circumcision for Christians, Paul compared the two in Colossians 2:11-12. Although baptism does not save us, no believer should refuse to be baptized. We take on water baptism in response to Christ’s command (see Matthew 28:19).

Up until the time of Genesis 17, God had only directly promised Abraham a son. He had not specifically mentioned Sarai’s name. As a result, Abraham and Sarah allowed their cultural norms to affect their understanding of God’s promise. As a result, Abraham fathered Ishmael with Sarah’s handmaid, Hagar (see Genesis 16). They incorrectly assumed that this was the way God intended to fulfill His promise. Even Sarai had convinced Abraham as much (see Genesis 16:2). Yet, this never
was God’s intent. God was preparing to bless Abraham’s wife. First, He changed her name from Sarai (“my princess”) to Sarah (“princess”). Before the name change, her name was limited. Now it would be unlimited just as her descendants would be. God told Abraham that Sarah not only was going to give birth to a child but that she also would be the matriarch of kings (verse 16). In verse 17, Abraham laughed in a moment of temporary disbelief. The verb used for “laugh” is used as a wordplay on the name “Isaac,” which means “he laughs.”

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Circumcision became a point of contention in the early church. Since the first members were Jewish, the accepted belief was that a person should become a Jew first before becoming a Christian. So Paul addressed circumcision in Romans 2:25-29. Paul had pronounced that external circumcision in and of itself had no real value (verses 25-27). Why? Circumcision that is only outward is of no value because God wants the outward demonstration to be the sign of righteous inward thinking. God wants those professing His name to have hearts that match their professions.

Paul also interjected the Holy Spirit into his discussion of righteous living. Only the Holy Spirit is able to change a person’s heart. The flaw of the Law was that it revealed human-kind’s shortcomings but had no mechanism to overcome these shortcomings. Paul would fully address these shortcomings later in Romans 3:23. Yet the Old Testament prophets had already recognized this problem. The Jews had become so hypocritical before their captivity until they thought obedience was all about sacrifices (see Isaiah 1:10-20). Even today, God desires more than just our coming to worship and church school on Sundays and Bible study and giving our tithes and offerings. He also wants our daily living to be a reflection of His righteousness.

PRAYER

Almighty God, we thank You for always being a keeper of Your promises. You have never fallen short on Your word. We ask that You continue to allow Your Holy Spirit to control us so that the “circumcision” of our hearts remains. We pray this prayer in Your Son’s name. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(September 4-10, 2017)

Circumcision
MONDAY, September 4: “Sarai (Sarah), Mother of Many Nations” (Genesis 17:15-17)
TUESDAY, September 5: “Ishmael, Father of a Nation” (Genesis 17:20-22)
WEDNESDAY, September 6: “All Males of Abraham’s Household Circumcised” (Genesis 17:23-27)
FRIDAY, September 8: “God’s Promise Realized through Faith” (Romans 4:13-25)
SATURDAY, September 9: “Jesus, Mediator of a Better Covenant” (Hebrews 8:1-8)
SUNDAY, September 10: “God’s Covenant with Abraham Reaffirmed” (Genesis 17:1-14)
Exodus 31:12-18—KJV
12 And the L ORD spake unto Moses, saying,
13 Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the L ORD that doth sanctify you.
14 Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.
15 Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the L ORD: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death.
16 Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant.
17 It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the L ORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.

Exodus 31:12-18—NIV
12 Then the L ORD said to Moses,
13 “Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy.
14 “Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it is to be put to death; those who do any work on that day must be cut off from their people.
15 “For six days work is to be done, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, holy to the L ORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day is to be put to death.
16 “The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant.
17 “It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the L ORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.”
And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God.

When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant law, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Multitasking, complex job responsibilities, and diverse family structures and commitments may make persons feel overwhelmed. How can one find relief from the tedious and mundane? God commanded Moses and the Israelites to rest on the Sabbath and keep it holy as a sign of their reverence to God, who created the earth in six days and who rested and was refreshed on the seventh day.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Examine the Bible’s teaching about the Sabbath and its importance for the ancient Israelites.
2. Repent of the self-destructive tendency to neglect the need for weekly rest and spiritual renewal.
3. Voice thanks to God for the gift of rest and spiritual renewal.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—The Hebrew word Shabbat for “sabbath” means “to rest” or “to cease.”
—On the Hebrew calendar, Sabbath is actually the seventh day of the week.
—Keeping the Sabbath and circumcision are both signs of God’s covenant.
—The Sabbath was a rest day, not only for all the Israelites, but also for their slaves, the alien residents, and all their beasts.
—Since God established it, Sabbath has been woven into the fabric of the life of God’s people. Scripture reinforces both God’s intentions for the Sabbath and the struggles of God’s people to understand and observe it.

Teachers of CHILDREN
—Moses was the recipient of the commands from God for the people.
—God gives a command concerning the Sabbath day: Keep it!
—God warns that punishment will take place for those who violate His commands.
—God required that no work be done on the Sabbath day.
—The Sabbath is holy because it is the day upon which God rested.
—God wrote commands on two tablets of the covenant.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

Around 1446 BC, about three months after leaving Egypt, Moses and the nation of Israel arrived at Mount Sinai. In the Old Testament, the Jews celebrated their arrival during the Feast of Weeks, or the Feast of Harvest, Shavuot in Hebrew. Occurring in late May or early June which
is late spring in Israel, in the New Testament the particular day of arriving at Mount Sinai is called Pentecost, which marks the fiftieth (“pente”) day after Passover.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

More than 600,000 Jewish men, not counting women and children, left Egypt (see Numbers 1:46). So it was easily two million people in total. Marching ten abreast with livestock, they would have been in a line that stretched about 150 miles. Here is how the *Pulpit Commentary* described Israel’s journey from Egypt:

From Rephidim in the Wady Feiran, where they had discomfited Amalek (Exodus 17:8-13), the Israelites moved towards Sinai, probably by the two passes known as Wady Solaf and Wady-esh-Sheikh, which gradually converge and meet at the entrance to the plain of Er-Rahah. This plain is generally allowed to be ‘the Desert of Sinai.’ It is ‘two miles long, and half-a-mile broad’ . . . nearly flat, and dotted with tamarisk bushes. The mountains which enclose it have for the most part sloping sides and form a sort of natural amphitheater. The plain abuts at its south-eastern extremity on abrupt cliffs of granite rock rising from it nearly perpendicularly, and known as the Ras Sufsafeh.

In Exodus 19–24, Moses was on the top of Mount Sinai receiving the Law and covenant from God.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

Moses (“drawn out”): delivered Israel out of Egyptian bondage, received the Law and the covenant on Mount Sinai from God, and led Israel to the borders of the Promised Land.

Children of Israel: a very common phrase in the Bible referring to the Israelites as the descendants of a common ancestor, Jacob (Israel).

Generations: reference to the succeeding lineage of Israel in perpetuity.

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

Sabbath: *(verse 14)* *(shabat)*: rest or cessation of activity; the seventh day of the Hebrew week.

Tables of testimony *(verse 18)*: another name for the “tablets of the covenant law” *(NIV)*; the Ten Commandments.

Finger of God *(verse 18)*: expression underscoring the fact that God “wrote” the Law on Moses’ stone tablets with His own hand.

**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

I. Introduction

A. The Christian Sabbath

B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture

A. Keeping the Sabbath *(Exodus 31:12-13)*

B. A Holy Day *(Exodus 31:14-15)*

C. A Sign *(Exodus 31:16-17)*

D. The Finger of God *(Exodus 31:18)*

III. Concluding Reflection
I. INTRODUCTION
A. The Christian Sabbath

Too often we spend too much time working and not enough time resting. God had it right. He worked six days. Then He rested on the seventh. We celebrate our God on Sunday morning. We believe “profaning the Sabbath day” (Nehemiah 13:17) is improper, but we have differing views about what that means today. We form our views about Sabbath observance by considering what Jesus and Paul said about the matter in addition to the regulations of the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet, we recognize Jesus as “Lord of the Sabbath” (see Matthew 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5).

We disagree about how to properly observe the Lord’s Day. Some of us may be familiar with blue laws, statutes that prohibited working or conducting business on Sunday as a violation of the “Christian Sabbath.” We are all familiar with the conventional wisdom that taking at least one day a week to rest and refresh makes for a longer life expectancy than working seven days a week. We need to be sure we are Trinity well—mind, body, and spirit. When we have had time to truly rest and reflect, we are at our best. Sometimes we make decisions that are in our best interests without regard for how those decisions will affect our wider community. To satisfy personal goals, if we are not careful, we may even test and push the limits of acceptable behavior. That is why we need to pause and pray and think before we act.

The church should be a place filled with believers who put a priority on meeting human needs. Jesus has already told us that the needy will always be with us. So we do not have a problem adjusting our religious ritual to accommodate people in need. In fact, we greatly value mercy over compliance to rituals. We do so knowing that Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath indeed is Lord of all. He is the Lord of our lives. Save for His grace, we would be that person out on the street homeless or in our homes hungry. Or it may be that we once were as they are. When we face criticism for our actions in this regard, we appeal to Scripture as our guide. We look to the example of Jesus. In the end, we can just ask, “What would Jesus do?”

B. Biblical Background

Exodus 31 is part of the section of Exodus (chapters 25–31) that provided instructions for building and furnishing the tabernacle (verses 1-11) and observing the Sabbath (verses 12-17), and recorded God delivering the two stone Tablets of Testimony. God appointed which workmen should be employed in building and furnishing the tabernacle (verses 1–11).

Exodus 31 is part of the Mosaic covenant. According to the online Bible study guide Got Questions (gotquestions.org/bible-covenants.html), “The Mosaic Covenant was a conditional covenant that either brought God’s direct blessing for obedience or God’s direct
cursing for disobedience upon the nation of Israel. Part of the Mosaic Covenant was the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) and the rest of the Law, which contained over 600 commands—roughly 300 positive and 300 negative. The history books of the Old Testament (Joshua–Esther) detail how Israel succeeded at obeying the Law or how Israel failed miserably at obeying the Law. Deuteronomy 11:26-28 details the blessing-cursing motif.”

We also note that the Sabbath was a sign of God’s creative and saving power. In the Old Testament, the Sabbath observance transitioned from reflection on creation to deliverance from Egypt. Since it was a sign of their covenant with Him, God repeatedly emphasized the importance of keeping the Sabbath throughout the Law (see Exodus 16:23-29; 20:8-11). One of the purposes of the Jewish people’s Babylonian Exile was to give the land the Sabbath rests not observed by Israel. In Luke 6, Jesus challenged the traditional understanding of the Sabbath by highlighting the biblical call for justice and love. One of the points of contention between Jesus and the religious leaders of His day was the proper observance of the Sabbath (see Matthew 12; Mark 2; 3; Luke 6; 13; 14; John 5; 7; 9). Jesus’ resurrection on that Sunday morning long ago led to the Christian Sabbath being observed on Sunday instead of Saturday. Paul told the Colossians not to let anyone condemn them on several legalistic points, including Sabbath observance (see Colossians 2:16).

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Keeping the Sabbath

(Exodus 31:12-13)

And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you.

After He had shared with Moses who was assigned to tabernacle construction projects in verses 1-11, God spoke to Moses again beginning in verse 12. In verses 12-18, God reiterated the importance of observing the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a sign of the special relationship between God and His chosen people. Prior to Exodus 31:12-18, God made mention of observing the Sabbath three times in Exodus—16:23; 20:8; and 23:12. Although it was part of the plan for the day, God’s basic idea about the Sabbath was not worship but rest from work. When God set aside the Sabbath as a day of rest, He literally was telling us that we should spend about 15 percent of our week resting. That said, we should take note that God’s command about Sabbath observances comes immediately after instructions for building the tabernacle. Even work on tabernacle would cease on the Sabbath. So God’s further commands concerning the Fourth Commandment were also a preventive measure so that the Israelites would not use the Sabbath as a work day in their efforts to complete the tabernacle. With God selecting the craftsman directly to build the tabernacle, these workers may have thought that they had carte blanche approval to work around the clock, including on the Sabbath, to finish it. It would not be unlike major building projects today that employ around-the-clock shifts to meet ambitious completion timetables.
God made His plea very personal, calling His chosen people “children” (verse 13). Most certainly, God had been Israel’s Father leading them out of Egypt. God wanted to be sure that Moses not only conveyed His words but also the immense importance of their obedience. Using the Hebrew word ‘ěk, translated “surely” in the NKJV and “verily” in the KJV, God was placing great emphasis on what He was about to say in verse 13. God did not refer to the Sabbath neutrally. Instead, He referred to them as “my Sabbaths.” God would be taking observance of them personally. Also, notice that Sabbaths is plural. This is because God is including the weekly Sabbath along with the one-year Sabbath each seventh year, and the Jubilee (observed every fifty years). That is one of the reasons why the Babylonian exile lasted seventy years. It was to allow the land to have its Sabbath rests (see 2 Chronicles 36:21).

When He called it “a sign between Me and you” (verse 13), God underscored the “why” of the observances. God also added two provisions to the Sabbath observance beyond that of Exodus 20:8-11. First, He made it a sign. Just as the rainbow was the sign of the Noahic covenant and circumcision of the Abrahamic covenant, the Sabbath was the sign of God’s covenant with the nation of Israel. It also reflected God’s desire for the nation to “rest” in Him. That is to say, they would find complete faith in God and not look to other gods or their own desire. Unfortunately, Israel’s history was filled with a restless nation constantly straying from Him. Even after the Exile, Israel used their shallow version of righteousness to develop their own form of Judaism that was only superficial.

God’s command would not be limited to the wilderness journey. No, it would be in effect “throughout your generations” (verse 13, NKJV), an indication that it would last in perpetuity. The keeping of the Sabbath would also be a teachable moment for the Jewish people. When their children asked why they observed the Sabbath, the parents would relay the reasons, including that it was a sign of their covenant with God and God’s command given in these verses. However, after the Exile, the Jews did not completely observe the Sabbath. So Nehemiah warned them of their actions and called them to uphold the Sabbath (see Nehemiah 13:15-22). Unfortunately, the Jewish religious leaders developed multiple rules and regulations about observing the Sabbath until they overburdened the Jewish people (see Matthew 12:1-13).

When the Jewish people sanctified the Sabbath, they recognized how God had sanctified them (verse 13). How had God sanctified them? He had set them apart from the rest of the world’s nations who worshipped multiple pagan gods and had profane worship practices. Since other ancient Near Eastern cultures practiced circumcision, Israel’s observance of the Sabbath would set them apart. God planned Israel’s deliverance from Egypt to fall on the Hebrew Sabbath of Saturday. Pharaoh and the Egyptians were defeated. Likewise, Jesus’ resurrection delivering us from sin falls on the Christian Sabbath Sunday. Satan and death were defeated. When Christ arose on the first day of the week, the Christian Sabbath came into being. All who would believe on Him find rest (see Matthew 11:28-30). Although we are not bound by the Fourth Commandment under the new covenant (see Romans 14:5; Colossians 2:16-17), the concept of rest underlying it still holds true. We all need a
day each week to rest and recharge. Ironically, Sunday is one of the busiest days of the week for Christians.

**B. A Holy Day**

*(Exodus 31:14-15)*

*Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: everyone that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death.*

In preparing to share the second provision, God wanted Moses to tell the Israelite people that they should keep the Sabbath for another reason. It was because it was a holy day for them. “Holy” literally means “to consecrate or set aside,” in this case, to the Lord. That carried a dual meaning. First, the day itself was set aside for worship. Second, by the Jews’ observing the Sabbath, they were saying to the world that they were a special people to the one and only true and living God.

According to the *Revell Bible Dictionary*, *consecrate* means “to make holy, to set apart. In Old Testament Israel, people were to ‘sanctify themselves’ before taking part in worship (Leviticus 11:44) and before special encounters with God (Exodus 19:22; Joshua 3:5). Scripture speaks of sanctifying (‘consecrating’ or ‘making holy’) priests (Leviticus 22:31-32), the firstborn (Exodus 13:2), the Temple (2 Chronicles 29:5), the Sabbath (Genesis 2:3; Deuteronomy 5:12), the altar (Exodus 29:37), and the anointing oil used in worship (Leviticus 8:10). All these were ‘set apart’ in some way, dedicated to the service of God. The message conveyed by the strict separation of the secular and the sacred was clear: God is unique and His people must commit themselves fully and only to Him.”

The second provision that God added to the Fourth Commandment was death for those who violated the sanctity of the Sabbath (verse 14). The Message version of part of verse 14 states, “Whoever profanes it will most certainly be put to death.” That underscored how serious God took the Jews’ observance of the Sabbath. There was no room to plead for mercy. In Numbers 15:32-36, we see God’s command in action. A man was caught gathering sticks on the Sabbath. He was placed under guard until the Lord instructed Moses to have the man put to death. They immediately took him outside the camp and stoned him to death.

In Leviticus 26, God warned that if the Jews violated the Sabbath, they would be removed from the land. Nehemiah alluded to this in 13:17-18. Nehemiah stressed the prohibition against working or doing commercial trade on the Sabbath; he made no mention of worship or other practices that were to characterize Sabbath observance. Micah 6:8 explained that what God required was not ceremonial observance but justice, kindness, and humility. The Sabbath was a rest day not only for all the Israelites, but also for their slaves, the alien residents, and all their beasts (see Exodus 20:11). In Leviticus 23:1-3, Moses recorded God’s making the Sabbath not only a day of complete rest but also a day of a holy convocation festival with no occupational work. Since God established it, Sabbath has been woven into the fabric of the life of God’s people. Scripture reinforces both God’s intentions for Sabbath and the struggles of God’s people to understand and observe it.
C. A Sign
(Exodus 31:16-17)

Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.

The “therefore” (NKJV) or “so” (NIV) in verse 16 is an indication that what God was about to say was in response to what Moses had recorded in verses 12-15. First, God restated the theme of these verses. God commanded His chosen people to “keep” the Sabbath. The Hebrew word translated “keep” in verse 16 is shamar, which means “to guard or protect.” That inferred that God wanted His chosen people to actively uphold the Sabbath observance. Additionally, they should do so in the broadest way possible as indicated by the Hebrew word `asah, translated “celebrate” in the NIV. Unfortunately, the Pharisees took this call to mean the establishment of many burdensome Sabbath rules.

Second, His command was not just to those alive at that time in the wilderness. It was to all the generations to come. The Mosaic covenant was a further fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. God’s command to observe the Sabbath was given in the same sense as circumcision was (see Genesis 17:13). Really, the Mosaic covenant codified the Abrahamic covenant, giving the Jewish people a guidebook by which to live. Since God’s promise to Abraham was to his succeeding generations, the call to observe the Sabbath was also. God’s command to observe the Hebrew Sabbath lasted until Jesus’ resurrection when it was replaced by the Christian Sabbath. However, we know that the Jewish people, who are still waiting for the Messiah to come, and some Christian denominations—Seventh-Day Adventists and Seventh-Day Baptists, for example—still observe the Hebrew Sabbath. We should keep in mind that God expected more from His chosen people than just observing the Sabbath. Observing the Sabbath was part of God’s call to Israel to obey His commands. Above all, their obedience must be from the heart so that their actions matched their intentions.

At its most basic level, the Sabbath was a marker. It was a marker signifying God’s covenant with the Jewish people. It was the Jews’ weekly sign of their special relationship with God. Originally, God set aside the Sabbath in recognition of God’s day of reflection after the six days of creation (see Genesis 2:1-3). Thus, the Sabbath is linked to the time before the Flood. It is the only command to be so. However, after the Exodus the day also commemorated Israel’s deliverance from Egypt (see Deuteronomy 5:15).

How do we interpret God’s words at the end of verse 17? They state that God rested and was refreshed. It seems to mean that God can get tired. He does not (see Isaiah 40:28). The Hebrew word translated “rest” in verse 17 is shabath, which means to “desist from exertion.” However, we should also look at the Hebrew word translated “Sabbath” (shabbath), which means “intermission.” Since the root word for “shabbath” is shabath, we can infer that the intent was not that God rested because of fatigue. Instead, it represented God’s pause after the six days of creation. That makes sense for God, who never tires or needs sleep. However, we as humankind need to do more than take an intermission. We need to ensure that we get some rest because we do get tired.
What did it mean for God to be refreshed? Well, the Hebrew word translated “refresh” is naphash, which means “to be breathed upon.” We find direction in understanding the word’s meaning from the root word of “naphash,” which is nephesh. Nephesh literally means a “soul,” “living being,” or “self.” That provides two thoughts. First, it hints at God’s personal name Yahweh, which means “self-existent or eternal one.” So, God had an opportunity to continue to be Himself on that seventh day. Second, God simply reflected on the goodness of creation (see Genesis 1:31).

D. The Finger of God
(Exodus 31:18)

And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God.

Verse 18 marked the end of Moses’ first trip to the top of Mount Sinai to meet with God. God had more to share with Moses. However, the Israelites were doing an unthinkable action. Because Moses, in their minds, had delayed in his return from the mountaintop, they persuaded Aaron to make a golden calf to be their god (see also Genesis 32). At this point, Moses did not know this was happening. So it was appropriate for him to write these closing words. Some Bible scholars believe that God had reached a stopping point for His first dialogue with Moses. Others believe that the sinful actions of the Israelites cut short this first dialogue. Either way, God would need to speak with Moses again and Moses needed to intervene on behalf of his fellow Jews.

When God had finished speaking with Moses, He gave Moses two stone tablets. Why? In keeping with the terms of Suzerain-vassal treaty (see Lesson 5), the two tablets were not different sections. Instead, they were duplicate copies, one for God and one for the Israelites. Because God’s words were written on stone tablets, we now say something can be changed because “it’s not written in stone.” They were called the “Tablets of the Testimony” because they were, in fact, a written testimony of God’s commandments. What happened to these tablets? Because of the nation’s sin with the golden calf, Moses cast them down in anger (see Exodus 32:19). On a subsequent visit to Mount Sinai, God replaced these two stone tablets (see Exodus 34:1-9). Eventually, Moses set these two replacement stone tablets inside the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle (see Exodus 40:20). They were set in there to remind the Israelites of their covenant with God.

The phrase “finger of God” reflected ancient Near Eastern beliefs in the power of a deity either for good or bad. In verse 18, “the finger of God” refers to God Himself. More specifically, it reflects the power of God in action. The finger of God had been in action before verse 18. Pharaoh had unfortunately seen it on display during the plagues (see Exodus 8:19). Even in the New Testament, we see this phrase used. When some people accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Satan, Jesus proclaimed that He did so “with the finger of God” (Luke 11:20, NKJV).

According to the Life Application Study Bible, “The two tablets of the Testimony contained the Ten Commandments (verse 18). These were not the only code of laws in the ancient world. Other laws had come into existence when cities or nations decided that
there must be standards of judgement and ways to correct specific wrongs. God’s laws for Israel were unique in that (1) they alleviated the harsh judgments typical of the day; (2) the rich and the poor received the same punishment; and (3) they did not separate religious and social law.”

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Rest is vitally important to healthy living. Rest is one of the three fundamentals of energy: getting enough sleep, eating well, and getting enough exercise. Servants of God, especially pastors, are among the people who get the least amount of rest.

What should you do? First, do not feel that God is finished with you, or that your work is over. God might lead you in other directions in the future, but be sure that He is the One you are following, and not just your own feelings. God may even use this experience to help others facing similar situations. In addition, get control of your schedule, and learn to take care of yourself physically and emotionally. Years ago, a wise minister said to this writer, “I’ve finally discovered that God doesn’t expect me to do everything—even if some in my congregation do.” Jesus could not do everything people wanted Him to do, and He needed times of rest. On one occasion, He told His disciples, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:31).

Finally, guard yourself spiritually. Take time to be alone with God every day, reading His Word and committing your burdens to Him in prayer. Remember the Bible’s promise: “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength” (Isaiah 30:15, NKJV).

PRAYER

Jehovah God, we thank You for Your creative and saving power. We praise You for the handiwork of creation. As we come to You in worship on the first day of the week, we ask that You keep our hearts focused on You and then bless us to leave for rest and refreshing. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(September 11-17, 2017)

Sabbath Observance

MONDAY, September 11: “The Sabbath Commandment” (Exodus 20:8-11)
TUESDAY, September 12: “Recall God’s Deliverance on the Sabbath” (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)
WEDNESDAY, September 13: “Healing on the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:9-14)
THURSDAY, September 14: “Teaching on the Sabbath” (Mark 6:1-5)
FRIDAY, September 15: “Worship on the Sabbath” (Acts 16:11-15)
SATURDAY, September 16: “A Psalm for the Sabbath” (Psalm 92)
SUNDAY, September 17: “The Sabbath, Sign of the Covenant” (Exodus 31:12-18)
Fall Quarter 2017
Unit I: Signs of God’s Covenants
Children’s Unit: Signs of God’s Covenants

September 24, 2017 Lesson 4

SPIRIT-FILLED HEART

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: A Change of Heart
YOUTH TOPIC: What Kind of Heart Do You Have?

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: A Spirit-filled Heart
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: A Change of Heart

DEVOTIONAL READING
Isaiah 43:14-21

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 36–37; Titus 3:1-11
PRINT PASSAGE: Ezekiel 36:22-32
KEY VERSE: Ezekiel 36:26

CHILDREN
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 36–37; Titus 3:1-11
PRINT PASSAGE: Ezekiel 36:22-32
KEY VERSE: Ezekiel 36:26a

Ezekiel 36:22-32—KJV
22 Therefore say unto the house of Israel, thus saith the Lord God; I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name’s sake, which ye have profaned among the heathen, whither ye went.
23 And I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned in the midst of them; and the heathen shall know that I am the Lord, saith the Lord God, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes.
24 For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.
25 Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean; from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you.
26 A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.
27 And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you

Ezekiel 36:22-32—NIV
22 “Therefore say to the Israelites, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone.
23 “I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.
24 “For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.
25 “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.
26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.
27 “And I will put my Spirit in you and move you
to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

28 And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.

29 I will also save you from all your uncleannesses: and I will call for the corn, and will increase it, and lay no famine upon you.

30 And I will multiply the fruit of the tree, and the increase of the field, that ye shall receive no more reproach of famine among the heathen.

31 Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall lothe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations.

32 Not for your sakes do I this, saith the Lord God, be it known unto you: be ashamed and confounded for your own ways, O house of Israel.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People stubbornly follow their own agendas without regard to the impact of their actions on those they respect and admire. What will motivate these persons to change? God will give them new hearts and put a new spirit in their hearts.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Recognize how a Spirit-filled heart makes a difference in the lives of believers.
2. Voice thanks to God for the gift of God’s Spirit.
3. Become receptive to the work of God’s Spirit in their midst.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—Ezekiel 36:23 is the only place in Scripture where God explicitly acts to sanctify God’s own name. In Ezekiel 36:23b-32, the vindication of God’s name is linked specifically to Israel’s restoration.

—Israel’s defeat led the nations of the world to see God as powerless. Ezekiel declared that God would use the restoration of the fortunes of the house of Israel, and their return to the land, to restore how the nations viewed God.

—The response of a renewed people is to see themselves as God sees them.

—This text draws upon other passages in the book of Ezekiel and attempts to fill out what Israel’s restoration might mean. This portion of the book of Ezekiel underscores that both the former miseries and the future prosperity of the house of Israel come from God.

—The people’s return to the land, at God’s initiative, would result in their repentance as
God’s holiness and their past sinfulness were revealed.  
—Rather than shame leading to repentance and preceding forgiveness, in the book of Ezekiel, it was Jerusalem’s restoration that brought the people to shame. God’s deliverance was not dependent upon the people’s repentance. The new heart and new spirit were both gifts (11:19; 36:26) and goals (18:31).

Teachers of CHILDREN  
—God accomplishes certain actions in order to honor God’s name.  
—God’s glory will not be shared with any other “god.”  
—God’s people are responsible for representing God to the rest of the world.  
—God promised to restore Israel physically and spiritually.  
—God offers a fresh start to all those who desire it.  
—God urged Israel to be ashamed of their sins.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON  
Ezekiel delivered his prophecy in chapter 36 around 585 BC. That was about eight years after he had begun to prophesy. Babylon began taking the people of Judah into captivity in 605 BC. Around 597 BC, Ezekiel was part of another large group taken into captivity. Finally, the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BC.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON  
Ezekiel delivered his prophecy in Babylon at Tel Abib near the Chebar River (see Ezekiel 1:1), near Nippur in modern-day Iraq. His work took place during the Babylonian Empire’s Golden Era (604–562 BC) under Nebuchadnezzar II. Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations in the same year Ezekiel wrote chapter 36. In general world history, it was a time near the end of the Iron Age (1200–539 BC), with the beginning of the rise of Persia as a world power. That is significant because some forty-six years in the future, the Persian Empire conquered Babylon.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON  
Ezekiel (“God strengthens”): from a priestly family, he prophesied to the people of Judah during the Babylonian Exile.  
Yahweh (“I Am the Lord”): God’s personal name or the Jewish national name for God.  
House of Israel: reference to both Judah and Israel looking to the time of a reunited kingdom.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON  
Sanctify (verse 23, KJV)—Hebrew: qâdash: means “to consecrate, be holy, be separate, or be hallowed.”  
Profaned (verse 22)—unholy, polluted, or secular.  
Heart (verse 26)—a person’s center for physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral activities.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON  
I. Introduction  
A. Not Serving from the Heart  
B. Biblical Background  
II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture  
A. Restoration  
   (Ezekiel 36:22-24)
I. INTRODUCTION

A. Not Serving from the Heart

From a human perspective, for most people their hearts function fine. However, when it comes to our spiritual hearts, we have a lot more people with spiritual “heart disease.” Why is that? Well, God desires more than lip service. We have to do more than just go through the motions. God truly desires service from the heart. Pastor Alan Carr shared the following story about not serving God from the heart: “I have here an old pocket watch. It looks like any other pocket watch. It has a case, hands, and a face. It has a chain and all the requisite parts that are necessary for it to carry out its function as a timepiece. However, there is a problem with this watch. You see, it just won’t run! Why not? It won’t run because it has a problem with its heart. Inside this case, there is a spring that is the heart of this watch. That spring is essential to the proper operation of this watch as a timepiece. That spring, the heart of this watch, is defective! The heart of the problem with this watch is a problem of the heart of this watch.”

There are plenty of people in the church and in religious circles who are just like this watch. On the outside they look fine. They appear to be religious and they do good things, but they cannot function as they were designed to function. They cannot truly worship God and bring glory to Him because they have a problem that cannot be readily seen by a mere surface inspection of their lives. They have a problem with their hearts!

While a person may not know another person’s heart, God does! He knows all about what is inside of you and me. He knows what makes us tick. In this passage, Jesus deals with some people who are suffering from spiritual heart trouble and do not even know it. But He does, and He takes the time to expose the true nature of their hearts. As He does, He also gives us some principles by which each of us can look at our own heart and determine if there may be a problem with it.

B. Biblical Background

Who was Ezekiel? From a priestly family, he was a “major” prophet who had been taken into Babylonian exile some twelve years before he wrote chapter 36. When he was twenty-five and training to be a priest (see Ezekiel 1:3), Ezekiel was taken into Babylonian exile along with about ten thousand of Judah’s top leaders, soldiers, and skilled craftsmen (see 2 Kings 22:14). Settling in his own home in the small village of Tel Abib near the Chebar...
River (see Ezekiel 3:15, 24), Ezekiel prophesied for about twenty-two years. Although he was a contemporary of Daniel’s, it is uncertain whether they ever met each other. It is likely, though, that Jeremiah may have been a mentor to a young Ezekiel while Jeremiah was preaching in the last years of Jerusalem.

Ezekiel 36 is part of a section of consolation encompassing chapters 33–48. Chapters 34–36 provide a vision of Israel’s reproof and restoration. These chapters are sandwiched between Ezekiel’s explanation of the fall of Jerusalem (see Ezekiel 33:21) and his vision of the valley of dry bones (see Ezekiel 37). Some Bible scholars compare Ezekiel 36 to the “new covenant” text in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Verses 22-32 draw upon other sections of the book of Ezekiel attempting to explain what Israel’s restoration would mean. In total, this portion of Ezekiel underscores the point that both the former miseries and the future prosperity of the house of Israel come from God.

In keeping with this quarter’s emphasis on biblical covenants, today’s lesson involves three covenants: the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and New covenants. Under the Abrahamic covenant, God made His promise that Israel would occupy their land into perpetuity but necessarily continuously. The Mosaic covenant underscored the need for Israel to be faithful to God to enjoy the blessings of their special relationship with God. If they did not, punishment was sure to follow and it did (see Zephaniah 1:5). Finally, Ezekiel’s glimpse into the future saw the eventual restoration of Israel in the time when God would establish the new covenant with His chosen people.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Restoration

(Ezekiel 36:22-24)

Therefore say unto the house of Israel, thus saith the Lord God; I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name’s sake, which ye have profaned among the heathen, whither ye went. And I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned in the midst of them; and the heathen shall know that I am the Lord, saith the Lord God, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes. For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land.

In chapters 33–39, Ezekiel took great pains in sharing God’s restoration message about a reunited Israel just as He had promised. Ezekiel closed with a prophecy about God’s glory returning to a future Temple.

In chapter 36, Ezekiel recorded the Lord’s words spoken to the nation of Israel. The Lord said He was prepared to act to bring Israel back to Himself in a future day. In that future day, the Lord said He would regather Israel from among the nations where they had been scattered. After the message of future blessing in verses 1-15, Ezekiel began a message about Israel’s renewal in verse 16.

In verse 22, God offered an explanation of why He would restore Israel. It would not be because of them. No, He was going to restore the “house of Israel” for His name’s sake. The Jewish people had profoundly profaned God’s name. What did that mean? It meant that they had made God’s name among the nations,
once so highly revered, nothing more than a commonplace name with little meaning and carrying no sense of fear and awe. In other words, God had to sanctify His holy name after the Jewish people had so profaned it in their rank disobedience. God placed special emphasis on His name in the book of Ezekiel, using the phrase “My holy name” some eight times in the prophet’s book (see Ezekiel 20:39; 36:20-22; 39:7-25; 43:7-8). They had become “professional” sinners during the entire existence of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and during most of the later years of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. So they have no reason to boast when God brings them back to the Promised Land. If it were truly based upon their behavior, they would have never returned. Instead, God had that on two reasons. First, He was going to keep His promise to Abraham. Second, as already stated, He wanted to restore His good name in the land, which did occur during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Ezekiel 36:23 is the only place in Scripture where God explicitly acted to sanctify God’s own name. The Lord said He would vindicate His name among the nations of the world so that the world would come to know that the God of Israel is the true and living God, holy in all His ways. Once the nation of Israel was in the land, the Lord would accomplish three things for Israel. In brief, first, He would sprinkle them with clean water so that they would no longer have any sin nor ever again turn from the Lord to worship idols (verse 25). Second, He would give each Jew a “new heart” and “new spirit” so that they would have hearts to have faith in the Lord forever (verse 26). Finally, He would put His Spirit within them so they would obey Him and walk in His commandments forever (verse 27).

In Ezekiel 36:23b-32, the vindication of God’s name is linked specifically to Israel’s restoration. Israel’s and Judah’s defeats led the nations of the world to see God as powerless. Ezekiel declared that God would use the restoration of the fortunes of the house of Israel and their return to the land to restore how the nations viewed God. When God restored Israel, the surrounding nations would have no doubt as to the might and goodness of God, “I am the Lord” (verse 23, NKJV). After Israel had been conquered by Assyria and Judah by Babylon, the Jewish people had been scattered all over the known world. Yet that would not matter. God would deliver them from these far-flung places and return them to their own land (verse 24). In verse 24, God recognized a remarkable fact. The Jewish people retained their national identity for nearly two thousand years from the time Nero destroyed Herod’s Temple and the scattering of the Jewish people until 1947 when they returned to Israel. We should note that the words of verse 24 refer to both the near future (the seventy years of exile in Babylon) and a later time during the second coming of Christ. That is because there are still many Jews scattered across the world.

B. New Heart (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.
In this time of restoration, God would do more than just return His chosen people to the land. He would cleanse them of their past sins and change them from the inside out. The uncleanness being referenced is cultic and moral defilement (verse 25). As a priest himself, Ezekiel was recalling how the priests had done so under the Law (see Exodus 30:17-21; Leviticus 14:5-7). This language of restoration is similar to Jeremiah’s New Covenant (see Jeremiah 31:27-34). Not only would His chosen people be free from idol worship, they would worship God sincerely. We see that that happened during the first decades after Israel’s return from exile. However, although the idol-free part continued, Israel’s worship lost its sincerity until Jesus told the Samaritan that a time was coming when the place for worshipping God would not matter. It would simply be about worshipping God spiritually from the heart (see John 4:23).

God’s great emphasis on cleansing Israel is noted with the repetition of “clean” or “cleanse” three times in verse 25. The number 3 is also associated with certain of God’s mighty acts. In ancient Near Eastern culture, water was used as a means of ritual cleansing or purification. We see such usage in other places in the Old Testament (see Exodus 29:4; Numbers 8:7). Before the Exile, the Jewish people failed to recognize their uncleanness. That is not unlike some churchgoers today. It took seventy years of exile for the nation to see what God had seen for years. That is also why God sometimes uses adversity to get our attention—so that we can recognize that we are not where we need to be in our relationship with God.

Still, the house of Israel had to be different. Sure, most of those sent into exile would have been dead by the time the nation returned. However, they could still be plagued by having the wrong attitude toward their relationship with God and a lack of understanding about what God requires for true worship. That is why God proclaimed that He was going to perform “heart surgery” on His chosen people (verse 26). The source of their problems was their bad hearts. Their hearts already had a spiritual “birth defect” because they had inherited Adam’s sinful heart (see Romans 5:12). They had allowed Satan to so contaminate them until the nation was on the verge of total heart failure. There was no way for God to make the old heart better. He could only replace it. In essence, God was reflecting on the Mosaic covenant versus the new covenant. The Law could only expose sin. It had no power to save. However, the new covenant, ratified by the blood of Jesus, does have the power to save. Also, while circumcision of the foreskin was a sign of the old covenant, “circumcision” of the heart would be a sign of the new covenant.

While the Mosaic covenant was very legalistic in nature, the new covenant would be more loving in nature. That is why we call the time after Jesus’ redemptive work the Age of Grace. Jesus made it clear in His Sermon on the Mount that simple outward compliance with the Law was not good enough. God desired that our obedience come from within. That is why even our thoughts, if sinful, are not acceptable to God. Humanly, it is impossible for us to obey in righteousness. However, it is divinely possible. That is the essence of verse 27. God would pour out His Spirit so that instead of dwelling among believers, He would dwell within them. So the Holy Spirit would spur believers to live right lives—“walk in My statutes” (verse 27, NKJV).
Although we are 100 percent responsible for performing right works, God does not leave us alone. Under the new covenant, Jesus has already opened the door to salvation through His redemptive work on the Cross. So the first step after admitting sin is to accept Jesus as one’s personal Savior. Immediately, the new covenant takes effect as the Holy Spirit enters us, giving us that “new heart.” He then continues within us until we die or Jesus returns, helping us work out our salvation.

We must also keep in mind that Ezekiel’s prophecy for Israel’s return to its homeland still holds. Many believe that the Jewish people, too, will come to accept Jesus as the Messiah. We look forward to that time during the Millennial Kingdom (see Zechariah 12:10; 13:1). During this time of special ministry, the Holy Spirit will be very active in the world at large (see Isaiah 44:3).

C. Blessings
(Ezekiel 36:28-30)

And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will also save you from all your uncleannesses: and I will call for the corn, and will increase it, and lay no famine upon you. And I will multiply the fruit of the tree, and the increase of the field, that ye shall receive no more reproach of famine among the heathen.

In verses 25-27, God shared the spiritual blessings to be bestowed on His chosen people. These were eternal blessings. Why? They led to salvation and eternity with God in heaven. Next in verses 28-30, God describes some temporal blessings that will be part of Israel’s restoration. Looking from a Christian perspective, some may see the “you” in verse 28 as pointing toward the church. However, the “you” here is still Israel. When God fully restores Israel, they will dwell peacefully in their land (verse 28). That is an important distinction. Why? Except for a brief time during the golden era of the united Israel under David and Solomon, the Jewish people continually had to be in fear of foreign oppressions or invaders. God’s covenant with Abraham was into perpetuity: “I gave to your fathers” (verse 28, NKJV; 11:17; 28:25; 34:13; 36:10; 39:27). Here, “fathers” refers to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So Israel’s living in the Promised Land will continue until the end of the age.

However, we should be clear to whom God’s promise applied. Originally, the promise was to all the twelve tribes of Israel. But after the kingdoms split, the promise continued primarily through Judah. Benjamin, a very small tribe, was absorbed into Judah. Also, after the capture of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians, some of these Jewish people became part of Judah. Collectively, this is the group through which Abraham’s promise now flows. We see evidence of this changed relationship among these brothers’ children in the Gospels with the friction between the Jews and their cousins the Samaritans (see John 4:29). It might seem strange that God would say “you shall be my people” in verse 28. However, Israel’s sins had become so bad until they were unrecognizable as God’s people.

In verses 28-30, we see God’s “to-do” list for restored Israel, using the formula “I will . . . .”

1. He will be Israel’s God (verse 28). The Hebrew word translated “God” in verse 28 is Elohim. This plural form recognizes the work of the Trinity. In the new covenant, all three members of the Godhead will be actively involved.
2. He will deliver Israel from all uncleanness (verse 29). Here, God is referring to Israel’s religious impurity. They had become grossly immoral. Having started with Abraham worshipping the one true and living God, the Israelites over time began to embrace the pagan religions of that region. The people of Judah never stopped worshipping God. They just added the worship of pagan gods, creating pluralistic religious practices not unlike where our nation is today.

3. He will bless their crops (verses 29-30). God would not limit His blessings just to one type of crop. It would include row crops as well as fruit trees. Looking to the future total fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecy, we may extend these “crops” to mean Israel’s economy will be blessed.

We take note of God’s use of the word *multiply* in verse 30 to describe Israel’s future economic prosperity. The Hebrew word *rabbah* translated “multiply” (NKJV, NASB) and “increase” (KJV) gives the idea that God’s planned prosperity for Israel will permeate all areas of their lives. Why was God going to bless His chosen people with so much prosperity during their restoration? Since the pagan nations associated famine with having the displeasure of the gods, they would view famine in Israel as God being displeased with them (verse 30).

D. Shame
(Ezekiel 36:31-32)

Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations. Not for your sakes do I this, saith the Lord God, be it known unto you: be ashamed and confounded for your own ways, 0 house of Israel.

At some point during their restoration, Israel as a whole would come to the realization of their sins (verse 31). The response of a renewed people is to see themselves as God sees them. Feeling total self-humiliation, they will not need a prophet or a religious leader to tell them of their past sins. Such realization fits within the framework of the new covenant. For Israel to walk in their renewal, Israel had to be ashamed, be dismayed, and repent. The first step toward salvation is admitting sin. So God’s words may be interpreted to look to the time of the Millennial Kingdom. Keeping in mind the split of the Israelite kingdom, Ezekiel was still referring to the remnant that continued to worship God even though they may have worshipped pagan gods, too. Zechariah and Paul (see Zechariah 13:8; Romans 11:26-27) referred to these remnants. They would hate their past actions so much until they would hate themselves (verse 31). Why? They would do so because they would reflect on their “iniquities” and “abominations” (verse 31). In the context of these verses, we can interpret iniquities to mean “evil thinking” and abominations to mean “doing disgusting things.” That makes sense because outward actions begin with inward thoughts.

In verse 32, God repeated and reemphasized His words in verse 22. God was not going to restore Israel because of anything they had done. As a matter of fact, Israel had behaved so immorally until they did not even deserve a second chance. Yet, God looked beyond their sins to His promise to Abraham. So if God did not restore Israel, He would be a liar. The people’s return to the land at God’s
initiative would result in their repentance as God’s holiness and their past sinfulness were revealed. When the full realization of their past sins sank in, Israel would be “ashamed and confounded” (verse 32). That meant that they would be disappointed in themselves and confused as to why they had done such stupid things. Collectively, they walked in shame for their past actions. This is not unlike believers today reflecting on their lives before Christ. Together with the new heart, the infusion of God’s Spirit meant that Israel would obey God’s commands in the future (see Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:10). Rather than shame leading to repentance and preceding forgiveness, in the book of Ezekiel it is Jerusalem’s restoration that brings the people to shame. God’s deliverance was not dependent upon the people’s repentance. The new heart and new spirit were both gifts (see 11:19; 36:26) and goals (see 18:31). In verses 33-38, God further described the effects of the restoration, repeating some of the major themes. These verses acted as a bridge between the previous verses and Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones in the next chapter, a vision of what Israel’s restoration would look like.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Having a Spirit-filled heart was front and center in today’s lesson. We should have been strengthened in our Christian walks because of Ezekiel’s prophecy of restoration and renewal. His words foreshadowed the coming of the New Testament writings. The coming and empowering of God’s Holy Spirit is the second center point of the early church after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. How do we keep our hearts Spirit-filled? It is quite simple. All we have to do is move ourselves out of the way and allow the Holy Spirit to work completely within us. He will empower our development. God will get the glory.

PRAYER

God of grace, we thank You daily for giving us chance after chance after we sin. We ask You to continually cleanse us of our sins of omission and commission. We gratefully acknowledge the power and presence of Your grace and mercy in our lives. It is in Your Son’s name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(September 18-24, 2017)

**Spirit-filled Heart**

**MONDAY, September 18:** “A New Covenant of the Heart” (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

**TUESDAY, September 19:** “Nations Will Know the Lord” (Ezekiel 36:33-38)

**WEDNESDAY, September 20:** “The Lord Will Restore Israel” (Ezekiel 37:11-14)

**THURSDAY, September 21:** “Restored as One People” (Ezekiel 37:15-23)

**FRIDAY, September 22:** “Making a Covenant of Peace” (Ezekiel 37:24-28)

**SATURDAY, September 23:** “Profitable Actions for Everyone” (Titus 3:8-11)

**SUNDAY, September 24:** “I Will Restore My Holy Name” (Ezekiel 36:22-32)
GENESIS 15:1-6, 17-21—KJV

AFTER THESE things the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.
2 And Abram said, Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus?
3 And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir.
4 And, behold, the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir.
5 And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.
6 And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness.

Genesis 15:1-6, 17-21—NIV

AFTER THIS, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”
2 But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”
3 And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”
4 Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.”
5 He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”
6 Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.
18 In the same day the \textit{Lord} made a covenant with Abram, saying, \textit{Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates:}

19 The Kenites, and the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites,
20 And the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaims,
21 And the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.

17 When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

18 On that day the \textit{Lord} made a covenant with Abram and said, \textit{“To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—}

19 “the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites,
20 Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites,
21 Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”

**UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE:** Desperate from past disappointments and failures, people fear a continued downward spiral of unfulfilled dreams and goals. How can people find hope to reach fulfillment in life? Although childless, Abram based his hope for descendants on the promises of his covenant with the faithful God.

**LESSON OBJECTIVES**

\textit{Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:}

1. Grasp the implications of God’s promise to Abram of descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens.
2. Identify with the plight of Abram and Sarai by reflecting on times of desperation they have experienced.
3. Bear witness to the hope and fulfillment God has brought to their lives.

**AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED**

\textbf{Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH}

—“After these things” links this passage to the one immediately preceding it when Abram rejected the offer for victory spoils of war. God was pleased with Abram’s choice and gave him an even greater reward.

—God reassured Abram of the promise that He had made to him in Genesis 12:2.

—Genesis 15:6 is a key verse and is quoted in Romans 4:3, 22; Galatians 3:6; and James 2:23—as faith in God is something everyone in the Bible is expected to exercise.

—The only response required of Abram was to believe God’s promise, even though he could not see it.

—God used the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch to symbolize God’s presence.

—Genesis 17:1-4 linked this covenant with the earlier conditional promise that Abram would become a great nation (12:2).

—God made two promises to Abram: one about descendants and the other about land.

—God used rituals, nature, and dreams to communicate the promises to Abram.

\textbf{Teachers of CHILDREN}

—God promised to reward Abram for his righteousness.

—Abram bargained with God because being
rewarded with land was meaningless unless he had an heir with whom he could share it.
—Although Abram was elderly and childless, God promised that his descendants would be as numero-
—God made a covenant with Abram, promising
to give the land of Canaan to his descendants as an inheritance.
—God promised a rich legacy to Abram’s offspring if they were faithful.
—Abram was considered righteous because of his blind faith and trust in God.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
The events of Genesis 15 took place around 2081 BC. Abram was between seventy-five and eighty-five years old. This time period was during the Middle Bronze age (2200–2000 BC) near the end of the Ur Empire (in present-day Iraq), before the Egyptian kingdom reached its peak. In fact, the events of Genesis 15 took place during a period of great instability in Egypt (2160–2010 BC).

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
The events of Genesis 15 took place in or near the Valley of Shaveh. Abram was still in Canaan, an area inhabited by a diversity of foreign tribes. This area would become part of northern Jerusalem some years later. With very few cities, people in the region still led migratory lives, living primarily in tents. So Abram’s presence in the region would not have seemed unusual.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON
Abram (“Exalted Father”): the first Jewish patriarch.
Lord God (“Adonai Jehovah”): the God who possesses undisputed ownership and absolute authority over all.
Eliezer: Abram’s head servant.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON
Damascus (verse 2)—ancient Syrian city, a desert oasis fed by the Abana and Pharpar rivers.
Vision (verse 1)—a revelation from God received by a prophet during a dream or dream-like state.
Heir (verse 3)—in ancient Near Eastern culture, a firstborn son (with some divinely initiated exceptions); one set to receive an inheritance by virtue of the kinsman-redeemer rule.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON
I. Introduction
A. Fear!
B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
A. Doubt and Fear
   (Genesis 15:1–3)
B. Like the Stars
   (Genesis 15:4–5)
C. Accounted
   (Genesis 15:6)
D. Covenant Confirmed
   (Genesis 15:17–21)

III. Concluding Reflection
I. INTRODUCTION

A. Fear!

Although we know Abraham as the “father of the faithful,” in Genesis 15 he was still a work in progress. While faith would become his bedrock principle, the verses of this chapter reveal a person struggling with fear. He was fearful that God’s promise of a son would not be fulfilled. Thinking about Abram’s fear reminds this writer of a message by Pastor W. T. Glynn delivered at a Conference of Christian Educators some twenty years ago. He shared a most fitting illustration for today’s lesson:

One tribe of Native Americans had a unique practice for training young braves. On the night of a boy’s thirteenth birthday, he was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. Until then, he had never been away from the security of his family and tribe. But on this night, he was blindfolded and taken miles away. When he took off the blindfold, he was in the middle of thick woods by himself, all night long. Every time a twig snapped, he probably visualized a wild animal ready to pounce. Every time an animal howled, he imagined a wolf leaping out of the darkness. Every time the wind blew, he wondered what more sinister sound it masked. No doubt it was a terrifying night for many. After what seemed like an eternity, the first rays of sunlight entered the interior of the forest. Looking around, the boy saw flowers, trees, and the outline of the path. Then, to his utter astonishment, he beheld the figure of a man standing just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It was the boy’s father. He had been there all night long. Even in our deepest times of fear and doubt, God is always there to protect us—even from ourselves.

B. Biblical Background

In Genesis 15, Moses recorded Abram’s two separate encounters with God (verses 1-6 and 7-21). We marvel at the many “firsts” in Genesis 15. Ray Pritchard provided a most appropriate overview of these firsts (keepbelieving.com/sermon/how-to-overcome-fear/):

“Genesis 15 has rightly been called one of the most important chapters in all the Bible. In it we discover the details of the Abrahamic Covenant, which is the most important covenant in all the Bible. Hundreds of years later the New Testament writers (especially Paul in Galatians 3, and Peter in Acts 3) will look back on this covenant as the foundation for the Christian Gospel. Since the word Genesis means “beginnings” we should not be surprised to discover several important firsts in this chapter:
1. The first use of the phrase “the word of the Lord came” (verse 1). This phrase is used over a hundred times in the Old Testament.
2. The first time God said “fear not” to anyone (verse 1).
3. The first time God is called a “shield” (verse 1).
4. The first time anyone is said to have “believed” in the Lord (verse 6).

Another special aspect of Genesis 15 is God’s formalization of His covenant with Abram following the ancient Near Eastern practice of a Suzerain-vassal treaty. Dr. Meredith Kline provided a brief summary of Suzerain treaties in a series of lectures several years ago (fivesolas.com/suzerain.htm):

“In the Ancient Near East, (sometimes) treaties (were) drafted between a superior and his inferior. The greater king is the suzerain and the lesser king is a prince, or a lesser lord in the service of the greater king. The lesser lord is a representative of all the common people who are under the protection of the greater king. He enforces the treaty among the masses.”

These Suzerain-vassal treaties open with two sections: (1) The identification of the Suzerain by his name and titles; (2) The historical survey of the Suzerain’s dealings with the vassal. The purpose is to illustrate to the vassal how much the Suzerain has done to protect and establish the vassal who therefore owes submission and allegiance to the Suzerain. These two sections are referred to as the preamble. The next section of these treaties lists the stipulations. What the vassal is required to do is spelled out in principal and detail. This section is often concluded with the requirement that the vassal deposit his copy of the treaty in his temple, where he is to occasionally read and study it to refresh his memory concerning his duties. The last section of these treaties contains the blessings and curses of the Suzerain. A number of ratifying ceremonies were used depending upon the era and culture. But the most widely used rite was that of cutting the bodies of animals in halves and placing them in two rows with enough space between for the two parties of the treaty to walk side by side. As they walked between the pieces, they were vowing to each other, “May what has happened to these animals, happen to me if I break this covenant with you.”

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Doubt and Fear

(Genesis 15:1-3)

 AFTER THESE things the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward. And Abram said, LORD God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir.

“After these things” links this passage to the one immediately preceding it when Abram rejected the offer for victory spoils of war. Yes, after defeating the forces of the nations of Chedorlaomer and his allies (see Genesis 14:5-17)
to free Lot and his family, Abraham refused to take any spoils from the battle (see Genesis 14:22-25). Abram did not want the king of Sodom to boast that he had made Abram rich (see Genesis 14:22-23). But Abram did give a tithe to Melchizedek, the high priest of Salem (see Genesis 14:20). So when God told Abram that He would be Abram’s shield in verse 1, it was God’s way of telling Abram that God’s protection was Abram’s spoil. In fact, all of Abram’s possessions, livestock, and servants did not make him rich. God was his real treasure. By choosing not to take temporal worldly goods, Abram gained an eternal heavenly reward. We, too, benefit from Abram’s reward, as we are spiritual descendants of him through faith.

We note God’s use of the phrase “I am” in verse 1. This is part of the literal translation of God’s personal name Yawweh, “I AM THAT I AM.” So God was letting Abram know that whatever he needed, He could provide.

The phrase “word of the Lord” first used here in the Bible would later be used to introduce God’s revelation to a prophet (for example, 1 Samuel 15:10; Haggai 1:3). Thus, Abram is called a prophet in Genesis 20:7. God had a very special relationship with Abram, calling him by name in verse 1. That is why God’s words, in the Hebrew imperfect tense, to Abram actually commanded Abram to stop being afraid. Having been displaced from everything he had ever known in the late years of his life and receiving what seemed like an impossible promise, it was natural for Abram to be fearful. It was God’s purpose during this encounter to calm Abram’s fears.

Abram’s first encounter with God in chapter 15 took place in the form of a vision at night (verses 1 and 5). Visions differ from dreams in that a person does not have to be asleep to have a vision. Also, a vision may be both visual and auditory or one or the other. Normally, God used visions to His prophets to share a message with a group of people, usually Israel or Judah. We note that God’s words to Abram in verse 1 marked the fourth occasion that God had spoken to Abram. God’s conversations with Abram highlighted God’s general relationship with the Jewish patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In a sense, these conversations hearkened back to God’s original relationship with humankind in the Garden of Eden except, at the most, they only saw a manifestation of God.

Although God did not explicitly speak the words of His promise given to Abram originally in Genesis 12:2, Abram knew what God was implying when God said that He was Abram’s “great reward” (verse 1). God’s words in this verse were meant to reassure Abram of that promise. Still, Abram was laser-focused on the human possibilities of his circumstance. It was just not humanly possible for the aged Abram and Sarai to have children. That explains why Abram—maybe sarcastically—asked God, “What will You give me?” (verse 2, NKJV). In essence, since he and his wife could not have children, Abram was saying that God was making an empty promise. Ironically, though, Abram addressed God using the compound name “Lord God.” In Hebrew, here “Lord” is Adonai, which means “lord, master, or owner in the sense of someone who has total legal title of and authority over possessions, including slaves.” Abram was literally asking God why he was still childless, seeing that God was all-powerful.

In an uneasy tone in verse 3, Abram told God that He had not given him any children,
so Abram would have to look to someone who had been in his household (verse 3). He was referring to Eliezer, who he thought was his only option for an heir. In ancient Near Eastern culture, it was not uncommon for a childless man to adopt an adult for inheritance purposes. Such adoption could even be extended to a faithful slave. Abram still had not fully comprehended that God would certainly fulfill His promise no matter how unlikely it seemed from a human perspective.

B. Like the Stars
(Genesis 15:4-5)

And, behold, the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.

Take note of the introductory word behold in the beginning of verse 4. That is our indicator that a statement of some significance follows. Adding to this significance, for the second time in chapter 15 we see the phrase “the word of the Lord” in verse 4. Here, “Lord” is the translation of Yahweh. Why is this noteworthy? First, it signified the personal nature of God’s interaction with Abram. Second, it also reflects on the essence of verse 1 where God said, “I am.” Anticipating Abram and Sarai’s attempt to intervene to “help” God through Hagar, God specifically stated this heir would come directly from Abram (verse 4), a son from his marriage, and not from a surrogate. God wanted to leave no room for misunderstanding.

In response to Abram’s question, God offered words of correction and encouragement. God reminded Abram of His promise, first stated in Genesis 12:2 and restated in Genesis 13:15-16. No, Eliezer would not be Abram’s heir. Knowing his continuing feelings of fear and doubt, God had to keep reminding Abram about the promise.

C. Accounted
(Genesis 15:6)

And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness.

After God’s words of encouragement and His illustration using the stars, it was time for Abram’s response. Would he continue to have doubts and fears, or would he accept God’s promise? Genesis 15:6 is a key verse and is quoted in Romans 4:3, 22; Galatians 3:6; and James 2:23—as faith in God is something everyone who would approach God is expected to exercise. Although he was in the Old Testament before the age of grace, Abram’s belief illustrates our salvation by faith.

When God promised that He would give Abram descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky, the patriarch-to-be “believed the Lord.” The only response required of Abram was to believe God’s promise even though he could not see it. He did. He literally said, “Amen!” There was nothing more to say. When Moses wrote in verse 6 that Abram believed, not only was this the first time stated in the Bible, it also marked another milestone in Abram’s spiritual growth. The Hebrew word translated “believed” (’aman) is also the root for “amen.” It gives the idea of support like the pillars of a building. Without the pillars, the building would fall. Likewise, without belief, Abram’s journey of faith would have ended here. So it was an affirmation (“It is
so.”), not a hope (“It may be so.”). Belief is the first step in our faith walk. Despite doubts and fears with a bit of sarcasm, Abram decided to believe in God.

Simply because Abram believed, God counted Abram as righteous (verse 6). Why did God count Abram as being righteous? Was it because of his lineage? No. Abram’s father worshipped idol gods (see Joshua 24:2). Was it because of his past acts? No. Abram had lied to the Egyptian pharaoh (see Genesis 12:10-20). No, it was much simpler than that. Despite the impossibility of his circumstance from a human perspective, Abram believed in God.

We should note that Abram did not ask God to count him as being righteous. He only believed. Why is the Hebrew word chashab in verse 6 translated “reckon” in the NASB, “counted” in the KJV, and “accounted” in the NKJV? This word is not unlike an accounting transfer from one ledger column to another. In this case, God moved Abram from the unrighteous to the righteous column. That is why Paul used the Greek word ellgeo in Romans 5:13; it is translated “impute,” which means “to put to one’s account.”

Based on his actions up to this point, it was clear that Abram was a good person by human standards. However, human goodness is based upon works. God counted Abram as righteous—not because he was good but rather, because he believed. The key to being counted righteous is not works but belief—faith. We also have to be clear that God’s “accounting” is real.

D. Covenant Confirmed
(Genesis 15:17-21)

And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces. In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates: The Kenites, and the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, And the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaims, And the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.

God’s confirmation of His covenant with Abram followed the practices of the ancient Near Eastern Suzerain-Vassal treaty described in today’s lesson’s Biblical Background. God used this human ritual to confirm to Abram that His Word is true and binding. He swears by Himself that these promises are real. God cuts a covenant with Abram that is unconditional; nothing was required of Abram for this covenant to be valid. Abram gathered the animals—heifer, goat, ram, dove pigeon—and sacrificed them.

Certainly, tired from preparing the sacrifices at about age 85, Abram fell asleep “as the sun was setting” (verse 12, NIV). He entered a deep sleep resulting in a nightmare, “thick and dreadful darkness” (verse 12). Indeed, God was going to share some bad news. Abram’s descendants would suffer four hundred years of slavery and mistreatment (verse 13). Making it worse, they would not even be in the Land of Promise. They would be in a foreign land. We know that the Hebrews resettled in Egypt after a severe famine ravaged the Land of Promise (see Genesis 47–50). God had “sent” Joseph ahead to be a savior for his people (see Genesis 39–47). At first, they were
welcomed with open arms (see Genesis 49–50). Yet, after another Egyptian pharaoh rose to power and disregarded the goodness of Joseph (see Exodus 1:8), his alarm at the huge number of Hebrews put him on the offensive. He feared that they would conquer their empire (see Exodus 1:9-10). So he enslaved the Hebrews, placing heavy burdens on God’s chosen people (see Exodus 1:11).

Yet, the news was not all bad. God would end their slavery. He would punish Israel’s oppressors (see Exodus 7-14). In contrast, when they left Egypt God would bless the Hebrews with all kinds of possessions (see Exodus 12:36). Although his descendants would have to suffer, Abram would die in peace “at a good old age” (verse 15). Abram’s descendants would return to the Land of Promise in the fourth generation, or after four hundred years. At that time, a generation was marked by the longer life span of a hundred years. The “Amorites” were a proxy for all the nations of Canaan. These pagan peoples’ immorality, though bad, had not reached its worst yet.

While Abram was still sleeping (verse 12), God’s presence passed through the divided animals. In the form of a “smoking firepot” and a “blazing torch” (verse 17), God’s presence was most often symbolized by fire (see Exodus 13:21). This was God’s signature of approval and responsibility to keep His promise. Since this was a unilateral agreement literally between God and Himself, God did not need Abram to pass through as well. That was another reason God placed Abram in a deep sleep.

This particular covenant is one-sided in that God is the only actor. Abram’s response was to believe the Lord—to trust in an unseeable future. God does not ignore the past, but focuses on the future. God used rituals, nature, and dreams to communicate the promises to Abram. God used the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch to symbolize His presence. Moses saw God’s presence in a similar way in Exodus 3:2. The nation of Israel would also see it at the base of Mount Sinai (see Deuteronomy 4:11), and as the pillar of fire by night (see Exodus 13:21).

After ratifying the covenant, God gave a detailed description of the boundaries of the Land of Promise. Possibly, this was God’s further reassurance for Abram. Commonly referred to as Canaan, the boundaries of this land have endured multiple conflicts even up to this present day. According to the Revell Bible Dictionary, Canaan was the “ancient name of the land along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, stretching from Sidon in the north to Gaza in the south, and reaching inland as far as the Jordan Valley (Genesis 10:19). A number of Semetic peoples, including the familiar Hittites and Amorites, are called Canaanites in the Old Testament (Genesis 19:18).” Verse 18 contains the only reference to the “river of Egypt” in the Bible. It was usually called the “brook of Egypt” (see Joshua 15:4, 47). Also, it was highly unlikely that this was a reference to the Nile, although it could have been a tributary. Neighboring nations and tribes also included the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Girgashites, and Jebusites. The territorial extent of the Promised Land (verses 18–21) was idealized. Only during the reigns of David and Solomon did the territory of Israel approximate these boundaries.

Abram trusted that God’s promise would be kept, even if it would not be in his lifetime.
The story of Abram’s family shows how God works with imperfect people to implement the divine plan. Only through patience was Abram able to learn to trust the promises of God.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Today’s lesson offered us a glimpse into Abram’s development into the “father of faith.” Still, it is important to note that his evolution was driven by his belief in God, not in himself. To underscore this point, the Our Daily Bread devotional reading for September 30, 2016, discussed “Bad Faith, Good Faith.”

Abraham’s faith was in something far bigger than himself—the one and only God. God promised Abram he would have a multitude of descendants (Genesis 15:4-5), so he faced a huge obstacle—he was old and childless. When he and Sarah got tired of waiting for God to make good on His promise, they tried to overcome that obstacle on their own. As a result, they fractured their family and created a lot of unnecessary dissension (Genesis 16; 21:8-21).

Abraham’s faith was in something far bigger than himself—the one and only God. It is the object of our faith that makes all the difference. Lord, I want a strong faith in You, not just faith in myself or my abilities or in others. I am nothing without You. Our faith is good if it is in the right Person.

PRAYER

Faithful God, we ask You for peace and hope whenever we have trials of our faith. We know that You are always there for us. However, our flesh sometimes clouds our faith. So we trust in You to be our strength in such trying times. In Your Son’s name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(September 25–October 1, 2017)

God’s Covenant with Abram

MONDAY, September 25: “The Lord’s Words Become Actions” (Psalm 33:1-9)
TUESDAY, September 26: “Abram Called and Blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3)
WEDNESDAY, September 27: “God Promises Abram Land and Descendants” (Genesis 13:14-17)
FRIDAY, September 29: “Promises of Land and Posterity Fulfilled” (1 Kings 4:20-25)
SATURDAY, September 30: “Abraham, an Example of Righteous Faith” (Romans 4:1-4)
SUNDAY, October 1: “Abram Enters into Covenant with God” (Genesis 15:1-6, 17-21)
Exodus 19:16-25—KJV
16 And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled.
17 And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount.
18 And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.
19 And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice.
20 And the Lord came down upon mount Sinai, on the top of the mount: and the Lord called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up.
21 And the Lord said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish.

Exodus 19:16-25—NIV
16 On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled.
17 Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.
18 Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.
19 As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.
20 The Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up.
21 And the Lord said to him, “Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the Lord and many of them perish.
22 “Even the priests, who approach the Lord, must
22 And let the priests also, which come near to the Lord, sanctify themselves, lest the Lord break forth upon them.
23 And Moses said unto the Lord, The people cannot come up to mount Sinai: for thou chargèst us, saying, Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it.
24 And the Lord said unto him, Away, get thee down, and thou shalt come up, thou, and Aaron with thee: but let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto the Lord, lest he break forth upon them.
25 So Moses went down unto the people, and spake unto them.

consecrate themselves, or the Lord will break out against them.”
23 Moses said to the Lord, “The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, ‘Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.’”
24 The Lord replied, “Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the Lord, or he will break out against them.”
25 So Moses went down to the people and told them.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Because of their human weakness, people need help from beyond themselves. How do people engage a power stronger than and different from themselves? In making a covenant with the holy and powerful God, the people of Israel consecrated themselves to stand in God’s awesome presence.

LESSON OBJECTIVES
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Identify ways the Israelites consecrated themselves to receive the Law from a holy, just, and powerful God.
2. Aspire to live lives befitting God’s obedient servants.
3. Engage in worship practices reflecting their reverence for God.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—The visible manifestation of God (theophany) to the people was in imagery that could be recognized by the people of Israel.
—Moses was the intermediary for God and for the people. This role changed from deliverer to spokesperson for the covenant relationship.
—The people were told of the danger they would face if they were disobedient to God’s command of not coming up the mountain—to “break out against them” signified that God would kill them.

—“Break through” (haras) refers to earlier set boundaries (19:12). The danger that the Lord “will break out” (prts) in verses 22 and 24 forewarns of a sudden judgment by God, as in 2 Samuel 5:20; 6:8.
—The transcendent God did not come to the people in human form or in a clear way that removed the mystery. God’s visible manifestation (theophany) was fire.
—The text challenged God’s people to hold together mystery and clear proclamation.

Teachers of CHILDREN
—Through Moses, God informed the Israelites of the plan to make them one nation.
God called the faithful to engage in spiritual and ritual cleansing as they prepared to encounter the divine.

Prayers of praise, gratitude, thanksgiving, and repentance may be considered as spiritual cleansing actions.

God empowers leaders with character traits that will cause others to listen to and believe them.

God commands the faithful to engage in disciplined, purposeful actions while preparing for an epiphany.

God’s visible presence is sometimes hidden in order to assure that the faithful will focus on His message.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The events of our next two lessons take place around 1446 BC. In verse 1, it had been forty-four days since Israel had left Goshen for Sinai. Their journey began on the first Passover, a Saturday, and it ended on a Friday. This was the first day of Pentecost. Taking twenty-four days, they had traveled just more than three hundred miles to the Red Sea, camping there for eight days until Pharaoh’s army arrived. Then, they traveled just more than 160 miles from the Red Sea in twenty days, including seven days encamped in the wilderness of Sin and two days battling the Amalekites. We should note that the Day of Pentecost is both the “inauguration day” for the Mosaic covenant and the Christian church. Moses ascended Mount Sinai for the first time (verses 3-6) on that day. The Holy Spirit filled the early Christians on Pentecost, too.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

From the context of verses 11-12, apparently, the Israelites had not camped at the base of Mount Sinai but were in close proximity. Some Bible scholars have speculated that since there were more than two million Israelites, the camp was three to seven miles away from the mountain. The Israelites were encamped in the Sinai wilderness (or high desert). This was a very rugged area with sparsely vegetated valleys. They would have most likely traveled to that region through the Wady Feiran, an oasis near Mount Sinai, to provide water for their many flocks and herds, not to mention the two million-plus people. We find the first mention of the exact phrase “Mount Sinai” in the Bible in verse 11.

PROFICIENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Aaron: Moses’ brother and Israel’s first high priest.
Moses: Israel’s leader during their deliverance from Egypt until just before their entrance into the Promised Land.
Priests: Although the Aaronical priesthood was not yet appointed, it is certain that as there were sacrifices before, so there were priests to offer them—probably the firstborn who were consecrated to God (see Exodus 13:2 24:5; Numbers 3:12 8:26)

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Answered (verse 19)—Hebrew: ‘anah (aw-naw’): to answer, respond, testify, speak, shout.
Charge (verse 21, KJV)—Hebrew: ‘uwd (ood): to take; to return, repeat, go about, do again.
Descended (verse 18)—Hebrew: yarad (yaw-rad’): went down, descended, declined, marched down, sank down.
Stood (verse 17)—Hebrew: yatsab (yaw-tsab’): to place, set, stand, set or station oneself, present oneself.
Trembled (verse 16)—Hebrew: charad (khaw-rad’): trembled, quaked, moved about, was afraid, was startled; be terrified.

**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

I. **Introduction**
   A. “Something Great”
   B. Biblical Background

II. **Exposition and Application of the Scripture**
   A. Three Days
      (Exodus 19:16-20)

B. Warn Them
   (Exodus 19:21-22)

C. Moses’ Response
   (Exodus 19:23)

D. God Scolds
   (Exodus 19:24-25)

III. **Concluding Reflection**

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

A. “Something Great”

Our Sunday, midweek, and other corporate teaching and worship opportunities ought to challenge us toward greatness. They ought to prepare us to be ready at all times for God to call us as ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Pastor Randall Smith, in his message “Grasping God’s Purpose: First Steps” (October 22, 2011), shared words about not being called to do something great (randalldsmith.com/grasping-gods-purpose-first-steps-exodus-19/):

“One of our country’s most beloved presidents was Abraham Lincoln. He had the great misfortune of being at the helm of our nation during one of its most troubled times. The once United States had split in two, and the armies of the North and South were waging an incessant war that claimed the lives of more men than have died in any war since. Lincoln felt the tragedy of this war more than anyone could have guessed. He mourned the deaths of soldiers and spent long periods visiting the sick and wounded in the Union hospitals. The constant shedding of blood was sometimes almost more than he could bear. Then, in the midst of the war, his own son died and the president was literally brought to his knees. In the middle of the week, Lincoln did what he often did during those days; he found refuge at a Presbyterian church in Washington, D.C. He went with an aide, sat with his stovepipe hat in his lap, and tried hard not to interrupt the meeting by sitting off to the side, near the preacher’s study. The minister opened the Scriptures and taught from God’s Word. And when he finished, the president stood quietly, straightened his coat, took his hat in hand and began to leave. His aide stopped him and said, ‘What did you think of the sermon, Mr. President?’ He said, ‘I thought the sermon was carefully thought through, eloquently delivered.’
The aide said, ‘You thought it was a great sermon?’ Lincoln replied, ‘No, I thought he failed; he did not ask of us something great’” (source unknown).

As Moses, the priests, and the children of Israel consecrated themselves at the base of Mt. Sinai, they were preparing for God to ask them to do “something great.” They would be asked to enter a special covenant relationship that would make Israel God’s chosen people.

B. Biblical Background

Some Bible scholars believe that parts of the narrative of Exodus 19–34 may not be in chronological order.

The Mosaic covenant is the central focus of the next two lessons. We highlight three things about God’s covenant with Israel. First, it was proof of God’s faithfulness, especially to His promise to Abraham. Second, God delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage to be His chosen people. Third, for Israel to enjoy the blessings of the covenant, Israel had to obey the covenant.

Exodus 19 acts as the precursor to Moses’ receiving the Ten Commandments and directions for construction of the tabernacle (see Exodus 19–20). Besides God coming into the world in the flesh, we marvel at God’s most awesome manifestation of Himself in the Bible. Israel arrived near Mt. Sinai and prepared to enter into covenant with God. This commitment would be revolutionary for the world because it would introduce monotheism, the exclusive worship of the one God by the Jewish people. Circumcision and observing the Sabbath were primary aspects of their worship. Although the children of Israel unanimously and wholeheartedly agreed to God’s covenant to be His chosen people, the rest of the Old Testament is filled with the many times Israel broke the covenant. They continually turned to worshipping the many pagan gods of the surrounding nations.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Three Days

(Exodus 19:16-20)

And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled. And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount. And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice. And the Lord came down upon mount Sinai, on the top of the mount; and the Lord called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up.

On the morning of the third day, Moses ascended to hear what God would ask of Israel. He wanted them to enter into covenant (see verses 3-6). Moses then delivered God’s “ask” to the Israelites, who responded affirmatively (see verses 7-8). Moses ascended the mountain a second time to deliver the Israelites’ response (see verses 8-13). Moses was the intermediary between God and the people. His role changed from deliverer to spokesman for the covenant relationship. Then Moses descended to consecrate the Israelites for what God would do in three days. The people had to consecrate themselves before they could come within the presence of God (see verse 14). The people could not come face-to-face with God because of God’s holiness.
The precursor to God’s descent on Mount Sinai was an incredible sight to behold with thunder, lightning, and a thick cloud (verse 16). God’s manifestation on Mount Sinai was a lesson to the Israelites of God’s infinite power and pure holiness contrasted with their temporal and sin-stained nature. The transcendent God does not come to the people in human form or in a clear way that removes the mystery. The visible manifestation of God (theophany) to the people was in imagery that could be recognized by the people of Israel. It was surely a sight that would be etched in their hearts and taught to succeeding generations so they would understand God’s might. We read about this same imagery in John’s revelation (see Revelation 4). We see consistency in the description of the manifestation of God in both accounts. Ironically, the pagan Baal worshipers also associated such sights and sound with their god. It is simple to understand why they would do so. Since theirs was an inanimate pagan god, they had to wait until a naturally occurring thunderstorm to claim a manifestation of their pagan god.

Since Moses had already descended from the mountain and no one else could go beyond the perimeter, it had to be an angel blowing the trumpet or a divine blowing of the trumpet from the mountaintop (verse 16). Knowing that no human was blowing the trumpet added to the awe of the assembled Israelites. The people were so afraid of God’s presence that they trembled (verse 16) until they stood away from the mountain. So Moses had to lead them out of their encampment to the base of Mount Sinai where they stood in awe of God (verse 17). From their vantage point, not only could they see the manifestation of God, they could also smell, hear, and nearly taste the fire of the lightning and feel the earth quake under the God’s powerful presence. To be clear, God’s presence is everywhere at the same time. However, a visible manifestation of God descended upon Mount Sinai (verse 18). We can think of the smoke enveloping the mountain as a smoke screen to hide God’s glory from the Israelites (verse 18).

The trumpet continued to sound longer and louder as an introductory musical prelude to Moses speaking (verse 19). After Moses spoke, God answered by voice, signifying that it was time for their conversation to begin (verse 19). At that time, the manifestation of God’s presence, hidden by the smoke, descended upon Mount Sinai (verse 20). Since all was now in order, God called Moses to come up to the top of the mountain. Moses represented all of Israel before God. We have to marvel at this eighty-year-old Moses traversing the rugged, steep terrain of the mountainside.

B. Warn Them
(Exodus 19:21-22)

And the Lord said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish. And let the priests also, which come near to the Lord, sanctify themselves, lest the Lord break forth upon them.

Repeating the warning given in verses 12-13, God wanted to ensure that no one broke the perimeter around the base of Mount Sinai. The people were told of the danger they would face if they were disobedient to God’s command not to come up the mountain; “many of them perish” signified that God would kill them (verse 21). This would be the case even if someone did so mistakenly, out of rebellion, or
out of curiosity. So God commanded Moses to warn the Israelites. There may have been some, though in awe, who wanted to get even closer to the mountain to “gaze at the Lord” (verse 21). Because God ordered him to remove his sandals at the burning bush (see Exodus 3:5), Moses would have been familiar with God’s command here. God had also commanded the people to abstain from sexual intercourse during their three days of consecration, which also included washing their clothes (verses 14-15). Washing the clothes of more than two million people had to have been a massive undertaking and some sight to see.

The reference to the priests comes before the Lord’s instructions that Aaron and his sons will fill that role (verses 22, 24). There are two schools of thought of this early reference to priests. First, these men were not priests at all. Moses simply appointed male leaders to offer sacrifices. Second, since offering sacrifices had been part of worshipping God since the time of Noah these were, in fact, pre-Aaronic priests. Although God does not initiate the Aaronic priesthood until Exodus 28, He did call Israel a nation of priests in verse 6. Just because God allowed Moses, Aaron, Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders to come past the perimeter of the base of the mountain was not an open invitation for everyone else to do so.

Just because they were serving as priests did not exempt these men from consecrating themselves. God was so adamant that they do so until He said that if they did not He would “break out against them” (verse 22, NKJV), or kill them. “Break through” (haras) refers to the boundaries set earlier (see 19:12). The danger that the Lord “will break out” (parats) in verses 22 and 24 forewarns of a sudden judgment by God, as in 2 Samuel 5:20; 6:8.

C. Moses’ Response (Exodus 19:23)

And Moses said unto the Lord, The people cannot come up to mount Sinai: for thou chargest us, saying, Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it.

In verse 23, Moses responded to God’s strict orders in verses 21-22. We note first the special relationship between God and Moses. After his initial hesitancy in accepting God’s call, Moses consistently displayed trust in God, following His instructions as directed. He had not made it a habit to question God’s concern and Moses’ reaction. To be clear, this was a contrast and not a conflict. Since we know that God really knew the hearts of the Israelites, it was interesting to see Moses react differently to warning the people about transgressing the boundaries around Mount Sinai. We also must understand that these were Moses’ fellow Hebrews. They were his people. So he had an unqualified love for them and only wanted the best for them.

Because God had already warned the people about transgressing the perimeter of the base of Mount Sinai (verses 12-13), Moses did not see any need to leave the mountaintop just to tell the people that. After all, he had just arrived. Moses’ response indicated that he did not think anyone would intentionally transgress the perimeter of the base of the mountain. Some might wonder if Moses objected to leaving the mountain because it would have created an extra trip up and down the mountain for the aging leader. This is unlikely because when Moses died, the writer emphasized his good health, including his strength (see Deuteronomy 34:7). Of note is that Moses made no specific mention of the priests. It could have been that Moses
included them when he said “people” in verse 23. However, God did make special mention of the priests, and it would have made sense for Moses to do the same. Moses could have felt that they would do the right thing because of their special positions.

Some might even argue that Moses was right based upon the actions of the Israelites later. However, we have to take into account two things. First, God knew the hearts of the Israelites. He knew that some were indeed curious, and others were rebellious. Moses would see the rebellious streak on display soon when the ten spies’ negative report led to an out-and-out rebellion among the Israelites (see Numbers 13:25–14:10). So as always, God was correct in insisting that Moses go down from the mountain and warn the people. We should also take into account that God’s commanding Moses to give another warning to the people would have led to an even greater sense of awe and fear among the people. It would have made this an even more solemn occasion. For those with lingering doubts or curiosity, this added warning would have alleviated them.

When he said “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai” (verse 23), Moses expresses unqualified certainty that the Israelites would not transgress the boundaries at the base of the mountain. He was not only taking into account the awe and the fear of the Israelites at the site of the manifestation of God on Mount Sinai, but He also was probably reflecting on how the Israelites had followed God’s commands in carrying out the provisions of the Passover and crossing the Red Sea. These two instances had the real-world possibility of death.

Moses’ choice of words to describe God’s previous warnings also indicates that he thought an additional warning was unnecessary. He used the Hebrew word uwd, translated “warned” (NKJV, NASB, NIV) and “chargedst” (KJV) in verse 23. This word means “to duplicate or repeat (as in a protest or testifying).” Some Bible scholars believe that the “bounds” mentioned in verses 12 and 23 were actually some type of physical barrier. They base their belief on the Hebrew word gabal translated “bounds” in verse 23. One of its meanings is “to twist as a rope.” Using this meaning, it would make sense to assume that some type of physical barrier was in use. However, others disagree for two reasons. First, gabal also means “set (bounds about),” which may be interpreted as an actual physical boundary or an imaginary boundary based upon some distance from the base of the mountain. Additionally, because deploying such a lengthy barrier would take much time and material, they believe that it had to just be a measured space so many feet around the base of Mount Sinai.

D. God Scolds
(Exodus 19:24-25)

And the Lord said unto him, Away, get thee down, and thou shalt come up, thou, and Aaron with thee: but let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto the Lord, lest he break forth upon them. So Moses went down unto the people, and spake unto them.

Without hesitation, God commanded Moses to leave the mountain immediately. In fact, we can sense a bit of scolding in the tone of God’s command. God was teaching Moses that the proper response to His commands should simply be “yes.” However, God’s scolding was mild. He did not punish Moses. We can see why God allowed Moses to have a difference of opinion. Later when the children of Israel
sinned with the golden calf (see Exodus 32), God wanted to totally destroy the Israelites except for Moses. Moses pleaded with God not to do so. In response, God did not destroy Israel. Did God really change His mind? No, this was God’s way of involving Moses in intercessory prayer for his people. Because of His eternal promise to Abraham, God would never totally annihilate His chosen people.

God also instructed Moses to return with Aaron. Why? There are several possibilities. First, Moses represented the “princely” and Aaron the “priestly” part of Israel’s leadership. Not only was God continuing to grow Moses as the overall leader, He also was preparing Aaron to lead Israel’s priestly order. Second, since the people may have wondered who could come on the mountain, God provided a positive approach, who could come and live, versus a negative approach of if anyone comes they will be killed.

Unlike Moses’ response in the previous verse, God included the priests. He wanted there to be no doubt that the priests were not exempted from the prohibition. Their special status did not matter. That still holds true today. God holds all Christians accountable. Whether we are clergy, lay leaders, or rank-and-file congregants, we are all bound to God’s twin “love” commands. He does not give exemptions or free passes.

God made it Moses’ responsibility to ensure that no one transgressed the set boundary around the perimeter of the mountain. Since Moses would soon return to the mountain, he could not directly ensure the people’s compliance. However, it was another opportunity for Moses to groom leaders among his people. Since there were more than two million people, it would call for hundreds if not thousands of leaders. Moses already had a leadership structure in place thanks to his father-in-law Jethro’s instructions in Exodus 18. He instructed Moses to set leaders over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens (see Exodus 18:21). It is probable that Moses instructed these same leaders to enforce the prohibition against transgressing the set boundary around, the base of Mount Sinai.

Moses continued to reinforce the punishment for a violation of God’s command, which was death. God had instructed that any violators would be stoned or shot with an arrow (verse 13). This punishment included both humans and animals. Because the person implementing the punishment could not transgress the Mount Sinai boundary, the arrow made sense as a means of punishment. The person carrying out the death sentence would not come under the same penalty.

In verse 25, Moses did as God commanded. Without hesitation, he left the mountain. When he arrived before the people, he shared God’s commands. From the context of these verses, it is clear that Moses was not mad at God. What is amazing in our congregations today is how some do not know how to disagree without being disagreeable! Moses’ response in verse 25 is a powerful example on how we should all learn to agree to disagree.

Reflecting on Exodus 15 as a whole, we see how it challenges God’s people to hold together the mystery of God and clear proclamation of His expectations. They were not to let the sights and sounds of the mountain keep them from fully comprehending God’s covenant message. In His covenant with Israel, God was establishing a theocracy. Israel would be a
religious nation with God as head. We know that the people rejected God’s theocracy in favor of a monarchy in 1 Samuel when they begged Samuel for a king like that of the neighboring nations.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

God’s interaction with His chosen people Israel at Mount Sinai formally ushered in the Mosaic covenant. It codified God’s covenant with Abraham. In the New Testament, God chose another mountain to usher in the new covenant. That mountain was Mount Zion. Hebrews 12:18-24 contrasts the Israelite experience at Mount Sinai with the Christian’s experience at Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem (see lesson 12). While the Israelites were filled with awe and fear before the presence of God at Mount Sinai, Christians today do not seem to have that same reverence for God. Pastor Drew Humphrey shared additional thoughts on our seeming non-reverence for God:

What would it be like to see God? As the people of Israel found out at Mount Sinai, it is a pretty memorable (and terrifying) experience! In the midst of smoke and thunder and shaking ground, God descended to meet His people in Exodus 19, and in so doing He revealed His unrivaled holiness. The question is: How well do we understand His holiness? Do our interactions with God reflect an appreciation for His transcendence? And more importantly, do we understand how Jesus has revolutionized our experience of God’s holiness?

PRAYER

Almighty God, we stand in awe of who You are. We marvel at Your majesty. We glory in Your creative work that goes beyond human understanding. Still, You see to our needs as only You can. You care for us as a parent does a child. We praise You daily for who You are and that You accept us as Your own. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(October 2-8, 2017)

God’s Covenant with Israel
MONDAY, October 2: “You Are God’s Choice” (Deuteronomy 10:12-22)
TUESDAY, October 3: “Prepare to Meet Your God” (Exodus 19:9b-15)
WEDNESDAY, October 4: “The Triumphant Glory of God” (Isaiah 60:1-7)
THURSDAY, October 5: “House of Israel, Praise the Lord” (Psalm 135:1-9, 19-21)
FRIDAY, October 6: “Revealed in a New Way” (Luke 9:28-36)
SATURDAY, October 7: “A Chosen Race, a Holy People” (1 Peter 2:1-10)
SUNDAY, October 8: “Worship God through Obedience” (Exodus 19:16-25)
OBEYING GOD’S LAW

**ADULT/YOUTH**

**ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC:** A Covenant Is a Serious Thing

**YOUTH TOPIC:** Be Obedient to the Law

**CHILDREN**

**GENERAL LESSON TITLE:** Obeying God’s Law

**CHILDREN’S TOPIC:** Obeying the Rules

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**DEVOTIONAL READING**

Psalm 119:49-64

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**ADULT/YOUTH**

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Exodus 20

**PRINT PASSAGE:** Exodus 20:18-26

**KEY VERSE:** Exodus 20:24

**CHILDREN**

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Exodus 20

**PRINT PASSAGE:** Exodus 20:1-17

**KEY VERSES:** Exodus 20:56, 6

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**Exodus 20:18-26—KJV**

18 And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off.

19 And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die.

20 And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not.

21 And the people stood afar off, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

22 Then the Lord said unto Moses, Thus thou shalt say unto the children of Israel, Ye have seen that I have talked with you from heaven.

23 Ye shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall ye make unto you gods of gold.

24 An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all

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**Exodus 20:18-26—NIV**

18 When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance.

19 and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”

20 Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”

21 The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

22 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites this: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven:

23 “Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.

24 “Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause
places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.

25 And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it.
26 Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon.

my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you.

25 “If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it.
26 “And do not go up to my altar on steps, or your private parts may be exposed.”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Without obedience to law, people live in chaos, hurting themselves, others, and their environment. Where can people get a law that they will obey? God delivered the commandments to the Israelites while showing divine and holy power that tested them to convince them to obey the laws of the covenant.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Explore the divine manifestations and warnings that accompanied the giving of the Ten Commandments.
2. Aspire to live in more perfect obedience to God’s laws.
3. Share a way to show God that they are serious about obeying God’s laws.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—Verses 22 through 26 frame the first section of laws following the Ten Commandments and focus on Israel’s worship.

—The stipulations of the “book of the covenant” consist largely of expansions and expositions of the Ten Commandments.

—God made a striking contrast between the power of the one true God “in heaven” who does whatever God pleases and the idols of silver or gold who have no power at all (Genesis 20:23).

—The people of Israel requested a mediator to stand between them and God. This role was first fulfilled by Moses and later by priests, prophets, kings, and—ultimately—Jesus.

—Moses let the people of Israel know not to fear that God would kill them because God was testing them so they might be governed by the fear of the Lord.

—God’s expectations for worship are simple and respectful.

—This encounter moved the Israelites beyond their easy response of Exodus 19:8—” Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.”

Teachers of CHILDREN

—A trustworthy and loving God sets standards for human interaction with the divine and with other humans.

—The commandments set standards for establishing just, peaceful, and faith-oriented communities.

—God’s commandments set specific requirements for certain human interactions.

—Effective rules must be accompanied by consequences for not following those rules.

—The commandments were given to glorify God and to set the Israelites apart as God’s holy nation.
THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
The events of today’s lesson took place around 1446 BC. The people of Israel resided at Mount Sinai for a full year; the rest of the book of Exodus, all of the book of Leviticus, and the first ten chapters of the book of Numbers all take place here. The year 1446 BC was part of the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC).

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
Moses was on Mount Sinai (also called Horeb). Although the exact location of Mount Sinai is unknown, traditionally it is thought to be Jebel Musa, “Mountain of Moses,” a mountain in the southern tip of modern Saudi Arabia. It was in this same general location that God had called Moses (see Exodus 3:12). The name Sinai was derived from the Hebrew word seneh, which means “acacia bush.”

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON
God ("Elohim"): one of the most common names for God in the Old Testament; starting in Genesis 1:1, it occurs more than 2,500 times in the Old Testament.
Moses: a Levite; his life had three periods of forty years—Pharaoh’s palace, Midianite wilderness, and leading Israel to the edge of the Promised Land.
Children of Israel: the most common designation of the Jewish people used in Jewish literature. It signifies the fact that they are descended from Jacob, who was also known as Israel.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON
Bless (verse 24)—Hebrew: barak (baw-rak’): to bless, kneel; to praise.
Darkness (verse 21)—Hebrew: ‘araphel (ar-aw-fel’): cloud, heavy or dark cloud, darkness, gross darkness, thick darkness.
Hear (verse 19)—Hebrew: shama’ (shaw-mah’): to hear, “listen” (NIV) to, obey; to understand.
Prove (verse 20)—Hebrew: nacah (naw-saw’): to “test” try, prove, tempt, assay, put to the proof or test.
Sacrifice (verse 24)—Hebrew: zabach (zaw-bakh’): to offer; to slay; to kill for sacrifice.
Seen (verse 22)—Hebrew: ra’ah (raw-aw’): to see, look at, inspect, perceive, consider; to shew.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON
I. Introduction
A. The Ten Commandments, Mr. Hatch, and Big Macs
B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
A. Lightning (Exodus 20:18-19)
B. Still Fearful (Exodus 20:20-21)
C. Do Not Make Anything (Exodus 20:22-24)
D. The Right Kind of Altar (Exodus 20:25-26)

III. Concluding Reflection
I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Ten Commandments, Mr. Hatch, and Big Macs

In the first years after their acceptance of the Mosaic Covenant, Israel took it very seriously. Perhaps there was no area that they took more seriously than observing the Sabbath. Although we Christians observe Sunday as our Sabbath, the same respect for the day should carry over from that of the Jews. After all, it is the day in which we continue to observe Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus does not expect our obedience to the Fourth Commandment to create a burden for us (see Mark 2:23-28). Still, many today lack zeal to obey God’s command like Mr. Hatch. As a matter of fact, they know more about Big Macs than they do about the Ten Commandments. Some years ago a survey was taken to see which was more recognizable—the Ten Commandments recorded in Exodus 20, or the ingredients of a McDonald’s Big Mac. Whether surprising or not, most people could name several or all of the ingredients of a Big Mac, while stumbling over naming the Ten Commandments. Really, as Christians we cannot blame the world’s ignorance. After all, do we know them ourselves? More importantly, do we model them in our daily living?

B. Biblical Background

We may divide Exodus 20 into four parts. In part 1 (verses 1-2) is Moses’ introduction to God’s giving of the Ten Commandments. We see how God’s deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage was still central to God’s relationship with His chosen people (verse 2). We also take note that God uses both His personal name (Yahweh) and one of the most often used Hebrew names for God (Elohim).

Part 2 begins in verse 3 with the first of the Ten Commandments; the Ten Commandments comprise verses 3-17. They are also repeated in Deuteronomy 5:6-21. That is how the book of Deuteronomy received its name in Latin: deuteron—“two” and nomium—“law.” Because God etched onto the stone tablets the version recorded in Exodus 20, it is more generally used by Christians and Jews. What is amazing about the Ten Commandments is that the rest of the Mosaic Law was based upon them. What we read in the rest of the book of Exodus and in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy are just applications of the Ten Commandments.

In response to God’s presence on Mount Sinai, the Israelites were still afraid. Their response comprises part 3 (verses 18-21). Finally, in part 4 (verses 22-26), God provided instructions on how to build a proper altar. Because of our overall emphasis on the Ten Commandments, we mostly skip a discussion of parts 3 and 4. In today’s lesson, we will see how verses 18-26 impact the other parts of Exodus 20.
How did the Mosaic covenant relate to the Abrahamic Covenant? Well, the Mosaic covenant did not establish Israel’s relationship with God. That had already been accomplished through God’s covenant with Abraham. In it, God established a perpetual relationship with Abraham’s descendants that made them His chosen people. The purpose of the Mosaic covenant was to establish guidelines for the fellowship between God and Israel. The most important aspect of the Mosaic covenant was what God would do if Israel obeyed or did not obey.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Lightning

(Exodus 20:18-19)

And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die.

The Ten Commandments are an important part of theophany (visual manifestation of God) and revelation. They outline a new way of living. After the Tenth Commandment in verse 17, we see a very clear dividing point between parts 2 and 3 of the chapter. We gain the immediate reaction of the Israelites to the giving of the Ten Commandments. In verses 18-20, the extreme fear of the Jewish people is on display. Who would not be afraid of the manifestations of God’s awesome power? In verse 18, we seemingly see a repeat of the sights and sounds recorded in Exodus 19:16. However, we should find it curious that the Hebrew words translated “lightning” are different in 20:18 and 19:16. The word translated “lightning” in 20:18 is *lappiyd*—“to shine as in a burning torch.” In 19:16, it is *baraq*—“lightning.” *Lappiyd* is rarely used in the Old Testament, appearing only one other time in the Books of the Law in Genesis 15:17.

Although they could not see God, the Israelites could hear God speaking to Moses. Moses did not record whether the Israelites understood God’s words. However, it was so loud until it sounded like thunder (verse 18). Their encounter with God moved the Israelites beyond their easy response of Exodus 19:8—“Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.” Now, they were so terrified at God’s awesome power until they were too afraid to have God talk directly to them. They thought that God would strike them down. Their reactions to the manifestation and voice of God is similar to that of Isaiah’s (see Isaiah 6:1-5) and John’s (see Revelation 1:17). They did not want to be in God’s presence or have Him talk to them. Instead, they pleaded with Moses to speak to them on God’s behalf (verse 19), to be their mediator. Their “ask” of Moses reflected their utmost respect for him and recognition that God had consecrated him for this leadership role. It also reflected their recognition that they were unworthy to be in God’s presence. Requesting a mediator to stand between them and God was a role first fulfilled by Moses and later by priests, prophets, kings, and ultimately Jesus. Yes, we also have a Mediator between us and God today. He is our Savior.
Jesus (see 1 Timothy 2:5). However, unlike in the Old Testament, we can speak directly with God. Technically, then, Jesus’ blood mediates between us and God when we sin.

We can also approach the Israelites’ fear from another way. It is possible that they did hear God’s words when He gave the Ten Commandments. After hearing this list of covenantal dos and don’ts, they recognized that it would be hard for them to obey them. We must keep in mind that the system of sin offerings and similar acts supporting their repentance of sin was not yet in place.

Prior to God’s speaking to Moses the Israelites were curious, gazing toward the mountain. This was partly the reason why God sent Moses down to warn the Israelites again about transgressing the perimeter boundary of the base of Mount Sinai. However, after God began speaking they retreated in fear. Ironically, the Jewish people lost much of their fear and awe of the Lord over time. It seems that the further they were removed from Sinai, the further their hearts drifted from God. We know that their sincerity in worshipping God grew shallow. How do we know? We see the introduction of idol worship during the golden age of Israel during Solomon’s reign. Although they had periods of revival where they did have displays of true commitment, they gradually moved their hearts far from the Lord. Jesus criticized the Jewish religious leaders for their actions in leading the people along this negative path in His time (see Matthew 5:17-48).

When Moses originally asked Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to have a feast to God in the wilderness, some Israelites may have viewed it as similar to the way the Egyptians worshipped their pagan gods. We must not forget that they had been in bondage more than four hundred years. So no one alive witnessed the worship practices of Jacob, Joseph, and his brothers. So they would not have had proper examples of how to worship and offer sacrifices to God.

B. Still Fearful
(Exodus 20:20-21)

And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not. And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was.

After hearing their fearful pleas, Moses addressed his fellow Israelites in an effort to calm their fears. Since it is most likely they were assembled in a great plain near the base of Mt. Sinai, Moses’ voice would have carried well. Obviously, it would have been relayed through to the farthest assembled group of Israelites. Moses did not ask, but literally commanded them not to fear. Their fears were unfounded. Since they had not transgressed the perimeter of the base of Mount Sinai, none of them was going to be stoned to death or killed by the arrow. Still, with the manifestation of God still in sight they no doubt simply had some amount of fear. Moses let them know that God was not trying to set them up so that they would be killed. Instead, God was testing them to see if they would be obedient (verse 20). From the time they assembled near Mount Sinai up until Moses’ address in verse 20, they had dutifully followed God’s commands. Moses was letting the people of Israel know not to fear that God would kill them because God was testing them so they might be governed by the fear of the Lord. Testing of the people by God (verse 20) also occurs in Exodus 15:25 and 16:4. Testing of God by the people occurs in Exodus 17:2.
God’s awesome presence instilled fear in them (verse 20). The bad news about fear is that it is not always long-lasting. I remember as a young child being afraid of the dark. I needed a night light so that if I woke up, I would see the light and not be afraid. Over time, I realized that I had nothing to fear in the darkness of my bedroom. One of the great moments of my childhood was throwing away my night light. I overcame my fear. Overcoming my fear of darkness was a good thing. However, the Israelites overcame their fear of God and it was not a good thing. Fear had the power to keep Israel from sinning for a while. But just like Adam and Eve, Satan deceived the people into sinning. In about forty days, we see the outcome of Satan’s work. Ironically, Moses, who had eased the people’s fear, left their presence. They redirected their confidence in overcoming their fears from Moses to a golden calf. The Israelites so overcame their fear until they danced and praised a golden calf in the sight of God’s presence on Mount Sinai just more than a month later.

When Moses told Israel “so that you may not sin” (verse 20), he was focusing on Israel’s relationship with God. In so doing, they also had the basis for developing right relationships with their fellow Jews and others. God’s main purpose in manifesting Himself before His chosen people was to test them so that they would not sin—miss the mark in their relationship with Him. God ultimately wanted Israel to move beyond their obeying Him out of fear to obeying because they loved God (see 1 John 4:18-19). Because believers really reverence God, we have no fear of Him. While reverence for God reflects great respect of who He is, fear of God is not unlike a cowering animal before a predator. Since we have experienced God’s love, we know that God knows what is best for us (see Romans 8:28).

Still, the Israelites were not convinced. They still stood afar off. That meant that they were further back than the minimum safe area near the base of Mount Sinai. Of course, it could not be that far because of the time it would take for two million-plus people to move backward. Evidently, Moses did not totally descend from Mount Sinai. Why? In verse 21 after addressing the Israelites, he drew back to enter the thick smoke that hid the manifestation of God. To the Israelites, it must have appeared that he had disappeared into thin air. Now Moses resumed receiving the Law from God. Moses had already received the foundation of the Ten Commandments. Now God would give him the details that would make these commandments operational.

Normally, darkness had a negative connotation. However, Moses knew that the light of God lay beyond the darkness. That is actually a lesson for us today. When things seem the darkest, God’s light penetrates darkness and gives hope. It should not be lost on us that God met Moses in a brightly burning bush. God’s presence was in that bush, but Moses did not see the manifestation of God. He only heard a voice. Now Moses was going into the darkness to be in God’s presence. He could not see anything in the dark smoke from the outside. Yet he knew that God was present within.

C. Do Not Make Anything
(Exodus 20:22-24)

And the Lord said unto Moses, Thus thou shalt say unto the children of Israel, Ye have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. Ye shall not make with me gods...
of silver, neither shall ye make unto you gods of gold. An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.

In verse 22, God resumed giving Moses instructions for the children of Israel. Verses 22 through 26 frame the first section of laws following the Ten Commandments and focus on Israel’s worship. So God delivered the first law of the covenant—building an altar (verses 21-26). God’s words in verses 22-23 focused on purity in worship. Impure hearts in worship would eventually lead to impure hearts in daily living. Fake worship would lead to fake living. Over the past few days, the Israelites had seen the manifestation of God on Mount Sinai, including the lightning and dark clouds. The last time Israel experienced a sign of thunder and lightning was in the context of the plague of hail sent on Egypt (see 9:23-26). That was why God told the Israelites, “You have seen that I have talked with you from heaven” (verse 22, NKJV). Such a sight might have spurred the “creative juices” of some of the Israelites so much so until they would make some type of image to depict what they had seen. God preemptively warned them not to make any type of image “to be with” Him (verse 23). Mention of “gods . . . alongside me” (verse 23) warned the Israelites against incorporating the gods of their pagan neighbors into their worship, making Yahweh merely one deity among many. God makes a striking contrast between the power of the one true God “in heaven” who does whatever God pleases, and the idols of silver or gold who have no power at all. In reality, it would have just been a graven image made of silver or gold.

God’s prohibition against making any image to accompany Him or act as a proxy for an image of Him was a repetition and application of the Second Commandment: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (verse 4, ESV). At the heart of this commandment is God’s desire for Israel to love Him. That is why God, in explaining the Second Commandment, said that He was a jealous God (verse 5). Ironically, when they thought that Moses was not going to return from Mount Sinai during his first forty-day ascent, the first thing to come to their minds was to make a golden calf to worship. Because of God’s desire for Israel to love Him, He was angered and threatened to destroy the whole of Israel (see Exodus 32).

But God did want Israel to offer Him sacrifices. However, such altars should not be fancy, but made from the earth (verse 24). These altars were probably made of compacted clay or bricks, which would have made them good at absorbing the blood of the sacrifices. Upon these altars, they would offer burnt offerings of sheep and oxen. They offered these animals whole as a sacrifice to God. Peace offerings were also included. They consisted of the blood, fat, and internal organs of the animals used for the burnt offerings. Worshippers could consume anything that remained from any of the offerings except for the sin offering. By eating the remainder, the people making the offering were symbolically being one with God. The existence of these offerings was an early indication of the impossibility of keeping the Law. One of the functions of these offerings was to “cover over” the sins committed by the
person making the sacrifice or for Israel as a whole or a tribe or clan.

In the next few chapters and in the book of Leviticus, God provides specific instructions on the type of offerings, including their purpose, what to offer, and who could offer it. We note that these were temporary altars until a permanent one would be built many years later in Jerusalem. In response to these offerings, God would bless Israel in two ways for their sacrifices. First, God extended blessings of atonement for sin through the sacrifice offered up. Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross would become the once-for-all atoning sacrifice for sin. Second, when they worshipped wherever they went as His chosen people, God would be among them and bless them.

D. The Right Kind of Altar
(Exodus 20:25-26)

And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it. Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon.

To differentiate Israel from the pagan worshippers around them, God did not allow for a fancifully designed altar. Why? Those building such altars would have placed their emphasis on their own handiwork instead of on God, who made everything including them. Why did God forbid the use of tools? It could have been that God did not want the altar contaminated by human-made materials. The clay and bricks were made directly from the earth (see Deuteronomy 27:5). Only the most basic of tools, if any, were to be used. Also, iron had not come into widespread use and was considered superstitious in ancient Near Eastern culture.

Since steps were associated with pagan altars, God forbade altar steps. Such steps would have made the altar fancy-looking like those of the Canaanite people during the Bronze Age. The requirement for the altar of Exodus 20:26 not to have steps contrasts with the requirement for the altar of Ezekiel 43:17 to have steps. Bible scholars disagree on the reality of “Ezekiel's Temple.” Some see it as imagery of what would have been had Israel stayed faithful to God instead of going into exile. Others see it as being symbolic of the Jews’ accepting Jesus as Messiah and having a building built worthy of His earthly throne during the Millennial Kingdom. There were steps on the east side of the altar (verse 17). This was a change from the altar described under the Law (verses 24-26). Since the altar in “Ezekiel’s Temple,” was so large—just more than 19 feet tall and 31 ½ feet square—steps would have been needed to reach the altar’s hearth on the very top. Since it was at the tallest point, in Hebrew, the altar’s hearth meant “mountain of God.”

Since the priests wore loose-fitting garments, if there were steps their nakedness may have been exposed as they walked up the stairs. That would have profaned God’s name. Still, even without the steps God did call for the priests to wear underpants, a type of girdle: “You shall make for them linen undergarments to cover their naked flesh. They shall reach from the hips to the thighs; and they shall be on Aaron and on his sons when they go into the tent of meeting or when they come near the altar to minister in the Holy Place, lest they bear guilt and die. This shall be a statute forever for him and for his offspring after him” (Exodus 28:42-43).
III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Moses was Israel’s mediator between them and God. He was their go-between. Although we have a healthy respect/fear for living according to God’s will, we still need a go-between, too. *The Daily Bread* devotional for March 14, 2015 (https://odb.org/2015/03/14/the-go-between/) offered the following insights on what it means to be a go-between:

Imagine standing at the bottom of a mountain, elbow-to-elbow with everyone in your community. Thunder and lightning flash; you hear an earsplitting trumpet blast. Amid flames, God descends on the mountaintop. The summit is enveloped in smoke; the entire mountain begins to shake, and so do you (Exodus 19:16-20).

When the Israelites had this terrifying experience near Mount Sinai, they begged Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (verse 19). The Israelites were asking Moses to mediate between them and the Almighty. After meeting with God, Moses brought God’s messages back down the mountain to the people below.

Today, we worship the same God who displayed His staggering greatness on Mount Sinai. Because God is perfectly holy and we are desperately sinful, we cannot relate to Him. Jesus is the go-between for us to a holy and perfect God (Romans 8:34; 1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus bridges the gap between God and us.

We should be thankful every day that Jesus is our go-between!

**PRAYER**

*God of grace, we ask You today to show us how to live a life worthy of Your name. We know this means that we must allow Your Holy Spirit to rule in our lives. We ask You to move us out of the way so that You may accomplish Your perfect will in our lives. We pray these things in the name of our risen Savior. Amen.*

**HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

**(October 9-15, 2017)**

**Obeying God’s Law**

**MONDAY,** October 9: “People Hear God Speak the Commandments” (Deuteronomy 5:22-27)

**TUESDAY,** October 10: “God’s Exclusive Claim” (Exodus 20:1-12)

**WEDNESDAY,** October 11: “Guide for Human Relationships” (Exodus 20:13-17)

**THURSDAY,** October 12: “The Law Finds Fulfillment in Jesus” (Matthew 5:17-20)

**FRIDAY,** October 13: “Anger Leads to Murder” (Matthew 5:21-26)

**SATURDAY,** October 14: “Lust Leads to Adultery” (Matthew 5:27-32)

**SUNDAY,** October 15: “People Hear God’s Word from Moses” (Exodus 20:18-26)
GOD’S COVENANT WITH DAVID

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT TOPIC: A Much Bigger Plan
YOUTH TOPIC: A Much Bigger Plan

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: God Makes a Promise to David
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: A Great Promise!

DEVOOTIONAL READING
Psalm 89:1-15

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 7:1-16; Psalm 89; 1 Chronicles 22:6-8
PRINT PASSAGE: 2 Samuel 7:1-6, 8-10, 12-16
KEY VERSE: 2 Samuel 7:16

CHILDREN
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 7:1-16; Psalm 89
PRINT PASSAGE: 2 Samuel 7:1-6, 8-10, 12-16
KEY VERSE: Psalm 89:28

2 Samuel 7:1-6, 8-10, 12-16—KJV
AND IT came to pass, when the king sat in his house, and the LORD had given him rest round about from all his enemies;
2 That the king said unto Nathan the prophet, See now, I dwell in an house of cedar, but the ark of God dwelleth within curtains.
3 And Nathan said to the king, Go, do all that is in thine heart; for the LORD is with thee.
4 And it came to pass that night, that the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying:
5 Go and tell my servant David, Th is is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in?
6 “I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling.”
8 “Now therefore so shalt thou say unto my servant David, Thus saith the LORD of hosts, I took thee from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel.
9 “I have been with you wherever you have gone, and
the sheepcote, from following the sheep, to be ruler over my people, over Israel:
9 And I was with thee whithersoever thou wentest, and have cut off all thine enemies out of thy sight, and have made thee a great name, like unto the name of the great men that are in the earth.
10 Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more, as beforetime.

12 And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom.
13 He shall build an house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever.
14 I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men:
15 But my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee.
16 And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever.

I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth.
10 “And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning.”

12 “When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom.
13 “He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.
14 “I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands.
15 “But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you.
16 “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”

**UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE:** When entering into relationships with others, people struggle to retain control of their plans and dreams. How can people sacrifice control in order to maintain vital relationships? God’s covenant with David was a compromise between the eternal, omnipresent God and the time- and space-bound David by allowing a temple to be built, but beyond David’s lifetime.

**LESSON OBJECTIVES**

*Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:*
1. Analyze David’s desire and the Lord’s promise.
2. Confess their natural human limitations in attempting to serve God in a manner that is worthy of the eternal and omnipresent Creator.
3. Humbly accept God’s blessings rather than striving to earn them through impressive acts of service.
AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—David was once a shepherd who became a king.
—Second Samuel 7:14 expresses the special familial relationship God promised to maintain with His people. This is quoted in 2 Corinthians 6:18 and Hebrews 1:5.
—David was not allowed to build God a house because David had shed so much blood before God on the earth (see 1 Chronicles 22:6-16).
—“Your offspring after you” (2 Samuel 7:12) refers to Solomon—God fulfilled the promise through David’s descendants, beginning with David’s son Solomon.
—The promise of an everlasting kingdom for the house of David (see 2 Samuel 7:16) became a focus for many later prophecies and powerfully influenced the messianic hope in Israel.
—This covenant extended beyond David personally to include the people of Israel.
—Many of the prophecies about the Messiah draw on this promise made to David (e.g., Matthew 1:1-17).

Teachers of CHILDREN
—God will bestow blessings on those who love the Lord that are beyond their wildest dreams.
—Although we try to demonstrate our love for God through our actions, God sometimes will remind us of a greater love.
—Human plans and desires are current and temporal, while God’s plans and desires are everlasting and eternal.
—God’s plans and desires are often made known through faithful, righteous spokespersons.
—Human-intended actions, no matter how worthy, may fall short of God’s plans for our lives.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The events of today’s lesson occurred around 997 BC. It was during the three-year period of 997–995 BC that David defeated Israel’s enemies, ushering in a period of peace. Israel entered her golden age as a united kingdom that lasted from 1030 to 930 BC. The world was in the Second Iron Age (1000–587 BC).

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The events of today’s lesson took place in Jerusalem in the heart of the united kingdom of Israel. David had led his forces in capturing the city in 1000 BC. After settling Israel’s civil war (1005–1003 BC) after Saul’s death, David began the process of transforming his nation into a world power with the worship of God at its center. Culturally, Israel still showed influence of the nation’s Egyptian bondage hundreds of years prior and the time of the Judges that ended with Samuel’s anointing of King Saul. With the infusion of instrumentation, we see their greatest influence in the liturgical aspects of worship centered in Jerusalem.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON
Nathan (“gift”): the prophet to the royal court during the reign of David and the early days of Solomon.
David: the greatest king of Israel 1010–970 BC; his military, political, and religious innovations ushered in Israel’s golden age.
“Your Seed”: David’s son Solomon who succeeded him as king and would build the Temple; he served 970–931 BC.
I. INTRODUCTION

A. From Tragedy to Triumph

We have all experienced disappointments in our lives. Some of the worst have been when we were set to do something we had always wanted to do, then something happened that prevented us from doing so. Some of those disappointments haunt us for the rest of our lives. Yet, we often find contentment after the initial disappointment because we somehow find ourselves in a better place. This type of thinking reminds this writer of a story widely circulated online. We will not debate whether the events of the story actually happened. What is important is its message:

In Scotland, a family by the name of Clark had a dream: husband and wife with their nine children wanted to immigrate to the United States. To make that dream a reality they struggled, scrimped, and saved. Finally, they managed to accumulate enough money and obtain all the paperwork they needed to take the trip and begin a new life in a new land. Ship reservations were made and the family was ecstatic. Then, as often happens, tragedy struck. Seven days before they were to leave the youngest of the children, a little boy, was bitten by a dog. The bite wasn’t serious; the doctor stitched the lad up in no time at all. The tragedy was the doctor also had to hang a yellow sign on the Clark’s front door. The yellow signed warned everybody to stay away: there was a possibility, a very small chance, that the boy had contracted rabies
from the bite of the unknown dog. Their ship was to sail in one week, the family was quarantined for two. They would have to stay behind as their ship, and their dreams, sailed into the sunset.

The father, outraged at what he felt was the unjust, unfair hand that he had been dealt, went down to the pier to stare as the ship set out. Furious at God, frustrated with his son; he cried and he cursed. He stomped home in a foul mood. He stayed that way, too. Then only a few days after his vessel had left port he got word that on April 15th the very ship which was to have brought them to a new life, had been sunk. The Titanic had gone down. As it disappeared, it had taken with it the lives of over 1,500 passengers. Hearing that news, Mr. Clark’s attitude was instantly transformed. Excitedly, enthusiastically, eagerly, he hugged his son. Plainly, powerfully, and prayerfully, he thanked his God. Their lives had been spared. Their tragedy had been turned into a triumph.

Keeping this illustration in mind, in today’s lesson we see how God’s denying David’s request to build a temple became an extreme example of a “backdoor” blessing.

B. Biblical Background

God’s covenant with David, the Davidic Covenant, is the focal point of today’s lesson.

Nathan was a prophet to King David. Prophets to the king always ran the risk of execution, especially when their words condemned the king. Given that possibility, Nathan was one of the most courageous examples of such a prophet in the Bible. We find his courage on display three times in the life of David. First, he had to tell David that God had denied his request to build a temple (see 2 Samuel 7). This had to be heartbreaking for David, but he heeded God’s word through Nathan. Nathan’s second and possibly most courageous action took place when he confronted David about his adultery committed with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of her husband (see 2 Samuel 12). Nathan had to deliver God’s judgment against David. Finally, at a time of unrest in David’s family near the time of David’s death, Nathan called on David to formally announce Solomon as his successor (see 1 Kings 1:24-27). Nathan’s name means “gift.” Indeed, Nathan was a gift to David. He served with the king from about 975 BC until David died. Nathan continued serving David’s son Solomon. We do not have a record of when he died. Nathan meant so much to David and his wife Bathsheba that they named one of their sons Nathan (see 1 Chronicles 3:5).

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. David’s Request

(2 Samuel 7:1-3)

AND IT came to pass, when the king sat in his house, and the Lord had given him rest round about from all his enemies; That the king said unto Nathan the prophet, See now, I dwell in an house of cedar, but the ark of God dwelleth within curtains. And Nathan said to the king, Go, do all that is in thine heart; for the Lord is with thee.
The events of 2 Samuel 7 took place after David triumphantly brought the ark of the covenant from the house of Abinadab (see 2 Samuel 6:3). Although David would continue to be at war with neighboring nations for a couple more years, the land was at relative peace because David defeated the Philistines (see 2 Samuel 5:17-25), who had been Israel’s archenemy. However, some Bible scholars say that David’s request in 2 Samuel 7 occurred after the events of David’s further conquests described in 2 Samuel 8. God’s giving David and Israel rest ran counter to the religious beliefs of the prevalent ancient Near Eastern culture (verse 1). In that culture, it was the reverse. The people were responsible for giving the deity rest as in a temple or holy shrine. That may have been one of the reasons why David wanted to build a temple for God (verse 2). We note that the ark of the covenant had been housed in the portable tabernacle for more than four hundred years since the time of Moses. Since it was designed using ten curtains (see Exodus 26:1), David referred to the ark of the covenant as dwelling “inside tent curtains” (verse 2, NKJV). God had never asked for a permanent building to house the ark, the symbol of His presence among Israel.

In verse 2, we find the first mention of Nathan the prophet. He ministered to David for the rest of David’s reign and into the reign of David’s son Solomon. David presented his request to God through the prophet Nathan. It was common practice in ancient Near Eastern culture for monarchs to inquire of the priest about building a temple for their deity.

Mentioning that his palace was built with cedar, David was indicating how luxurious it was. Cedar was not a common tree to Palestine and had to be imported from Lebanon. So it was both a luxury wood and expensive to import. Haggai scolded the Jews returning from exile for using such wood while God’s Temple lay in disrepair (see Haggai 1:4). Consider the imagery here. David was living in a fine palace while the ark of the covenant was inside a portable tent. That really bothered David. A man after God’s own heart, he did not want his house to be better than God’s “house.” We should note that David had come a long way from living in a cave (see 1 Samuel 22:1).

David wanted to make Jerusalem both the secular and religious capital of Israel. Such consolidation would greatly strengthen David’s monarchy. We also commend David for wanting to give back after God had given him so much. That holds true today. We ought to give joyously to God whether in time, talent, or tithe.

We find Nathan’s response interesting. He did not first ask God for direction. He simply responded on his own. After all, David’s dream seemed like something that God would have given David. However, not all of our dreams, though they may seem divinely inspired, are within God’s will for us. That is why it seems in verse 2 that Nathan got carried away with David’s request. He knew that God was with David in everything David had accomplished up to this point in his life. Also, we should not confuse Nathan’s use of the words “the Lord is with you” (verse 3, NKJV) as God’s blessing. This was just a general blessing like we would say “God bless you” today.

B. Never Had a Permanent Home (2 Samuel 7:4-6)

And it came to pass that night, that the word of the Lord came unto Nathan, saying, Go and tell my servant David,
Thus saith the Lord, Shalt thou build me an house for me to dwell in? Whereas I have not dwelt in any house since the time that I brought up the children of Israel out of Egypt, even to this day, but have walked in a tent and in a tabernacle.

After making his request known to Nathan, David went to bed excited about building a “house” for God. However, God had other plans. Verse 4 begins by letting us know that something totally opposite of what transpired in verses 1-3 is about to happen. God spoke to Nathan (verse 4). In verses 5-7, God introduced His covenant with David with a preamble summarizing how He had not had nor desired a permanent “home.” In His covenant with David, God set forth the framework for His relationship with Israel through the coming of the Messiah. The Davidic covenant was a continuation and fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham.

In verse 5, God commanded Nathan to go to David with a message not only about the Temple but also David’s royal dynasty. We note God’s use of the word servant in reference to David. Certainly, David had always done God’s will faithfully. He did so even when it really did not make sense, like when he stood up to the Philistine giant Goliath. David was an Old Testament example of Paul’s words to the church at Corinth: “Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2).

In verse 3, Nathan was speaking on his own behalf. But now God was instructing Nathan on what to say on His behalf. These were two different messages, 180 degrees different in their content. That is why when Nathan would begin speaking to David, God wanted Nathan to use the special introductory phrase of the Old Testament prophets, “Thus says the Lord.”

This phrase and very similar iterations appear more than four hundred times in the Old Testament. It showed God’s stamp of approval on the prophet’s words. When God’s people heard them, they would be assured that the words were not the prophet’s, but God’s. However, the prophet was not exempted from the wrath of the people if they were unhappy about the message (see 1 Kings 19:10; Jeremiah 38:6).

After the prophetic introduction, God told Nathan to ask David a rhetorical question: “Would you build a house for Me to dwell in?” (verse 5). Obviously, God knew that David had asked to do so. Ironically, no one had ever asked God to build a “house” for Him. Still, considering the intertribal rivalry as well as the cycles of apostasy of the twelve tribes in the Promised Land, it makes sense that such a building project was never considered.

God did not offer an immediate answer to His own question. Instead, He reflected on how His presence had never had a permanent home (verse 6). It had been about 430 years since the building of the tabernacle to hold the ark of the covenant. In that time, wherever Israel had gone the tabernacle was part of the journey. Although the Israelites had settled in the Promised Land, they were still nothing more than a loose federation of tribes. Other than the judges, there was no central governmental authority. So there really had been no consideration for having a permanent location for the Ark because Israel had no national capital city. That all changed with the coronation of Saul as king. Israel began to have a central secular governmental authority. With David’s elevation to the throne, consolidation of power, and conquering Jerusalem to be the capital city, the time was ripe for also having a permanent location for the Ark.
C. God’s Abiding Presence

(2 Samuel 7:8-10)

Now therefore so shalt thou say unto my servant David, Thus saith the Lord of hosts, I took thee from the sheepcote, from following the sheep, to be ruler over my people, over Israel: And I was with thee whithersoever thou wentest, and have cut off all thine enemies out of thy sight, and have made thee a great name, like unto the name of the great men that are in the earth. Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more, as beforetime.

After providing a preamble to His covenant with David, God instructed Nathan to begin telling David the specifics of what the covenant demanded.

Again, we see the use of the validation stamp “Thus says the Lord of hosts” in verse 8. Since God was about to share how He had been with David in conquering Israel’s enemies, we notice that God used His warfare name, “Lord of hosts.”

God wanted to remind David that he had truly come a long way. God called him while he was yet a shepherd boy (see 1 Samuel 16). As a matter of fact, his own family did not even think he was king material. He was the youngest and given the least desired task of caring for the sheep (see 1 Samuel 16:11). God had now elevated him to become ruler over all of Israel.

Yet, David’s experience with the sheep prepared him well to be king on two fronts. First, working alone amidst constant danger (wild animals and rogue marauders), David quickly had to learn to overcome his fears and be resourceful in protecting his flock. These two traits would prove indispensable in David’s ascent to the throne and throughout his reign. Second, since sheep are not intelligent animals, it honed David’s ability to lead a diverse group of people, including some who were simply hard to lead. These same lessons still work today for clergy and leaders in our congregations.

Throughout his ascension to the throne, there had been one constant—God’s abiding presence (verse 9). Wherever David went, whether it was in the valley or a cave, God was with David. At every turn, David faced enemies. Some were external while others were internal, including King Saul. It did not matter who it was; God had “cut off” all David’s enemies (verse 9). In so doing, God had made David’s name great in Israel and throughout the known world (verse 9). David’s exploits as king were not only recorded in the Old Testament and Jewish extra-biblical books, but they were also included in the history of ancient Near Eastern nations, including Egypt.

In verses 10 (Print Passage) and 11 (Background Passage, God made two promises. First, in verse 10, He promised to establish a permanent, secure nation of Israel. Second, He would establish a permanent royal dynasty for David (verse 11). Reiterating His promise to Abraham, God would appoint a place in perpetuity for His chosen people (verse 10). It is curious that God stated that Israel would “move no more.” On the “before” side of that statement, we know that Israel moved from the Promised Land to Egypt, staying there for four hundred years. On the “after” side, God allowed the Babylonians to transport Israel into exile.

Later, Roman emperor Nero destroyed Jerusalem during the early days of the Christian church, creating a Jewish diaspora that did not return to the Promised Land until 1947 with the creation of modern-day Israel. Still, Israel has never been permanently displaced from the Promised Land.
God promised that Israel would no longer be oppressed as they had been during the period of the judges by the “sons of wickedness” (verses 10-11), highlighted by the Philistines.

D. Eternal Royal House
(2 Samuel 7:12-16)

And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: But my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever.

In verse 12, we find a preview of verses 13-16: David would die peacefully, God would see that David’s son would ascend the throne at his death, and God would bless David with an everlasting royal house. Although a time of turmoil would engulf David’s reign (see 2 Samuel 11–1 Kings 2), he would die peacefully (see 2 Kings 2:10-12). “Your seed” (verse 12, NKJV) refers to Solomon; God fulfilled the promise through David’s descendants beginning with David’s son Solomon.

Literally, God was telling David, “Thanks, but no thanks!” God was not mad. In fact, He was going to do way more for David than David could have ever dreamed or expected. Unlike pagan kings’ requests to build a temple, the prophet Nathan delivered a denial of David’s request. When we consider that the pagan kings’ gods were phony and the pagan priests benefitted financially and materially from the growth of such worship, it was not a surprise that the pagan kings’ requests to build a temple were always granted. Although God’s denying his request to build a permanent place of worship may have been viewed as a slight to David, God’s establishing the house of David to reign forever was a much more important blessing (verse 16). Solomon would build the house for God that David so wanted to build (verse 13). God still allowed David to play a major role in the building of the Temple. He allowed David to stockpile the supplies needed to build the Temple (see 1 Chronicles 22). In that way, all Solomon had to do was to start the formal building process.

Why did God not allow David to build the temple? We are not told directly in the book of 2 Samuel. However, we learn about God’s objections to David’s plan in 1 Chronicles 22:6-16 and 28:3. David was not allowed to build God a house because David had shed so much blood before God on the earth. However, we are not certain that God told David His reasons while he lived.

In verse 13, God revealed a most glorious promise to David. Through David’s son Solomon, God would ensure that the house of David lasted forever (verse 13; Acts 2:30). When God said that He would be David’s Father and David His son, he was not likening David to God’s Son, Jesus (verse 14). Instead, God was describing the special relationship He had with David. Now for other kingdoms in the ancient Near East, especially the Egyptians, the king was considered a deity. Verse 14 expresses the special familial relationship God promised to maintain with His chosen people. This is quoted in 2 Corinthians 6:18 and Hebrews 1:5. Knowing that Solomon would have his moral failings, God would use others to chasten him (verse 14).
But unlike how He dealt with Saul, God would not remove him from the throne (verse 15).

However, God’s “mercy” (KJV, NKJV) or “lovingkindness” (NASB) (verse 15) would never depart from Solomon or the rest of David’s royal house. In the Old Testament, God’s commitment to this covenant was captured in the Hebrew word *chesed*, which is sometimes written in its Romanized form *hesed*. It literally means “God’s steadfast love”—that is, no matter what, God’s love would never end.

The promise of an everlasting kingdom for the house of David (verse 16) became a focus for many later prophecies and powerfully influenced the Messianic hope in Israel. This covenant extends beyond David personally to include the people of Israel. Many of the prophecies about the Messiah draw on this promise made to David.

**III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION**

We understand that our best intentions are not always God’s will. That is when we recognize that the will of God supersedes our personal plans and ambitions. So sometimes God tells us no.

All of our dreams within the will of God will explode, as in “blow up” or flourish. Why? It is because “the moment we get tired in the waiting, God’s Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don’t know how or what to pray, it doesn’t matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That’s why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good” (Romans 8:26-28, The Message).

**PRAYER**

Omnipotent God, we thank You for Your “yes,” but we thank You even more for Your “no.” We know that You know the plans for our lives better than we can ever imagine. So we ask You to strengthen us to accept Your will as we praise You for Your grace and mercy. We ask this prayer in Your Son’s name. Amen.

**HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

*(October 16-22, 2017)*

God’s Covenant with David

**MONDAY,** October 16: “Samuel Anoints David King of Israel” (1 Samuel 16:1, 11-13)

**TUESDAY,** October 17: “God to Build the House of David” (1 Chronicles 17:9-15)

**WEDNESDAY,** October 18: “Resources to Build the Temple” (1 Chronicles 22:2-5)

**THURSDAY,** October 19: “David Instructs Solomon about the Temple” (1 Chronicles 22:6-16)

**FRIDAY,** October 20: “Extolling the Majesty of the Lord” (Psalm 89:1-15)

**SATURDAY,** October 21: “David, Prepared for Service” (1 Samuel 16:19-23)

**SUNDAY,** October 22: “God’s Covenant with David” (2 Samuel 7:1-6, 8-10, 12-16)
GOD’S COVENANT WITH THE RETURNED EXILES

Adult/Youth
Adult/Young Adult Topic: Sign on the Dotted Line
Youth Topic: Learning from Mistakes

Background Scripture: Nehemiah 9–10
Print Passage: Nehemiah 9:32-38; 10:28-29
Key Verse: Nehemiah 9:33

Children
General Lesson Title: God’s Pledge to the Exiles
Children’s Topic: I Promise!

Background Scripture: Nehemiah 9–10
Print Passage: Nehemiah 9:32-38; 10:28-29
Key Verse: Nehemiah 10:29b

Nehemiah 9:32-38; 10:28-29—KJV
32 Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.
33 Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly:
34 Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them.
35 For they have not served thee in their kingdom, and in thy great goodness that thou gavest them, and in the large and fat land which thou gavest before them, neither turned they from their wicked works.

Nehemiah 9:32-38; 10:28-29—NIV
32 “Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today.
33 “In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly.
34 “Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our ancestors did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the statutes you warned them to keep.
35 “Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile

October 29, 2017
Lesson 9

Devotional Reading
Psalm 103:1-14
Behold, we are servants this day, and for the land
that thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit
thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants
in it:
37 And it yieldeth much increase unto the kings
whom thou hast set over us because of our sins: also
they have dominion over our bodies, and over our
cattle, at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.
38 And because of all this we make a sure covenant,
and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal
unto it.

.....

28 And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites,
the porters, the singers, the Nethinims, and all they
that had separated themselves from the people of the
lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and
their daughters, every one having knowledge, and
having understanding;
29 They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and
entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in
God’s law, which was given by Moses the servant of
God, and to observe and do all the commandments
of the LORD our Lord, and his judgments and his
statutes.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People often find themselves in painful consequenc-
es of their own wrongdoing. In the embarrassing angst of suffering for their own wrongs, how
can they dare ask for help from others? The people of Israel, hurting from painful losses of
the exile for their sins, followed Nehemiah in confessing their wrongs and making a covenant
with God to obey the law given through Moses.

LESSON OBJECTIVES
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Study the prayer recorded in Nehemiah 9 for repentance and covenant affirmation.
2. Regret sinful attitudes and actions, both personal and corporate, in which they are complicit.
3. Express their commitment to following God’s ways in daily life.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO
BE EMPHASIZED
Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—Ezra’s prayer psalm (9:6-38) is heavily
infused with parallels and allusions to other
Old Testament writings (e.g., verses 16, 29,
with Jeremiah 7:26; 17:23). He also drew
from the theology and traditions of the
people, incorporating them in his prophetic
instruction.
—“All the hardship” (9:32) refers to the sufferings
of the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles.
—Ezra’s prayer acknowledges again that the people
sinned amid God’s blessing.
THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The book of Nehemiah is postexilic, set in the era of Persian dominance (Achaemenid Empire) of the fifth century BC. The events of today’s lesson take place around 445 BC. It was about two months after Nehemiah had led the third group of Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem. Artaxerxes I had been ruling as king of Persia since 465 BC.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The events of today’s lesson took place in Jerusalem. The city was a shell of itself. However, under Nehemiah’s leadership the walls of the city were completed. In 538, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, first governor of post-exile Israel, work on the second Temple began and continued for two years. However, opposition from the Samaritans delayed the work seventeen years until work resumed and was completed four years later. The Persian Empire was at its height under King Artaxerxes. The Persians were just one of a succession of world powers that pestered or subjugated Israel. It began with the Assyrians, followed by the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and finally the Romans. Under the leadership of King Cyrus II, the Persians conquered Media in 549 BC. The combined Medo-Persian Empire became a world power able to defeat Babylon in 539 BC. They continued as a world power, eventually extending their empire to the Middle East. Alexander the Great conquered the Medo-Persian Empire in 331 BC.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Priests: After the adoption of the Mosaic Law, the Aaronic priesthood was reestablished in Israel with only those in Aaron’s lineage able to serve. Levites: descendants of Jacobs’ son Levi responsible for Jewish worship life, including the Aaronic priesthood, maintaining the Temple, leading worship, and preparing sacrifices and offerings.
Nethinim (“given ones” or “those set apart”): group of servants tasked with assisting the Levites in the service of the Temple, doing the menial work required in Temple operations, such as wood cutting and water carrying.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Commandments (9:34)—Hebrew: mitsvah (mits-vaw’): ordinances; laws; the commandment (of God); “commands” (NIV).

Goodness (9:35)—Hebrew: tuwb (toob): best things; bounty; comeliness; good things, goodness.

Increase (9:37)—Hebrew: parah (paw-raw): bear fruit; bearing fruit; become fruitful; flourishes; produce; product; revenue; “abundant harvest” (NIV).

Mighty (9:32)—Hebrew: gibbouw (ghib-bore’): strong, mighty; brave man.

Right (9:33)—Hebrew: ‘emeth (ch’-meth): faithfully; assuredly; firmness, faithfulness, truth; “righteous” (NIV).

Testify (9:34, KJV)—Hebrew: ‘uwd (ood): to witness; record; to return, repeat, go about, do again; to bear witness.

Trouble (9:32)—Hebrew: akar (aw-kar’): to disturb or afflict; cause distress; to stir up; disturb; “hardship” (NIV).

TOPICAL OUTLINE

I. Introduction

A. Hosea and Gomer

The story of Hosea and Gomer summarized God’s unconditional love for His chosen people Israel. God used Hosea’s relationship with his wayward wife to capture Judah’s relationship with God. Although Judah would sometimes be good and sometimes bad, God’s love never wavered. He never forgot His covenants with Abraham and David. Eventually, the seventy-year exile helped the Jewish people realize the painful consequences of their own wrongdoing. They acknowledged unfaithfulness so much so until they were ready to sign on the dotted line of a renewed covenant with God. We all can relate to God’s faithfulness to us even when our commitment to Him was not very much. We, too, returned to God ready for restoration and renewal.

B. Biblical Background

Nehemiah is one of the four books of the Bible that records the history of post-exile Judah. The others are 2 Chronicles (36:22-23), Ezra, and Esther. The book of Nehemiah
may be divided into major parts: rebuilding the wall (chapters 1–7) and reforming the people (chapters 8–13). The second part may be further subdivided into covenant renewal (8–10) and establishment of policies (chapters 11–13). In terms of the covenants of the Bible, we see references to the Abrahamic covenant and Mosaic Covenant in today’s lesson.

Nehemiah was King Artaxerxes’s cupbearer and served as governor of Judah. He led the third group of Jewish exiles back home in 445 BC. He was a true renaissance person.

Who was the king of Assyria mentioned in verse 32? It may have been Shalmanesar III (858–824 BC). Ancient writings mention a battle in which he defeated King Ahab in 853 BC. This battle is not mentioned in the Bible. It also could have been Pul (752–742 BC) to whom King Menahem of Israel paid tribute (see 2 Kings 15:19-20). Other possibilities include Shalmanesar V (727–722 BC) (see Isaiah 20:1), or Esarhaddon (681–669 BC) (see 2 Kings 19:37).

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Faithful God, Unfaithful People
   (Nehemiah 9:32-35)

Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day. Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly: Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them. For they have not served thee in their kingdom, and in thy great goodness that thou gavest them, and in the large and fat land which thou gavest before them, neither turned they from their wicked works.

Today, too many Christian teachers and preachers resort to gimmicks and clichés when sharing God’s Word. However, we learn a wonderful lesson about the power of reading God’s Word zealously and faithfully in Nehemiah 8:1-12. After hearing Ezra read the Law of Moses, the people were moved to tears so much so until Nehemiah and Ezra had to tell them to stop (see verse 9) and instead rejoice (see verses 10-11). The people did as their leaders instructed. They were also moved to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (see Nehemiah 8:15-18) for the first time since before the Exile. The impact of hearing God’s Word culminated in a group of Levites (see Nehemiah 9:4-9) leading the nation in a corporate prayer of confession.

Their’s was not an ordinary prayer. It is the longest prayer recorded in the Bible and joins the prayers of Ezra 9 and Daniel 9 as great prayers of confession. What is striking is that it is a corporate prayer not unlike America’s National Day of Prayer (scheduled for observation May 3, 2018), except the whole nation was gathered in one place.

Our lesson today covers the last three sections of the prayer. The Levites began verse 32 by referring to God as Elohim. Why Elohim? Since the Jewish people considered “Yahweh” too holy to pronounce aloud based upon their interpretation of the third commandment (see Exodus 20:7), they most commonly referred to
God as Elohim. We note that they personalize their address of God by referring to Him as “our” Elohim (also found in Nehemiah 4:4, 9, 20; 5:9; and 6:16). By addressing God in such a personal manner, the Jewish people were setting the stage for making their covenant with God as recorded in verse 38 and Nehemiah 10.

The Levites went further than personalizing God’s name. They provided three adjectives to describe who God is. First, He is “great.” Compared to all the other so-called “great” pagan gods of the other nations, only God was truly great. The psalmist underscored this description of God in Psalm 95:3 (ESV): “For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.” Second, He is “mighty.” We quickly identify this description with Isaiah’s description of God the Son, in Isaiah 9:6. God’s might had made a difference in the history of Israel, including parting the Red Sea and providing manna in the wilderness. Third, God is “awesome.” The Hebrew word translated “awesome” here is יָרֵע (yare’), which means “to fear; morally, to revere.” This description of God harkens back to Israel’s encounter with God at Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19–20 and others).

After vividly describing God, the Levites next shared the basis of God’s unfailing commitment to Israel (verse 32). God had continued to keep the covenant He made with Abraham. His “mercy” (KJV, NKJV) or “lovingkindness” (NASB) was God’s covenant love, the Hebrew word חֵסֶד (chesed). ἀγαπή (Agape) is the New Testament counterpart of chesed. Chesed reflected God’s unconditional love for His chosen people.

Also in verse 32, we find the one and only request in this prayer. They asked God not to think that their current “trouble” (NKJV, KJV) or “hardship” (NASB, NIV) was a trivial matter. What hardship? They were referring to their suffering at the hands of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. They wanted to know that God cared about their trouble.

This trouble was not limited to a part of Israel. It had been shared by the royal house—kings and princes, religious order—priests and prophets, and the remnant that returned—fathers and people (verse 32). There was a simple reason why they were in trouble. They had been unfaithful to God. The prayer acknowledges the multigenerational sins of the people and expresses hope that God would notice their confession and grant relief. Despite how bad Israel had been, God was much more “good” than they ever deserved (verse 32). While God had been faithful because of His covenant love, Israel had been downright wicked (verse 33). Repeating the three categories of verse 32, the Levites made it clear that every Israelite, regardless of position or social status, had been guilty of not keeping the Law and its requirements (verse 34). Even when God sent prophets to warn them, they refused to listen to God’s “testimonies” (verse 34). During the days of the united and divided kingdoms, Israel was unfaithful God. When God blessed with “good things” (verse 35, NKJV), Israel still remained unfaithful. Even when God led them in conquering the Promised Land—“a large and rich land” (verse 35) flowing with milk and honey—they refused to turn from their wicked ways.

B. Sure Covenant
(Nehemiah 9:36-38)

Behold, we are servants this day, and for the land that thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and
the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it: And it yieldeth much increase unto the kings whom thou hast set over us because of our sins: also they have dominion over our bodies, and over our cattle, at their pleasure, and we are in great distress. And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it.

While the previous parts of the prayer (verses 6-35) focused on Israel’s past, verses 36-38 presented the current state of Israel’s affairs, stating “today” (verse 36). They literally presented themselves prostrate before God. The Levites told God that after all of the past history, they were still there in 445 BC. Yes, they were back in the Promised Land. Yes, they had a Temple for worship. Yes, they had secular and religious leadership in place. However, things were nowhere near the same as they were even during the time of King Hezekiah (see 2 Kings 18–20). Why? Even though the remnant of exiles had returned to Jerusalem, they were still subject to the Persian king. In effect, they were slaves in their own land (verse 36). It was bad enough being slaves in Babylon. It was worse now to be a slave in their own land. Yet, they had no one to blame but themselves.

We can feel the sadness and regret of their prayer. The Israelites reminisced over how God had promised the land to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and then gave it to their descendants under Joshua’s leadership. After the initial conquest of the Promised Land, Israel fell into a cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and deliverance during the period of the judges. Israel did better during the reigns of Saul and David, but never really gave God their all after the early days of Solomon’s reign. Still, during their time in the land before the Exile they enjoyed the fruit of the land and the bounty of the livestock.

The Promised Land had been and continued to be a place of bountiful produce and crops. That was even more so since the land had been used lightly during the seventy years of the Exile. We also note that, while more than a million Jews entered the Promised Land under Joshua’s leadership, only about sixty thousand returned after the Exile. So there was much less strain on the land. As a result, they must have done well with their crops and livestock. Even still, the Israelites were not able to enjoy the fruit of their labor to the fullest. Why? They had to pay tribute to the Persian king. Based upon the language used, “much increase” (verse 37) would have led to a large tribute due to be paid. Even their service was part of their tribute, making them slightly above slave status. Used some thirteen times in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for “body” in verse 37 (gviyah) referred to our human condition at its weakest point, during oppression, or in trouble (see also Genesis 3:19, 47:18-19), or as a corpse. In verse 37, the former meaning is used. The Israelites did not blame God. It was their fault. God had simply used the Persians to punish them. That is why they said they were “in great distress” (verse 37, NKJV), which is similar in language to “trouble” in verse 32.

In verse 38, the Levites culminated their prayer with a promise to recommit the nation to God. Why? They did this in response to all
that they had prayed about in the previous verses. They were repenting for the past sins of their foreparents. They were thanking God for being faithful. Though they had to pay heavy tribute, they were still thankful to be back in their homeland. In a sense, their asking for a covenant was both old and new. It was old because God’s covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David were still in effect. It was new because the Israelites wanted to “wipe the slate clean” and start over on a righteous “foot” with the Lord. They refer to “covenant” twice in verse 38.

In essence, the use of this word signified that a binding agreement had been made. That is why the KJV, NKJV, and RV translated the phrase as “sure covenant” in verse 38. The covenant would be sealed by the leaders, Levites, and priests named in the next chapter verses.

C. Everybody Else
(Nehemiah 10:28)

And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the porters, the singers, the Nethinims, and all they that had separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, every one having knowledge, and having understanding.

In Nehemiah 10, we find recorded the names of the leaders, priests, Levites, Nethinim, and tribe or clan leaders who sealed (equivalent to signing) the new covenant (see verses 1-27). In the ancient Near East, people signing a document used something similar to wax imprinted with a particular pattern unique to that person. We notice that Ezra’s name is not included in the list in verses 2-8. This was a list of heads of the priestly households, and Ezra was not a head of a household. Likewise, some of the Levites listed in verses 9-13 were later listed as heads of the Levite orders (see Nehemiah 12:8). Finally, the secular leaders other than the top leadership signed the document (verses 14-27).

With the leaders’ sealed approval complete, it was time for “the rest of the people” (verse 28, NKJV) to affirm their commitment to the covenant. The range of people committed to the covenant is now expanded to include all groups in the community. The comprehensive nature of Nehemiah 10:28 depicts a community-wide agreement with no exceptions. Following the example of their leaders, the rank-and-file priests and Levites gave their sealed approval. The rest of those serving in Israel’s corporate religious life—singers and Nethinim (non-Levite Temple helpers)—also gave their approval. Even those securing the gates did so. In an unusual move, those sealing their approval included women—wives and daughters—children, and God-fearing non-Israelites. The message was clear: If anyone claimed to be an Israelite or desired to live among them, they had to formally consent to approving the covenant agreement. The only exceptions were those who did not have “knowledge and understanding, which may have included very young children and persons with mental challenges. It was truly a nationwide effort.

This post-exile covenant “signing” was in stark contrast to the last covenant event between God and Israel. It was near the base of Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19–20). There the people gave vocal approval that they would
obey. In Nehemiah 10, we read that nearly everyone was represented in giving their written approval (see Nehemiah 10:38). They did not want to leave anyone any wiggle room to say later that they did not approve of the covenant.

D. An Oath and a Curse
(Nehemiah 10:29)

They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God’s law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes.

Just as the Law was read in a public forum in Nehemiah 8, so was the covenant. At that time, there were very few written documents and most people could not read or write anyway. Those are the reasons why the Levites had to share Israel’s history in detail in their prayer (see Nehemiah 9:5-38). Also, that is why everyone gave their “seal” of approval. It was similar to how people use their thumbprints to “sign” a document today or unlock their smart device. The “everybody else” mentioned in verse 28 are called “these” in verse 29. So, everyone in the nation was formally on board. No one disapproved. They were serious! How serious were they? They were so serious until they added an oath and a curse to their signing of the covenant.

The MacArthur Study Bible NIV provides a concise description of the use of a curse and oath:

Covenants characteristically were ratified by an oath ceremony in which the parties swore to the terms of the covenant. A curse rite was often included wherein the slaughtering of an animal indicated similar consequences for the covenant breaker. Israel’s pledged adherence to the Law was thus solemnly affirmed.

They made an oath that they would follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all of God’s commands, regulations, and decrees. In ancient Near Eastern times, an oath was a sacred, unbreakable promise to do something. The “something” in this case was obeying the Mosaic Law. Recognizing that their fore parents technically complied with the tenets of the Mosaic Law most of the time, they included the Hebrew word yalak, which meant “to walk.” They were committing to backing their right talk with right actions. They had moved in their thinking about their relationship with God to what He had desired since Moses assembled the Israelites near the base of Mt. Sinai. He wanted them to obey because they loved Him. So, now the chesed covenant love flowed both ways.

A curse was different from an oath. While an oath focused on the positive side of doing a promise, a curse looked at the negative side of not fulfilling the
promise. In ancient Near Eastern culture, a curse was meant to call down evil on or cause bodily harm to someone. However, in the Old Testament it was used as a warning as to the consequences for not fulfilling a promise or vow. The first curse occurred in the Garden of Eden when God cursed the ground (see Genesis 3:17-19). In summation, the oath put forth a binding obligation on the person making the oath while the curse provided a penalty if the oath was broken.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

In his commentary on the book of Nehemiah, _Hard Work in Hard Times: Rebuilding God’s Work and God’s People_, Paul Apple offered the following comments on Israel’s prayer of confession in today’s lesson:

God has demonstrated His covenant loyalty and His faithfulness to His intrinsic nature of goodness down through history. That was the message of the first 31 verses of chapter 9. But God wants us to agree that He has acted fairly when it comes to our specific situation. The problem is that most people want to try to twist God’s promises to realize all of the benefits of God’s faithfulness and goodness without first embracing His justice.

Since we know that we cannot play God, we should take note of the post-exile Jews who gave both an oath and curse to obey God’s commands in their daily walk.

PRAYER

Merciful God, we come to offer our thanks to You for never leaving us or forsaking us. You had every right to, but Your grace and mercy intervened. For that, we praise Your holy name. You have been and will continue to be our very present help in the time of trouble. We find consolation in knowing that You will never forsake us. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(October 23-29, 2017)

God’s Covenant with the Returned Exiles

MONDAY, October 23: “Israel Gathers for National Confession” (Nehemiah 9:1-5a)
TUESDAY, October 24: “God, Creator and Covenant Maker” (Nehemiah 9:5b-8)
WEDNESDAY, October 25: “God Meets Rebellion with Steadfast Love” (Nehemiah 9:26-31)
THURSDAY, October 26: “Redeemer of Israel’s Iniquities” (Psalm 130)
FRIDAY, October 27: “Forgive Fellow Believers Repeatedly” (Luke 17:1-4)
SATURDAY, October 28: “God’s Kindness Leads to Repentance” (Romans 2:1-8)
November 5, 2017
Lesson 10

**FAITHFUL GOD, UNFAITHFUL PEOPLE**

**ADULT/YOUTH**
**ADULT TOPIC:** Unwavering Commitment

**YOUTH TOPIC:** Unwavering Commitment

**CHILDREN**
**GENERAL LESSON TITLE:** Be Faithful
**CHILDREN’S TOPIC:** Do What Is Right

**DEVOTIONAL READING**
Psalm 44:1-8, 13-19, 26

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**ADULT/YOUTH**
**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Numbers 25; 1 Samuel 2:27-36
**PRINT PASSAGE:** Numbers 25:10-13; 1 Samuel 2:30-36
**KEY VERSE:** 1 Samuel 2:35

**CHILDREN**
**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Numbers 25; 1 Samuel 2:27-36
**PRINT PASSAGE:** 1 Samuel 2:30-36
**KEY VERSE:** 1 Samuel 2:30b

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**Numbers 25:10-13; 1 Samuel 2:30-36 —KJV**

10 And the **Lord** spake unto Moses, saying, 
11 Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, hath turned my wrath away from the children of Israel, while he was zealous for my sake among them, that I consumed not the children of Israel in my jealousy. 
12 Wherefore say, Behold, I give unto him my covenant of peace: 
13 And he shall have it, and his seed after him, even the covenant of an everlasting priesthood; because he was zealous for his God, and made an atonement for the children of Israel. 

30 Wherefore the **Lord** God of Israel saith, I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the **Lord**

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**Numbers 25:10-13; 1 Samuel 2:30-36 —NIV**

10 The **Lord** said to Moses, 
11 “Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from among the Israelites. Since he was as zealous for my honor among them as I am, I did not put an end to them in my zeal. 
12 “Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him. 
13 “He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.” 

30 “Therefore the **Lord**, the God of Israel, declares: ‘I promised that members of your family would minister before me forever.’ But now the **Lord** declares: ‘Far be it from me! Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained.”
saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.

31 Behold, the days come, that I will cut off thine arm, and the arm of thy father’s house, that there shall not be an old man in thine house.

32 And thou shalt see an enemy in my habitation, in all the wealth which God shall give Israel: and there shall not be an old man in thine house for ever.

33 And the man of thine, whom I shall not cut off from mine altar, shall be to consume thine eyes, and to grieve thine heart: and all the increase of thine house shall die in the flower of their age.

34 And this shall be a sign unto thee, that shall come upon thy two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas; in one day they shall die both of them.

35 And I will raise me up a faithful priest, that shall do according to that which is in mine heart and in my mind: and I will build him a sure house; and he shall walk before mine anointed for ever.

36 And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left in thine house shall come and crouch to him for a piece of silver and a morsel of bread, and shall say, Put me, I pray thee, into one of the priests’ offices, that I may eat a piece of bread.

31 “The time is coming when I will cut short your strength and the strength of your priestly house, so that no one in it will reach old age,

32 “and you will see distress in my dwelling. Although good will be done to Israel, no one in your family line will ever reach old age.

33 “Every one of you that I do not cut off from serving at my altar I will spare only to destroy your sight and sap your strength, and all your descendants will die in the prime of life.

34 “And what happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you—they will both die on the same day.

35 “I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his priestly house, and they will minister before my anointed one always.

36 “Then everyone left in your family line will come and bow down before him for a piece of silver and a loaf of bread and plead, “Appoint me to some priestly office so I can have food to eat.””

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Some people are more faithful to their commitments than others. How do we respond to those who are faithful to their commitments and to those who are not? God rewarded faithful Phinehas and punished Eli’s unfaithful children, thus proving that God is faithful to the everlasting covenant with God’s people.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Contrast God’s responses to the priestly ministries of Phinehas in Numbers 25 with Hophni and Phinehas (Eli’s sons) in 1 Samuel 2.

2. Reflect on the consequences of infidelity to God.

3. Serve others faithfully as ones called by God to lives of service.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—First Samuel 2:32 is a prediction of the decimation of Eli’s priestly family in the death of his sons, the massacre of his descendants, and the removal of Abiathar as priest (see 1 Kings 2:26-27).

—First Samuel 2:32 refers to the capture of the Ark by the Philistines (4:1-11), the destruction
of Shiloh (Jeremiah 7:14), and the relocation of the tabernacle to Nob (1 Samuel 21:1-6)
—The overt misbehavior of Hophni and Phinehas, Eli’s sons, involved greed, gluttony, and fornication (see 1 Samuel 2:12-22). Their primary offense was treating the things of the Lord “with contempt” (1 Samuel 2:17).
—First Samuel 2:33 is a reference to Abiathar, who was expelled from office by Solomon (see 1 Kings 2:26-27).
—The fates of Hophni and Phinehas (1 Samuel 2:34) did not nullify the trustworthiness of God’s promise (verse 30). The condemnation and ultimate demise of Eli’s sons (4:10-11) did, however, underscore that God’s promises are conditional. The promises depend on the continuing faithfulness of those in a position to receive them.
—Much of the Old Testament presents the corruption of Israel’s faith through intermarriage with pagan people as a recurring danger.
—The unfaithfulness of Hophni and Phinehas had repercussions that reached beyond their own lives and times (verse 31).

Teachers of CHILDREN
—Eli, the priest, ministered in Shiloh.
—Hophni and Phinehas, Eli’s sons, defamed the office of priest through theft, extortion, and sexual misconduct.
—While Eli was aware of his sons’ behavior and scolded them, he failed to stop them.
—The deaths of Hophni and Phinehas and the plight of Eli’s generations were prophesied to Eli.
—Eli’s descendants would no longer serve as priests and would not be favored by God.
—God’s declaration that a priest would be raised to minister successfully was a prophecy related to the coming Messiah.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
The events in Numbers 25 took place around 1407 BC, shortly before the children of Israel crossed the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land during the late Bronze Age (1550–200 BC).
The events in 1 Samuel 2 took place around 1100 BC. It was sometime after Hannah’s song of thanksgiving for her son Samuel during the late Iron Age (1200–539 BC), which the Philistines helped usher in.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
The events in Numbers 25 took place in Shittim or Acacia Grove, an ancient Moabite city east of the Jordan River. It was about seven and a half miles northeast of the north shore of the Dead Sea in the present-day country of Jordan.
The events in 1 Samuel took place in and around Shiloh. Located north of Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, it was the religious center of Israel until the time of David. The tabernacle containing the ark of the covenant was located there for nearly 370 years.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON
Phinehas: priest, grandson of Aaron, whose zeal for God ended God’s wrath against Israel for sinning with the Moabite women.
Hophni and Phinehas: sons of Eli who served as officiating priests at Shiloh whose extreme wickedness included sexual sins and misuse of tabernacle resources.
Eleazar: oldest son of Aaron who served as high priest after his father’s death.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Atonement (Numbers 25:13)—Hebrew: kaphar (kaw-far’): to cover, purge, make an atonement, make reconciliation, cover over with pitch.

Honor (1 Samuel 2:30)—Hebrew: kabad (kaw-bad’): to be heavy, to glorify; to be honorable, be glorious, be burdensome; honour’ (KJV).

Peace (Numbers 25:12)—Hebrew: shalowm (shaw-lome’): completeness, soundness, welfare, peace.


Zealous (Numbers 25:11)—Hebrew: qinah (kin-aw’): ardor; zeal, jealousy; to envy, be jealous, be envious, be zealous.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Lessons from Balaam

In his book Holman Old Testament Commentary: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Glen Martin offered his take on Balaam’s attempt to deceive Israel:

It used to be that if one wanted his dog to run free in his yard, he had to fence in his property. Now, however, one can do the same with an invisible fence, which is a wire buried just beneath the top soil around the edge of one’s property. The dog wears a special electronic collar, so when it approaches the wire, it is stopped by an electrical jolt. God has given each of us an invisible fence. We are privileged to experience an inner voice called the conscience that warns us when we are approaching forbidden territory. To cross these boundaries will cause heartache and grief, so God gives us ample warnings. But like Balaam, we can become so numb to God’s voice that we tune out his warnings and his guidance. We may even get to the point where we no longer feel the occasional, loving jolt of his discipline.

We may also apply this invisible-fence concept to Israel. They knew the boundaries of what was acceptable and unacceptable behavior in God’s sight. As they approached the
Promised Land, it was as if some of the Israelites decided to take off their spiritual “collars” and throw caution to the wind. They paid dearly—with their lives. But the good news is that amidst such a period of gross disobedience, there was one with an unwavering commitment to be faithful while everyone else was unfaithful. He was Phinehas.

B. Biblical Background

Mosaic Covenant: As the foundation for God’s “covenant of peace” (see Numbers 25:12) with Phinehas, the Mosaic covenant (see Deuteronomy 11, and others) is the covenant of interest in today’s lesson. Specifically, we address the sections on the establishment of the Aaronic priesthood.

Phinehas: Becoming the third high priest upon the death of his father, Eleazar, Phinehas served for nineteen years.

Balaam: King Balak, king of Moab, hired him to curse Israel (see Numbers 22–24). Balaam is identified in Joshua 13:22 as one who practiced divination. He was not a prophet in the biblical sense, as he combined a worship of Jehovah with practices of occult powers (which are condemned by God in Deuteronomy 18:10-13).

Eleazar and Ithamar: Allen Brummel, in his sermon “Eli’s House Is Cut Off,” provided the following synopsis of the lineages of Aaron’s sons Eleazar and Ithamar (prca.org/sermons/1samuel2.27-36.html):

Eli was of the priestly house of Aaron (1 Samuel 2:27, 28). According to 1 Chronicles 24:1 Aaron had four sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. Nadab and Abihu were killed by the Lord for their offering of strange fire on God’s altar. Numbers 3:4 and Leviticus 10 record this incident which occurred in the wilderness of Sinai. Nadab and Abihu were cut off to such a degree that they had no offspring that survived. The line of the priesthood of Aaron was continued through his other two sons, Eleazar and Ithamar. After the death of Aaron the high priestly office was filled by Eleazar, but later was transferred, for a reason not revealed, to the house of Ithamar. Eli was a descendant of Ithamar. First Chronicles 24:4 records that there were sixteen sons of Eleazar and eight sons of Ithamar. The line of Eleazar continued through Zadok, the faithful priest, unbroken till the birth of Jesus Christ.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Zealous!

(Numbers 25:10-11)

And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, hath turned my wrath away from the children of Israel, while he was zealous for my sake among them, that I consumed not the children of Israel in my jealousy.

Moses was away at Shittim (KJV, NIV) or Acacia Grove (NKJV), the place where Israel was staging to prepare to enter the Promised Land (see verse 1). Although many saw how the Israelite men were heavily involved in sexually charged pagan worship practices with the women of Moab, no one acted. They knew...
what was going on was wrong. Then, boldly, Phinehas went forth to strike a blow against Baal. His actions kept God from destroying Israel.

In response to their sin, God commanded Moses to kill all the leaders who had engaged in this abomination against Him (see verse 4). So Moses gave the command to kill them (see verse 5). It would be a public execution to serve as a warning to the rest of the Israelites. As if to mock Moses, one bold Israeli man Zimri took a Midianite woman named Cozbi (see verses 1-9, 14-15) to his tent in the sight of Moses. To be clear, this was a woman from Midian, not Moab. Midian was several hundred miles south of Moab. It is possible that the woman lived among the Moabites. But it is also true that Baal worship was prevalent throughout the region. So whether or not she lived in Moab, Zimri’s sin followed the pattern set forth with the women of Moab. Zimri was bold. He acted in front of his fellow Israelites. Not only that, but he also was the clan leader in the tribe of Simeon. If other leaders saw him sin without punishment, they may have been spurred to do the same. This made his sin an open attack on God’s authority over Israel. If his sin went unchecked, it would have severely compromised Moses’ authority.

Involvement with Moabite women and the resulting idolatry connected with Moabite gods had sparked a God-initiated plague that killed 24,000 Israelites. In response, it appeared that all the other men, including the priests and Levites, were frozen in time. We do not know whether they were afraid that the offending man would attack them or were just so afraid at God’s command to kill the offending men until they were too scared to act. Then, as if on cue, Phinehas the priest, son of Eleazar, who was son of Aaron, took bold action (see verse 7). He took a javelin and drove it through both Zimri and Cozbi, killing them both. In turn, God ended the plague in response to Phinehas’s zeal.

What drove Phinehas to such bold action? God said that “he was zealous with my zeal” (verse 11). The Hebrew word qana’ is translated “zealous” in the NKJV and NIV and “jealous” in the KJV and NASB. A verb qana’ depicts Phinehas’s decisive action to stand for God. In complement, Qin’ah is a noun that captures the state or level of Phinehas’s passion for God and His righteousness. Collectively, “zeal” and “zealous” take on the meaning of being intensely passionate about preserving or protecting the Mosaic covenant and, more importantly, God’s holy name. Yes, Phinehas was obedient to God’s command. But he also was very passionate about his love for God. Unlike his fellow Israelites of the first century, he did have a zeal of God according to knowledge (see Romans 10:2). Because of his zealousness, many more thousands of Israelites were spared from the plague.

B. Covenant of Peace
(Numbers 25:12-13)

Wherefore say, Behold, I give unto him my covenant of peace: And he shall have it, and his seed after him, even the covenant of an everlasting priesthood; because he was zealous for his God, and made an atonement for the children of Israel.

After recapping and praising Phinehas for his actions, God readied to pronounce a special blessing on Phinehas and his descendants. The use of the Hebrew word hinneh, translated “behold” (NKJV), is an indication for the listener/
reader to pay special attention to what is about to be said. Because of his devotion to Him amidst Israel’s harlotry in Moab, God blessed Phinehas with a “covenant of peace” (verse 12). The Hebrew word translated “peace” is shalom.

We note the special nature of God’s covenant with the house of Phinehas. First, it is based upon the Mosaic Covenant. In that covenant, God outlined the Aaronic priesthood. Second, it is not a covenant of “absence of conflict,” as we may so easily translate the Hebrew word shalom. It is much more than that.

So God’s calling His covenant with Phinehas a covenant of peace reflected the special relationship God proposed for Phinehas and his lineage. It also reflected Phinehas’s role in returning shalom between God and Israel after their gross sin episode. Although God gave the priesthood to Aaron’s descendants, God’s covenant of peace only applied to Phinehas’s descendants. God’s promise would go beyond Phinehas to include his descendants. After becoming high priest upon the death of his father, Phinehas and his descendants continued as high priests except for an unexplained break from the time of Eli until King Solomon removed Abiathar (see 1 Kings 2:27), who were all descendants of Aaron’s youngest son Ithamar.

Again, God shared why He was blessing Phinehas. He was zealous in standing up for God. In turn, God received Phinehas’s zeal as atonement for Israel’s sin. The Hebrew word translated “atonement” in verse 13, kaphar, means “to cover” in a way that a thing (in this case, sin) is blotted out. Instead of seeing Israel’s sin, God saw Phinehas’s zealous act.

### C. Unfaithfulness Punished

(1 Samuel 2:30-34)

Wherefore the Lord God of Israel saith, I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the Lord saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days come, that I will cut off thine arm, and the arm of thy father’s house, that there shall not be an old man in thine house. And thou shalt see an enemy in my habitation, in all the wealth which God shall give Israel: and there shall not be an old man in thine house for ever. And the man of thine, whom I shall not cut off from mine altar, shall be to consume thine eyes, and to grieve thine heart: and all the increase of thine house shall die in the flower of their age. And this shall be a sign unto thee, that shall come upon thy two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas; in one day they shall die both of them.

From our previous outlines based on Numbers 25, we know that God made a covenant with Phinehas for a perpetual priesthood. However, at some point the priesthood leadership was transferred from the house of Eleazar to Ithamar. Eli was descended from Ithamar (see 1 Chronicles 24:1-6). The overt misbehavior of Eli’s sons Hophni and Phinehas included greed, gluttony, and fornication (see verses 12-22). Their primary offense was treating the things of the Lord “with contempt” (verse 17). It was no secret that Eli had some wicked sons (see 1 Samuel 2:12-17). What made it even worse was that they were serving as the operating priests for the tabernacle at Shiloh. In 2 Samuel 2:22-36, we read about God’s condemnation and prophecy of punishment for Eli’s sons and the house of Eli. Ironically, God sent a “man of God,” an unnamed prophet, to share His words of condemnation (see verse 27).
Through the prophet, God reminded Eli how He had called the house of Aaron to serve as Israel’s priests (see verses 27-28). Rhetorically, God asked Eli why he allowed his sons to defame the tabernacle and thus God’s name. More than that, God chastised Eli for standing up for his sons and not God. We should note that other priests of the house of Ithamar served with Eli and his sons. It is reasonable to assume that they knew of the wickedness of Eli’s sons, too. “I said” (verse 30) referred to God’s promise to the line of Aaron (see Exodus 29:9).

The unfaithfulness of Hophni and Phinehas had repercussions that reached beyond their own lives and times (verse 31). God’s punishment on Eli’s priestly lineage was two-fold. First, He punished Eli’s descendants, ultimately eliminating their lineage as priests. Second, He would do the same for the whole house of Ithamar. Because of their sins, no one in the house of Eli would live a long life. They all died in the prime of life (verse 32; see also 1 Samuel 4:11). The purge of the house of Eli continued until Solomon removed Abiathar as priest (see 1 Kings 2:26-27), allowing the line of Eleazar to serve which fulfilled God’s promise (see Numbers 25:10-13).

“Enemy in My dwelling place” referred to how the Philistines captured the tabernacle at Shiloh (see 1 Samuel 4:1-11; Jeremiah 7:12-14). In total, in 1 Samuel 2:32 we find two sets of predictions against the house of Eli. First, there was the prediction of the decimation of Eli’s priestly family in the death of his sons, the massacre of his descendants, and the removal of Abiathar as priest (see 1 Kings 2:26-27). Second, there was the prediction of the capture of the Ark by the Philistines (see 4:1-11), the destruction of Shiloh (see Jeremiah 7:14), and the relocation of the tabernacle to Nob (see 1 Samuel 21:1-6).

In verse 33, God reiterated what He had told Eli in verses 31-32. God’s repetition of the punishment underscored its severity and assurance that it would occur. Eli would indeed grieve during his lifetime when he received the news that the Philistines had killed his sons. He was so distraught until he fell over backwards and broke his neck and died (see 1 Samuel 4:18). Again, God told Eli that none of his house would reach old age (verse 33). Although some of the terms of God’s punishment would come later, the death of his sons Hophni and Phinehas would be a more immediate confirmation (verse 34) to Eli. The fates of Hophni and Phinehas (verse 34) did not nullify the trustworthiness of God’s overall promise to Aaron (verse 30). The condemnation and ultimate demise of Eli’s sons does, however, underscore that some of God’s promises are conditional. The promises depend on the continuing faithfulness of those in a position to receive them.

D. A Faithful Priest
(1 Samuel 2:35-36)

And I will raise me up a faithful priest, that shall do according to that which is in mine heart and in my mind: and I will build him a sure house; and he shall walk before mine anointed for ever. And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left in thine house shall come and crouch to him for a piece of silver and a morsel of bread, and shall say, Put me, I pray thee, into one of the priests’ offices, that I may eat a piece of bread.

After sharing words of doom and gloom, God ends His prophecy to Eli on a positive note—for Israel as a whole, not Eli’s house. God was going to “raise up . . . a faithful priest” (verse 35) in contrast to the unfaithfulness of
Eli and his sons. The Hebrew word translated “faithful” is ‘aman, which shares the same root word as “amen.” So, the coming of this priest was a complete certainty. This “faithful priest” would be completely different from Eli and his sons. How? He would be faithful to God’s will, “My heart and in My mind” (verse 35, NKJV).

A “sure house” refers to God’s promise of an extended lineage of priests. It also reminds us of post-exile Israel’s “sure covenant” promise in Nehemiah 9:38. They would also serve “forever” (verse 35), and during the Millennial Kingdom (see Ezekiel 44:15; 48:11). “My anointed” (NIV) is no doubt a reference to the coming Messiah (verse 35). The Hebrew word translated “anointed” in verses 10 and 35 is mashiyach, which means “a consecrated person, specifically, the Messiah.” It is God’s Anointed.

Still, some Bible scholars offer different views on who this priest was. Some look to the immediate future and see the prophecy pointing toward Samuel. Indeed, he was both a faithful priest and judge. He showed his faithfulness to both Saul and David. He was a welcomed change from Eli’s sons. However, his sons followed the example of Eli’s sons (see 1 Samuel 8:2). Samuel was a descendant of Levi’s son Kohath, so he was a Levite. However, after Eli and his sons died, Phinehas’s son Ahitub (Eli’s grandson) served as high priest followed by his son Ahijah. Ahijah’s son Ahimelech served, followed by the last of the line of Eli, Abiathar.

Finally, some Bible scholars look even further into the future from Eli’s promise from God. They believe that the “faithful priest” is a reference to God’s Son, Jesus. After all, the writer of the book of Hebrews called Jesus our Great High Priest (see Hebrews 4:14). However, Jesus’ maternal and earthly paternal lineages sprout from Judah. So He would not have been of the household of Phinehas. Also, God said that this “faithful priest” would “walk before” Jesus’ coming. If this reference is to Jesus’ first coming, then this “faithful priest” could refer to the house of Phinehas. If it is to His second coming, the same holds true except that Jesus’ work of atonement on the Cross superseded the role of the high priests in the lineage of Phinehas. Still, one can make the argument that Jesus is the spiritual fulfillment of Phinehas’s example of atonement. In either of these three cases, God’s prophecy to Eli looked to a priest who would serve Him faithfully.

The future would be dismal for the house of Eli (verse 36). They would be impoverished, literally begging for bread. Whereas they once engorged themselves on the Temple sacrifices, they would end up begging for food (see verses 12-17). What made that so ironic is that as the “man of God” was speaking to Eli, Eli and his sons were living “high on the hog.” From a worldly perspective, they had everything they wanted and then some. But who is the “him” in verse 36? Some Bible scholars look to the end of the preceding verse and believe it is referring to Jesus. Others, however, believe it referred to Zadok. Since the house of Eli disappears after Solomon dismisses Abiathar, it is most likely a reference to Zadok. That reasoning follows from the closing words of verse 36 in which those of the house of Eli would beg to do priestly work in exchange for just a morsel
of bread. They would be desperate to provide for themselves.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

In his online blog, Jim Lafoon offered fitting concluding thoughts about the life of Phinehas (jimlaffoon.wordpress.com/category/lessons-from-the-life-of-phinehas/):

Hadn’t this new generation learned anything from the failure of their parents to enter the Promised Land? As he continued to lead the people in weeping and repentance in front of the tent of meeting, what he saw next stunned him. In broad daylight, in front of the whole nation, a Hebrew leader brazenly took a Midianite woman into his tent and began to commit an act of immorality with her. As the nation looked on in stunned silence, the plague began to grow in intensity.

Before Moses could even respond to this man’s audacity, a young man named Phinehas was on his feet, sprinting toward the transgressor’s tent. Burning with the fear of the Lord and a passion for the purity of his generation, he slew the offending couple while they were in the very act of immorality. His bold response to this couple’s wicked sin and rebellion stopped the plague and spared the whole nation from destruction.

May God give us the Phinehases we need in this critical hour.

PRAYER

Lord God, we know we are not perfect. However, we ask You to help us live lives whereby we sin by accident and not by appointment. Would You give us, Lord, a discerning spirit so that we can be on the lookout for modern-day Balaams in our lives? We thank You in advance for Your providential care. In Your Son’s name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(October 30–November 5, 2017)

Faithful God, Unfaithful People
MONDAY, October 30: “God Is Always Faithful” (Psalm 44:1-8)
TUESDAY, October 31: “Performing a Good Service to Jesus” (Matthew 26:6-13)
WEDNESDAY, November 1: “Serve the Lord and One Another” (Romans 12:9-18)
THURSDAY, November 2: “Called to Mission Service” (Philemon 8-16)
SATURDAY, November 4: “Treating Offerings with Contempt” (1 Samuel 2:12-17)
SUNDAY, November 5: “Covenant of a Perpetual Priesthood” (Numbers 25:10-13; 1 Samuel 2:30-36)
PROMISE OF A NEW COVENANT

**ADULT/YOUTH**
**ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC:** Written on the Heart
**YOUTH TOPIC:** Promise of a New Day

**CHILDREN**
**GENERAL LESSON TITLE:** God’s Great Promise
**CHILDREN’S TOPIC:** Promise of a New Day

**DEVOTIONAL READING**
Psalm 87

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**ADULT/YOUTH**
**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Jeremiah 31
**PRINT PASSAGE:** Jeremiah 31:27-34
**KEY VERSE:** Jeremiah 31:33

**CHILDREN**
**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Jeremiah 31
**PRINT PASSAGE:** Jeremiah 31:27-34
**KEY VERSE:** Jeremiah 31:33b

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**Jeremiah 31:27-34—KJV**

27 Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man, and with the seed of beast.
28 And it shall come to pass, that like as I have watched over them, to pluck up, and to break down, and to throw down, and to destroy, and to afflict; so will I watch over them, to build, and to plant, saith the LORD.
29 In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.
30 But every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge.
31 Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah:
32 Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand

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**Jeremiah 31:27-34—NIV**

27 “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will plant the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with the offspring of people and of animals.
28 “Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,” declares the LORD.
29 “In those days people will no longer say, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’
30 “Instead, everyone will die for their own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge.
31 “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.
32 “It will not be like the covenant I made with their
to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD:
33 But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.
34 And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

The Lord said God would make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah.
—God loved the people unconditionally, even when they broke the covenant.
—The promise Jeremiah described was not tied to a mere restoration of adherence to the external Law, but, rather, was connected to a sweeping transformation of the hearts of Israel and her people.
—The passage points to the conclusion of a period of God’s judgment and resulting hardship and

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Try as we might, as humans we often fail in our relationships. How can we restore broken relationships with others? Jeremiah foresaw a time when God would make a new covenant, writing God’s law on human hearts with the vow to be Israel’s God and to make Israel His people.

LESSON OBJECTIVES
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Examine Jeremiah’s message about the new covenant God will write on Israel’s heart.
2. Appreciate how the new covenant makes a difference in their relationship with God.
3. Respond to God’s new covenant by living in accordance with the law written on their hearts.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED
Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—Jeremiah confirmed that God was both in the circumstances that had brought exile and suffering to Israel and in those circumstances that would result in its transformation.
—Jeremiah 31:29 used a popular proverb that originated in a misunderstanding of passages like Exodus 20:5 to communicate that children would no longer suffer because of the sins of their ancestors.
—Jeremiah 31:30 emphasized individual responsibility as both preparation and explanation for the imminent destruction of Jerusalem, which the people may have been tempted to blame on the sins of their forefathers.
—The Lord said God would make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah.
—God loved the people unconditionally, even when they broke the covenant.
—The promise Jeremiah described was not tied to a mere restoration of adherence to the external Law, but, rather, was connected to a sweeping transformation of the hearts of Israel and her people.
—The passage points to the conclusion of a period of God’s judgment and resulting hardship and
to a coming time of God-initiated renewal and blessing for the people of Israel.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**
—Jeremiah was a prophet to Judah during the period of exile.
—Jeremiah’s prophecy included both the number of years of Judah’s captivity and the assurance of their restoration.
—Jeremiah’s message included God’s judgment, justice, and promises.

**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The events of today’s lesson took place around 590 or 586 BC. If it were 590 BC, it would have taken place during the reign of King Zedekiah (597–586 BC). If it were 586, it was the same year that Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. This was about 134 years after Israel fell to Assyrians.

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The events of today’s lesson took place in “greater” Jerusalem near Ramah about ten miles north of Jerusalem. Judah experienced a series of weak, or puppet, kings after the death of the good king Josiah in 609 BC. In a pluralistic society, Judah worshipped both God and idol gods. Jerusalem was a shell of itself. The whole area had experienced attacks from the Babylonians. Still, the prevailing feeling across the nation was that God would deliver Judah just as He had done previously, especially during the period of the judges. This thinking continued as more and more exiles were taken to Babylon from Jerusalem including Daniel and his three companions in 606 BC, and Ezekiel and other Jewish leaders in 597 BC.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**LORD:** Yahweh is God’s personal or proper name; the Jews considered it so sacred that they did not voice it aloud.

**Judah:** refers to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin that remained with the Davidic dynasty and were most of the remnant that returned from Babylonian exile.

**Israel:** refers to the other ten tribes (excluding Judah and Benjamin) who, after splitting from the united kingdom at the death of Solomon, established their own form of religion that kept worshipping idol gods until they were conquered by the Assyrian army.

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

**Build (verse 28)**—Hebrew: *banah* (baw-naw’): to build, rebuild, establish, cause to continue.

**Covenant (verse 31)**—Hebrew: *berith* (ber-eeth’): covenant, alliance, pledge.

**Hand (verse 32)**—Hebrew: *yad* (yawd): hand, strength, power.
I. INTRODUCTION
A. Overvalued Heart

In today’s lesson, we see how God moved from a covenant written on stone tablets to one written in our hearts. Yet, not every heart will be receptive to God’s new covenant. Why is that? Well, one reason is that some people overvalue their hearts. Here is a story that has appeared many times online that gives us an example of a case of an overvalued heart:

One day in a heavily crowded place, a young man began shouting. “People, look at me. I have the most beautiful heart in the world.” Many people looked at him and were stunned to see his beautiful heart in a perfect shape, without any flaw. It looked quite amazing. Most of the people who saw his heart were mesmerized by the beauty of his heart, and praised him.

However, there came an old man who challenged the young man, “No my son, I have got the most beautiful heart in the world!” The young man asked him, “Show me your heart, then!” The old man showed his heart to him. It was very rough, uneven, and had scars all over. In addition, the heart was not in shape; it had bits and pieces joined in various colors. There were some rough edges; some parts were removed, and fitted with other pieces. The young man started laughing, and said, “My dear old man, are you mad? See, my heart! How beautiful and flawless it is. You cannot find even a bit of imperfection in my heart. See, yours? It is full of scars, wounds, and blemishes. How can you say your heart is beautiful?”

“Dear boy, my heart is just as beautiful as your heart is. Did you see the scars? Each scar represents the love I shared with a person. I share a piece of my heart with..."
others when I share love, and in return I get a piece of heart, which I fix at the place from where I have torn a piece!” said the old man. The young man was shocked. The old man continued, “Since the pieces of heart I shared were neither equal nor in the same shape or size, my heart is full of uneven edges and bits and pieces. My heart is not in shape because sometimes I do not get love in return from those to whom I gave it. Your heart that looks fresh and full with no scars indicates that you never shared love with anybody. Isn’t that true?”

The young man stood still and did not speak a word. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He walked to the old man, tore a piece of his heart and gave the piece to the old man.

Just as God wants to write His covenant in our hearts, He also wants us to use our hearts to spread agape love abroad. In the process, we will gather some emotional scars, but we will grow spiritually.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Days Are Coming

(Jeremiah 31:27-28)

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man, and with the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass, that like as I have watched over them, to pluck up, and to break down, and to throw down, and to destroy,

and to afflict; so will I watch over them, to build, and to plant, saith the Lord.

Jeremiah 31 begins with a description of God’s unconditional love (see verses 1-6). Then Jeremiah reflects on the joy of the time to come (see verses 7-17). While verses 18-22 outline the conditions of Israel’s repentance, verses

B. Biblical Background

New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The NKJV Study Bible offers the following description of the New Covenant:

Jeremiah is the only Old Testament prophet who speaks of the New Covenant that Jesus inaugurated (Matthew 26:28). Some readers, desiring to celebrate what is “new” in the “New Covenant,” might be tempted to disparage the former covenant, the Mosaic covenant. But we should be careful to avoid any implication that there was something wrong in the covenant God had graciously bestowed on Israel. God had never designed the Law of Moses as a means to obtain salvation. Instead, forgiveness of sins has always been God’s gracious gift to those who have humbled themselves before Him in faith (Genesis 15:6; Micah 6:6-8; Romans 4:1-5:2; 7:13-25). The Law was God’s way of pointing out the pathway that believers should walk. Thus, the problem with the covenant at Mount Sinai was not in God’s provision, but in Israel’s response. The Israelites had continually broken the covenant.
23-30 foretell the future prosperity of Judah. Finally, verses 31-37 focus on God’s promise of a new covenant.

In the future, not only was God going to restore Judah and Israel into a united kingdom, but He also was going to greatly multiply (“sow . . . seed,” verse 27) their children and livestock. In ancient Near Eastern culture, the abundance of children and livestock were seen as signs of wealth and divine favor. That is important to note because only about sixty thousand people returned after the Exile, a stark reduction from the number of people who went into exile. God’s words in verse 27 reflected how the land had been depopulated, first by the Assyrian conquest of Israel and now by the Babylonian conquest of Judah. However, God would reverse this fact (see Ezekiel 36:9-11; Hosea 2:23).

Verse 28 refers to Jeremiah 1:10. In both instances, God was referring to what He had had to do to Israel and Judah. The words “pluck,” break down,” “throw down,” “destroy,” and “afflict” describe to what extent God had to uproot Israel and Judah to punish them for their many sins. He had used the Assyrians to punish the Northern Kingdom of Israel while He used the Babylonians to do the same for the Southern Kingdom of Judah. In turn, God used the Medo-Persians to punish the Babylonians, the Greeks for the Medo-Persians, and so on. After all this time of upheaval, God was going to “build” and “plant.”

We notice that God used five words to describe the punishment of His chosen people and their conquerors but only two for restoration. Tying God’s words “I will watch over them” here in verse 28 with “the Lord of hosts” in verse 23, we may infer that God was only referring to His chosen people in the restoration phase. “Build” referred to the physical reconstruction of the nation, while “plant” referred to the population and livestock in verse 27.

B. Sour Grapes

( jeremiah 31:29-30)

In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children’s teeth are set on edge. But every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge.

“In those days” refers to Israel’s future repentance and restoration (verse 29). Bible scholars look at this phrase with a near future and a distant future outlook. First, in the near future (seventy years or so), the people of Judah would return to their homeland. Their return would be proof positive that the proverb mentioned next is not true. Second, in the distant future the new covenant would usher in an era of one-on-one relationships with God which will make believers personally responsible for their actions before God (see Romans 11:26-27). Jeremiah next referred to a common proverb of that time.

People used the proverb to shirk their responsibility for their current situation. They had created their own narrative of “alternative facts.” They wanted to blame someone else, namely their parents and ancestors. This popular proverb of the time had originated in a misunderstanding of passages like Exodus 20:5 to communicate that children will no longer suffer because of the sins of their ancestors, “You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth
generation of those who hate me” (ESV). The “sour grapes” represent the evil that their parents did. The “teeth . . . set on edge” represents the consequences of the parents’ actions on the children. God was making it clear that the consequences of sin were solely those of the current generation of Jewish people.

Verse 30 emphasizes individual responsibility as both preparation and explanation for the imminent destruction of Jerusalem, which the people may have been tempted to blame on the sins of their forefathers. So Jeremiah confirmed that God was both in the circumstances that had brought exile and suffering to Israel, and in the circumstances that brought Israel’s transformation. W. A. Criswell, in his comments on Jeremiah 31, stated, “The Hebrews had accused God of injustice and cruelty in the punishment of children for the sins of their fathers. Actually, the children had surpassed their fathers in their wickedness. Under the New Covenant, there would be no misunderstanding because every individual must bear the responsibility for his own sins (Jeremiah 17:10; Deuteronomy 24:16; Ezekiel 18:2, 20).”

C. The New Covenant

(Deuteronomy 24:16; Ezekiel 18:2, 20)

Verse 30 emphasizes individual responsibility as both preparation and explanation for the imminent destruction of Jerusalem, which the people may have been tempted to blame on the sins of their forefathers. So Jeremiah confirmed that God was both in the circumstances that had brought exile and suffering to Israel, and in the circumstances that brought Israel’s transformation. W. A. Criswell, in his comments on Jeremiah 31, stated, “The Hebrews had accused God of injustice and cruelty in the punishment of children for the sins of their fathers. Actually, the children had surpassed their fathers in their wickedness. Under the New Covenant, there would be no misunderstanding because every individual must bear the responsibility for his own sins (Jeremiah 17:10; Deuteronomy 24:16; Ezekiel 18:2, 20).”

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD.

Verse 31 begins the same way verse 27 did, so we expect a pronouncement of some future event. In this instance, it is the coming new covenant. God would be establishing a new covenant with a united Israel, both the former Southern Kingdom of Israel and the Northern Kingdom of Judah. This is the only occurrence of the phrase “new covenant” (verse 31) in the Hebrew Scriptures. The theme is explored in Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; and Hebrews 8:8-12. Additionally, Jeremiah’s words of hope were in great contrast to the rest of his prophecy. We note that God initiated the covenant—“I will make a new covenant” (verse 31, NKJV). Verse 31 uses the Hebrew word karath translated “make,” which means “to cut (off, down or asunder); by implication, to destroy or consume; specifically, to covenant.” So this word gives the meaning of a new beginning, starting over. In fact, God was. He had set forth a new paradigm that shifted the responsibility on the human side from collective to individual responsibility.

The new covenant would be radically different from God’s previous covenants. We should note that the starting point would be the Jewish people. However, God’s design was for everyone to become part of this covenant. For Jeremiah’s readers/listeners, this must have been a cause for hope and expectation. After all, the people of Judah were in Babylonian captivity or on their way. While Mount Sinai was the basis for the Abrahamic, Palestinian, Peace, and Davidic covenants, we can look to the New Testament to see Mount Zion associated with the new covenant. The new covenant would be the culmination of all of God’s previous covenants, going back to the Garden of Eden. The New Covenant was distinctive in three ways. First, it called for a united Israelite kingdom. That was special because after the
reign of Solomon, the kingdom split. Then after the Assyrians conquered Israel, the Jewish people were mostly those of the tribe of Judah with some from Benjamin, Levi, and a few of the other tribes. Second, it would be transformative. It would do what countless sin offerings could not do. It would provide atonement for sins. Finally, it foretold of the Messiah. This foretelling had inferences for Jesus’ first and second comings.

God’s new covenant would not be like the Mosaic covenant, “not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers” (verse 32, NKJV). In verse 32, Jeremiah also relayed God’s intense feelings about His relationship with Israel. God first presents Himself as having been a Father to Israel. He had literally taken “them by the hand” (verse 32, NIV) to lead them out of Egypt. If God had not intervened through the terrorizing plagues against the Egyptians and continually gently prodded His chosen people to leave, the Jewish people would have stayed in Egypt. Certainly, those parents reading this lesson appreciate God’s disappointment at Israel. God had done everything He promised to do for Israel. All they had to do was obey His commands. Instead, Israel was most disobedient.

The Lord says God will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. While the old covenant was based upon the Jewish people’s faithfulness to God, the New Covenant offered the reverse. It was built upon God’s faithfulness to them. That meant the New Covenant would never be broken and would also be expanded to the Gentiles through the redemptive work of Christ on the Cross. God loves us unconditionally even when we disobey Him. As the saying goes, “God loves the sinner but hates the sin.” Jeremiah confirmed that God was both in the circumstances that had brought exile and suffering to Israel (verse 32) and in those circumstances that brought its transformation.

Throughout the Old Testament, we see God’s relationship to His chosen people as that of father to child (see Jeremiah 3; Hosea 11:1). However, in verse 32, God described His relationship with the Jewish people as that of a marriage. Following that metaphor, God had been faithful but Israel and Judah had been unfaithful (“whore after their gods,” Exodus 34:15, KJV). Not only was God’s relationship with Israel like that of a father, it was also like that of a husband. God had always been faithful. In contrast, Israel had continually been unfaithful by following after the idols of the surrounding peoples. They would have rather worship lifeless wooden and metal images rather than the true and living God.

D. Written on Our Hearts
(Jeremiah 31:33-34)

But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

It should not be lost on us how the Bible is divided into two parts: the Old Testament (or Covenant) and the New Testament (or Covenant). Why was there a need for a new covenant? The old covenant was a bilateral agreement. Both parties (God and Israel) had responsibilities to uphold. Due to faithfulness,
God upheld His part. Due to their unfaithfulness, Israel did not. In Near Eastern culture, a covenant (Hebrew: *berith*) was the most solemn, binding agreement that two parties could enter. The common practice for ratifying such a covenant was both parties passing between the remains of sacrificed animals, signifying symbolically what would happen if either party broke the covenant. Still, the old covenant could only identify sins but did not offer a remedy. Notice God’s words in verse 33. He would make the covenant with Israel. The New Covenant would be a unilateral agreement literally between God and Himself. In this way, the covenant would be everlasting. At the heart of the New Covenant is a relational knowledge of God and a unilateral, unconditional divine forgiveness.

The promise Jeremiah described is not tied to a mere restoration of adherence to the external Law but, rather, is connected to a sweeping transformation of the hearts of Israel and her people. The passage places greater emphasis on the willingness to obey God’s Law (thus the metaphor of the law written on the heart) than on knowledge of a written law capable of being read and memorized. In the New Covenant, God also gives us a new nature (see John 3:3; Hebrews 10:16-18).

Believers will not receive knowledge about the New Covenant secondhand. Rather, everyone would know God personally (verse 33). With the Law written on tablets, the priests had to read it to the people to remind them of what to obey (see Nehemiah 8). The people’s relationship with God was connected through bloodlines. If you were born an Israelite, you were considered part of God’s chosen people. This was not the case with the New Covenant. In this new relationship, obedience would not have to be coerced. No, believers would obey because they wanted to. The Law written on stony tablets would be replaced with the law written “on tablets of human hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:3, NIV).

The Israelites had relied on the priests and Levites for their knowledge of God’s Word. This made for a very impersonal relationship between God and the Israelites. The role of these religious leaders would evolve. Instead of being mediators between God and the Israelites, they would instead be exhorters and encouragers promoting the need for a personal relationship with God. Everyone in Israel would know God personally, from the least to the greatest (verse 34).

Now, Israel’s many sins could not be overlooked. So God provided a way out: “For I will forgive their wickedness” (verse 34, NIV). Unlike too many of us who tend to forgive but not forget, God “will remember their sins no more” (verse 34, NIV). Jesus’ redemptive work on Calvary fulfilled this promise of God: “For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28, NKJV).

How believable would God’s promise in Jeremiah 31 be during the Exile and in future days during dismal times? Just like God placed the rainbow as an eternal sign of His promise never to destroy the earth again by flood, God now made a promise to Israel that they would never disappear as a nation (verse 36). During the dark days of the Exile, during the dark days of oppression under the Roman Empire, Israel would need assurance of God’s
abiding presence. After the Exile, there were mere thousands of Israelites versus the millions before (see Ezra 1–3).

How sure is God’s promise that Israel would never cease to be a nation? God shares two assurances. Positively, God reminded those who would hear these words in the years to come about His work in creation. He had created the universe, the earth, and even day and night (verse 35). In all this time, God’s creation had not failed. So neither would His Word fail. Nature is so certain of God’s word until the waves of the sea roar “the Lord Almighty is his name” (verse 35, NIV). Negatively, the only way God’s promise would fail would be “if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out” (verse 37, NIV). We know they cannot. Since God’s work in creation is certain, so is His Word. This new covenant cannot, will not be broken.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

The centerpiece of the Old Testament is the Law of Moses. The first ten commands were written on two stone tablets. For God it was nothing, but for humankind it takes some effort to write on stone. However, it was more difficult for God to “write” the Law in the hearts of humankind. Just as Ezekiel said in Ezekiel 36:26, what humankind needed was a spiritual heart transplant. However, humankind could not perform its own spiritual heart surgery. Only God could do that.

Why the heart? The heart is the center of who we are. That is why the heart is the best place for God to write His New Covenant. Likewise, the New Covenant is the best message to write in our hearts. Also, the Law was given to a specific people, the Jews. The New Covenant would not have that limitation. It would be open to all on an individual basis.

Not only would God now write His covenant within individual hearts, He would also cleanse their hearts through the transformative power of the Holy Spirit.

PRAYER

Merciful God, we ask You to search our hearts. Where You find sin, we ask You to cleanse our hearts as only You can. We then ask You to continue molding and making us into what You want us to be. We praise Your name as did our foreparents who proclaimed You to be a “heart fixer” and a “mind regulator.” We pray this prayer in Your Son’s name. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(November 6-12, 2017)

Promise of a New Covenant
MONDAY, November 6: “God’s Love Brings the People Together” (Jeremiah 31:1-6)
TUESDAY, November 7: “People with Disabilities Welcome” (Jeremiah 31:7-9)
WEDNESDAY, November 8: “Israel Celebrates Their Homecoming” (Jeremiah 31:10-14)
THURSDAY, November 9: “Rachel’s Children Come Home” (Jeremiah 31:15-20)
FRIDAY, November 10: “Covenant Relationship Restored” (Hosea 2:16-20)
SATURDAY, November 11: “In Remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:14-20)
SUNDAY, November 12: “Accountability under the New Covenant” (Jeremiah 31:27-34)
MEDIATOR OF THE NEW COVENANT

**ADULT/YOUTH**

**ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC:** The Go-between  
**YOUTH TOPIC:** Warning!

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Hebrews 12:14-15, 18-29; Psalm 66  
**PRINT PASSAGE:** Hebrews 12:14-15, 18-29  
**KEY VERSES:** Hebrews 12:28-29

**CHILDREN**

**GENERAL LESSON TITLE:** Our Relationship with God  
**CHILDREN’S TOPIC:** Awesome!

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Hebrews 12:14-15, 18-29; Psalm 66  
**PRINT PASSAGE:** Psalm 66:1-9  
**KEY VERSE:** Psalm 66:5

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**HEBREWS 12:14-15, 18-29—KJV**

14 Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:
15 Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.

18 For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest,
19 And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more:
20 (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart:
21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:)

**HEBREWS 12:14-15, 18-29—NIV**

14 Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.
15 See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

18 You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm;
19 to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them,
20 because they could not bear what was commanded:
21 The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”
22 But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of
But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the
city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an
innumerable company of angels,
23 To the general assembly and church of the
firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God
the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made
perfect,
24 And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant,
and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better
things than that of Abel.
25 See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if
they escaped not who refused him that spake on
earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away
from him that speaketh from heaven:
26 Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he
hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the
earth only, but also heaven.
27 And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the
removing of those things that are shaken, as of things
that are made, that those things which cannot be
shaken may remain.
28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot
be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve
God acceptably with reverence and godly fear:
29 For our God is a consuming fire.

Humans desire to experience a power greater than
themselves, but do not always realize that drawing near to such needed power can be an awe-
some prospect. How can people approach such a power without being consumed? The psalmist
affirmed that God allows humans to approach the divine; the writer of the book of Hebrews
proclaimed that Jesus provides the means of boldly approaching the presence of God.

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Consider the meaning of the Bible’s teaching that God is “a consuming fire.”
2. Repent of their failure to acknowledge God’s holiness and their own lack thereof.
3. Celebrate Jesus as the Mediator who brings us safely into God’s holy presence.

The writer contrasted the physical manifestations of Sinai with the encounter with Christ, which
cannot be reduced to tangible categories.
—Christians are admonished to watch out for one
another to ensure that none fall short of the gift
of eternal salvation (verse 15).
The Mount Zion in Hebrews 12:22 is not the literal Mount Zion in Jerusalem but the heavenly city of God.

_Firstborn_ (verse 23) is plural in Greek and modified by “who are enrolled.” Jesus was previously called _the_ firstborn Son; here, His followers are also granted an inheritance as if they were firstborn sons.

Abel’s blood cried out for justice and retribution, but Jesus’ blood was shed for forgiveness and reconciliation (verse 24).

God warned that because we have a greater revelation through Jesus, we have a greater responsibility and therefore a greater danger (verse 25).

The writer seemed to say that Sinai was a frightening place because the unholy people of Israel were in close proximity to a holy God. The grace and forgiveness available in Jesus Christ made approaching God less fearsome.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**

—Hebrews 12:18-29 contrasts the encounter of Israel with God under Moses’ leadership with the New Testament relationship of the church to God through Jesus Christ.

—Hebrews 12:18-29 contrasts Mount Zion with Mount Sinai.

—Imagery in Hebrews 12:22 equates Mount Zion with a heavenly scene.

—Psalm 66 calls God’s people to approach God with confidence and praise.

—Psalm 66:1-9 identifies various expressions of praise to God for faithfulness and protection throughout Israel’s history.

—Psalm 66 is a song of praise.

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**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The events of today’s lesson took place around AD 68. This date is accepted by many Bible scholars. However, since the authorship of this book is unknown, an exact date is difficult to determine. However, based upon the topics covered in the book, it seems to be before the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Also, Roman Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome in AD 49. It is widely assumed that it was because of the dispute between Christian and non-Christian Jews. That means that the book was definitely written between AD 49 and 70.

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

Assuming a time period between AD 49 and 68, and the comparison of the Mosaic and New Covenants in Hebrews 12, the geographic location was probably in or around Jerusalem or Rome. During that period, Judaism and Christianity faced severe oppression from the Roman authorities. After Rome burned in AD 64–68, Emperor Nero blamed Christians—which led to a period of intense persecution, with many Christians fleeing the city between AD 66 and 73. With his suicide, Nero’s reign ended in AD 68.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

*Abel:* the second-born of Adam and Eve; killed by his older brother Cain, he is included in the Hebrews 11 faith “hall of fame.”

*God the Judge:* has authority and right to punish people’s unrighteous living.

*Moses:* called Israel’s law giver; received the Law on Mount Sinai amidst the most extensive display of God’s manifestation on earth ever.

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

*Grace* (verse 15)—Greek: _charis_ (khar’-ece):
that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness: grace of speech; favor; thanks.

**Holiness** (verse 14)—Greek: *hagiasmós* (*hag-ee-as-mos’*): consecration, purification; sanctification.

**Mediator** (verse 24)—Greek: *mesítês* (*mes-ee’tace’*): one who intervenes between two, either in order to make or restore peace and friendship, or form a compact, or for ratifying a covenant; a go-between.

**Peace** (verse 14)—Greek: *eîrene* (*i-ray’-nay’*): a state of national tranquility; rest; quietness.

**Promised** (verse 26)—Greek: *epaggéllo* (*ep-ang-él’-lo’*): professed; to announce that one is about to do or furnish something.

**Touched** (verse 18)—Greek: *pselaphao* (*psay-laf-ah’-o’*): to handle, touch, and feel.

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**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

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**III. Concluding Reflection**

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

**A. Only Two Dolls**

David Daniels, in his sermon “Mediation,” shared a most fitting story about the need for mediation (preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2012/january/mediation.html):

“There was once a couple who had been married for sixty years. Throughout their life they had shared everything. They loved each other deeply. They had not kept any secrets from one another, except for a small shoebox that the wife kept in the top shelf of her closet. When they got married, she put the box there and asked her husband never to look inside of it and never to ask questions about its contents. For sixty years the man honored his wife’s request. In fact, he forgot about the box until a day when his wife grew gravely ill, and the doctors were sure she had no way of recovering. So the man, putting his wife’s affairs into order, remembered that box in the top of her closet, got it down, and brought it to her to the hospital. He asked her if perhaps now they might be able to open it. She agreed. They opened the box, and inside were two crocheted dolls and a roll of money that totaled $95,000. The man was astonished.

“The woman told her husband that the day before they were married, her grandmother told her that if she and her husband were ever to get into an argument with one another, they should work hard to reconcile, and if they were unable to reconcile, she should simply keep her mouth shut and crochet a doll. The man was touched by this, because there were
only two crocheted dolls in the box. He was amazed that over sixty years of marriage, they apparently had had only two conversations that they were unable to reconcile. Tears came to his eyes, and he grew even more deeply in love with this woman, even at the end of her life. Then he turned to the roll of money. “What’s with this?” he asked. His wife said, “Well, every time I crocheted a doll, I sold it to a local craft fair for five dollars.”

When the husband saw only two dolls, he thought that he had done quite well without any type of mediation. Then he knew differently when his wife explained the $95,000. Today, in our marriages or relationships in general, we may need an outside mediator to help resolve a dispute. In the case of Jesus, He became our Mediator between us and God. His redemptive work on Calvary resolved the longest-running “dispute” in history—humankind as God’s enemy. Jesus, our great Mediator, has made us God’s friends.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Right Pursuit

(Hebrews 12:14-15)

Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.

In verses 12-29, the Hebrews writer answered the question, “How should Christians conduct themselves under the New Covenant?” He began by encouraging his readers/listeners to “take a new grip” (verse 12, TLB) and stand firm so as to be an example to those weaker in the faith (verse 13). They will be strengthened enough not to stumble in their faith. He continued by calling on believers to pursue peace and sanctification. The Greek word translated “pursue” in verse 14 is dioko, which means “to follow or press hard after something.” Since the present imperative tense is used in this verse, it has the meaning of a call to continually press hard toward something without giving up. It is not unlike Paul’s analogy of the race, “Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for
which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me” (Philippians 3:12, NKJV).

The Greek word translated “peace” in verse 14 is eirene, which means “to join or bind together something that had been previously separated.” Eirene conveys the sense of the Old Testament word for “peace,” shalom, which more often described harmony in relationships—individual to individual (see Genesis 34:21). So the Hebrews writer urged his readers to pursue harmony with everyone. It is understood that harmony cannot exist without believers’ first having harmony with God. After the Fall in the Garden, humankind became God’s enemy. We were literally at war with God. However, Jesus’ redemptive work on the Cross opened the door for humankind to be at peace with God (see Romans 5:1). Now that we have peace with God, the writer exhorted his readers to have the peace of God (see Galatians 5:22; Philippians 4:7).

The Greek word translated “holiness” (NKJV, KJV, NIV) and “sanctification” (NASB) is hagiasmos, which means “to purify or sanctify.” Following Paul’s “Roman Road,” we may view the Hebrews writer’s call to pursue peace as acknowledgment that we have been justified, “made” righteous by God based on Jesus’ redemptive work on the Cross. However, we must continue beyond justification and be counted as righteous to pursue righteousness. Because of our sin nature, we are unable to achieve righteousness by our works. However, we move from justification to sanctification. While justification happens instantaneously based upon our belief in and acceptance of Jesus as our personal Savior, sanctification is a process. With the aid of the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit, we strive to become more like Jesus every day. We pursue sanctification.

While we are pursuing peace and holiness (verse 14), we have to watch for three pitfalls:
1. “fall short of the grace of God” (verse 15, NKJV): refusing God’s offer of salvation and meeting our needs (see also 4:16);
2. “root of bitterness” (verse 15, NKJV): allowing unrighteousness such as idol worship to take root in the church (see Deuteronomy 29:18);
3. Unrighteous living: example of Esau (verses 16-17).

The “bitter root” references Deuteronomy 29:18 (ESV): “Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit.” In this passage, Moses was preparing the Hebrews to enter the Promised Land by renewing the covenant. He admonished them to stay true to the covenant, never turning away due to some bad element among them, a “bitter root.” The “root” is not the source of bitterness. Instead, it is the fruit that it bears and the fruit is poisonous and causes many to become “defiled” (verse 15), where “defiled” refers to being hurt spiritually. Just like ingesting poison will kill people if they do not get immediate care, it is the same in the church. If the poisonous root is allowed to grow in a local congregation unchecked, it will eventually kill the congregation. So these “roots” are anything that causes discord in the church.
B. Contrasting Mountains  
(Hebrews 12:18-24)

For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:) But ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.

In verses 18-24, the writer contrasted the physical manifestations of Sinai with the encounter with Christ that cannot be reduced to tangible categories. The writer seemed to say that Sinai was a frightening place because the unholy people of Israel were in close proximity to a holy God. The grace and forgiveness available in Jesus Christ make approaching God less fearsome. According to The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, “The writer (of Hebrews) proceeds to contrast the Jewish and Christian ways by contrasting the terrors associated with the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai with the joys and the glory associated with Mount Zion. He sounds the note of warning that great privilege means great responsibility. Earthly, material things (i.e., things that can be ‘shaken’) will not last forever. By contrast, God’s kingdom is unshakable, and the author uses the contrast as an exhortation to right conduct. He has made it plain that God will not trifle with wrongdoing. The persistent sinner can count on severe judgment.”

Verses 18-21 provide a historical review of what happened on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19:20; Deuteronomy 4:11-12; 5:22-27; see also lesson 6). He used a sevenfold description of these events to bring about the maximum effect upon his readers. The passage implies that both purposeful, resolute action (“pursue,” verse 14) and anxiety-producing risk (verse 18) are often involved in drawing near to a holy God.

The author placed special emphasis on the fear of the Jewish people. While Moses was on the top of Mount Sinai communing with God, the people were commanded to consecrate themselves and stay at the bottom (see Exodus 19:10). They were not even allowed to come near the base of the mountain (see Exodus 19:12-13). In fact, anyone who touched the mountain was to be put to death (see Exodus 19:13). Although the people had already consecrated themselves, the Hebrew people were so afraid until they did not want any more words spoken to them (verse 19). God’s “mountain” was so holy until “if even an animal touched the mountain, it must be stoned” (verse 20; see Exodus 19:12-13). Even God’s spokesperson Moses was afraid (verse 21; see Deuteronomy 9:9).

Now, verses 22-24 offer a clear contrast to the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. Mount Zion was synonymous with Jerusalem. Whenever Jerusalem is mentioned in the Bible, it is always in terms of “coming” or “going up.” Mount Zion had a special place in Jewish history (see Psalm 48:1-3). Mount Zion here does not refer to the earthly location (southeast Jerusalem) but rather God’s heavenly city and
its inhabitants—“thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly” (verse 22; see Hebrews 11:10, 13-16; 13:14; Philippians 3:20). Mount Zion had special significance for the Jewish readers. It was the name given to the ridge upon which Solomon built the first Temple (see 1 Kings 8:1-2). Solomon was able to approach “Mount Zion” as he prayed to God on the day of the dedication of the Temple (see 1 Kings 8:27-30). The use of “Mount Zion” and “heavenly Jerusalem” in verse 22 reflected Old Testament poetic parallelism also found in Joel 2:32, Micah 4:2, and Amos 1:2. The author painted the picture of the end times.

As opposed to the fear and trembling in approaching God at Mount Sinai, there was now an inviting approach to Him in the heavenly Mount Zion. The Hebrews writer used verses 22-24 not only to offer a contrast to verses 18-21, but also to exhort his readers to appreciate the superiority of the changed relationship with God. At Mount Sinai, God’s people were fearful, looking to Moses to act on their behalf (see Exodus 20:18-21). But approaching Mount Zion, God’s people would not be fearful. There is a festive, inviting atmosphere (verse 22).

“Firstborn” (verse 23) is plural in Greek and modified by “who are enrolled.” Jesus was previously called the firstborn Son; here, His followers are also granted an inheritance as if they were firstborn sons. “Church of the firstborn” (NIV; Colossians 1:18; 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23; Revelation 1:5) refers to those saved, “names are written in heaven” (verse 23, NIV), from the dawn of the New Testament church until the Second Coming (see Revelation 7:9). The Old Testament saints including Hebrews 11’s heroes of faith are not left out. These “spirits of the righteous” (verse 23, NASB) are “made perfect” (verse 23). Although not saved by the blood of Jesus, they are justified by their faith in God (see Galatians 3:8, Hebrews 11:39-40) and will receive glorified bodies at the Rapture (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). The reference to blood (verse 24) recalls the symbolism of blood to effect forgiveness of sins in Hebrews 9.

Under the New Covenant, Jesus is the Mediator (verse 24) for all who would believe on Him. In contrast to Moses who was not a perfect mediator between God and believers, “Jesus the mediator of a new covenant” (verse 24) was perfect (see Hebrews 7–9). Further, Jesus is not only the Mediator, but is also the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice for sin. By giving His life, Jesus redeemed all who believe from the penalty of sin (see 1 Timothy 2:6). Jesus’ blood is better than Abel’s. Why? Abel’s blood cried out for justice and retribution, but Jesus’ blood was shed for forgiveness and reconciliation (verse 24). Jesus’ blood saves, while Abel’s blood condemned his brother. The Hebrews writer was not devaluing Abel’s blood-cry. Rather, since Abel’s blood could only cry for justice, Jesus’ blood both cries for justice and offers forgiveness (verse 24). Christ’s blood cleanses sins completely, forever (see Hebrews 8:7-13; 9:11-14; 10:15-18).

C. God’s Voice
(Hebrews 12:25-27)

See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven: Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that
are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

In response to God’s shaking heaven and earth to remove the temporal, only the eternal kingdom of God will stand (verses 25-27). Our response should be one of reverent gratitude to God (verses 28-29). Not only was the “heavenly Jerusalem” much more inviting, it was also a kingdom that could not be shaken (verses 25-29). Just as the Israelites were punished for not heeding the Word of God under the Law, believers under the New Covenant will also be punished if they “turn away from him who warns us from heaven” (verse 25). Again, the emphasis is on the responsibility of believers associated with our superior position than that of those under the Law. After rekindling the notion of fear at the presence of God in verse 26, the author sought to encourage his readers. Believers are exhorted to “be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe” (verse 28). Why? God will create a new heaven and a new earth, even a New Jerusalem (see Revelation 21:1, 2). This new kingdom will never pass away. It will be eternal into the ages.

Verse 25 is one of many warnings in Hebrews not to neglect the salvation God offers (for example, Hebrews 2:3; 6:4-6; 10:26-27).

In Moses’ day, God shook Mount Sinai, but a time is coming when He will not only shake “the earth but also the heavens” (verse 26; Haggai 2:6). This is a reference to the second coming of Christ and the Judgment. What will be the result of this final “shaking”? All of the physical creation (temporal) will be shaken so that it can be removed (verse 27). At that time, God, who shook Mount Sinai, will shake both heaven and earth (see Matthew 24:29; 2 Peter 3:10-13; Revelation 6:12-14; 20:11; 21:1). Yet, His kingdom will not be shaken. It will endure throughout the eternal ages (see Luke 18:29). Everything temporal (“things that are shaken,” verse 27) will be destroyed, but everything eternal (“things which cannot be shaken,” verse 27) will remain.

D. Gratitude
(Hebrews 12:28-29)

Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire.

Finally, God will create a “new heaven and a new earth . . . a new Jerusalem” (Revelation 21:1-2) that is eternal, unshakable (verse 28). Verse 28 encourages believers to respond with gratitude and awe as they consider the majesty of God’s kingdom. There is only one appropriate response to God’s promises—an attitude of worshipful gratitude in reverence and fear. Yes, we can now approach Mount Zion without the terror exhibited by the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. However, in our hearts we must still have reverent fear at being in the very presence of God.

From Hebrews 2 to 12:28, the writer had been warning his readers not to forsake their faith in God. If they did, they would face God’s judgment, His “consuming fire” (verse 29, NKJV; see Deuteronomy 4:24). That is why we should come to God reverently and worship Him in Spirit and in truth. In that way, we come to God on His own terms. The nature of God revealed in Christ is ultimately meant to draw us closer to God. So believers today, “children” of the New Covenant, look forward to the fulfillment of the eternal covenant (see Hebrews 13:20-21). In reality,
we can collapse the seven covenants discussed this quarter into the eternal covenant. What is this covenant? It is God’s plan of redemption of all who trust Him developed in eternity past that will continue into eternity to come. God already knew that Adam would fall in the garden. So He designed the seven earthly covenants to continually reveal Himself to humankind. Finally, under the eternal covenant, there will be no need for a sign. Why? We will be with Jesus!

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Jeff Street was a sixteen-year-old parking lot attendant at an amusement park in New York City in 1969 when he stole $40 from the cash register. Street thought little about the incident over the years, but in 1978 he became a Christian. Six years later in 1984, Street sent the amusement park a check for $326, money to repay the original $40 theft, plus $286 in interest. Interviewed by media officials, he explained his actions: “I was praying at my desk and reading the Word, and it just came to me. It wasn’t the Lord’s voice, but it came from within me; I had to pay back the money.” Street explained that his response was “more like an act of obedience.”

Street heeded the warning of Hebrews 12:25. The children of Israel refused to heed God’s message on earth through His servant Moses. They were punished. Surely today believers must heed God’s message, for we have received it from heaven in the form of God made flesh—His Son, Jesus. If we ignore Jesus’ message, we will not escape God’s judgment.

Although we continue to commit sin, God is compassionate. He allows us an opportunity to confess our sins and ask for forgiveness. Additionally, He counts us righteous through the blood of His Son and gives us the right to enter heaven. For that, we ought to have steadfast thanks for God’s grace. We should be glad that in Jesus we have a wonderful Mediator for our sins.

PRAYER

All-knowing God, we thank You for the New Covenant sealed by the blood of Your Son. We no longer have to offer animal sacrifices for our sins. Your Son, Jesus, has already paid it all. We look forward to the day when we will be with You in heaven. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(November 13-19, 2017)

Mediator of the New Covenant
MONDAY, November 13: “God’s Awesome Power” (Psalm 66:1-4)
TUESDAY, November 14: “Covenant Blessings” (Matthew 5:1-12)
WEDNESDAY, November 15: “Keep Your Covenant with God” (Deuteronomy 4:21-24)
THURSDAY, November 16: “Praise God for Answered Prayer” (Psalm 66:16-20)
FRIDAY, November 17: “Everlasting Single Sacrifice for Sin” (Hebrews 10:11-18)
SATURDAY, November 18: “Mediator of the New Covenant” (Hebrews 9:11-15)
SUNDAY, November 19: “Receiving the Unshakable Kingdom” (Hebrews 12:14-15, 18-29)
1 Corinthians 11:23-34—KJV
23 For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread:
24 And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.
25 After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, this cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.
26 For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.
27 Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.
28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.
29 For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh judgment on himself.

1 Corinthians 11:23-34—NIV
23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,
24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.”
25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”
26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.
27 So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.
28 Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup.
29 For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.
and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.
30 For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.
31 For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.
32 But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.
33 Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another.
34 And if any man hunger, let him eat at home; that ye come not together unto condemnation. And the rest will I set in order when I come.

30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.
31 But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment.
32 Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.
33 So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together.
34 Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions.

**UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE:** It is often easier to make promises than to keep them. How can we remember to keep the promises we make? Paul exhorted believers to remember these promises through celebrating the Lord’s Supper in a way that affirms the covenant it embodies.

**LESSON OBJECTIVES**

*Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:*

1. Explore the meaning of the Lord’s Supper as a time of covenant remembrance.
2. Aspire to eat the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner as covenant partners with God.
3. Live out daily the covenant implications of the Lord’s Supper.

**AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED**

**Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH**

— Each time believers participate in receiving the body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, they join in an act intended to remind them of what Jesus did, how they are linked to Him, and how they are linked to one another (verses 24, 26).

— People must test the attitudes of their own hearts and actions and their awareness of the significance of the Supper, thus making it a spiritual means of grace (verse 28).

— We are disciplined by God so we might repent of our sins and grow in grace (verse 32).

— Each person was to exercise restraint and wait to eat with the others. If people were too hungry, they were to satisfy their hunger at home so they did not bring selfish or discriminatory practices into the church (verses 33-34).

— The passage begins with Paul reminding the Corinthians that the practice of the Lord’s Supper was passed on to them by Paul himself. Paul had received the practice “from the Lord” (verse 23).

— As in the covenant initiated in the days of Moses, the New Covenant brought by Jesus involved blood and sacrifice.
—When Christians partake of the Lord’s Supper in the proper manner, they accept/remember afresh the New Covenant of forgiveness offered them through the actions of Jesus Christ.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**
—Strife in the Corinthian church led Paul to write this letter.
—Because new converts were modeling their behavior at the Communion table after the Corinthian “love-feast,” the Communion gathering had become a point of contention, gluttony, and selfishness, thus losing its spiritual and symbolic meaning.

**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**
Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian church in AD 54 or 55. It was also a pivotal period in the prevailing Roman Empire. In AD 54, Emperor Claudius’s wife poisoned him. His successor was Nero (AD 54–68), who would increasingly persecute Jews and Christians.

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**
We have two geographical and cultural settings in today’s lesson. Paul wrote the letter from Ephesus near the end of his three-year stay there (see 1 Corinthians 16:5-9; Acts 20:31). His letter was written to the church in Corinth. Although under Roman rule, the city was still a hub for Greek culture. It was a mixed city comprised of Romans, Greeks, and Jews, where Romans and Greeks were in the majority and the Greeks shaped the culture predominated by paganism and immorality. We note that the power of the Roman Empire dominated the known world until the late fifth century AD.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**
**Corinthian Christians:** the church in Corinth was dominated by Gentile believers who previously worshipped multiple pagan gods.
**Disciples:** served as Jesus’ “cabinet” during His earthly ministry; they celebrated the Passover/Lord’s Supper together in the Upper Room.
**Paul:** a former prominent official in the Jewish religious leadership hierarchy, he became God’s ambassador/evangelist to the Gentiles.

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**
**Bread (verse 23)**—Greek: *artos* (ar’-tos): bread; loaves were consecrated to the Lord.
**Broke(n) (verse 24)**—Greek: *klao* (klah’-o): to break; used in the NT of the breaking of bread or communion.
**Cup (verse 25)**—Greek: *poterion* (pot-ay’-ree-on): a cup, a drinking vessel.
**Remembrance (verse 25)**—Greek: *anamnesis* (an-am’-nay-sis): a remembering, recollection.
**Testament (verse 25)**—Greek: *diatheke* (dee-ath-ay’-key): a compact, a “covenant” (NIV), a testament.
TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction
   A. The African-American Lord’s Supper Experience
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. Bread and Cup
      (1 Corinthians 11:23-25)
   B. Proclaimers!
      (1 Corinthians 11:26)
   C. Self-examination
      (1 Corinthians 11:27-32)
   D. Come Together
      (1 Corinthians 11:33-34)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION
A. The African-American Lord’s Supper Experience

The History of the Communion Table Covering. Why have African-American churches used a cloth covering over the Lord’ Supper elements? When African Americans had to hold worship services outdoors, they needed something to keep the flies, bees, and other insects from spoiling the bread and juice on the Communion table. The solution was obvious. Use a cloth covering. Even when worship moved to church buildings, the covering was still needed because during warm parts of the year windows and doors were open, allowing insects to enter. After central air became common, the covering continued although it was no longer needed to keep insects from spoiling the elements.

B. Biblical Background

The Lord’s Supper. In our final lesson of the quarter, our focal covenant is the New Covenant. In lesson 11, we received an introduction to the New Covenant. In last week’s lesson, we contrasted the Mosaic and new covenants. Today, we focus on one of the two signs of the New Covenant—the Lord’s Supper. The other sign is water baptism by immersion in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the focus of Article 14 of our Baptist Articles of Faith.

Early in Jesus’ ministry, He made it clear: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Matthew 5:17-18). In keeping with this promise, Jesus did not establish the Lord’s Supper “out of thin air.” Instead, He repurposed and streamlined the Passover celebration. Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper during His last Passover meal with His disciples. In so doing, He made the Lord’s Supper a bridge between the old and new covenants. The
Passover meal observed the Old Covenant as it signified Israel’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage. The Lord’s Supper recognized the New Covenant Jeremiah prophesied about in Jeremiah 31:31. As in the covenant initiated in the days of Moses, the New Covenant brought by Jesus involved blood and sacrifice. The New Covenant was central to the development of the early church from its Jewish foundations (see Hebrews 8:8). Many scholars believe this passage predates written references to the Lord’s Supper in the Gospels.

**Love Feast.** The problem with the Lord’s Supper observance was to do it reverently amidst a culture of sexual immorality and drunkenness. The young church risked congregants’ overindulgence during their fellowship love feasts, which were held just before observance of the Lord’s Supper. The online Bible study guide *Got Questions* offers the following description of the “love feast” (gotquestions.org/love-feast.html):

A love feast or agape feast was a fellowship meal eaten by Christians in the early church. There is biblical evidence for the practice of these communal meals, during which Christians gathered not just for the sake of sustenance and socializing, but for the sake of fellowship (Acts 2:46–47; 1 Corinthians 11:17–34). The term “love feast” appears in the Bible in the book of Jude. The author of the epistle is talking about false teachers who come into the believers’ fellowship, pretending—they are wolves in sheep’s clothing. These false teachers are described as “blemishes at your love feasts” (Jude 1:12). The ESV calls the pretenders “hidden reefs,” pointing up the dangerous nature of false teachers and their potential to shipwreck Christians.

**II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE**

**A. Bread and Cup** *(1 Corinthians 11:23-25)*

*For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, this cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.*

Paul had heard about the schisms in the Corinthian church (see 1 Corinthians 1:11). These schisms carried over into their love feasts (see the Biblical Background) and observance of the Lord’s Supper (see verse 18). In verses 23-26, Paul addressed the institution of the Lord’s Supper, while in verses 27-34 he focused on the individual believer’s self-examination before partaking of the observance.

It was significant that Paul began this section by saying, “For I received from the Lord” (verse 23, NKJV). First, what he was about to share was not secondhand information. He had received a revelation directly from the Lord. Paul reminded the Corinthians that the first Lord’s Supper took place the night Jesus
was betrayed (verse 23). Paul was making the point that although Jesus was crucified with the consent of the Roman authorities, it was Jesus’ own people that betrayed Him. We notice two things about Paul’s retelling of this event. First, it was apparent that the early church had developed a firm narrative about the Lord’s Supper. Second, it follows closely Luke’s account in Luke 22:19-20.

Jesus took bread and blessed it (verses 23-24). This bread was part of the unleavened bread used for the Passover meal. The Greek word translated “thanks” in verse 24 is *eucharisteo*, which means “to give thanks.” That is where some Christian denominations derived the name *Eucharist*, another name for the Lord’s Supper. Neither the name *Eucharist* nor *Communion* appear in the New Testament, only the Lord’s Supper (see verse 20). Because He blessed the food and broke the bread, Jesus was the host of the meal.

Paul made emphasis on remembrance in his description of the Lord’s Supper. In mentioning both the bread and cup, Paul shared Jesus’ repeated words “do this in remembrance of Me” (verses 24-25, NKJV). Paul did so to remind his readers/listeners to remember Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross. In Luke’s account of the Lord’s Supper, we find this phrase to remember (see Luke 22:19). Matthew (26:26-30) and Mark (14:22-25) do not. We also note that “cup” is used in verse 25, not wine. Because wine is not mentioned some Bible scholars believe that it was unfermented wine juice, in keeping with the unleavened bread. Others, however, conclude that it was wine because the Greek word translated “cup” is *poterion*, which means “wine cup.”

When Jesus told His disciples, “This is my body, given for you; do this in remembrance of me” (verses 24-25), He was following the formula for the Passover meal in which the presider over the meal recounted Israel’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage. However, Jesus was now fulfilling the messaging of the Passover in light of the New Covenant. Although Jesus’ words, “Take, eat. This is my body” (verse 24b) is straightforward, they have caused disagreement in the Christian church. For Roman Catholics, they believe in transubstantiation—the substance of the bread and wine is transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus. A number of Lutherans and Orthodox Christians believe in consubstantiality—the body and blood of Jesus are present alongside the bread and wine. Finally, most Protestant denominations, including National Baptists, believe that they are only symbolic. That follows from the reasoning that “this is my body” is a common Semitic expression meaning “this symbolizes my body.”

Each time believers participate in receiving the body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, they join in an act intended to remind them of what Jesus did, how they are linked to Him, and how they are linked to one another (verses 24, 26). Originally, the cup in the Passover meal referred to the “cup of blessing or redemption,” the third cup of wine served during the Passover meal. With this cup, Jesus called on His disciples—and us today—to remember His shed blood that redeemed us from our slavery to sin. Jesus’ words harken back to His Father’s words in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Just as partaking of the Lord’s Supper is done on an individual basis, so is the New Covenant. We all can approach God’s throne of grace directly. God announced the New Covenant.
in the book of Jeremiah. Jesus ushered it in through His redemptive work on the Cross.

B. Proclaimers!

(1 Corinthians 11:26)

For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till he come.

Jesus did not specify how often we should observe the Lord’s Supper. He just told us “as often as” (verses 25-26), which literally means “whenever you do so.” Some denominations insist on having it every Sunday, while others leave it up to local congregations. As a children, we observed Communion every quarter. Today, this writer observes it, as many congregations do, on the first Sunday of each month. Either way, Jesus was not concerned about the frequency of the observance. It was the quality and content that mattered. That was the issue Paul was addressing. The quality of the Corinthian church’s observances was low. Why is quality so important? Well, each time believers participate in receiving the bread (body) and wine/grape juice (blood) of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, we join in an act intended to remind us of what Jesus did, how we are linked to Him, and how we are linked to one another (verses 24, 26). The overall effect of the Lord’s Supper is to remind us of Jesus’ sacrificial death. However, the elements of the observance remind us of how much Jesus suffered.

Jesus’ death was the ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate example of unselfishness. In contrast, some members of the Corinthian church had selfishly abused the Lord’s Supper by bringing their own food and denying food to others in the fellowship (verses 20-21). So in sharing these words “eat this bread and drink this cup,” Paul was definitely not referring to the way that they had been observing the Lord’s Supper! Paul reminder the Corinthians that whenever they observed the Lord’s Supper, they were literally preaching the first part of the Gospel message, that Jesus died (verse 26). That is why Christmas means nothing without Resurrection Sunday. The Greek word translated “proclaim” (NKJV, NASB, NIV) in verse 26 is kataggello, which means “proclaim, preach, or show.”

C. Self-examination

(1 Corinthians 11:27-32)

Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.

In verse 27, Paul moved from the corporate aspect of the Lord’s Supper to the individual participants. From the outset, he made it clear to the Corinthians that their behavior in observing the Lord’s Supper was not acceptable. Now we should understand that their actions were influenced by the prevailing culture of paganism and immorality. Some of them had undoubtedly participated in some of this debauchery not too long before they were saved. In fact, they may have thought their present behavior was acceptable because it was “better” than the non-Christians’ in their communities. That is a warning for us today. We should
never use another person or group of people as our measuring stick for righteousness. It must always be Jesus.

Based upon his description of the meaning of the Lord’s Supper in verses 23-26, Paul now prepared to share ways in which the individual congregants could examine themselves. First, he shared a penalty for not eating and drinking in a worthy manner. They would be guilty of doing so in vain. When Paul called the selfish actions of those participating in the Lord’s Supper “unworthy” in verse 27, he was striking a serious blow to them because they took pride in being found worthy within their social circles. We note the “or” in verse 27, translated from the Greek word ἐν meaning “or, than.” At first glance, this might seem confusing. Was Paul indicating that a believer could partake of one or both of the elements of the Lord’s Supper? No. We should focus on the phrase “unworthy manner” after that “or.” Since some in the Corinthian church were on their way to being drunk before they partook of the Lord’s Supper, drinking that additional wine would be done so unworthily. They would be partaking to get another drink. Even for those eating the bread, some may have come hungry and sought to get full. That, too, would have been unworthy. In both cases, their emphasis was misplaced. It should have been on remembering Jesus’ sacrificial death, and not on “feeding their faces” or getting another drink.

Paul called on the Corinthians to examine themselves. The Greek word translated “examine” (NKJV, NASB, KJV, NIV) in verse 28 is ἔγκοιμαζο, which means “to test or approve.” In other words, Paul was asking the Corinthian Christians to take time for a period of self-reflection under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As our Paraclete, He is our Counselor, able to help us see where we are wrong even when we think we are right. Now, we cannot be too hard on ourselves in self-examination. Paul’s words about self-examination were aimed at the ill-spirited that had been fostered by the gluttony and drunkenness carried over from the love feast. Today, we must test the attitudes of our own hearts and actions. Although we will have made some mistakes the previous week, if we confess our sins God is ready, willing, and able to forgive us. In truth, our sinful nature makes it impossible for us to ever be found worthy. It is all about God’s grace. It is God’s grace that makes us worthy to partake of the Lord’s Supper.

What are the consequences of eating and drinking unworthily? Well, selfish attitudes in partaking of the Lord’s Supper were serious. Paul likened it to being found guilty in a court of law (verse 29). Paul often used courtroom imagery in his teachings (see Romans 2). Paul’s reference to “many” being weak or sick reflected the Old Testament belief that wrongdoing resulted in sickness. Some had died in their selfishness—“sleep” (verse 30). Will God call some folks home early for partaking of the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner? Some Bible scholars believe that that was what Paul was saying. Others, however, believe it was similar to what happened to Ananias and Sapphira (see Acts 5:1-11). Such extreme punishment was not to be lasting. It was God’s way of strengthening the early church through holy “subtraction.” God’s discipline today takes many different forms, including feelings of deep regret when we do something that hurts our relationship with God. In verse 31, Paul
was telling the Corinthians that if they truly examined themselves, they would not face punishment.

D. Come Together
(1 Corinthians 11:33-34)

*Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another. And if any man hunger, let him eat at home; that ye come not together unto condemnation. And the rest will I set in order when I come.*

After explaining the significance of the Lord’s Supper and providing a framework for self-examination, Paul gave final instructions on how he expected things to proceed. We have to admire the way Paul taught the Corinthians on this matter. He did not immediately go into “scold” mode. He began his letter with words of commendation and went on to intertwine words of commendation with words of correction. He seemed to reserve one of the most problematic areas for the end of the letter and placed it very close to the “love chapter.” That ought to be a lesson for us today.

Since some may have thought he was being overly harsh in his previous words, Paul referred to the Corinthian Christians as “my brethren” to begin verse 33. He truly loved them. He founded the church there. He was their spiritual father. Like any good father, he had to offer words of discipline. It probably hurt him more than it hurt them. Paul knew that these undisciplined love feasts and cavalier observances of the Lord’s Supper were not going to stop. So he now gave them very practical advice on how to conduct themselves. He made the spiritual practical.

The Greek word translated “come together” in verses 33 and 34 is *sunerchomai,* which means “to convene, depart in company with.” In essence, this word meant that people departed their fellowship favorably. In other words, even if they disagreed on some matter, they would leave in an “agreeable” manner. They would not fall out of fellowship with one another. This helps explain why Paul used this word multiple times in his letter (see verses 17, 18, 20, 33, 34; and 14:23, 26). Considering what had been happening in the preceding love feasts, Paul exhorted each person to exercise restraint and wait to eat with the others. That was actually good manners. In so doing, no one would be slighted. If people were too hungry, they were to satisfy their hunger at home so that they did not bring selfish or discriminatory practices into the church (verses 33-34).

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder offered a fitting description of the diversity of communion observance in the African-American church (theafricanamericanlectionary.org/Pop-upLec-tionaryReading.asp?LRID=3):

Among African Americans, this gratitude expresses itself creatively. For some African American congregations, Holy Communion is a solemn occasion with exquisite attention to detail. Deacons or stewards are meticulously dressed in black, and missionaries and deaconesses or members of the altar guild wear white. The white linen cloth covering the elements on the
communion table is carefully removed and folded. The distribution of the elements proceeds with military precision. Trays of bread and cups move seamlessly from the pastor to the lay leaders to the congregation, as soft organ music floats through the sanctuary.

In other African American congregations, Holy Communion is a more festive affair. As the meal is being distributed, a sainted elder in the congregation shouts the familiar words of a song, such as, “I know it was the blood for me.” Then the organist, choir, and entire congregation lift that song until hands start clapping; feet begin tapping; bodies begin swaying; tambourines start rattling; and souls get happy: “I know it was the blood . . . they pierced him in His side . . . He never said a mumblin’ word . . . He hung His head and died . . . He’s coming back again . . . one day when I was lost He died upon the cross . . . I know it was the blood for me.” In the folk language of our ancestors, this beloved song narrates the Lord’s suffering, death, and certain return.

When we partake of the Lord’s Supper in the proper manner, we accept and remember afresh the new covenant of forgiveness offered us through the redemptive actions of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

**PRAYER**

Merciful God, accept us today as we celebrate the sacrifice of Your Son on Calvary just as we are, without one plea. We recognize the blood that He shed for us. We come to Thee just as we are, thanking You for Your grace and mercy. We pray this prayer in Jesus’ name. Amen.

**HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

(\textit{November 20-26, 2017})

**Remembering the Covenant**

\textbf{MONDAY}, November 20: “Christ Our Creator, Savior, Peacemaker” (Colossians 1:9-20)

\textbf{TUESDAY}, November 21: “Mealtime, Foretaste of the Lord’s Supper” (1 Corinthians 11:17-22)

\textbf{WEDNESDAY}, November 22: “Keeping the Faith Entrusted to You” (Jude 1-4, 17-25)

\textbf{THURSDAY}, November 23: “Preparing to Share the Passover Meal” (Mark 14:12-16)

\textbf{FRIDAY}, November 24: “Jesus Celebrates with Bread and Cup” (Mark 14:22-25)

\textbf{SATURDAY}, November 25: “Participating in Spiritual Worship” (Romans 12:1-8)

\textbf{SUNDAY}, November 26: “Observing the Lord’s Supper” (1 Corinthians 11:23-34)
Faith in Action

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The study this quarter explores the twofold nature of faith as belief and action. Selections from the book of Acts show various examples of proclaiming faith in Christ. In the book of Daniel, we see faith in action as sincere, obedient, bold, and strong. The lessons from several epistles show how our actions both as individuals and as communities demonstrate our faith in Christ.

Unit I, “The Early Church Proclaims Faith in Christ,” has five lessons that reveal what the early leaders proclaimed about living our faith in Christ. The sessions in the book of Acts report several examples of social-welfare ministry and evangelism in spite of opposition. The book of Ephesians teaches about faith that leads to unity in the body of Christ. The Christmas session gives an account of the Wise Men who faithfully searched for the newborn King of the Jews.

Unit II, “A Living Faith in God,” has four lessons exploring faith in action from the book of Daniel. These lessons provide models for ways to actively engage in behaviors that demonstrate sincerity, obedience, boldness, and strength of faith.

Unit III, “Self-controlled, Upright, and Godly Faith,” has four lessons that look at passages from the books of Acts, James, and 1 Timothy, providing specific examples of faith as both belief and action. The book of James teaches that faith without works is dead. The lesson from the book of 1 Timothy offers instructions about leading others in a life of faith.
17 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them; and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is well here; if you wish, let us make three tabernacles: one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” But he did not permit them. And he said to them, “This is my Son; listen to him.”

Jesus Foretells His Death and Revival

18 Now when Jesus came into a certain place, he said to his disciples, “I must go on to Jerusalem and undergo the afflications of the cross. And he said to them, “Whoever will come after me must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose or forfeit life? For the子民 says, ‘The young man must not die, for he is good to my father and to my mother, and has built me a house, and has fitted out my bedchamber, and has set men over me, and anointed me with oil in my head.’ I will also give the young man thirty pieces of silver. Then I will stretch out my hands to him.” And in that place, a voice said to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He said, “Who is it, Lord?”

1 The Greek words for Peter and rock sound similar. 2 Greek: the gate of Hades. 3 Or shall have been bound. 4 Jesus to be will. 5 Greek: my sin. 6 For verse 16:13-16 see parallels, Mark 9:28-31, Luke 9:30-36. 7 For verse 17:1-13 see Mark 9:11-13. 8 For verse 17:14-19 see parallels, Mark 9:42-48, Luke 9:37-41. 9 It is possible that this was a person who was similar to John the Baptist. 10 Some manuscripts add verse, Mark 9:39-32, Luke 9:41.
FAITH IN JESUS

December 3, 2017

Lesson 1

FAITH IN JESUS

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: Seeking Wholeness
YOUTH TOPIC: Desiring to Be Whole

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Faith in Jesus
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Look at Me Now!

DEVOTIONAL READING
Psalm 118:1-14

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 3
PRINT PASSAGE: Acts 3:11-21
KEY VERSE: Acts 3:16

CHILDREN
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 3
PRINT PASSAGE: Acts 3:11-21
KEY VERSE: Acts 3:9

Acts 3:11-21—KJV
11 And as the lame man which was healed held Peter and John, all the people ran together unto them in the porch that is called Solomon’s, greatly wondering.
12 And when Peter saw it, he answered unto the people, Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this? or why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk?
13 The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go.
14 But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you;
15 And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses.
16 And his name through faith in his name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.
17 And now, brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers.

Acts 3:11-21—NIV
11 While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon’s Colonnade.
12 When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?
13 “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go.
14 “You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you.
15 “You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.
16 “By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.
18 But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled.
19 Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.
20 And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you:
21 Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.

17 “Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders.
18 “But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer.
19 “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,
20 “and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.
21 “Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People who are broken want to be made whole. How and where do they find wholeness? Peter proclaimed that faith in Jesus restores people to wholeness.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Examine the role of Peter’s healing miracle in the post-Pentecost time frame.
2. Value the need for bold witnessing.
3. Exercise a faith that reaffirms that the identity of Jesus Christ in the first century is the same identity in the twenty-first century.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
— This passage is a story of a healing and a sermon. The sermon comes not in a worship service but at an opportune time, to help a group of people understand what they have just seen.
— In verses 20-21, Peter spoke of repentance as bringing wholeness, times of refreshment in the present, and a time of universal restoration in the future.
— People were utterly astonished by the power of God they saw in Peter’s actions and words.
— The truthfulness of the death and resurrection of Jesus, which Peter argued here (verse 15), was a common theme among the evangelistic messages in the book of Acts (see Acts 2:23-24; 4:10; 5:30-32; 10:39-41; 13:28-31).
— Peter used the healing of the lame man as evidence to strengthen his witness to the resurrection of Jesus.
— The response to the healing for which Peter called (verses 19-20) makes it clear that the focus of his ministry prioritized spiritual healing over physical healing.
— Peter emphasized the role of faith in the healing process (verse 16), which was also stressed by Jesus in such Scriptures as Luke 7:6-9, 47-50; 8:46-48.
Teachers of CHILDREN
—Peter and John were both leaders among Jesus’ disciples.
—Prayer and sacrifices were part of the evening worship that Peter and John attended at the ninth hour (3:00 p.m.).
—As Peter and John went to worship, they saw a man who begged for money because he could not walk.

—Peter and John gave the man more than he anticipated: they healed him.
—The people were amazed and questioned how the disciples were able to heal the man.
—Peter used this opportunity to preach about the power of Christ and how the people should repent of their sins, and that Jesus will return.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
Research reveals that the book of Acts was most likely written between AD 63 and AD 70. Although the time sequence was a significant amount of years after the crucifixion of Jesus, the power of His presence was still as fresh as the day the last nail was driven into His wrists.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
Luke was a Gentile physician who wrote the book of Acts as a follow-up to the Gospel that bears his name. The reader is provided with a variety of descriptive details that brings to life the acts and occurrences of the first-century church. Acts 1:8 is possibly the most well-known verse and provides a snapshot of the expanding geographical radius of its scope: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Jerusalem was the geographical bullseye and the city where the church began. But the message of the Cross was much too powerful to remain in Jerusalem. It was destined to expand to Judea, and Samaria, and eventually internationally.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON
Peter: known as Simon Peter, Simeon, or Simôn, according to the New Testament, he was one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, leaders of the early Christian church.
Paul: a former persecutor of the church whose Jewish name was Saul. He went on several missionary journeys and endured much hardship and difficulty for the privilege of representing God.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON
Colonnade (verse 11)—Greek: stoa (sto-ä’): “porch” (KJV).
Faith (verse 16)—Greek: pistis (pē’-stēs): reliance upon Christ for salvation, assurance, and belief.
Healed (verse 16 [KJV])—Greek: holoklēria (ho-lo-klā-rē’-ä): physical wholeness.
Ignorance (verse 17)—Greek: agnoia (ä›g-noi-ä): inadvertence, sometimes with the idea of willful blindness.
“Wiped Out” (verse 19)—Greek: exaleiphō (eks-ā-lā’-fō): obliterated; “blotted out” (KJV).
I. INTRODUCTION
A. The Practical, Relevant Gospel

Jesus was concerned about the spiritual as well as physical needs of the people. On several occasions when the multitudes came to hear Jesus speak, Jesus realized that the people were hungry. He suspended the lesson for that day and provided food for their stomachs in addition to the food He gave for their souls. Whenever and wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, the coinciding question must be this: How can the truth of Jesus be adapted to the current context? It is a sin to bore people with Bible facts and fail to give practical outlets of expression to the timeless Word of God. Biblical recitation without practical application results in missed opportunities for ministry.

The more we know, the more we should grow. That is why spiritual teaching in all its various forms should be vibrant. Since we live in a sight-and-sound generation, relevant ministry must pay attention to the visual factor just as Jesus used parables in order to effectively communicate the Gospel. Not everything that is modern, hip, and popular is necessarily appropriate, adaptable, and applicable to a certain ministry locale. Make your ministry indigenous and organic to your particular situation. There is a tendency to do ministry based on yesterday, but there is no time like the present, and the church was called to serve this present age.

B. Biblical Background

Immediately following the death of Jesus, the eleven disciples went into hiding for fear of the Jewish authorities. But when the Day of Pentecost came, those timid, scared disciples were transformed into a bold group of unstoppable warriors for the Lord. They preached openly in the Temple and in the marketplace. On the day described by today’s text for this lesson, Peter and John were headed to the Temple at the time of prayer, which was 3 p.m. The person who tried to get their attention was not given a personal name.
The name given to him by society reflected his condition rather than his ambition. The culture and the community defined him by his deficit. The people labeled him by his lack rather than enabled him by his potential. This man who had suffered the indignity of being a beggar lifted his eyes and did the only thing he knew how to do: he looked for money from Peter and John. Peter replied, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Sometimes we as people do not really know how or what to ask. We think we know what we need, but God knows better than we know because God is omniscient. Our thoughts of what we want depends on our limited understanding. But God knows exactly what we really need.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE
A. Peter’s Instant Audience
(Acts 3:11-12)

And as the lame man which was healed held Peter and John, all the people ran together unto them in the porch that is called Solomon’s, greatly wondering. And when Peter saw it, he answered unto the people, Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this? or why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk?

Since the unnamed beggar in this narrative was certainly a familiar fixture to the regular Temple visitors, it would have been a miracle if he was seen walking and leaping. This encounter created an instant audience, and Peter had the presence of mind and heart to use this aggregation as an opportunity to celebrate the Savior. Because Peter and John had pure, spiritual motives, they were able to avoid some pitfalls of the flesh that might have ordinarily trapped and thwarted them. Verse 11 records that after he was healed and after his celebratory happy dance, in a show of sincere joy and appreciation, the beggar held on to Peter and John. These two disciples could have soaked in the moment and reveled in the fact that they had just played a significant role in the miracle that had just occurred. The constant challenge of people who minister is to make sure that all the glory goes to God all the time. Whenever we begin to believe our own press, and whenever we are tempted to take even the smallest amount of credit for what almighty God has done, we are on a very dangerous and slippery slope toward being at spiritual odds with God. God is more than willing to use us as vessels to make a difference in someone’s life, but when we begin to monetize miracles and sensationalize salvation through suggesting that it is somehow attached to our skill or our will, we do a dangerous disservice to the people and also dishonor God.

We should all ask God to make us sensitive to the many opportunities throughout the day to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. This could occur at home, at work, at school, at play, or through social media. The text reports that the people ran toward Peter and John because they were amazed at the sight of the miraculous healing. Although the healing was amazing in itself, it alone was the wrong motive for the people’s attention.

Peter was adeptly in tune with the motive of the masses when they came running toward him. He wasted no time with a personal public relations push, but immediately addressed the meat of the matter and dismissed any
faint notions of self-credit. His words were simple and direct: “Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power we made this man walk?” This response demonstrated great personal humility as well as great spiritual ability. He could now access God’s power because he was in the right position.

B. Peter Teaches a Course on Jesus History 101 (Acts 3:13-16)

The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go. But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses. And his name through faith in his name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.

Verse 13 states that “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go” (NIV). The names of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob represent the “big three” in a royal bloodline of spiritual patriarchs. From these forefathers can be traced the lineage of Jesus the Christ. Abraham is considered the father of the faithful, and he was originally introduced in Scripture in Genesis 17:1-5. Abraham, who was originally named Abram, followed God’s instructions to leave his comfortable, familiar home in Ur of the Chaldees to go to a place that God would reveal as Abram moved. There are some revelations that we will receive from God only as we place feet to our faith and act in simple obedience to the will of God. We will not always completely understand everything that God tells us to do. But if we are faithful in following God’s guideposts, we will always arrive at the best destination from God’s perspective. From a human perspective, we often have an underdeveloped perception of what is our optimal good. But God’s point of view always exceeds our limited scope of understanding. Abraham was great, but the God of Abraham is so much greater, and this is the God that glorified Jesus. Peter made no effort to be subtle about identifying the guilty parties in the plot to kill Jesus. Instead, he boldly attributed the death of Jesus to the people he was currently addressing. Pilate may have been the figurehead involved, but Pilate actually wanted to set Jesus free. Sadly, due to his weak and defective leadership, Pilate gave in to the will of the people and after literally washing his hands of the matter, he sentenced Jesus to death.

In verse 14, Peter continued by further articulating the blame for killing Jesus: “You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you” (NIV). The intensive terminology utilized in this statement is befitting of the deed that was committed. How could one so holy and righteous be treated so carelessly and callously? Peter portrayed a powerful and striking contrast between a freed murderer and the condemned Savior. This stark contrast continues in verse 15 with this assertion: “You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.” Peter used a rare phrase in referring to Jesus as “the author of life,” and this term only appears in this passage. Wordplay is in full effect here, because in
essence he was saying that they ended the life of the beginner of life. However, their efforts fell short because a higher power overrode their inadequate efforts, and the King they tried to kill was resurrected through God’s will. The proof of that fact was beheld by the many people who visually and physically encountered Jesus after He rose from the dead.

In verse 16, Peter identifies the power of resurrection as the same power that enabled the lame man to walk: “By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.” The crowd had been astounded and confounded by the mighty healing miracle they beheld, but Peter identified the true source of the power and simplified the process of the power through reducing the formula to two essential parts: (1) faith, and (2) the name of Jesus. When faith and the name of Jesus get into close proximity to each other, amazing things begin to take place.

C. Peter Appeals to the People for a Response (Acts 3:17-21)

And now, brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers. But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled. Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord. And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.

Like a highly skilled defense attorney, Peter expertly and successfully established his position in the historic court case of Jesus vs. the People. Conventional tables have been turned and Jesus has been portrayed as innocent, while the world has been depicted as guilty. Just as the people may have thought Peter would point a finger of condemnation following the accusation, instead Peter replied, “Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer.” Potential condemnation had shifted to contextualization, and Peter portrayed the people and their leaders from a perspective of pity rather than from a perspective of blame. In God’s grand scheme of things, God was able to use even their sin and foolishness for God’s glory even without their realizing what had occurred. Although they thought they had been victorious over Jesus, their very actions had already been predicted even before they were born. That is why as Christians we do not have to worry about what people may say or do to us. Their actions and accusations can be used as spiritual elevation, and God can providentially use their evil for our good.

It was Peter’s desire that his excellent explanation would sufficiently convince the people to turn from their own way and toward a personal relationship with God. In verses 19-20, he compelled them to “repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus” (NIV). To repent means to turn and to go in the opposite direction. Sometimes the things we need to turn away from are blatantly immoral. Other times, the thing we need to
turn away from is ourselves and our own way of thinking and living. Selfishness and willfulness are at the heart of disobedience to God. The “times of refreshing” mentioned in verse 19 may refer to a spiritual, mental, and emotional sense of joy, confidence, and peace of mind.

The final installment in today’s lesson is verse 21: “Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” This verse refers to the locale of Jesus until He returns to restore order to the people of the earth. With this in mind, we all should ask some sobering questions: When Jesus returns, will I be ready? What do I need to alter in my life in order to be acceptable to God? Such questions are spiritually healthy and help us to grow, because the unexamined life is not worth living.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Peter and John were used in God’s plan to restore humanity to a state of wholeness through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Then and now we are faced with the challenge to exchange our inadequacy for God’s adequacy and to exchange our brokenness for God’s wholeness. Many people are broken without even realizing it, and they have been dysfunctional so long that they do not remember what it means to be healthy. As ambassadors for Christ we are called to carry the Good News that there is a Divine Repairman who is able to fix whatever is broken in our lives so that we may live out our destiny to the glory of God.

PRAYER

Dear God, thank You for being our friend. Thank You for knowing us better than we know ourselves. Help us to trust You even during the times when we do not completely understand You or Your ways. We give You control of our present and future. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(November 27–December 3, 2017)

Faith in Jesus

MONDAY, November 27: “Take Refuge in the Lord” (Psalm 118:1-9)
TUESDAY, November 28: “The Lord, My Strength and Salvation” (Psalm 118:10-14)
WEDNESDAY, November 29: “A Blessing Promised to All Peoples” (Acts 3:22-26)
THURSDAY, November 30: “Your Faith Saved You” (Luke 7:44-50)
SATURDAY, December 2: “Crippled Beggar Requests Alms” (Acts 3:1-10)
SUNDAY, December 3: “Repent and Believe in Jesus” (Acts 3:11-21)
December 10, 2017

Lesson 2

FAITH TO DISCERN

ADULT/YOUTH

ADULT TOPIC: Facing Opposition

YOUTH TOPIC: Forging Ahead

CHILDREN

GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Faith to Understand

CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Set Apart!

DEVOTIONAL READING

Psalm 146

ADULT/YOUTH

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 13:1-12

PRINT PASSAGE: Acts 13:1-12

ADULT KEY VERSE: Acts 13:12

YOUTH KEY VERSE: Acts 13:2

Acts 13:1-12—KJV

NOW THERE were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

2 As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work unto which I have called them.

3 And when they had fasted and prayed, they laid their hands on them, and sent them away.

4 So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, went down to Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus.

5 When they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews: and John was with them as their minister.

6 And when they had gone through the island unto Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Barjesus:

7 Which was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God.

Acts 13:1-12—NIV

NOW IN the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.

2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands upon them and sent them off.

4 The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.

5 When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

6 They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus,

7 who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God.
LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Contrast the differing motives and sources of power of Saul (Paul) and his company with those of Bar-Jesus.
2. Appreciate what it signified for Saul (Paul) to pronounce blindness on another by the power of the Lord, and that the chief proconsul Sergius Paulus then believed in Jesus.
3. Commit to a season of prayer and fasting before embarking on a new ministry.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Sometimes we are at a loss when unexpected events interfere with our goals. How can we keep our commitments and forge ahead? Empowered by their faith in Jesus, Paul and Barnabas preached and taught about Jesus despite a false prophet’s efforts to deter them.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

— Cyprus is situated on shipping lanes between Syria, Greece, and Asia Minor and had a large Jewish colony, which Saul and Barnabas visited.

— Magician or magos is a term for students of the metaphysical that were often used as advisors by political leaders.

— Proconsul is the title of the governor of a senatorial province of Greece, which Cyprus became in 22 BC.

— The laying on of hands in this story is a blessing, not an ordination, as Paul and Barnabas were “ordained” before this.
Tradition holds that the first Gentile church was founded in Antioch (see Acts 11:20-21), where the disciples of Jesus Christ were first called Christians (see Acts 11:19-26). It was from Antioch that the apostle Paul began his missionary journeys in approximately AD 46–48. The first mission trip was the shortest in time and distance of the first three, but it represented a significant development in the history of the new Christian church. It established Paul as the leader in spreading the Word of God. Paul went on to write a significant portion of the New Testament.

### THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

Antioch, named after King Antiochus I, who was a Greek king and a general of Alexander the Great. As the capital of the Roman province of Syria and Phoenicia, Antioch was an important port city located on the river Orontes and was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, with many Jews living among a predominantly Greek population. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, there were more Jews living in Antioch at this time than in any other city outside of Judea. Antioch was a marvelous spectacle city in which Herod the Great had extravagantly paved more than two miles of a street with marble and erected a colonnade from end to end.

### PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

**Bar-Jesus/Elymas:** a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet who was an attendant of the proconsul Sergius Paulus.

**Saul:** a former persecutor of the church who later took on the name Paul. He went on several missionary journeys and endured much hardship and difficulty for the privilege of representing God.

### KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

**Antioch (verse 1)—**Greek: *Antiocheia* (án-tē-o’-khā-á): the capital of Syria. Many Greek-Jews lived in Antioch, and there at the church at Antioch those who professed the name of Christ were first called Christians (Acts 11:19ff; Galatians 2:11).
Holy Spirit (verse 2)—Greek: pneuma (pnyü’-mä): God’s Spirit, wind or breath; “Holy Ghost” (KJV).
Magician (verse 6)—Greek: magos (mä’-gos): “sorcerer” (KJV/NIV).
Proconsul (verse 7)—Greek: anthypatos (än-thü’-pä-tos): Roman proconsul; “deputy” (KJV).

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON
I. Introduction
   A. God’s Providence Protects Us
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. The Holy Spirit Commissions Saul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3)
   B. Resistance to the Gospel (Acts 13:4-8)
   C. False Prophet Exposed (Acts 13:9-12)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION
A. God’s Providence Protects Us
   Life has a way of giving us unexpected curveballs that can throw us off course if we are not vigilant and on guard. It is sometimes difficult to understand how and why our efforts are hindered and our goals are contested even when our motives are pure and the work we are doing is expressly for the glory of God. But is it right to expect a problem-free life just because we are working for God? What is the benefit of trouble in the life of a child of God? It is hoped that these and other questions can be answered as we explore the experiences of Paul and Barnabas as they delivered the Gospel message in Paphos and the regions beyond. An important principle to remember is that if God is for us, no one can stand against us (see Romans 8:31). Even if there is opposition, we can rest on God’s promise that no weapon formed against us will ultimately prosper (see Isaiah 54:17). The victories that we experience as we triumph over the various adversities of life serve as live advertisements of God’s power and positive proof that God can and will work through us to rectify situations that seek to thwart the progress of God’s Word through our ministry efforts.

B. Biblical Background
   The first seven chapters of the book of Acts could be called “The Church among the Jews.” Chapters 8–12 could be entitled “The Church Transitions to Include Gentiles,” and chapters 13–28 could be “The Church among the Gentiles.”
The International Bible Society acknowledges the following as the primary purposes of the book of Acts: (1) *To present a history*. The significance of Acts as a historical account of Christian origins cannot be overestimated. It tells of the founding of the church, the spread of the Gospel, the beginnings of congregations, and evangelistic efforts in the apostolic pattern. One of the unique aspects of Christianity is its firm historical foundation. (2) *To give a defense*. One finds embedded in Acts a record of Christian defenses made to both Jews and Gentiles, with the underlying purpose of conversion. (3) *To provide a guide*. Luke had no way of knowing how long the church would continue on this earth, but as long as it pursues its course, the book of Acts will be one of its major guides. (4) *To depict the triumph of Christianity in the face of bitter persecution*. The success of the church in carrying the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome and in planting local churches across the Roman Empire demonstrated that Christianity was not a merely human work ("Intro to Acts," The International Bible Society).

The book of Acts is a valuable record that chronicles the early events, movements, and challenges of the early Christian church.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. The Holy Spirit Commissions Saul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3)

*NOW THERE were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.* As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

There were several prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch, including “Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.” Each of these individuals played some part in the development of the church. The names mentioned in this passage represent only a sample of the disciples that comprised the church at Antioch. There were people whose names were not called but were still critical to the functioning of the fellowship. What is it about some people that take offense if they participate in ministry and their names are not mentioned? In such instances one must question the motives of the members and whether they are driven by the praises of men or for the glory of God.

A specific time was designated for worshipping the Lord and fasting by the early church. Their worship likely consisted of singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs along with breaking of bread, prayer, fellowship, words of practical exhortation, and scriptural impartation. As humanity grows weaker and wiser, intelligent individuals have been able to discover cures for diseases, invent supercomputers, microchips, and smartphones, and go to the moon and back, but they still have never been able or will ever be able to replace worship. Humanity was created for worship. As one theologian has said, there is a “God-shaped vacuum” inside of us all and people try to put alternatives into that space such as power, money, and sex, but nothing fits except God.”
Fasting was also a regular, normal part of life in the early church. The disciples had been taught that although prayer was a powerful force for changing things and changing people, there are some things that can only be changed through prayer and fasting. Fasting coupled with prayer focuses faith in a way like nothing else can accomplish. When you fast, your problem may not move just how and when you want it to move, but we can rest assured that our prayer and fasting are not wasted.

Continuing in verse 2, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” It is significant that the Holy Spirit clearly spoke to the disciples and gave very specific directions. A good question at this point would be, Does the Holy Spirit still speak to us today? The same Holy Spirit who spoke then can and will speak now. The better question would be whether or not we are listening when the Spirit does speak.

Verse 3 records that after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them off. This is the early version of a missionary commissioning ceremony. The practice of the laying on of hands represents a spiritual impartation, empowerment, and a blessing.

B. Resistance to the Gospel
(Acts 13:4-8)

So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus. And when they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews: and they had also John to their minister. And when they had gone through the isle unto Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Barjesus: Which was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for so is his name by interpretation) withstood them, seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith.

Verse 8 records that after Paul and Barnabas were commissioned by the Holy Spirit and confirmed by the people, they went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the Word of God in the Jewish synagogues, and John also went along to assist them in the process. After traveling through the entire island, they came to Paphos where they met Bar-Jesus, a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet. This false prophet was an attendant of the proconsul Sergius Paulus. The name Bar-Jesus literally means “Son of Joshua,” or “Son of Yeshua” in Hebrew. This is the Greek transliteration of an Aramaic or Arabic word equivalent to the Greek magos. Arabic words and phrases linked to this name indicate a wise or learned man. The proconsul was an intelligent man who sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the Word of God. Elymas the sorcerer opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith.

There are at least three levels of insight we can glean from these verses: (1) spiritual warfare is real; (2) intelligent people are attracted to the Word of God, even if they are not believers; and (3) just because we are Christians and our cause is just does not mean that we are exempt from crisis or opposition. Let us examine more closely each of these three insights.

1. Spiritual warfare is real. Regarding the reality of spiritual warfare, Ephesians 6:12 reads, “For our struggle is not against flesh
and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

2. **Intelligent people are attracted to the Word of God, even if they are not believers.** The claims of Christ can stand tall in the marketplace of ideas because they are true and intelligent and compelling. The field of Christian apologetics offers support in successfully developing and presenting thorough responses to the intellectual and philosophical challenges to Christianity. One of the current challenges to belief in God is the seemingly harmless but widely pervasive and dangerously deceptive concept called secular humanism. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, secular humanism is “a system of values and beliefs that are opposed to the values and beliefs of traditional religions.” It centers on human concerns and seeks human solutions and explanations to life’s questions. This philosophy seems quite acceptable on the surface, but the primary problem lies in the fact that secular humanism rejects the idea of the almighty God and attempts to fill that vacuum with dependence on the almighty self. However, no matter how intelligent or experienced any man or woman may be, that person will never come anywhere near being sufficient to replace God.

3. **Just because we are Christians and our cause is just does not mean that we are exempt from crisis or opposition.** Trouble, problems, and pain are all a part of life, and Christians are not given a free pass in this category. In fact, God is expertly able to use all these to work together for the good of those who love God and are the called according to God’s purpose (see Romans 8:28). As mature disciples of Christ, our best course of action is to accept what God allows and to trust God for the best outcome because God cares for us.

C. **False Prophet Exposed**  
(Acts 13:9-12)

Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,) filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him. And said, O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season. And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand. Then the deputy, when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord.

The term false prophet is an oxymoron in that these two words exclusively are incompatible. A prophet is an inspired teacher or proclaimer of the will of God who delivers messages that originate from God. Since God is the source of truth, then anyone claiming to represent God and who intentionally speaks falsehoods is worse than a mere sinner. Retribution and punishment for a person perpetrating such a deed would therefore need to be commensurate with the infraction. Verses 9-10 of the text state that Saul, who was also called Paul, “filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ‘You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?’”

Notice that every action done by the early church—from the selection of the missionaries to their commissioning to the rebuke of the
false prophet—was motivated by the power of the Holy Spirit! What a comfort to know that one cannot go wrong when led and prompted by the power of the Holy Spirit. There is sometimes a tendency for people to assume that the only role of the Spirit is to comfort. But John 16:13-15 provides a broader view of the divine assignment of the Holy Spirit: He guides, expresses the heart of God, gives insight into the future, and glorifies Christ. Furthermore, when a prophet or minister is operating under the power of the Holy Spirit, that individual is authorized to fulfill the functions as stated in 2 Timothy 4:2. To rebuke means to “express sharp disapproval or criticism of (someone) because of their behavior or actions.” A rebuke is an indication of distinct displeasure. In order for a situation to warrant a rebuke on the level expressed by Paul, there must be a clear and blatant disregard of God’s ways plus a boldness on behalf of the person issuing the rebuke.

Proverbs 28:1 asserts that “the wicked flee when no one is pursuing them, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.” Philemon 1:8 records that “for this reason, although I have great boldness in Christ to command you to do what is right.” Second Corinthians 3:11-12 shows us, “So if the old way, which has been replaced, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new, which remains forever! Since this new way gives us such confidence, we can be very bold. Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God’s presence.”

Righteous boldness is not something that can be easily imitated. In order for it to have the right effect, it must originate from the right place. Otherwise it could come off as false bravado or just plain meanness. The origin of holy boldness is from a heart of love and spiritual light. When we speak the truth in love we do not have to worry about people’s reaction and can confidently leave the results to God. The harsh words spoken by Paul in verse 11 (NIV) were these: “Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun.” One of the things that nobody should want to experience in his or her life is the hand of God being against him or her. When this occurs nothing prospers. It is great to have God’s hand to support us or to protect us, but it is an awful thing to have God’s hand against us. Who can stand against God’s hand? Everybody’s arms are too short to box with God. The result of God’s hands being against the false prophet Elymas was this: “Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand” (verse 11b). Elymas had disrespectfully disregarded the validity of the Gospel. He thought he possessed more insight than the King of Light. So his penalty became darkness. He was reduced to bearing the indignity of asking strangers to help him move from place to place. This was not the first time that God resorted to striking someone blind to get their attention and to establish the point that it is God who is in control and not humanity. In fact, Saul himself had been struck blind at the point of his conversion with Christ as detailed in Acts 9:8-9. There are also other examples of this practice.

This lesson ends with verse 12: “When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.” Sometimes miracles are what it takes in order to get people’s attention. God is not real just because of miracles, but the performance
of a miracle can help to arrest human doubt long enough for faith to take root and yield fruit. Simplified, life is a struggle between faith and doubt. The closer we walk with God, the more we will lean toward faith. The further we walk away from God, the more we will tend toward doubt. But as pivotal as miracles can be, miracles must not dominate or even be a primary factor in the progression of our faith. Jesus made this point abundantly clear on several occasions.

The bottom line in the encounter with the false prophet is that the proconsul believed. This was worth the effort exerted to claim this man’s life for Christ. Not only did the proconsul believe, but also his focus and emphasis were not directed toward and fixated on the miracle. His focus was upon the teachings about the Lord. The contemporary church could learn much from this scriptural encounter. Our goal should not be just to get people focused on the music, the lights, the pastoral personality, the sound, and the productions. Godly power would prevail if we could get people excited about the teachings of the Lord. Let us strive to allow that to be the common thread that runs through everything that we attempt as a church.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

We do not always understand when events occur that prevent us from accomplishing our desired results. But if our cause is clear and if we are walking in our God-given purpose, then our will must match our calling so that we allow absolutely nothing to hold us back from accomplishing our goals. If God be for us, who can be against us? African Americans have had to exercise these principles of perseverance throughout history in order to succeed in American society. No weapon formed against us will prosper if we place our trust wholeheartedly in the will of God.

PRAYER
Dear God, we believe You. But sometimes we need a little help, especially when we are doing Your will the best we know how and still encounter unexpected resistance. So when those times occur, please send us a reminder that You are still God and You are in control. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(December 4-10, 2017)

Faith to Discern
MONDAY, December 4: “Joshua Discerned as New Leader” (Deuteronomy 31:14-15, 23; 34:9)
TUESDAY, December 5: “Eli Senses God’s Call to Samuel” (1 Samuel 3:1-9)
WEDNESDAY, December 6: “Test the Spirits” (1 John 4:1-6)
THURSDAY, December 7: “Blind Man Discerns Jesus as Prophet” (John 9:13-17)
FRIDAY, December 8: “Paul’s Strategy: Jews First, Then Greeks” (Romans 1:8-12, 16-17)
SATURDAY, December 9: “Door of Faith Opened to Gentiles” (Acts 14:21-28)
December 17, 2017

Lesson 3

FAITH TO PERSEVERE

ADULT/YOUTH

ADULT TOPIC: Persevering through Opposition

YOUTH TOPIC: Hold On

CHILDREN

GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Faith to Keep Going

CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Jumping for Joy!

DEVOOTIONAL READING

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

ADULT/YOUTH

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 14; Colossians 2:6-7

PRINT PASSAGE: Acts 14:8-11, 19-23

ADULT KEY VERSES: Acts 14:21-22

YOUTH KEY VERSE: Acts 14:22

CHILDREN

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 14; Colossians 2:6-7

PRINT PASSAGE: Acts 14:8-11, 19-23

KEY VERSE: Acts 14:10

Acts 14:8-11, 19-23—KJV
8 And there sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother’s womb, who never had walked:
9 The same heard Paul speak: who stedfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be healed,
10 Said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped and walked.
11 And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men.

…..

19 And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead.
20 Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.

Acts 14:8-11, 19-23—NIV
8 In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked.
9 He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed
10 and called out, “Stand up on your feet!” At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.
11 When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!”

…..

19 Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.
20 But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Review the nature of the miracle performed at Lystra and how the crowd interpreted that miracle.
2. Appreciate the fickleness of a crowd mentality.
3. Ask God for courage and strength in the face of resistance to the Gospel.

**AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED**

**Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH**

—This chapter of the book of Acts traces the conclusion of the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas to Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and the return to Antioch.

—At the end of the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas experienced misunderstanding, violence, and persecution in response to their efforts.

—In Lystra, when the man jumped up and walked, the people showed their misunderstanding by thinking Paul and Barnabas were sent as gods.

—Paul experienced being stoned and left for dead.

—The missionaries appointed elders as leaders in the new churches they established.

—In spite of the calamity that surrounded Paul’s visit to Lystra, the mention of disciples there (verses 20, 22) and the fact that Timothy was from Lystra (Acts 16:1) indicate that Paul and Barnabas’s evangelistic efforts there were not in vain.

—Paul appealed to the basic religious character and beliefs of the Greeks by pointing to God’s work among them already manifested and not by condemning them as heathens.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**

—Paul and Barnabas went to Lystra, where Paul healed a man who could not walk.

**UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE:** Sometimes the good things we do are blocked by an unexpected obstruction, but we pick up and go on anyway. What gives us the strength to keep going? Even though he was stoned and persecuted, Paul’s faith in his message impelled him to continue to proclaim the Good News of God.
—When the man jumped up and walked, the people thought Paul and Barnabas were gods.
—The people wanted to treat Paul and Barnabas as gods, but Paul and Barnabas protested and encouraged them to worship God.
—Opponents of Paul and Barnabas stirred up the people and stoned Paul, dragged him out of the city, and left him for dead.
—The Lord spared his life, and Paul left with Barnabas for Derbe, where they made many disciples.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

Biblical scholars place the chronological date of the writing of the book of Acts before AD 64/65. The earliest date would have been around AD 60 or 61, which is the date of Paul’s two-year imprisonment. Dr. David Malick notes that “the abrupt ending of Acts allows for an early date (around the time of the events), but could also be understood theologically to emphasize the continuance of Paul’s mission through other believers. Acts 20:25 may hint at Paul’s death. Therefore, it is not determinative.”

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The author of the book of Acts is universally agreed upon to be none other than Luke—who is also the writer of the gospel of Luke—the book that bears his name. Taken together, the Luke-Acts literary combination comprises approximately 28 percent of the entire New Testament. The first-century church struggled with a number of issues identified by Luke in the book of Acts. Some of these issues included conflict among and between Gentile disciples and Jewish disciples. Also in play were the various factions which tended to support various teachers and apostles whom they favored. This is evidence that no matter the culture or era, anywhere there are people, there will also be conflict and differences. Other issues included the exposure of false teachers, issues among the poor and women, conflict between the church and state authorities, and persecutions. This wide variety of issues seems to indicate that Acts was written and intended for a diverse audience in order to assist the believers to successfully navigate a multiplicity of subjects, as well as outline a transparent history and challenging trajectory of the early church.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Paul: a former persecutor of the church whose Jewish name was Saul. He went on several missionary journeys and endured much hardship and difficulty for the privilege of representing God.
Barnabas: an early Christian, one of the prominent disciples in Jerusalem. According to Acts 4:36, Barnabas was a Cypriot Jew. He and Paul undertook missionary journeys together and defended Gentile converts against the Judaizers.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Gospel (verse 7)—Greek: euaggelizō (yü-än-ge-lē’-zō): to announce the Good News.
Gods (verse 11)—Greek: theos (the-o’s): God, a god, generally.
Lystra (verse 8)—Greek: Lystra (lü’-strä): a Lycanian city in the southern part of the Roman province Galatia.
Stoned (verse 19)—Greek: lithazō (lē-thā’-zō): pelt with stones.
I. INTRODUCTION
A. Ministry against the Odds

Without a doubt, the greatest influences Rome had on conquered territories were political and economic. One of the chief political concerns of the Roman Empire was to ensure peace and loyalty within the empire by exerting forceful control over local authorities. Conquered nations were allowed a measure of local autonomy, but their local governments were often reconfigured and were always in subjection to the Roman hierarchy. For example, the book of Acts mentions two Roman governors of Caesarea, namely Felix and Festus, who ruled the entire land of Judea from Caesarea. In addition to overseeing taxation, they were responsible for maintaining peace and order in their part of the Roman Empire.

B. Biblical Background

The book of Acts explores a unique time in the history of the Christian church. In many ways, one might characterize this time as the church at her best. This is because the church was so new and there had not been enough time for people to corrupt the ideal with a wide variety of spiritual aberrations and counterfeits to the genuine. One passage that beautifully expresses this spiritual ideal is found in Acts 2:42-47, in which the behavior and relationships of the early church is described in delicate detail:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”
What a powerful picture of what the church was originally designed to be! Contemporary congregations would do well to use this description as a template for successful congregational life. Interestingly, this

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Healing the Lame Man
   (Acts 14:8-10)

   And there sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother’s womb, who never had walked: The same heard Paul speak: who stedfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be healed, Said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped and walked.

Imagine being born without the ability to walk. You would not have been able to join in with the other children during play time. Participating in most sporting events would be out of the question. You would probably be unable to frolic with a pet, unable to swim, and if you lived during biblical times you would probably be dependent on someone to transport you wherever you desired to go. This is the likely life story of the man in today’s text. In many cases in those days, a physical impairment was made worse by the psychological/emotional self-negativity due to the social stigmatization and demoralization connected with being lame. This issue is still alive today. We must ask ourselves if we tend to view or treat special needs persons or physically challenged persons any differently than we do able-bodied individuals. If so, why do we do that and what would it take to raise our level of sensitivity regarding this issue? How would you feel if you were physically challenged, and how would you want to be treated?

The lame man listened to Paul as he was speaking. There is a blessing in listening to the Word of God being taught or preached. There are so many things that could potentially distract us from hearing God’s voice in any environment. Some possible distractions might include entertainment options, telephones, television, social media, acquaintances, responsibilities, employment, family needs, and even church business. Sometimes God speaks in a still, small voice, so we must secure a quiet environment in order to clearly hear the voice of God. People who have participated in church for a considerable amount of time must take care not to take church, worship, and God for granted. Never allow yourself to get too used to God. Although God is our friend, a certain amount of holy reverence must be reserved for glorifying God. The next time you experience preaching, teaching, or worship, make sure you listen intently and on purpose. Those who listen on purpose usually learn on purpose.

As the lame man listened, Paul noticed his interest and looked directly at him and “saw” his faith (verse 9b). How is it possible to see someone’s faith? Perhaps Paul was using his spiritual discernment to detect the sincerity of the lame man. Maybe the lame man was so intently gazing upon Paul that his eye contact and body language communicated a sense of faith. There is an important and essential
element of human faith and responsibility in the operation of miracles. Sometimes people tend to want God to act without their playing a part in the process. God is a God of relationships, and God takes pleasure when we participate in our own miracles. Like a proud and loving father, God wants us to achieve a healthy spiritual balance between depending on Him for what we need and depending on our own God-given wisdom, gifting, and abilities for success in life. In what areas of your life do you most need to purposefully activate or increase your faith?

Paul called out, “Stand up on your feet!” At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. Paul was direct and assured in his assessment of the situation. He possessed the unusual anointing to give a direct command that would result in physical healing when obeyed. What Paul did not possess was the ability to make that man obey the command.

**B. Men Mistaken for Gods**

*(Acts 14:11)*

And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men.

When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” The people in the crowd knew no other way to explain the miracle of the lame man being healed other than to attribute it to an act of their gods. However, this sentiment was the exact opposite of what Paul had intended to accomplish through his ministry in the town. Paul’s one and only purpose was to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ so that those who heard might turn away from their fleshly ways and turn toward a life of following the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ. When the people attributed the miracle to the power of the gods, Paul reflexively went into deep anguish mode. For the people to give the attention, the credit, and the glory to false gods for the lame man’s healing was the polar opposite of Paul’s desire. *Blasphemy* is defined as “the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence to a deity, to religious or holy persons, to sacred things, or toward something considered sacred.” Blasphemy was considered one of the most serious of sins. Accepting credit that is rightfully due to God is bordering on blasphemy, and this was certainly not part of Paul’s intention.

It may seem humorous or incredible for the people to mistake the disciples for someone who deserved deity status because of the role they played in the healing of the lame man. However, we must also ask ourselves if we have ever observed or have participated in similar misattribution in contemporary times. There are many examples of human beings being treated like gods, starting with the treatment of the pope. To a lesser degree, there are some bishops and pastors who are extremely revered and elevated. Subconsciously, we may expect our pastor to do things that we could do for ourselves, such as pray, lay hands on ourselves, or make certain decisions. Ministers are marvelous people, but no matter how gifted a person may be, he or she is still a human being, and nobody can take the place of God.

**C. The Hardships of Ministry**

*(Acts 14:19-23)*

And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and
Iconium, who persuaded the people, and having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead. Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

Notice how very quickly the focus of the crowd shifted from deification to degradation. This is reminiscent of when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey on what would become known as Palm Sunday. The people lauded Him, celebrated Him, and lined His path with palm branches. However, less than a week later, the fickle crowd had completely reversed directions. Whereas once they hailed Him, now they nailed Him. How could such a drastic shift occur? The mob mentality is unstable and not truly rooted in spiritual truth. This brand of fickle faith reveals the urgent need for deliberate discipleship. People who are not spiritually grounded tend to shift as soon as the winds of public opinion begin to blow in a different direction. In order to become spiritually grounded, more is required than periodic attendance at worship on Sundays. It will even require more than showing up in Sunday school class. Spiritual grounding is the result of discipleship, and discipleship develops endurance and perseverance. Few people desire to experience what it takes to persevere.

There is nothing known to humanity that can take the place of deep and abiding experiential faith and trust in Jesus Christ. The fruit of faith was demonstrated through the healing of the lame man, but it was also shown after Paul was stoned and dragged out of the city and presumed to be dead as a result of his injuries. When the other disciples gathered around him, he got up and walked into the city. Paul exhibited an indomitable, never-give-up spirit that matched perfectly with the harsh conditions he endured. One wonders if contemporary Christians could have tolerated such harsh treatment. For some saints, it is a major issue if someone passes them in church and fails to greet them. What if we were stoned for our faith? Would we walk back into the fray and continue to advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ? The word Christian means Christ-follower. If we are following Christ and Christ was persecuted, lied on, plotted against, tortured, and killed, would it not be reasonable for us to expect a little hardship from time to time? We can build up our tolerance to hardship by accepting what God allows and by believing that all things work together for good to those who love the Lord and are the called according to His purpose.

As is illustrated by verse 21, the Gospel cannot be stopped just because of a few conflicts, bumps, bruises, and obstacles along the way. Even close brushes with death cannot halt God’s truth from marching. The large number of disciples that were gained because the disciples did not give up is a testimony to the need to persevere in the faith. No one knows the lives and souls that are at stake when we are faced with the choice to continue spreading the Gospel or to quit. The focus of the disciples was strengthening and encouraging the church through traveling to the various cities. Since they did not have
access to advertising, physical healing and other miracles were used to attract attention, demonstrate God’s power, and build faith.

The ministerial, tag-team, dynamic duo of Paul and Barnabas did not just waltz into the city, preach the Word, and then leave the converts to fend for themselves. Instead, after teaching and training disciples and establishing a church, gifted leaders were appointed and placed in charge of continuing the process of discipleship. The leaders were called elders.

In addition to the appointment of elders for leadership, prayer and fasting were central to the discipleship process. A church with prayer is a church with power. A church without prayer is a church without power. In spite of the New Testament’s central focus on prayer, many contemporary churches continue to exist with little or no significant prayer emphasis and activity. Often the prayer meeting is the lowest-attended activity in the life of the church. Why? Even though we preach, teach, and testify about the power and importance of prayer, our actions as a community of faith prove differently. How many church songs have you heard regarding the subject of prayer? But the church choir alone is usually larger than the prayer attendance and sometimes larger than the Bible study. What would it take to reverse this trend?

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Even when we are sincerely accomplishing good things for the glory of God, our best intentions can sometimes be misunderstood, as was Paul’s in this lesson. When that occurs, look to God for strength to continue the tasks with which you are gifted to accomplish. There will be times when you would do good, but evil is present to distract you and impede your progress. When those times occur, be still and know that God is God and is still on the throne of life. Let persecution improve your faith rather than drown you in doubt. Your faith will give you the power to persevere in the presence of any obstacle.

PRAYER

Lord, help us to persevere through persecution in order to elevate the cause of Your kingdom and to communicate the powerful Good News of Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(December 11-17, 2017)

Faith to Persevere

MONDAY, December 11: “Rejoicing while Struggling and Suffering” (Colossians 1:24–2:5)
TUESDAY, December 12: “Both Jews and Gentiles Called to Repent” (Acts 17:22-33)
WEDNESDAY, December 13: “Believing and Suffering in Christ” (Philippians 1:27-30)
THURSDAY, December 14: “Suffering so Others May Be Saved” (2 Timothy 2:1-10)
FRIDAY, December 15: “Consolation when Afflicted” (2 Corinthians 1:3-11)
SATURDAY, December 16: “Speaking Boldly, Forced to Flee” (Acts 14:1-7)
SUNDAY, December 17: “Proclaiming Christ Faithfully despite Angry Opposition” (Acts 14:8-11, 19-23)
NEW WHEN Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, 2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. 3 When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. 5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, 6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. 7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.
8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.
9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.
10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.
11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.
12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.
8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”
9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.
10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.
11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.
12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People often search for the best ways to honor someone they look up to and revere. How can we best honor a special person? The Magi traveled a great distance from their own country to Bethlehem in order to give gifts and pay homage to Jesus, the child born King of the Jews.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Contrast the role and motives of the Magi with those of King Herod.
2. Sense the nature of the commitment of the Magi to come and worship Jesus.
3. Worship Jesus with a commitment no less than that demonstrated by the Magi.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—The Magi represent the first of many characters in the Bible to worship Jesus.
—The number of Magi is not given. In the Middle Ages, the Western church decided there were three Magi and assigned them names. The Eastern church tradition is that there were twelve Magi.
—Bethlehem is the town of David’s ancestor, Ruth, and of David’s immediate family.
—The fact that Magi from afar had come to honor the baby Jesus apparently served to intensify Herod’s fears of the Christ child and His possible rivalry or threat to his own reign as king.
—The quotation in Matthew 2:6 comes from Micah 5:2, 4 concerning the location of the birth of the Messiah.
—Originally applied to priests and experts in
mysteries in Persia and Babylon, the term “wise men” had by this time come to refer to people who studied/practiced such things as astrology, dream interpretation, sacred writings, wisdom, and magic.

—Herod (a.k.a. Herod the Great) was appointed by Rome to govern as king over the Jews from about 37 to 4 BC. He was known as a ruthless ruler who murdered one of his wives, several sons, and many other relatives during his reign.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**

—Herod was afraid that a young male child had been born who would become the new king and take his place as the ruler over the Jews.

—The star appeared to declare the birth of Christ and to guide the Magi to Jesus.

—With ill intent, Herod requested that the Magi report to him when they found the child.

—The Magi searched for Jesus, who was by then a toddler.

—The Magi worshipped Jesus and brought special gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, which represented His holiness, His royalty, and His death, respectively.

—The Magi received a divine warning not to return to Bethlehem to report to Herod, so they returned home (probably through modern-day Iran, Iraq, Yemen, or Saudi Arabia) another way.

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**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

There is no definitive consensus among biblical scholars on the exact date of authorship for the book of Matthew. However, most place the chronological genesis of the text between AD 70s and 90s. Researchers at Boston College contend, “The scholarly consensus holds that the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke were composed independently of one another sometime in the 80s or 90s [AD]. Both used a written form of the Gospel of Mark as source material for their own narratives. In addition, because both Matthew and Luke contain a large amount of material in common that is not found in Mark, most researchers hold that both Evangelists also had a collection of Jesus’ sayings that they incorporated into their works.”

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**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

According to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, in AD 66, Judea was in an uproar. War broke out between the Jews and the Romans. Jewish rebel fighters held their own for a while, but in AD 70 the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, which was the very center of Jewish social, religious, and political life. In David L. Barr’s book *New Testament Story*, we learn that Matthew’s gospel was written in the aftermath of this chaos. Christianity was taking root throughout the Roman Empire and Judaism was trying to find its footing after its defeat. This is where the Pharisees come into the picture. This was a dominant and influential religio-political group located in the philosophical middle ground between the Sadducees on the far right and the Zealots on the far left. The Pharisees desperately desired to maintain Jewish unity, history, and traditional beliefs above all other concerns, including the upstart Christianity that espoused what they considered strange doctrines taught by Jesus of Nazareth. Pharisees categorically rejected the notion
of Jesus’ being the Messiah, and Christians were eventually banned from worship in the synagogues.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**Magi:** There are a variety of opinions regarding the meaning of the Magi. However, most agree that the original meaning of μάγοι is wise men who interpreted special signs.

**King Herod:** According to biblical researcher Jack Zavada, although Herod ruled over the Jews in Israel in the time before Christ, Herod the Great was not completely Jewish. Zavada further says that “he was born in 73 BC to an Idumean man named Antipater and a woman named Cyprus, who was the daughter of an Arab sheik. King Herod was a schemer who took advantage of Roman political unrest to claw his way to the top.”

**Mary:** In *History’s Women* by Mary Chadwick, the following information is shared about Mary the mother of Jesus: “Historically, little is known about Mary. It is told to us that Mary was a peasant woman from the tribe of Judah, and in the line of King David. She became the wife of Joseph, son of Heli (Luke 2:7). It is never mentioned who Mary’s parents were, but based on the knowledge of Mary’s character found in the Scriptures, it is believed that she came from a godly home of devout Jews.”

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

- **Bethlehem (verse 1)—Greek: Βηθλεὲμ (bē-thlé’-ēm):** house of bread, a town of Judea.
- **Herod (verse 3)—Greek: Ἡρῴδης (hā-rō’-dās):** Jewish king.
- **Magi (verse 7)—Greek: Μάγος (mā’-gos):** a sorcerer, wizard, magician.

**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

I.  **Introduction**
   A.  Jesus Is Born
   B.  Biblical Background

II.  **Exposition and Application of the Scripture**
   A.  Wise Men Seek God (Matthew 2:1-2)
   B.  Unwise Herod Worries and Plots (Matthew 2:3-7)
   C.  Wise Men Worship God (Matthew 2:8-12)

III.  **Concluding Reflection**

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I.  **INTRODUCTION**

A.  **Jesus Is Born**

   Jesus was born in an obscure environment in which only lowly shepherds acknowledged His arrival. God used a bright star to guide them to the place where Jesus was born. They were so compelled that they walked off their jobs in order to encounter Jesus. What if such a sacrifice were called for today in order to develop a relationship with Jesus? What fueled their search for the Messianic king? According to Don Schwager’s *Gospel of Matthew Commentary*, it was “faith in the promise of God to send a Redeemer, a King who would establish God’s reign of peace and righteousness. To know and to encounter Jesus Christ is to know God personally. In the encounter of the wise men with Jesus we see the plan of God to give His only Son as King and Savior, not just for
the Jewish people but for all the nations as well. The Lord Jesus came that both Jew and Gentile might find true and lasting peace with God.” The commission of those who follow Jesus is to bring the light of Jesus Christ to those we meet through witnessing with our lives and with our verbal testimony.

B. Biblical Background

Matthew, the author of the gospel that bears his name, was a tax collector. In his day, tax collectors were considered to be in the same social class as prostitutes, thieves, and murderers. Matthew’s original name was Levi, and this is why in the gospels according to Mark and Luke he is identified as Levi. It is not known if it was Jesus who changed his name to Matthew or if Levi changed it himself after he became a disciple. In either case, God used this name change to demonstrate that only God could change a tax collector named Levi into an apostle named Matthew. God used Matthew to be an example of how a life can be changed by the transforming power of His grace and mercy. The gospel according to Matthew was and is considered to be one of the most important documents of the Christian faith. It contains the fullest and most systematic account of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. However, the information contained in the book of Matthew is organized in a more topical fashion rather than an exact day-to-day record of the life of Jesus Christ. Thus, Matthew’s gospel is not a purely topical or chronological account of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. For a more complete understanding and appreciation of the gospel according to Matthew it should be understood that the name Christ means “Messiah” or “Anointed One” or “the Lord’s Anointed One” or “Jesus the Messiah.” The significance of this is that Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah points to Jesus Christ. Messianic prophecies are and will be fulfilled by Jesus Christ (spiritualfoundations.com).

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Wise Men Seek God
   (Matthew 2:1-2)

NOW WHEN Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

What made the Magi travel so far looking for Jesus? Travel in the region in and around Israel during the time of Jesus’ birth was far from convenient. The typical mode of transportation and the probable means utilized by the Magi was by way of camelback. One can only imagine riding by camel across the arid plains and blazing terrain for probably hundreds of miles. The personal motives and group motivation for the long and arduous journey had to be significant enough to warrant the extreme effort it took to make such a trip. The Magi were perceptive enough to understand the importance of the star that signaled the birth of the Christ child. There must have been thousands of babies born in Judea, but none of them were provided with a celestial billboard
to announce their arrival. Since the Magi were visitors from a distant locale, they assumed that such an important birth must have been known by people who lived in the area, so they began their inquiry in the capital city of the region—Jerusalem. They did not ask the blacksmith or baker, but they went to the top of the governmental food chain and inquired of King Herod. Little did the Magi know that their appointment would later mean Herod’s ethnic genocide of male Jewish children due to his personal insecurity and leadership paranoia.

In verse 2, the Magi report that their end motive and intention for their long journey is to worship the one who was born to be King of the Jews. King Herod assumed that anyone who was called a king posed a threat to him, so he sought to kill him. Thus, Herod’s reaction was the direct opposite of the Magi’s. Interestingly, the Magi referred to Jesus as “King of the Jews” at His birth, and the Roman official Pilate labeled Jesus “King of the Jews” at His death. Perhaps none of them fully realized that Jesus was not only King of the Jews, but He was also king of the whole world. But just because Jesus holds that title does not make it an automatic reality in our individual lives. Many people accept and desire Jesus to be Savior, but what about Lord? Contemplate and discuss the difference between these two. The word lord is defined as “someone or something having power, authority, or influence; a master or ruler.” What would it take to make Jesus owner, master, ruler, and king of our lives? Other terms that identify what it means to have Jesus as king are the words obedience and submission.

The end result and goal of our quest in life is to worship God, as the Magi did, in spirit and in truth. If we do everything else right but fail to worship God, all our efforts are in vain.

B. Unwise Herod Worries and Plots

(Matthew 2:3-7)

When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

King Herod could be described as a small man sitting on a big throne. He was an insecure ruler who was bothered by a baby. Obviously, no newborn is capable of giving orders and directing people, but whenever someone perceives a threat, whether it is real or not, it becomes real to them. Not only was Herod worried, but other people in Jerusalem were also disturbed. One of life’s biggest fears is the fear of the unknown. When something occurs that we do not fully understand, we tend to invent the part of the issue about which we are unsure. Often our mental inventions are totally unreal and out of touch with reality. No wonder they are scary and produce fear. This notion is multiplied when a large group of people are fearful of the unknown.

Verse 4 reveals that King Herod did not know where the Christ child would be born. The reason that King Herod was unaware of where the Messiah would be born was probably because he was not adept in Jewish history and theology. He was only a Roman client king of Judea serving Rome with pleasing the empire as his focus.
Through songs and sermons the town of Bethlehem has been immortalized as the birthplace of Jesus. It is important to remember that although Jesus may have been born in Bethlehem, it does not mean it was where Jesus lived and grew up. Mary and Joseph were traveling to pay taxes when Jesus was delivered. That birthplace of Bethlehem fulfilled a prophecy which would not have been accurate if Jesus had been born in His hometown of Nazareth. Bethlehem was a relatively small and humble town.

One of the divine assignments of Jesus was to shepherd the people of Israel. In John 10:11, Jesus proclaims Himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep.

C. Wise Men Worship God
(Matthew 2:8-12)

And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

In verse 8, we see an example of how one’s selfish personal agenda can so easily create a tainted motive for worship. King Herod had no intention of worshipping God when he asked the Magi to let him know when they found the Messiah. In fact, Herod’s intentions were exactly the opposite. Rather than wanting to worship Jesus, Herod wanted to kill Jesus.

When reading about the movement of the star in verses 9-10 it almost seems as if the star adopted the human qualities of a personal tour guide in order to assist the Magi in accurately locating the Christ child. In this case, the Magi followed the star until it stopped over the place where the child was staying.

Bible scholars surmise that when the Magi reached Jesus in verse 11 that Jesus may have been one or two years old. By this time Mary and Joseph were married and they had begun living in a house in Bethlehem. When the Magi finally laid their eyes on the Christ child who was there along with His mother, Mary, there was one instant, spontaneous, compelling, unmistakable reaction and response to Jesus: they worshipped! The gifts and offerings could come later, but first on the list of priorities was worship. We all should ask this question: Do I prioritize worship, or do I worship my priorities? Worship is not something that God considers to be optional.

Many things matter much, but worship matters most. God wants us to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Following their worship, the Magi offered gifts. Sacrifice and giving are natural, appropriate aspects of authentic worship. The gifts they offered were not cheap but expensive. Whenever we worship we should be able to give of our best because there is absolutely nothing too good for God.

God speaks to us in a variety of different ways. The most reliable way to hear God’s voice is through the written Word of God (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Holy Spirit can also give us guidance (see Hebrews 8:10-11). Godly
counsel can give us godly wisdom (see Proverbs 11:14). Other avenues of communications include confirmation (see Matthew 18:16), the peace of God (see Colossians 3:15), and timing (see Acts 18:13). Here in verse 12 the Lord spoke to them through a dream.

Genuine worship should be transformative. Once we have tasted of God’s essence and experienced close contact with the Almighty, we cannot return to business as usual. This alteration was reflected in the behavior of the Magi. After being spiritually elevated through worship, the Magi could see life from a totally different perspective. Things that used to seem right and make sense now seemed wrong. Consequently, the Magi saw the Christ, worshipped Him, and gave Him their gifts. They became different men, further separated from those of their own country because they did something and saw something and experienced something others had not. How about you? What difference does worship make in your life? Look for practical ways to make the most of your personal and corporate worship time with God. Make sure it is God-centered, Word-based, bathed in prayer, and done in a spirit of excellence. Make sure your worship is real, because the effectual, fervent prayer and worship of the righteous avail much.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

The Magi serve as great examples of what it means to diligently seek God regardless of the sacrifice or inconvenience. They also modeled the need to practice spiritual discernment, to avoid distractive traps, to practice transformative worship of God, to give sacrificially to God, and to leave the worship experience differently than when we came. All of these life lessons can be practiced and applied in order to enable our relationship with God to become all that it is capable of achieving.

PRAYER

Thank You, Lord, for being born into the world and coming to give us life more abundantly. Although You came as a child, You did not remain a child but You grew up and made a difference. Just as You grew up in Judea, please also grow up in us to a place of peace, love, and spiritual prosperity. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(December 18-24, 2017)

Faithful Seekers of the King
MONDAY, December 18: “God Saves Moses” (Exodus 1:22–2:10)
TUESDAY, December 19: “Light to the Nations” (Isaiah 42:1-9)
WEDNESDAY, December 20: “A Peaceful Ruler from Bethlehem” (Micah 5:1-5)
THURSDAY, December 21: “Faithful to God’s Plan” (Matthew 1:18-25)
FRIDAY, December 22: “Escape for Family; Massacre of Infants” (Matthew 2:13-18)
SATURDAY, December 23: “Holy Family Setstle in Nazareth” (Matthew 2:19-23)
SUNDAY, December 24: “Wise Men Seek then Worship Jesus” (Matthew 2:1-12)
Lesson 5

December 31, 2017

FAITH TO UNITE

**ADULT/YOUTH**
**ADULT TOPIC:** United We Stand
**YOUTH TOPIC:** United despite Diversity

**CHILDREN**
**GENERAL LESSON TITLE:** Faith Brings Us Together
**CHILDREN’S TOPIC:** Stand Together

**DEVOTIONAL READING**
Psalm 68:1-6, 15-20, 32-35

**ADULT/YOUTH**
**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Ephesians 4
**PRINT PASSAGE:** Ephesians 4:1-16
**ADULT KEY VERSES:** Ephesians 4:1-3
**YOUTH KEY VERSE:** Ephesians 4:3

**CHILDREN**
**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Ephesians 4
**PRINT PASSAGE:** Ephesians 4:1-16
**KEY VERSE:** Ephesians 4:3

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**Ephesians 4:1-16—KJV**

I THEREFORE, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,
2 With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;
3 Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;
5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism,
6 One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.
7 But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.
8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.
9 (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?)

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**Ephesians 4:1-16—NIV**

AS A prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.
2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.
3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.
4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;
5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism;
6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.
7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.
8 This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.”
9 (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?)
10 He who descended is the very one who ascended
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Understand how the seven “ones” of the faith relate to Christian unity.
2. Value the diversity of spiritual giftedness in contributing to Christian unity.
3. Commit to exercising spiritual giftedness in the pursuit of Christian unity.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Many people search all their lives for something that will make them feel grounded, whole, and in sync with life. Where can they find that something? Paul told the Ephesians that even though they had many different gifts, their faith in Christ would bring them unity and help them grow together in love.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Understand how the seven “ones” of the faith relate to Christian unity.
2. Value the diversity of spiritual giftedness in contributing to Christian unity.
3. Commit to exercising spiritual giftedness in the pursuit of Christian unity.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—In verses 4-6, Paul listed seven elements of Christian unity: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God.
—Paul reminded believers to live according to the values of the Spirit of God—in humility, gentleness, unity, love, and peace.
—Paul used the metaphor of the body of Christ for the church.
—This passage provides a theological rationale for the behavior that is required of the church.
—Ephesians 4 is commonly seen as the transition in Paul’s letter from doctrinal teaching (chapters 1–3) to exhortation (chapters 4–6).
In the pagan context in which Paul’s letter was written, humility was seen as a highly negative characteristic as compared to pride.

In verse 8, Paul adapted Psalm 68:18 for his purposes, shifting from the divine victor being the recipient of gifts to the giver of gifts.

Chapter 4 in the book of Ephesians has often been quoted in ecumenical circles as a kind of hallmark of the call to Christian unity, and as such it can be compared to Jesus’ prayer in John 17, where Jesus called for the unity of believers, especially John 17:11, 20-23.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**

—Paul reminded believers to live according to the values of the Spirit of God—humility, gentleness, unity, love, and peace.

—Keeping peace within the body of Christ maintains a level of unity that allows the ministry of Christ to take place.

—Paul emphasized that the Holy Spirit brings unity in one’s faith because there is only “one Lord, one faith, and one baptism” (verse 5).

—Christ’s gifts are given to promote the building up of His kingdom.

—God’s people must not be tricked into false beliefs.

—If we grow up with Christ as our Head, the whole body will be built in love.

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**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

Most scholars agree that Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians toward the end of his first imprisonment in Rome (see Ephesians 3:1; 4:1), which would have been around AD 61. The letter was hand-delivered by Tychicus (see Ephesians 6:21), just as the letter to the Colossians had been (see Colossians 4:7-9). In AD 60–62, during Paul’s Roman imprisonment, he wrote what is now called the prison epistles, which include the books of Colossians, Philemon, Philippians, and Ephesians. This was where the book of Acts ended. He was on house arrest, which means that he was free to talk, but not free to go wherever he desired to go. During this imprisonment, Paul wrote a letter to the church at Ephesus and the surrounding areas.

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

Ephesus was a big, prosperous harbor city in Asia Minor. Ephesus boasted of international trade, a thriving silversmith guild, and a theater that seated twenty thousand people. The church in Ephesus existed within a context and culture that was directly affected by the primary attraction in the city, the Temple of Diana. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. This huge temple was dedicated to the goddess Diana (Artemis). People from all around the world flocked to the great temple. At the temple and on the streets were goddess prostitutes. The common belief was that more of the goddess’s power could be experienced through sexual intimacy with her priests and priestesses. The immorality of the city flourished and flooded over into the society and families. The disciples of Jesus lived lives that were in stark contrast to the culture of the temple or Diana. They belonged to God and served only God, which undoubtedly set them apart from the culture, if not at odds with the culture (Paul J. Bucknell’s Teacher’s Commentary).

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**Tychicus:** The individuals who stand out in this passage are of course Paul (who has already
been described in detail through these lessons) and Tychicus. There is much probability in the conjecture that Tychicus and Trophimus were the two brethren who were associated with Titus. Tychicus was entrusted by Paul to carry letters to several churches.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Mature (verse 15)—Greek: auxanō (au-ksa’-nō): cause to increase, become greater, grow.
Unity (verse 13)—Greek: henōtēs (he-no’-tās): oneness, unanimity.
Worthy (verse 1)—Greek: axiōs (ä-ksē’-ōs): in a manner worthy of, worthily.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction
   A. Unity and Maturity in Christ
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. Live a Worthy Life
      (Ephesians 4:1-7)
   B. Clarifying the Mystery
      (Ephesians 4:8-13)
   C. Committed to Living in Truth
      (Ephesians 4:14-16)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION
   A. Unity and Maturity in Christ
      In Ephesians 4, Paul established the important priority of unity and maturity in the body of Christ (see verses 13-16). This epic passage provides the parameters by which to measure spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is referred to by Paul as “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” which is the primary purpose and end goal of the church. Although the Great Commission involves evangelism, evangelism is not an end in itself, but only a means toward making disciples. Evangelism gets them in, and discipleship builds them up and gets them back out in order to get others in. The church is just a vehicle designed to produce mature disciples, much like the car factories in Detroit are designed to produce automobiles rather than hamburgers. This is the church’s true calling: to demonstrate to the world the character, spirit, unity, and power of a people whose lives are yielded to the Spirit of God.

   B. Biblical Background
      The book of Ephesians answers important practical questions such as, What does the ideal Christian church look like? How should Christians behave? Generous portions of instruction, encouragement, and advice are served up in this letter.
      Some of the themes in Ephesians include Christ’s having reconciled the whole of creation to Himself and to God. People of all nations are united to Christ and to one another in the church through the working of the Trinity. Paul used liberal amounts of imagery to describe the church. Just as Jesus used common items encountered in a typical day, Paul...
employed common images such as the body, the temple, a bride, and a soldier in an attempt to teach and explain the Gospel in a way that is simple, clear, and memorable.

Paul established that Christians are called to live lives that are holy and which give honor to God. The idea of unity can be seen clearly in the first chapter of Ephesians (Ephesians 1:3-10), and this principle of unity is seen throughout the rest of the entire book. God’s one eternal purpose is to unite one body of believers through Christ.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Live a Worthy Life

*(Ephesians 4:1-7)*

*I THEREFORE, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.*

In verse 1, Paul reminded his readers of his spiritual position and his physical condition. He expertly combined these two realities through the usage of the term “prisoner of Christ Jesus.” Since Paul had dedicated his life to spreading the Gospel, one might be tempted to wonder how God could allow Paul to be imprisoned at such a crucial stage in the life and development of the church. How could the word be spread while Paul was locked in a prison? One good thing that came out of Paul’s being imprisoned was that since he could not travel freely, he had to train others and send them to the churches and disciple them. This multiplied the ministry and got more people directly involved and on the road toward spiritual growth and maturity.

In verse 2, Paul spotlighted four personal characteristics that are reflective of the worthy calling mentioned in the previous verse. The first characteristic is humility, which is defined as a “modest opinion or estimate of one’s own importance or rank.” When this trait is in place, it allows us as disciples to be effective in reaching out to all kinds of people without regard to class, race, gender, or any other barrier that may potentially exist. The second characteristic is gentleness, which indicates softness, tenderness, and being mild-mannered or courteous in action. Such behavior goes far to open avenues of openness with other people. The next trait is patience, which is the capacity to accept or tolerate various kinds of trouble, inconvenience, or disappointments without becoming angry or upset. This quality is valuable for a disciple because it enables a focus on the goal of the Gospel without getting distracted by the inevitable obstacles in life. The fourth characteristic is love, which is biblically defined as the personification of God. To love, then, is to reflect God in one’s life for the benefit of someone else.

In the High Priestly Prayer as recorded in John 17:20-23, Jesus prays for unity among the believers. This is clearly repeated in verse 3. Out of all the prayers that Jesus could have prayed the night before His crucifixion, Jesus prayed that the disciples might be one. Jesus
was refreshingly aware of the power of oneness. Unity combines our collective power, and peace preserves our collective power.

The passage continues with the theme of unity and oneness among the body of Christ in verses 4-6. There are seven “ones” that are mentioned in verses 4-6. These ones include one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God. The importance of oneness in each of these areas is placed into perspective when we consider them otherwise. For example, observe how the power and importance of these words and concepts are diluted when they are paired with any word other than one: two bodies, three hopes, four lords, five faiths, six baptisms, and seven gods. Obviously, the impact is severely diluted. But when in its proper place, this chronic succession of ones combines to create a united chorus of togetherness that has the capacity to impact the world to the glory of God. Just about everything we know of is better together. If we only had two teeth, even they would be better together.

Grace, as Paul used it in verse 7, is known as God’s free and unmerited favor as manifested through salvation. Grace does not come in a one-fits-all size. Consequently, grace must be apportioned by the hand of our all-wise God, who already knows not to give some people too much grace and other people not enough grace.

B. Clarifying the Mystery
(Ephesians 4:8-13)

Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

Verses 8-10 are taken from Psalm 68:18, which is part of a Pentecost-related psalm in which Moses referred to his ascension to Mount Sinai. This psalm originally celebrates the triumph of God over the enemies of God’s people. However, Paul used it to concentrate on God’s ultimate victory over hostile spirits. The logic used here is that an ascent also involves a descent. Both the ascent and the descent are necessary in the work of the Redeemer in order to fulfill all things. Some interpret the statement referring to descending into the lower parts of the earth as a very early reference in Christian literature regarding Christ’s descending into the abode of the dead, and it may also refer to Christ’s incarnation.

Apostle Paul went immediately from a theologically mystical focus in verses 8-10 to a practical ministry theme in verses 11-13. Five different ministerial functions of the church are outlined there. Although many refer to this as the fivefold ministry of the church, such terminology indirectly assumes that the five offices mentioned is an exhaustive list. However, there are many other avenues of service, including deacons, counselors, psalmists, and so forth. The term apostle comes from the Greek apostolos, meaning “one who is sent.” While we as Baptists generally view the office of apostle as being closed, a church planter in our contemporary context can be seen as doing some of the work of an apostle. The current church culture seems to be infatuated
with exalted church terminology and titles such as “Prophet,” “Bishop,” “Archbishop,” “Apostle,” or “Chief Apostle” that set certain ministers apart from others. The bottom line is that anyone God chooses to use is simply a servant. In Christianity, the twelve apostles were the primary disciples of Jesus. The second usage of this term in Scripture is as one who is commissioned and sent by a community of believers to preach the Gospel.

A **prophet** is one who is especially assigned and empowered by God and commissioned to carry God’s message to the people through actions of foretelling, forthtelling, or both. An evangelist in some circles has only been seen as a guest preacher who conducts a revival. But beyond this understanding, an evangelist is generally seen as a protestant minister or layperson who is gifted by God to go out and proclaim God’s Gospel in a wide variety of places in a wide variety of ways to a wide variety of people. There can be an evangelist called to reach children, to work with drama, to utilize film, or through an endless variety of other means. The evangelist’s primary goal is to share the message of salvation. The terms “pastor” and “teacher” seem to be more familiar and more commonly used in our setting. A pastor is called to serve as a spiritual and practical shepherd over the lives of people both inside a church and outside of a church. The teacher is called to convey knowledge, insight, and life principles through utilizing a wide variety of tactics and tools.

Verse 12 characterizes the church of God as an equipping station for people to find their purpose and to fulfill their destiny. Genuine Christian ministry seeks no reward other than approval by God as a sacrificial expenditure of the gifts of grace that have been bestowed.

The culminating tone in verse 13 revisits previous observations and establishes spiritual growth and maturity as the desired goal of the disciple. Three virtues and values are highlighted as worthy of constantly striving toward: Christian unity, godly knowledge, and spiritual maturity. Unity in the faith is an ongoing focus and effort that must be forever maintained in order to be eventually gained. There can be no season in the church where unity is left to chance. Selfishness is a mark of spiritual childishness, but unity is a mark of spiritual maturity. Knowledge of God must be more than the acquisition of divine facts. Knowing God goes beyond head knowledge and moves to heart possession and life alteration because of that intimate relationship. The more we truly know God, the higher we should grow in God. This is moving beyond information to application. We are called to hunger and thirst after a kind of righteousness that goes far beyond just knowing God’s acts to becoming familiar with God’s ways. The *Interpreter’s Bible* states it well regarding spiritual maturity: “The illusion that Christianity is a religion of children and not for grown men and women is disastrous. It is widespread. A few memories of Sunday school are not enough for the storms of later life. Ignorance of Bible and creed and Christian doctrine . . . exposes thousands of men and women to every wind of doctrine . . . . A Christian without daily or at least weekly contact with Holy Scripture, and without continuous growth in understanding of its meaning, will soon find his faith withering away.” As we grow together in the faith, we pool our knowledge and help to sharpen one another on the road toward spiritual maturity.
C. Committed to Living in Truth
(Ephesians 4:14-16)

That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

Verses 14-16 of the biblical text suggest in a forceful way that as followers of Jesus Christ it is imperative that we be committed to speaking and living out the truth. This means that our speech will be honest and our actions reflect the integrity that is found in Jesus Christ and our relationship to Him. No doubt we have discovered that speaking the truth in love is not an easy task. It is neither convenient nor pleasant. In fact, it takes a lot of courage to do so. However, it is necessary.

We are also informed that it is through and in Jesus Christ that all believers are formed and fitted together into a body with one purpose, which is to elevate and emulate Jesus Christ. As a part of His body we are to reflect His character and participate in His work.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

In our universal human quest for purpose, significance, and wholeness, how can we rise above the frustration of successively struggling to attain these goals? Paul reassured the church at Ephesus that through the coordinated utilization of the many different gifts, their strengthened faith in God, and their demonstrated unity, they would be able to successfully grow toward individual and corporate spiritual maturity.

PRAYER

Lord, help us to be dissatisfied with remaining spiritual adolescents. As long as we live, let us never stop growing individually and collectively. Daily let us press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of spiritual maturity in Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(December 25-31, 2017)

Faith to Unite
MONDAY, December 25: “Live the New Life in Christ” (Ephesians 4:17-24)
TUESDAY, December 26: “Live as Imitators of God” (Ephesians 4:25–5:2)
WEDNESDAY, December 27: “Disciplined Living in Christ” (Colossians 3:1-11)
THURSDAY, December 28: “Leadership Gifts in the Church” (1 Corinthians 12:27-31)
FRIDAY, December 29: “Accept the Gifts of Weaker Members” (1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 22-26)
SATURDAY, December 30: “Experience the Unity of Spirit” (1 Peter 3:8-12)
SUNDAY, December 31: “Seek the Common Life from Above” (Ephesians 4:1-16)
A SINCERE FAITH

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT/Young Adult Topic: Living Your Convictions
Youth Topic: Watch What You Eat

CHILDREN
General Lesson Title: Sincere Faith
Children’s Topic: Stand Firm

DEVOTIONAL READING
Psalm 56

Daniel 1:8-21—KJV
8 But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.
9 Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs.
10 And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king.
11 Then said Daniel to the guard whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah,
12 Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink.
13 Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of

Daniel 1:8-21—NIV
8 But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.
9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel,
10 but the official told Daniel, “I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you.”
11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah,
12 “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink.
13 “Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.”

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the portion of the king’s meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants.
14 So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days.
15 And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king’s meat.
16 Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse.
17 As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.
18 Now at the end of the days that the king had said he should bring them in, then the prince of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar.
19 And the king communed with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: therefore stood they before the king.
20 And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm.
21 And Daniel continued even unto the first year of king Cyrus.

14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.
15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.
16 So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.
17 To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.
18 At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar.
19 The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s service.
20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.
21 And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People often find themselves confronted by contradictory requirements from different sources of authority. How do we resolve such conflicts? Daniel’s active faith combined with tact helped him resolve his conflict and remain obedient to God in terms of dietary requirements.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Explain the choice that Daniel and his companions faced and the outcome of the choice they made.
2. Aspire to have the faith of Daniel when confronted with contradictory directives from different sources of authority.
3. Identify situations that call for the exercise of faith as Daniel and his companions exercised theirs.
AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—Daniel’s active faith combined with tact helped him resolve his conflict and remain obedient to God in terms of dietary requirements.
—Daniel and his friends’ choice to maintain dietary purity illustrates their wisdom.
—The outcome of their decision leads others faced with similar decisions to look to Daniel, et al., as positive examples.
—Scripture records stories of faithful people who did not fare so well (temporarily speaking) when faced with tough choices (such as Stephen in Acts 6–7).
—The question at the heart of this passage—Can a person remain true to his or her faith in a hostile or secular environment?—would have been particularly relevant for Jewish people who had been scattered throughout the known world by war, occupation, and persecution.
—This passage implicitly presents readers with a contest between the God of Israel and the gods of a foreign power (cf. 1 Kings 18). The author demonstrated that the God of Israel is active and all-powerful—even in Babylon.

Teachers of CHILDREN
—Daniel and his friends were captured and brought to King Nebuchadnezzar’s palace in response to the king’s request for physically fit, well-educated, handsome, and wise young men.
—King Nebuchadnezzar wanted Daniel and his friends to forget their religion and culture and embrace the religion, culture, and language of the Babylonians.
—Daniel remained obedient to God despite the king’s attempt to get Daniel to forget and disobey God.
—Daniel’s diet proved to be an asset for him and his friends.
—Through their God-given ability, Daniel and his friends mastered the literature and science of the Babylonians.
—Because of their ability to make sound judgments, the king appointed Daniel and his friends to his staff as advisors.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
Daniel began his time in Babylon serving in Nebuchadnezzar’s court and eventually served under Darius the Mede. The Medo-Persians took over Babylon in 539 BC, which is only explicitly mentioned in Daniel 5:30-31.

Daniel’s refusal of the king’s portion ignited a series of events that form the storyline of the book of Daniel. In 604, Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. In 585, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are introduced. In 539 BC, Daniel interpreted the handwriting on the wall. In that same year, Daniel was thrown into the lions’ den and survived and had a series of dreams, and prophesied the overthrow of Persia and the deliverance of Israel.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
The experiences included in the book of Daniel are some of the most well-known and loved in the Bible. Daniel demonstrated God’s complete control over time and nations by giving detailed prophecies about the succession of kingdoms and rulers. Daniel foretold the eventual establishment of Messiah’s kingdom, which would overthrow the kingdoms of this world. Some scholars date Daniel’s authorship in the second century BC. The
book of Daniel is important for anyone seeking to delve into biblical prophecy and understanding; it is also a prerequisite to understanding the book of Revelation. Both books fall into the category of writings known as apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic writing is a genre of prophetic writing that developed in post-exilic Jewish culture, describing or prophesying the complete destruction of the world. The word apocalyptic refers to events resembling the end of the world; momentous or catastrophic.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Ashpenaz: chief of the king’s court officials responsible for training the young men in the culture, religion, and ways of the Babylonians.

Daniel: Daniel was carried off to Babylon in 605 BC by Nebuchadnezzar the Assyrian, but was still living when Assyria was overthrown by the Medes and Persians. In spite of the captivity of the Jews, Daniel enjoyed the highest offices of state at Babylon, but he was ever true to Jerusalem.

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: These three Hebrew youths were trained in Babylon along with Daniel and promoted to the rank of Magi. They all were given Chaldean names but refused to succumb to Chaldean ways. They personified the principle of being in the world but not of the world.

Nebuchadnezzar: king of Babylonia from about 605 BC until about 562 BC. He constructed the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple.

King Cyrus: the king under whom the Babylonian captivity ended. In the first year of his reign, he was prompted by God to make a decree that the Temple in Jerusalem should be rebuilt.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

“Carried Into” (verse 2)—Hebrew: bo (bō): to carry in; lead in.

Royal (verse 8, NIV)—Hebrew: pathbag (pathvag’): delicacies, food.

Servants (verse 12)—Hebrew: ‘ebed (eh’ved): the name of two Israelites.

Wisdom (verse 20)—Hebrew: Chokmah (khok-mā’): skillful, wise.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction
   A. Daniel, a Man of Faith and Courage
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. Daniel’s Refusal and God’s Favor
      (Daniel 1:8-10)
   B. Daniel and His Friends Are Tested
      (Daniel 1:11-16)
   C. The Blessings of Obedience
      (Daniel 1:17-21)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Daniel, a Man of Faith and Courage

Daniel the man is an example of someone that others would want to emulate. His courage and his faith in the face of danger are at once inspiring and encouraging. A true leader’s mettle is tested not in times of peace and calm, but in times of trial. Daniel was a prophet who moved to the beat of God’s drum rather than caving in to the pressures
of peers and public opinion. Daniel was un-daunted by the threat of persecution, the pos-
sibility of pain, or even the specter of death because the power of his purpose outweighed the problem of his fears. His real-life example of faith encourages believers to stand in the face of persecution because, in the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, “he who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”

Daniel’s name means “God is my judge” (Dan= judge; ie= my; el= God). Some of Daniel’s contemporaries include Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Ezekiel, and Obadiah. Daniel was a man of principle, perception, power, and prayer. He was born around 625 BC, which was also the birth date of the neo-Babylonian Empire. He lived during the reign of King Jo-
siah until the fall of the neo-Babylonian Empire under the conquest of Cyrus, king of Persia.

B. Biblical Background

The book of Daniel is written in both He-
brew (the language of the Jews) and Aramaic (which is the language of the Babylonians) (1–2:4a—Hebrew; 2:4b–7:28—Aramaic; 8:1– 12:13—Hebrew). The book of Daniel bridges the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament. It also serves as the founda-
tion for the book of Revelation. The book of Daniel covers Daniel’s age from about nineteen to about ninety-two. Daniel was a Hebrew of noble birth and was taken captive as a youth by Nebuchadnezzar in 605 BC. After the Baby-
lonians tapped Daniel and others to be taught the customs and language of the Chaldeans, Daniel continued in Babylon throughout the seventy-year period of exile. Daniel became an official in the court of Nebuchadnezzar and continued to serve other monarchs until the first year of Cyrus (536 BC; see Daniel 1:1-2, 21). The strong faith and spiritual deter-
mination of Daniel resonates throughout the book. Although he was given a pagan name, he refused to accept the pagan culture. His insis-
tence on standing up for right was powered by his great faith and reflected in every aspect of his life, from his diet to his worship practices.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Daniel’s Refusal and God’s Favor

(Daniel 1:8-10)

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs. And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king.

Today’s text begins with Daniel’s refusal to blend into Babylonian culture, which most expected to be automatic. The cultural proto-
ocol was for Daniel to be trained by Ashpenaz in the areas of culture, education, and religion. The young men who were placed under his care were the cream of the crop in terms of physical appearance and intellectual capac-
ity. According to Daniel 1:4, they were indi-
vidually selected to be “without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to un-
derstand, and qualified to serve in the king’s
“palace.” He was to teach them the language and the literature of the Babylonians. They were given new names and offered the king’s food, but Daniel and his friends refused. This action by the fearsome four Hebrews runs counter to the current cultural mentality of some contemporary Christians who primarily celebrate wealth, prosperity, and the finer things in life. But wealth, elegance, and extravagance do not always signify God’s blessings. The blessings of God come from having a humble, contrite, courageous, and obedient heart, which is reflected in the life of Daniel through verses 8-10.

Daniel’s unusual mentality is immediately on display in verse 8 as he refused what is royal in order to obey what is right. While some may have interpreted the access to the king’s royal food and wine as a privilege, Daniel viewed it as defilement. No matter how good something may seem physically, the most important aspect is what effect choosing it has spiritually. The word resolved is used to describe Daniel’s decision. It means to decide firmly on a course of action. This means that we cannot afford to wait until the choice is upon us to decide what to do. To “resolve” means to develop a predetermined decision so that when specific topical problems present themselves in the future they have already been solved in the past. To resolve is to presolve. Of course, this requires personal discipline and perseverance in order to be successful.

Verse 9 indicates that Daniel had a good rapport with his captors, specifically with the official set over him and the others brought into the king’s service (verse 3). The “favor and compassion” displayed to Daniel did not occur because of Daniel’s good looks or great intelligence. It was God who caused the official to show favor to Daniel. The official wanted to grant Daniel’s cuisine request, but he was worried that if Daniel’s appearance looked worse than the others, the official would be on the receiving end of the king’s unfavorable repercussions. In those days, if a king’s worker failed to fulfill his job it was not a matter handled by the human resources department. The king could have his head. This was not a matter to be taken lightly. Regardless of one’s level of earthly authority, God always has the last word.

B. Daniel and His Friends Are Tested (Daniel 1:11-16)

Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king’s meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants. So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days. And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king’s meat. Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse.

Daniel was so confident in God’s plan for the long term that he was able to speak by faith about the short term. Faith is the substance of what we hope for, not the things that we already have. Without faith, it would have been impossible for Daniel to speak in the present regarding a desired outcome in the future. Successfully speaking by faith is not a magic, automatic procedure. Statements of faith are in line with the revealed will of God.
or the intentional will of God, and thus they are backed by God’s power.

The discipline and dedication of Daniel’s diet inspired what is now known as the “Daniel Fast” (see also Daniel 10:2-3). This particular fast consists of vegetables and water without meat products. Vegetables in general are healthier than meat products, and water is generally healthier than sugary drinks. In Daniel’s case, the sugary drink was alcohol. Consequently, today when people go on a Daniel fast, they usually end up looking and feeling physically healthier—much like Daniel. In addition to the physical factor, the Daniel fast also has a spiritual focus that combine to make it a win-win situation. Daniel’s wholehearted dedication to God enabled Daniel’s life to make an impact on the world long after his physical life ended. In contemplating Daniel’s predicament as a servant and his proposal regarding food and drink, it would have been very easy and even understandable for him to have caved in to the pressure of the expectations to blend with the captor’s culture. But because of his faith and fortitude, centuries of lives have used Daniel’s testimony as a template for fidelity to God.

Daniel’s divine experiment, or test, was to trust God to intervene and assist him to achieve more with less by faith. And according to verses 12 and 14, Daniel expected the Lord’s intervention within ten days. This principle of achieving more with less runs counter to the typical consumer mentality of the past and the present.

It is interesting to note that indulgence often leaves the body and countenance in worse shape than it was before, and temperance often leaves the body and countenance in better shape than it was before. There is a physical price to be paid for overindulging in rich food and strong drink. Conversely, there is great benefit to be gained by exercising discipline in all areas. It is quite possible that Daniel’s discipline made an impression on the guard who provided him the alternative food. God is a great economist, and whenever God asks us to obey spiritual guidelines, our obedience is not just for our own benefit but also for the benefit of those who observe our obedience.

C. The Blessings of Obedience
(Daniel 1:17-21)

As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. Now at the end of the days that the king had said he should bring them in, then the prince of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king communed with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: therefore stood they before the king. And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm. And Daniel continued even unto the first year of king Cyrus.

While verse 15 indicates the external results of a Daniel fast, verse 17 indicates the internal results. God blessed Daniel and his friends’ faithfulness and discipline with exceptional “knowledge and understanding.” Understanding is comprehension, awareness, insight, and good judgment. The value and importance of wisdom cannot be overrated. To have a thorough understanding about something is to be able to fully utilize and
process information about it to the fullest advantage. Conversely, when we do not understand something, we are in danger of misusing it. Daniel and his friends, because of their faithfulness and obedience, were given knowledge and understanding by God. This knowledge and understanding spanned a wide variety of fields of expertise. In addition, Daniel was given the unique ability to understand and interpret a wide variety of dreams and visions. These skills made them very valuable, and they were able to parlay their abilities in the marketplace.

In verses 18-19, we see that promotion follows preparation and faithful discipline. In order for someone to be qualified to serve the king, a period of preparation time was prescribed. This period of time was set aside to remove or reduce possible instances of mistakes being made while working for the king—as such mistakes could be very costly. Verse 19 seems to indicate that all of the Israelites tapped for preparation for the king’s service were presented to the king. The chief official must have been particularly proud to present Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah to King Nebuchadnezzar. They looked good, they spoke well, they reasoned wisely, and thus they were deemed to be perfect candidates for royal service.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

In life, there sometimes seems to be two different sets of values, rules, and expectations about what it means to be right or wrong, good or bad, successful or unsuccessful. The two distinctly different contrasting perspectives are the world’s ways and God’s ways. The world’s ways often promote and glorify self. God’s ways promote the kingdom of God. How can we successfully live in the world but not be of the world? Daniel and his associates demonstrated strong confidence in God’s plan, and that confidence was rewarded with physical benefits, spiritual benefits, and career benefits.

PRAYER

Lord, grant us the grace to trust You and obey You even when Your ways contrast with the culture. May we always believe and remember that Your ways are not our ways and Your thoughts are not our thoughts. Consequently, our plans will not always be Your plan. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(January 1-7, 2018)

A Sincere Faith

MONDAY, January 1: “In God I Put My Trust” (Psalm 56)
TUESDAY, January 2: “The Lord God Defeats Baal” (1 Kings 18:30-39)
WEDNESDAY, January 3: “Faithful Living in Another Land” (Jeremiah 29:4-9)
THURSDAY, January 4: “Always Live as Salt and Light” (Matthew 5:13-16)
FRIDAY, January 5: “Be Faithful when Tested” (Revelation 2:8-11)
SATURDAY, January 6: “Training Plan for the Captives” (Daniel 1:3-7)
SUNDAY, January 7: “Stand by Your Principles” (Daniel 1:8-21)
Daniel 3:19-23, 26-28—KJV

19 Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated. 

20 And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. 

21 Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. 

22 Therefore because the king’s commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flames of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. 

23 And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.

Daniel 3:19-23, 26-28—NIV

19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual. 

20 And he commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. 

21 So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. 

22 The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. 

23 And these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

…..
26 Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, came forth of the midst of the fire.

27 And the princes, governors, and captains, and the king’s counsellors, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them.

28 Then Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king’s word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Sometimes people are challenged to endure great trials and tribulations because of their convictions. How can they face such challenges and remain faithful? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego boldly disobeyed the king’s command and were delivered from a fiery furnace by the power of God.

LESSON OBJECTIVES
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Explore the connection between the faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and their deliverance from the fiery furnace.
2. Sense the faith commitment of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.
3. Identify situations that can call for exercise of faith in the face of martyrdom.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—The book of Daniel has several themes, two of them being God’s sovereignty over foreign rulers and the ideal of heroic obedience, even to the point of death.
—Daniel and his companions, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, had previously gone against the king’s orders by eating different food than what the king ascribed to all the noble youth in training.
—After throwing the boys into the fiery furnace, King Nebuchadnezzar identified a fourth person in the flames as “God” and later called the figure “God’s angel.”
—The king blessed the God of Shadrach,
Meshach, and Abednego and decreed respect for their God.
—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego “fell down” into the fiery furnace (verse 23). This contrasts with their refusal to “fall down” before Nebuchadnezzar’s statue (verses 5-7, 10, 11, 15).
—Although Nebuchadnezzar blessed the God of Israel, he did not explicitly rescind his previous decree. Furthermore, three times he referred to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as “their God,” never acknowledging this God’s sovereignty over all creation.
—This story is the last we hear of Daniel’s three friends. Unlike other tales of biblical heroes (such as Daniel in Daniel 6:28 and Mordecai in Esther 10:2-3), there is no reference to their future long-term security. The narrative remains open-ended, letting later readers identify with the experience of these Jews from the past.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**
—Although King Nebuchadnezzar required that everyone bow down and worship the nine-foot statue he had made, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to worship the statue and break the commandment in Exodus 20:3.
—When questioned by the king about their refusal to bow down and worship the statue, the three Hebrew boys demonstrated their allegiance to and faith in God as they believed that God could deliver them from the punishment of the fiery furnace.
—After not heeding the king’s several warnings and threats, the three Hebrew boys were thrown into the fiery furnace.
—After a restless night, the king checked on the three Hebrew boys and saw four figures in the furnace.
—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not affected by the fire that was seven times hotter than usual.
—King Nebuchadnezzar decreed that the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be respected by everyone.

**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The ordeal regarding Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace reminds us that fire was one of the most powerful forces known to the culture of the time, and that is why the furnace had never lost a victim due to its overwhelming ferocity.

But God has a long track record of successfully delivering His people out of danger and into safety. Like a dedicated human parent, God has an internal obligatory instinct to deliver relatives and loved ones from danger. Anyone and anything that is standing in the way of God’s deliverance must be silenced, overcome, or destroyed. God is the most high God, and above this God there is no other. Not even the elements of the universe such as water, wind, or fire can withstand the power of God. It was significant that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were all cast into what was ostensively a consuming fire, and the Chaldeans actually worshipped the fire. Consequently, in some ways the fiery furnace represented a contest between the Chaldean god and the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

theologian Dr. John F. Walvoord observes that although all four youths shared an intelligent understanding of the Chaldean literature, only Daniel had the ability to interpret dreams and visions. Furthermore, although some critics devalue the importance of Daniel’s prophetic gift, Daniel’s contribution is just as important and more extensive than that of any other book of the Old Testament. As King Nebuchadnezzar questioned Daniel and his three companions, they were found to be “ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm.” Their intelligence and discernment were both from school smarts as well as spiritual smarts. The entire descriptive narrative stands as an eloquent testimony of the power of God in a dark hour of Israel’s history. The faithfulness of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego was even more significant in light of Israel’s captivity in a foreign land. God is constantly looking for those who would dare to be different, even in the face of danger. Their example of courage and spiritual fortitude stretches far beyond the borders of the Old Testament to our contemporary culture to serve as encouragement for us to stand strong regardless of the surrounding circumstances.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**Daniel:** Daniel was carried off to Babylon in 605 BC by Nebuchadnezzar the Assyrian, but was still living when Assyria was overthrown by the Medes and Persians. In spite of the captivity of the Jews, Daniel enjoyed the highest offices of state at Babylon, but he was ever true to Jerusalem.

**Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah:** These three Hebrew youths were trained in Babylon along with Daniel and promoted to the rank of Magi. They all were given Chaldean names, but refused to succumb to Chaldean ways. They personified the principle of being in the world but not of the world.

**Nebuchadnezzar:** king of Babylonia from about 605 BC, until about 562 BC. He constructed the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple.

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

**Babylon** (verse 1 [Background Scripture])—Hebrew: *Babel* (bä-bel’): an eastern Mediterranean empire and its capital city.

**Furnace** (verse 19)—Hebrew: *attuwn* (at-tün’): fireplace.

**Praise** (verse 28)—Hebrew: *bērak* (ber-ak): to kneel, bless; “blessed” (KJV).

**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

I. Introduction
   A. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. It’s Getting Hot in Here
      (Daniel 3:19-20)
   B. An Urgent Command
      (Daniel 3:21-23)
   C. A Great Miracle for God’s Glory
      (Daniel 3:26-28)

III. Concluding Reflection
I. INTRODUCTION
A. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were only focused on worshipping the one true God and thus were reported to the king. Facing death, they courageously stood before him as the king pressured the men to deny their God. Overcome with pride and rage over Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s refusing to deny their God, Nebuchadnezzar ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than normal. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound and cast into the flames. The fiery blast was so hot it killed the soldiers escorting them. But as King Nebuchadnezzar peered into the furnace, he marveled at what he saw: “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods” (Daniel 3:25, ESV). Then the king called the men to come out of the furnace. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out unharmed, with not even a hair on their heads singed or the smell of smoke on their clothing.

Needless to say, this made quite an impression on Nebuchadnezzar, who declared, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego” (Daniel 3:28, ESV). Through God’s miraculous deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that day, the rest of the Israelites in captivity were given freedom to worship, and protection from harm by the king’s decree.

B. Biblical Background

Consider several salient biblical points of interest regarding Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The fiery furnace was not a small household oven, but was a huge chamber used to smelt minerals or bake bricks for construction. The death of the soldiers who escorted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego proved that the heat of the fire was not survivable. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were young men when their faith was severely tested. Yet even threatened with death, they would not compromise their beliefs. There has been much speculation regarding the identity of the fourth person in the furnace. Was he an Old Testament manifestation and foreshadowing of Jesus Christ? Was he an angel? The text does not provide specifics other than what Nebuchadnezzar himself said: “the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.” We do know exactly that he looked like nothing they had ever seen or heard about before.

God’s miraculous intervention in a moment of crisis is not promised. If it were, believers would not need to exercise faith. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego trusted God and determined to be faithful without any guarantee of deliverance. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego courageously took their stand before Nebuchadnezzar, they did not know with certainty that God would deliver them. They had no assurance they would survive the flames. But they stood firm anyway.
II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. It’s Getting Hot in Here (Daniel 3:19-20)

Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated. And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace.

What transpired that changed King Nebuchadnezzar from being pleased with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to his being so enraged with them that he ordered them to be killed? King Nebuchadnezzar had invested a great deal of time, energy, resources, and training into these young Hebrews, with the goal of grooming them for personal service to the king. The positions for which they were being prepared were unquestionably desirable in that they would be exposed to many of the same privileges and amenities that the king would experience. No doubt, the king felt that he had done these three Hebrews a tremendous favor by including them in his exclusive royal circle of association. This elevation of the Hebrews was known by others, and they were undoubtedly envied by others because of what seemed like their good fortune. In reality, their elevation was an appointment by God in order to showcase His glory. In many cases, people assume they are in control when they are only being used to promote God’s greater plan.

King Nebuchadnezzar’s command that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than normal is evidence of the extent of his wrath. Not only did he want them burned, but he also wanted them savagely incinerated and completely obliterated. Anger is an emotion that garners a great deal of attention because it can make us react in drastic ways. The king allowed his anger to take him beyond reasonability to extreme actions. No doubt King Nebuchadnezzar was insulted by the bold and unyielding stance of the three foreigners who had been given desirable opportunities by the king’s administration. Upon closer examination of these three young men’s involvement in the king’s service, it does not seem that their involvement was voluntary. Instead, it was a type of conscription which resulted in their compulsory involvement in royal service.

B. An Urgent Command (Daniel 3:21-23)

Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Therefore because the king’s commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flames of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.

The three Hebrews were wearing garments that had been provided to them by their majority rulers. Perhaps the king’s administration felt that they could change these young men by changing their names and altering their clothing, as the king had initially changed their diet. But most of these were only exterior factors, as they refused to change their internal values. The integrity within them was stronger than the culture around them. They decided to live their lives as active thermostats rather than...
passive thermometers. Thermometers reflect the atmosphere, while thermostats affect the atmosphere.

The fire that was created to kill the Hebrews ended up killing some of the executioners. Death by furnace was a particularly cruel method of execution. But whenever violence runs rampant there are often innocent bystanders who are affected in the process. The soldiers who died while discharging their duties of throwing in the three were innocent casualties who paid a high price for doing their jobs. This is a reminder of the violence that occurs in some of our urban centers where crime is rampant and one need not be a participant in order to be a victim. There have been many instances in which someone was simply waiting at a bus stop or at school, or even sleeping in their beds and they became the unwitting victims of gun violence.

The violence that was directed toward the three Hebrews was a systemic problem perpetuated by King Nebuchadnezzar, who had the power to indiscriminately prey upon the weaker masses without cross-examination or due process of legal redress. However, as has been the case throughout biblical history and American history, God has often stepped in to intervene and to address the wrongs exacted by the oppressors. God plays a part in addressing sociological issues, and we as a church and as individuals also have a part to play in the process of building healthy communities.

C. A Great Miracle for God’s Glory

(Daniel 3:26-28)

Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, came forth of the midst of the fire. And the princes, governors, and captains, and the king’s counsellors, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them. Then Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king’s word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God.

King Nebuchadnezzar saw with his own eyes that his extreme efforts to annihilate Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had absolutely no effect on them. No doubt this was the first time that anyone had ever emerged from the furnace unharmed. As the officials crowded around the three Hebrews, even the most hardened skeptic or doubter had to concur that this was indeed a divine miracle and an act of God that could not be reproduced by human hands. Not only were they alive, but also the fire had not harmed their bodies in any way. Their hair was not singed, their robes were not scorched, and there was not even the smell of fire on them. Only God could perform such a miracle. God has a way of making believers out of unbelievers. God has a way of taking what others meant for evil and using it for God’s good.

When King Nebuchadnezzar witnessed for himself the power of God, it was enough to motivate him to instantly transfer his worship from a false god to the true and living God. Man-made gods are incapable of miracles. Even when ungodly people witness God’s
power firsthand, their natural response is praise! But God’s power was not the only thing that impressed King Nebuchadnezzar. In verse 28, he pointed to the outstanding fact that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego “trusted in [God] and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.” Amazingly, their disobedience and defiance of the king’s command touched his heart and served as a powerful witness to the king. We do not always know who is watching us and how our words and actions are making an impact on those within our sphere of influence. These three men serve as a shining example of what God can do when we are available, usable, faithful, and determined to obey God regardless of the costs.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

When it feels like our world is falling apart, we can remember that we are not alone and that our God is with us no matter what may come our way. We may not always be able to see God at work, but God still loves us and will not abandon us. God will not always spare us from the flames, but God will always be with us in the flames. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego showed great faith under pressure. We may never have to face a literal furnace, but in times of crisis we are called to stand with the Lord in everyday decisions. When we practice obedience, we are much better able to successfully face the fires of life in faith.

PRAYER

Lord, give us the grace and faith to refuse to compromise with the culture as we walk through the fires of life with You as our very present help. Let us never doubt that even if we must enter the furnace, You will be with us. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(January 8-14, 2018)

A Bold Faith

MONDAY, January 8: “We Must Speak about Jesus” (Acts 4:13-22)
TUESDAY, January 9: “We Must Obey God, Not Humans” (Acts 5:27-32)
WEDNESDAY, January 10: “Prayer, Fasting, and a Bold Move” (Esther 4:5-17)
THURSDAY, January 11: “All Ordered to Worship the Image” (Daniel 3:1-12)
FRIDAY, January 12: “We Will Not Serve Babylonian Gods” (Daniel 3:13-18)
SATURDAY, January 13: “King Astonished at Jews’ Survival” (Daniel 3:24-25)
SUNDAY, January 14: “God Delivers from the Fiery Furnace” (Daniel 3:19-23, 26-28)
A PRAYER FOR AN OBEDIENT FAITH

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: A Cry for Help
YOUTH TOPIC: In Need of Faith

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Daniel 9:1-19
PRINT PASSAGE: Daniel 9:4-8, 15-19
KEY VERSE: Daniel 9:19

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: A Prayer for an Obedient Faith
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Being Obedient

CHILDREN
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Daniel 9:1-19
PRINT PASSAGE: Daniel 9:4-8, 15-19
KEY VERSE: Daniel 9:19a

Daniel 9:4-8, 15-19—KJV

4 And I prayed unto the LORD my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments;
5 We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments:
6 Neither have we hearkened unto thy servants the prophets, which spake in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.
7 O LORD, righteousness belongeth unto thee, but unto us confusion of faces, as at this day; to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel, that are near, and that are far off, through all the countries whither thou hast driven them, because of their trespass that they have trespassed against thee.
8 O Lord, to us belongeth confusion of face, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against thee.

Daniel 9:4-8, 15-19—NIV

4 I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: “Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments,
5 “we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws.
6 “We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.
7 “Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame—the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you.
8 “We and our kings, our princes and our ancestors are covered with shame, LORD, because we have sinned against you.”
15 And now, O Lord our God, that hast brought thy people forth out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and hast gotten thee renown, as at this day; we have sinned, we have done wickedly.

16 O Lord, according to all thy righteousness, I beseech thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain: because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and thy people are become a reproach to all that are about us.

17 Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake.

18 O my God, incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name: for we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies.

19 O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God: for thy city and thy people are called by thy name.

15 “Now, Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day, we have sinned, we have done wrong.

16 “Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. Our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us.

17 “Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary.

18 “Give ear, our God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy.

19 “Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act! For your sake, my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People want release from feelings of shame that may result from past mistakes. Where can they go to find such relief? Daniel prayed to the Lord a prayer of confession, seeking forgiveness, mercy, and strength to obey.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Comprehend Daniel's prayer of confession.
2. Feel the need for Daniel's type of prayer today.
3. Pray as Daniel prayed.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—The unifying theme in Daniel 9 is trust in God’s righteousness despite defeat and suffering.
—Daniel’s prayer of penitence began with a communal confession of the failure of all the people.

—Daniel prayed not to get the people out of their punishment, but to circumvent the law.
—Daniel was demanding God’s justice be done to maintain the law to punish, to forgive, and to show mercy to the people.
—Daniel “turned toward the Lord” in prayer (Daniel 9:3), possibly a reference to the custom of facing Jerusalem while praying.
—Just as Daniel continued to pray even when threatened with death (6:11), here he prayed out of concern for the continued existence of his people. The gravity of the situation was highlighted by references to fasting, sackcloth, and ashes (verse 3).

—Daniel 9 has similar features to other Jewish penitential prayers from the Persian era, such as Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9. These include an emotional depiction of the community’s distress, a request for God to acknowledge their suffering, confession of sin, and acknowledgment of the awesome greatness of God.

—The prayer has two main divisions: (1) confession of sin (verses 4-14) and (2) a plea for God’s help (verses 15-19).

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

According to the Web site Judaismanswer.com, Daniel 9 is one of the most difficult and controversial prophecies in the Tenach. The reason given is that “Christians contend that it is a perfect calculation of the coming of Jesus. Jews see it as setting the outline for the second temple period which was a test as to whether the Jewish people would return completely to the service of HaShem or not. Scholars see it as referring to the desecration of the temple by Antiochus. At the core of these disagreements is the chronology of the Babylonian and Persian Kingdoms and their rule until the founding of the Seleucid kingdom.”

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

According to the Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary of the Old Testament, “Daniel adds to his interpretation of the dream the warning to the king to break off his sins by righteousness and mercy, so that his tranquility may be lengthened. Daniel knew . . . that the judgments of God were directed against men according to their conduct, and that punishment threatened could only be averted by repentance (cf. Jeremiah 18:7; Jonah 3:5; Isaiah 38:1). This way of turning aside the threatened judgment stood open also for Nebuchadnezzar, particularly as the time of the fulfillment of the dream was not fixed, and thus a space was left for repentance. The counsel of Daniel is interpreted by Berth, Hitz, and others, after Theodotion, the Vulgate, and many Church Fathers and Rabbis, as teaching the doctrine of holiness by works held by the later Jews, for they translate it: redeem thy sins by well-doing.”

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

**Lord:** The word *Lord* is defined as one having power and authority over others. It means a ruler by
right or preeminence to whom service and obedience are due. In the context of this lesson, the Lord was the one to whom Daniel prayed and offered an honest confession. Because of Daniel’s relationship with God and his diligent desire to keep God’s commandments, he was willing to go the extra mile because of his commitment to his Lord.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON
Covenant (verse 4)—Hebrew: bēriyth (ber·ēth’): pledge, alliance.
Rebelled (verse 5)—Hebrew: arad (mā·rad’): rebellious, revolt.
Righteous (verse 7)—Hebrew: tsēdaqah (tsed·ä·kä’): right; “righteousness” (KJV).

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON
I. Introduction
A. Confessions of a Passionate Prophet
B. Biblical Background
II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
A. Awesome Work by an Awesome God (Daniel 9:4-6)
B. Unfaithfulness to a Righteous God (Daniel 9:7-8)
C. Sinful People and a Merciful God (Daniel 9:15-19)
III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION
A. Confessions of a Passionate Prophet
   Daniel 9 is a significant prophetic passage in biblical literature and showcases Daniel’s elevation, application, and appreciation of the important prophetic role. There are many questions and various interpretations about Daniel’s prophecies, but the best way to understand Scripture is by comparing the Bible to itself. Anytime one does not understand a biblical text, always check the context. Understanding prophecy is not accurately accomplished by guessing about the meaning of a passage. The prophecies in the book of Daniel are remarkable because they provide a perspective about world history, predictions about specific prophetic periods, and a chronological prophecy about the coming Messiah.
   The value of the book of Daniel need not be relegated only to ancient prophecy because its relevance is as current as the morning newspaper. For example, the book of Daniel can be helpful in developing a deeper understanding of various current life events and why things happen the way that they do. The book of Daniel can also be helpful in encouraging us not to yield to peer pressure from the culture, no matter how strong or how many others have given in. The book of Daniel can be a source of spiritual power in the everyday events of life so that we can overcome the inevitable obstacles and walk in victory. Daniel can also inspire us to have a stronger belief in prayer and a more frequent practice of prayer.
II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Awesome Work by an Awesome God
   (Daniel 9:4-6)

And I prayed unto the Lord my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments; We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments: Neither have we hearkened unto thy servants the prophets, which spake in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.

The quotation in verse 4 is probably a vestige of a formal prayer. Although many contemporary prayers exclude personal confession, confession is nonetheless an integral and important aspect of a healthy and holistic prayer life. A healthy and balanced prayer life should include an element of adoration in which God is glorified simply because He is worthy. It should also include confession because confession helps us to be honest with God and puts us in a state of personal transparency. Prayer should also include an element of thanksgiving in which our appreciation is expressed to God for the blessings we have experienced and received. Another element is supplication, which includes any requests we have to bring before God. Closely related to supplication is intercession, in which we bring requests on behalf of someone else. Another aspect of prayer that is often overlooked is the element

B. Biblical Background

Although the book of Daniel contains a great deal of prophecy, the feel of the book falls more in line with historical or narrative literature because of its approach to the subject matter. The book of Daniel identifies several different empires within its scope and context as a prophetic book: the Babylonian Empire (625–536 BC) with Nebuchadnezzar as king; the Persian Empire (536–330 BC), which involved the leadership of Cyrus; the Grecian Empire under the leadership of Alexander the Great; and the Roman Empire, which grew out of Syrian control.

With this rich history as a contextual backdrop, J. B. Tidwell says that the book of Daniel proceeds to accomplish several purposes:

1. To magnify Jehovah, who delivers His servants, who is God of all nations, and who will punish idolatry, who is pure, righteous, and so forth.
2. To encourage his countrymen to resist the forces that threaten the foundation of their faith. This was done by the example of Daniel and his companions whom Jehovah saved.
3. To give a prophecy or vision of all times from the day of Daniel to the messianic period.
4. To outline the religious philosophy of history which would issue in a great world state, which the messianic King would rule by principles of justice and right, and which would subdue all kingdoms and have everlasting dominion. The main idea is the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God. As compared with the former prophetic books there are two new teachings: Concerning angels and concerning a resurrection from the dead (The Bible Book by Book).
of listening. A complete relationship with two entities involves dialogue rather than monologue. God has much to say if we would just take the time to listen.

God’s “covenant of love” that is referenced in verse 4 alludes to the relationship of trust, obedience, and promises made between God and God’s people. Essentially, if we draw near to God, God promises to draw near to us (see James 4:8). If we keep God’s commandments, we can expect God’s provision and protection. The commandments that God gives are not optional suggestions but are mandatory guidelines given for our good and for God’s glory.

Daniel directly addressed the wrongs of the people and came humbly before God by describing in detail the collective sins of the people. Glossy prayers generalize sinful shortcomings. Spiritual prayers specify our sins and ask God for forgiveness. The specific aspects of this confessional prayer include the people’s rebellion and turning away from God’s laws and commands. Rebellion is direct, willful, and intentional disobedience to a command. Rebellion is therefore slightly different from unintentional sin. Another area identified by Daniel was the failure of the people, the princes, the kings and the forefathers to heed the words and directives of the prophets. The mention of this specific sin highlights the ongoing need for God’s true prophets to speak truth to power that comes in the form of governments, rulers, or other opinion leaders.

B. Unfaithfulness to a Righteous God
(Daniel 9:7-8)

O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto thee, but unto us confusion of faces, as at this day; to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel, that are near, and that are far off, through all the countries whither thou hast driven them, because of their trespass that they have trespassed against thee. O Lord, to us belongeth confusion of face, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against thee.

In verses 7-8, the righteousness of God was contrasted with the unfaithfulness of the people. The result of this stark contrast between God’s holiness and the people’s sinfulness is a covering of shame. The prayer hinted at the fact that God’s chosen people were scattered in so many geographical locations because of their widespread unfaithfulness.

Verse 9 acknowledged that God did not deliver to the people the punishment that they deserved, but that due to God’s great mercy and grace God extended forgiveness instead of punishment. Mercy and forgiveness are two key complimentary aspects of God’s divine character. Because God is merciful, God forgives. The fact that God forgives exhibits God’s character. Since God’s people are called to be like God, we are also called to display an ever-increasing measure of grace and mercy to the people we encounter, and especially to those who need it most. God forgives us, and those who have been forgiven much love much.

C. Sinful People and a Merciful God
(Daniel 9:15-19)

And now, O Lord our God, that hast brought thy people forth out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and hast gotten thee renown, as at this day; we have sinned, we have done wickedly. O Lord, according to all thy righteousness, I beseech thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain: because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and thy people are become a reproach to all that are about us. Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and
his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord’s sake. O my God, incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name: for we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God: for thy city and thy people are called by thy name.

The children of Israel never forgot the massive miracle of their deliverance from Egyptian captivity through the supernatural parting of the Red Sea. Each generation was periodically reminded of this event through the continuous retelling of the story as parents taught their children and celebrated sacred holidays such as Passover. They appropriated the power exerted by God that was extended toward the Israelites. The same way that God delivered them back then is the same way God will deliver us from our Red Sea situations today. African-American sacred music is filled with allusions to the crossing of the Red Sea. Consider the lyrics in the gospel song “God Specializes,” by Roberta Martin:

“Have you any rivers that you think are un-crossable?
Have you any mountains that you can’t tunnel through?”

If God never does anything else, He has already done enough.

In verse 16, after Daniel detailed all the ways in which Jerusalem was lacking, he wisely reminded God of His mercy before he asked for God’s help. Daniel appealed to God’s great investment in His people’s present circumstance.

In verse 17, Daniel prayed to God as if the weight and fate of an entire nation were resting on the success or failure of his intercession. Like a seasoned spiritual defense attorney, Daniel prayed in a way that made it seem like it would be in the Lord’s best interest to respond affirmatively to Daniel’s request. Daniel lined up his request with that which is for God’s sake. This approach is a wise one for contemporary Christians who often pray according to our own will with our own priorities in mind. When the people of God begin to pray according to the will of God for the sake of the kingdom of God, amazing things begin to happen. Prayer is not about casting our own personal vision and expecting God to fund it. God has already cast the vision, and it is reflected in 2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people who are called by name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, forgive their sins and heal their land.”

Daniel spared no emotion in verse 18 in his passionate plea for God to be the one to immediately intervene and rescue the people from devastation and desolation. With carefully chosen words, Daniel constructed a pathway toward healing through harnessing the mechanism of personification and anthropomorphism. Daniel attributed human characteristics to the holy God and appealed to God’s senses as if God were human. The two senses Daniel targeted are the sense of hearing and the sense of sight. He was convinced that if only God would open His eyes and see the people’s state of affairs, He would be moved to act favorably. If only God would give His ear and hear what was happening, He would undoubtedly intervene. Daniel’s secondary appeal is not based on the righteousness of the people, but on the great mercy of our God.
This was a subtle indicator of the shallowness of human righteousness and the unfathomable depth of God’s mercy.

The personification continues here in verse 19 as Daniel’s passion reached a fever pitch. He was literally begging God. There is something about putting our whole heart into our prayer that gets God’s attention. When we dispense with the formalities and get real with God, God hears our cries. Daniel passionately entreated God to do three basic things—listen (or hear), forgive, and act. When God listens to our genuine cries, and hears our repentant hearts and sorrowful pleas, forgiveness follows. Forgiveness paves the way for restoration to take place. Daniel demonstrated how realistic repentance preceded restoration. He demonstrated marvelous insight into the heart of a father when he concluded his appeal to God by essentially saying, “God, You have got to help us because, after all, we are Your children and You are our Father; so that makes us family.” From both a human perspective as well as from a spiritual perspective, when all else fails in getting what you need, appeal to the bloodline. When assistance is truly needed, how could God refrain to help someone who bears His name?

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

In the song “Stand,” gospel artist Donnie McClurkin sings the lyrics

“After you’ve done all you can, you just stand.”

Daniel’s prayer reflected a similar level of resilience. Daniel’s prayer of confession reflected his desire for forgiveness, mercy, and strength to obey. These cannot be purchased in a mall, but must be secured from humbly approaching the throne of grace to receive help in the time of need (see Hebrews 4:16).

PRAYER

Lord, thank You for never leaving us even though we are often guilty of neglecting You and even rejecting You. Help us to lay down the empty distractions of this world and to seek first Your kingdom and Your righteousness. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(December 15-21, 2018)

A Prayer for an Obedient Faith

MONDAY, January 15: “Plea for God’s Forgiveness and Mercy” (Nehemiah 1:4-11)
TUESDAY, January 16: “Disobedience Results in Israel’s Downfall” (Jeremiah 25:8-14)
WEDNESDAY, January 17: “A Renewed Call to Repentance” (Joel 1:13-20)
THURSDAY, January 18: “Seeking Answers through Prayer and Supplication” (Daniel 9:1-3)
FRIDAY, January 19: “Prayer of Confession for Israel’s Sins” (Daniel 9:9-14)
SATURDAY, January 20: “Receiving Answers to Prayer and Confession” (Daniel 9:20-24)
SUNDAY, January 21: “Daniel’s Prayer of Confession and Supplication” (Daniel 9:4-8, 15-19)
A STRONG FAITH

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT TOPIC: Strength when You Need It Most
YOUTH TOPIC: Be Strong!

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Strong Faith
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Be Strong!

DEVOTIONAL READING
Revelation 1:9-18

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Daniel 10–11
PRINT PASSAGE: Daniel 10:10-19
KEY VERSE: Daniel 10:19

CHILDREN
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Daniel 10–11
PRINT PASSAGE: Daniel 10:10-19
KEY VERSE: Daniel 10:19a

Daniel 10:10-19—KJV
10 And, behold, an hand touched me, which set me upon my knees and upon the palms of my hands.
11 And he said unto me, O Daniel, a man greatly beloved, understand the words that I speak unto thee, and stand upright: for unto thee am I now sent. And when he had spoken this word unto me, I stood trembling.
12 Then said he unto me, Fear not, Daniel: for from the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words.
13 But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days: but, lo, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me; and I remained there with the kings of Persia.
14 Now I am come to make thee understand what shall befall thy people in the latter days: for yet the vision is for many days.
15 And when he had spoken such words unto me, I set my face toward the ground, and I became dumb.

Daniel 10:10-19—NIV
10 A hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees.
11 He said, “Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and stand up, for I have now been sent to you.” And when he said this to me, I stood up trembling.
12 Then he continued, “Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them.
13 “But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia.
14 “Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come.”
15 While he was saying this to me, I bowed with my face toward the ground and was speechless.
And, behold, one like the similitude of the sons of men touched my lips: then I opened my mouth, and spake, and said unto him that stood before me, O my lord, by the vision my sorrows are turned upon me, and I have retained no strength.

17 For how can the servant of this my lord talk with this my lord? for as for me, straightway there remained no strength in me, neither is there breath left in me.

18 Then there came again and touched me one like the appearance of a man, and he strengthened me,

19 And said, O man greatly beloved, fear not: peace be unto thee, be strong, yea, be strong. And when he had spoken unto me, I was strengthened, and said, Let my lord speak; for thou hast strengthened me.

16 Then one who looked like a man touched my lips, and I opened my mouth and began to speak. I said to the one standing before me, “I am overcome with anguish because of the vision, my lord, and I feel very weak.

17 “How can I, your servant, talk with you, my lord? My strength is gone and I can hardly breathe.”

18 Again the one who looked like a man touched me and gave me strength.

19 “Do not be afraid, you who are highly esteemed,” he said. “Peace! Be strong now; be strong.” When he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, “Speak, my lord, since you have given me strength.”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Sometimes circumstances of life cause us to feel like we cannot go on. Where can we find strength to do so? Daniel found strength in prayer and from the angel sent by God to encourage him and answer his prayer.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Explore the story of Daniel’s visit by an angel.
2. Sense Daniel’s state of mind during the angelic visit.
3. Thank God that God’s people always receive from God exactly what they need to know at the time—no more, no less.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—The exchange with the angel revolved around a number of repeated images: (1) the heavenly touch, which allowed Daniel to stand and speak; (2) the angelic message of comfort and purpose; (3) the threat from the “princes” of Persia and Greece; (4) and the introduction of Michael.
—Following the revelations in Daniel 9, Daniel mourned and fasted for three weeks before this experience. As in Daniel 9, the focus of Daniel’s concern was the unfolding of an uncertain future.
—Daniel’s visions were so disturbing that they caused weakness and pain. The Hebrew term tsîr is the same one used to describe the pains of a woman in labor (e.g., Isaiah 21:3-4).
—The angel’s message, “Be strong and courageous,” echoes similar words spoken to Joshua in Joshua 1:9.
—The encounter ends with a highly symbolic panoramic vision of the unfolding of history in the Persian and Hellenistic periods.
Teachers of CHILDREN

—The first time God’s messenger spoke to him, Daniel fainted.
—The messenger calmed Daniel’s fears, restored Daniel’s speech, and strengthened Daniel’s weakness.
—Although God sent a messenger to Daniel, he was delayed by powerful obstacles.
—God answers prayers in God’s own time.
—God sent the messenger to tell Daniel what would happen to the Israelites in the future.
—The man in linen was likely a messenger from God.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

Chapter 10 introduces what chapters 11 and 12 complete: apocalyptic visions and predictions about the future which are outlined in detail in those two chapters. Chapter 10 reveals the activities of the holy angels upon behalf of God’s people. This is also seen in Hebrews 1:14, but Daniel’s revelation goes beyond what is stated there. Daniel 10:1-3 reveals that Daniel fasted for three whole weeks. The purpose for this fasting was connected to his mourning. He was mourning because in the three years of Cyrus’s reign, the restoration of the Temple (Ezra 1–3, especially Ezra 4:4-5) had been stopped. This caused Daniel great concern and anxiety because of Daniel’s great love for the things of God. The chronology of this passage reckons from the overthrow of Nabu-nahid, that is from Cyrus’s accession to the throne of Babylon; the term “third year” that is referenced may be reckoned from his assumption of the title “King of Persia” (Coffman’s Commentary of the Bible). In Daniel 1:21, it is said that “Daniel continued even unto the first year of King Cyrus.”

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

Critics have attacked the book of Daniel because they claim the title “Cyrus, king of Persia” was not a contemporary way of referring to him. However, this would have been a perfectly legitimate way of referring to this king unofficially or even officially. Perhaps Daniel’s Babylonian name appears again here to assure the reader that this was the same Daniel whom we met in preceding chapters (Daniel 1:7). He was the Daniel who had unusual skill in understanding visions and dreams (Daniel 1:17). The message that came to Daniel was a revelation from God that included a vision. The emphasis on “message” in this verse may indicate that, in contrast to the preceding visions, this one came primarily as a spoken message, perhaps again from an angel. Daniel claimed that the message was true and that it involved a revelation of great conflict to come.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Daniel: Daniel was God’s prophet who initially rose to greatness through his refusal to eat food from the king’s table after being conscripted for service in the king’s royal palace. Daniel rejected the meat and insisted on a healthy diet of vegetables. His physical diet was only a small part of his overall regimen of total life discipline.

“Being” with Outstretched Hand: In Daniel 10:10, an unnamed spiritual being with an outstretched hand touched Daniel and spoke prophetically to him regarding his present and his future. His words were calming and reassuring and produced peace in Daniel.

Prince of the Persian Kingdom: a demonic, ungodly force that resisted the unnamed being from assisting Daniel.
Michael: A high-ranking archangel who intervened on God’s behalf to allow God’s will to be accomplished and God’s kingdom causes to prosper.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON


Michael (verse 13)—Hebrew: Miyka’el (mekā·āl’): Michael, an archangel.

Revelation (verse 1 [Background Scripture])—Hebrew: dabar (dā·vā’): a “revelation,” “thing,” or “message” means a word. This word is used more than 1,000 times in Scripture.

Vision (verse 14)—Hebrew: chazown (khā·zōn’): a sight (mentally); revelation, a dream.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction
   A. Demonic Resistance and Divine Assistance
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. The Answer to a Prayer (Daniel 10:10-12)
   B. Demonic Resistance to Divine Assistance (Daniel 10:13-17)
   C. Strength from Another Touch (Daniel 10:18-19)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Demonic Resistance and Divine Assistance

   Daniel 10 showcases a grand struggle between the forces of God and the forces of evil. The reader is offered a glimpse of the invisible warfare taking place between the dominion of darkness and the kingdom of light. The gods of the nations are idols, and behind every idol are demons (see Psalm 96:5; 1 Corinthians 10:20). Israel’s distress, difficulty, and suffering are at the center of the great conflict between God and Satan.

   The moment that Daniel beheld his vision of 536 BC, his strength was sapped. This vision is extraordinary, and Daniel needed several touches before he could fully receive the revelation. Three of the five touches Daniel received are recorded in chapter 10 (verses 10, 16, and 18). The others are in 8:18 and 9:21. The touches that made Daniel strong represent what God would do for Israel after a time of distress.

B. Biblical Background

   Assuming that Daniel was about fourteen years old in 605 BC, he would be approximately eighty-three years old during the period covered in chapter 10.

   Chapters 10–12 of the book of Daniel record Daniel’s final vision; chapter 10 introduces the vision, with chapter 11 going into greater detail. Chapter 12 gives a broad overview of the book and recasts the broad picture as it closes with peaceful words.
spoken to Daniel. An overview of chapter 10 is as follows: verses 1-3, setting for the vision; verses 4-6, Daniel’s vision experienced; verses 7-9, responses to the vision; verses 10-14, the angel speaks to Daniel; verses 15-17, Daniel’s weaknesses; verse 18–11:1, the angel ministers to Daniel. Daniel’s vision was preceded by three weeks of mourning. Perhaps this time of fasting from fine foods was the preparation Daniel needed to effectively receive the vision sent by God. In order for us to receive God’s message, we must be tuned in to God’s spiritual frequency.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. The Answer to a Prayer
   (Daniel 10:10-12)

And, behold, an hand touched me, which set me upon my knees and upon the palms of my hands. And he said unto me, O Daniel, a man greatly beloved, understand the words that I speak unto thee, and stand upright: for unto thee am I now sent. And when he had spoken this word unto me, I stood trembling. Then said he unto me, Fear not, Daniel: for from the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words.

Daniel 10:10 is not the first time that Daniel had been touched by an angelic being in human form. Daniel 8:16 records a similar instance of Daniel’s being touched by the angel Gabriel. Throughout the Bible, a physical touch represents a transference of disablement or enablement. In this case, the touch was intended to convey a sense of peace and assurance to Daniel. Instead, the unexpected nature of this occurrence produced the opposite: a state of trembling and fear because of the unknown. Perhaps Daniel was full of wondering and internal questions such as “Why am I being touched? Is this an enabling touch or a disabling touch?” Any time we are in the presence of God a sense of awe, wonder, and reverence should prevail. The Old Testament is full of worship descriptions during which the worshippers bowed down on their hands and knees to worship God. Bowing is a natural response to a feeling of humility and honor. Worship practices that are too casual fall short of this ideal and fail to capture the depth of a fervent worship experience in which pride is cast aside and the only focus is on adoration of God.

Verse 11 shows that Daniel was highly esteemed in the eyes of God. Few prophets receive a personal messenger sent by God to encourage and comfort them. The favorable, considerate words spoken to Daniel by the angelic being possibly helped to ease the shock felt by Daniel due to the angel’s unexpected appearance. The message brought by the messenger was evidently important enough that Daniel needed to be standing in order to be sure to receive it.

In verse 12, the spiritual being brought the news to Daniel that since the first day Daniel began to pray, the answer from God was on the way. Unfortunately, God does not provide spiritual “tracking numbers” for us to conveniently check up on God’s response to our prayers. Consequently, we usually must wait for God’s answer and trust God in the meantime. God’s timing is not our timing, and God’s ways are not our ways. The time that we must wait is the time to build our faith. When it comes to receiving an answer from God, it is much better to be humble than to be in a hurry.
B. Demonic Resistance to Divine Assistance
(Daniel 10:13-17)

But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days: but, lo, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me; and I remained there with the kings of Persia. Now I am come to make thee understand what shall befall thy people in the latter days: for yet the vision is for many days. And when he had spoken such words unto me, I set my face toward the ground, and I became dumb. And, behold, one like the similitude of the sons of men touched my lips: then I opened my mouth, and spake, and said unto him that stood before me, O my lord, by the vision my sorrows are turned upon me, and I have retained no strength. For how can the servant of this my lord talk with this my lord? for as for me, straightway there remained no strength in me, neither is there breath left in me.

The twenty-one days that the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted the angel was the same amount of time that Daniel prayed and fasted (see verses 2-3, 13). What if Daniel had not prayed and fasted? Sometimes our labor in prayer and our fasting may seem to be of little consequence because we may not be able to visibly observe any immediate, tangible results. But God’s ways are not our ways, and God’s timing is not always our timing. It is not our job to understand everything, but to trust God in everything, whether seen or unseen.

Daniel actively waited for three weeks for an answer from God. The answer included events that would happen in a time yet to come (verse 14). As such, part of our answer from God may involve waiting for a future revelation. Waiting on God need not be a negative or even neutral experience. We can put our faith in drive while we wait by focusing on the following: 1) We can continue to pray while we wait. There is no better opportunity to strengthen our prayer life than waiting. 2) We can develop a deeper trust while we wait. The opposite direction of trust is doubt. Doubt can consume us, but trust can groom us. 3) We can reject options that are mere substitutes for God’s genuine will.

A sense of humility and utter unworthiness are traits exhibited by Daniel throughout the entire exchange with the divine messenger and is expressed again in verses 15-16. Humility is an important trait in spiritual growth and maturity. We can have no spiritual ability without personal humility. There are many ways to be humble: (1) Be grateful for what you already have without complaining about what you feel you need. (2) Be open and teachable. Nobody knows everything, and we are placed on earth inherently dependent upon others and their knowledge. (3) Be yourself because you are a unique individual. (4) Accept the bad with the good and the bitter with the sweet. (5) Live your life to make a difference for others and for the sake of the kingdom more so than for yourself.

Daniel was overwhelmed and amazed by the combination of the angel’s appearing and the message spoken directly to him by the angel. The experience is so intense that it momentarily seemed to rob Daniel of his speech, his strength, and even his breath (verse 17). Sometimes the glory of God is just too much to contain, and different people express this state of being in various ways. Some people cry, some people shout, and others may even jump or run. The mode of expression is not as important as the willingness to be in touch with God’s power and to express it in appropriate ways. (Assignment: Identify a list of appropriate and inappropriate ways to express passion for God.)
C. Strength from Another Touch  
(Daniel 10:18-19)

Then there came again and touched me one like the appearance of a man, and he strengthened me, And said, O man greatly beloved, fear not: peace be unto thee, be strong, yea, be strong. And when he had spoken unto me, I was strengthened, and said, Let my lord speak; for thou hast strengthened me.

Sometimes a first touch or even a second touch is not enough to give us what we need to become who we need to be. The multiple touches bestowed upon Daniel served to reassure, to remind, and to revive the prophet Daniel (verse 18). Some people have been figuratively touched by the almighty God, and that single touch has accomplished so much. But they are still in need of another touch by the hand of God in order to fully experience the power of God in their lives. God’s touch upon our lives is not at all limited to the physical realm. God’s touch can strengthen our mental, emotional, financial, and relational areas and much more.

Throughout the Old Testament and New Testament biblical narratives, angelic figures have greeted humanity with the simple yet powerful statement “Fear not.” Verse 19 identifies God as the absolute source and giver of peace. When it comes to being an effective disciple, people who think they are already strong enough need not apply. The awareness of one’s neediness is a mark of spiritual maturity. A powerful paradoxical statement is found in 2 Corinthians 12:9: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Sometimes life throws us curveballs and we feel like we are about to strike out. In such times, we must remember how God has helped us in the past. We must also place our faith in the written promises of God. We should also turn our attention toward heaven and make our requests to the God who can answer our prayers like He answered Daniel’s prayer, even though it took time to accomplish.

PRAYER

Dear God, thank You for never leaving us nor forsaking us. You keep Your promise to supply our needs according to Your riches in glory in Christ Jesus. You are our living Lord, our sovereign Savior, and our faithful friend. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(January 22-28, 2018)

A Strong Faith

MONDAY, January 22: “A Vision Sends Jacob to Egypt” (Genesis 46:1-7)  
TUESDAY, January 23: “Joshua, Be Strong and Courageous” (Joshua 1:1-9)  
WEDNESDAY, January 24: “Ezekiel Called to Speak to Israel” (Ezekiel 1:26–2:7)  
THURSDAY, January 25: “Paul Called to Macedonia in a Vision” (Acts 16:6-10)  
FRIDAY, January 26: “Daniel Sees a Vision” (Daniel 10:1-9)  
SATURDAY, January 27: “Time of the End” (Daniel 12:8-13)  
SUNDAY, January 28: “Be Strong and Courageous” (Daniel 10:10-19)
FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT TOPIC: Action Speaks Louder than Words
YOUTH TOPIC: Walking the Walk

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 2:14-26
PRINT PASSAGE: James 2:14-26
KEY VERSE: James 2:17

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: My Faith and My Works
CHILDREN'S TOPIC: Actions Speak Louder than Words

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 2:14-26
PRINT PASSAGE: James 2:14-26
KEY VERSE: James 2:26

Psalm 143

James 2:14-26—KJV
14 What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?
15 If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food,
16 And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?
17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.
18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.
19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.
20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?
21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?

James 2:14-26—NIV
14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?
15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food.
16 If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?
17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is useless.
18 But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.
19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.
20 You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?
21 Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?
22 Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?
23 And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.
24 Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.
25 Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?
26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.
23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend.
24 You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.
25 In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?
26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People know that talk is cheap and that actions speak louder than words. How are we to live in this regard? James said that our professions of faith must be matched by accompanying action.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Comprehend the teachings of James regarding the relationship between faith and works.
2. Regret those times when deeds have not lived up to words.
3. Serve God with actions that match faith expressions.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—Scholars have debated how James 2 relates to Paul’s teaching about “justification by faith.” Nevertheless, James’s topic was not about having a “saving faith” but how to be a “doer” of God’s Word, most importantly the “works of faith” (James 2:14-17).
—Faith without works (Greek: erga) is empty. (Greek: arge is a pun.)
—James wrote a diatribe, a Greek rhetorical style that used a fictional dialogue with an imagined partner, to argue his point (James 2:18-23).
—James authenticated his argument with examples of faith in action from the Torah (James 2:20-25): Abraham’s (Genesis 22:1-18) and Rahab’s (Joshua 2:2-21) faith were demonstrated by their actions.
—The dialogue was completed (2:26) repeating verse 17: faith without works is dead.

Teachers of CHILDREN
—Faith is reflected in both words and action.
—Faith and deeds are interrelated.
—Words without deeds is indicative of hypocrisy.
—Faith involves believing with all one’s being—mind, emotions, behavior, and spirit.
—An appeal is made to those who could do good deeds but instead offer words.  

—Abraham and Rahab are examples of persons with a “doing” faith.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON  
The book of James is considered to be the earliest of the New Testament epistles. Nothing in the letter goes beyond events that occur through Acts 9. The scattered Jewish believers of the persecution of Acts 8:1–4 appear to be the recipients (see James 1:1). The church was still meeting in synagogues, as suggested by James 2:2. These considerations all point to a date as early as AD 34–35, even though a few other biblical research sources place the origin at 48–49 AD.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON  
The recipients of the letter written by James are identified explicitly only in James 1:1 as “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” Some scholars believe that this expression refers to Christians in general, but the term “twelve tribes” would more naturally apply to Jewish Christians. A Jewish audience would be more in keeping with the obviously Jewish nature of the letter. The recipients were Christians, and it has been suggested that these were “believers from the early Jerusalem church who, after Stephen’s death, were scattered as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Syrian Antioch (see Acts 8:1; 11:19 and notes). This would account for James’s references to trials and oppression, his intimate knowledge of the readers, and the authoritative nature of the letter. As leader of the Jerusalem church, James wrote as a pastor to instruct and encourage his dispersed people in the face of their difficulties” (International Bible Society).

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON  
Abram/Abraham: Abraham was the husband of Sarah and a wealthy trader and herdsman—and the journey he made followed an ancient trade route. He had a special relationship with almighty God, and God promised him that he would become the father of many nations.  
Rahab: Rahab belonged to an idolatrous people and had a name meaning “insolence, fierceness,” or “broad, spaciousness.” Rahab ran an inn built on the Jericho city wall where she hid the spies on her rooftop. When the king of Jericho learned that the men had been to Rahab’s house, he sent orders for her to turn them over. She lied to the king’s soldiers concerning the whereabouts of the spies and sent the soldiers off in the opposite direction. In spite of her past profession as a prostitute, Rahab is included in the Hall of Faith (Hebrews 11).

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON  
Credited (verse 23)—Greek: logizomai (lo-gē’-zo-mī): reckon, charge with; “imputed” (KJV).  
Deeds (verse 14)—Greek: ergon (e’r-gon): “work” (KJV), labor, action.  
Offered (verse 21)—Greek: anapherō (ä-nä-fe’-rō): bear, bring up, offer up.  
Oppress (verse 6)—Greek: katadynasteuō (kä-tä-du-nä-styü’-ō): to overpower, quell, treat harshly.
I. INTRODUCTION

A. How to Have Faith

The book of James is a practical, concise, how-to guide on living the Christian life. Some Christians interpret the book of James as proving that good works play a role in our salvation, but this letter actually says that good works are the fruit of our salvation and will attract nonbelievers to the faith. James’s readers were suffering under Roman persecution and were living in poverty. Just as it does in today’s times, poverty and persecution tend to breed social and spiritual conflict. Many believers were living in a worldly manner, and James wrote to correct them and to challenge them to seek God’s wisdom to work out these problems while seeking to understand and bear with one another under the guidance and leadership of God.

B. Biblical Background

There were two apostles named James: one was the brother of John, and the other was the son of Alphaeus (see Matthew 10:2-3). One of the brothers of Jesus was also named James (see Matthew 13:55). After working through his own issues of faith in his brother, he later became the overseer of the Judean church. James was a very influential leader among the Jews and the church. It is said that he spent so much time in prayer that his knees became like those of a camel (Halley’s Bible Handbook).

Faith that is alive is demonstrated by a believer’s conduct. We should live out our faith in constructive ways. Trials will test every Christian. We become mature in our faith by facing temptations head on and conquering them with God’s help. Jesus commanded us to love one another. When we love our neighbors and serve them, we imitate Christ’s servant character. Our tongue can be used to build or destroy. We are responsible for our words and must choose them wisely. God will help us control our speech and our actions as well. Our wealth, however much or little, should be used to advance the kingdom of God. We should not favor the wealthy or mistreat the poor. James told us to follow the advice of Jesus and store up treasures in heaven through charitable works.
II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Faith without Works  
(James 2:14-18)

What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.

In Hebrews 11:1, faith is described as “the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.” Both Paul and James emphasized that justification before God must be demonstrated through the right kind of life. Saving faith produces demonstrative fruit. The audience for James’s letter had accepted the doctrine of justification, but their lives told a different story. Genuine faith is validated by righteous action. James skillfully built his argument regarding faith and prepared an intricate explanation of how a head knowledge of God without practical, effective action makes that faith irrelevant and ineffective.

Verses 15-16 bring us face-to-face with the question of faith and works. What is the use of being a Christian if one does not live in accordance with the personal, practical mission pattern consistently exhibited by Christ? The question from Christ for such behavior would be, “Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not the things that I say?” (Luke 6:46, NKJV). The mentality reflected in verses 15 and 16 is that of a person who wants the name and benefits of Christianity without the corresponding responsibility of caring for the underprivileged.

But Jesus made it clear that whatever we do or do not do to the least of these, we have done it unto Him.

Verses 17-18 represent the application of the faith illustration. If the extent of one’s professed faith merely consists of nice thoughts and pleasant phrases, then that faith has form without function. Like a lifeless carcass, it has mass but no movement. Faith and action are not exclusive, and they desperately need each other’s company in order to survive and to operate effectively. When faith is stripped of its ability to move and stands idle without implementing what it says it believes, then the only thing to do in that case is to bury that faith. One may ask, What happens to dead faith that is left lying around and not buried? The unpleasant answer is that it begins to stink. Unburied dead faith smells like “I talk a good Christian game but the only thing holy is the name.” Unburied dead faith gives a bad rap to those who are actually sincere. Churchgoers who have unburied dead faith usually talk the loudest but accomplish the least.

Ironically, the disciples who are sincere are just the opposite. They operate their faith with pure motives and have no desire to superficially broadcast their actions in order to turn the attention toward themselves.

Without faith as a foundational motive for our actions, it would be easy to do the right things for the wrong reasons. Effective works are the natural outcome of effective faith. William Barclay notes that “the fact that Christianity must be ethically demonstrated is an essential part of the Christian faith throughout the New Testament.”
B. A History Lesson on Faith
(James 2:19-23)

Thou believest that there is one God; thou dost well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.

James continued to address those who have great faith but little else to go along with their faith. Those individuals seem to take great pride and comfort in knowing that they intellectually accept the fact that there is only one God. There are some truths that are so fundamental that they are elementary. Some of James’s readers apparently exalted the belief in one God as an impressive characteristic. James took aim at this hollow boast and announced that their belief in one God is also shared by demons who are also practicing monotheists. Matthew 8:28-34 records an instance when Jesus was about to serve some demons an eviction notice. The demons begged Jesus to cast them into a herd of pigs. Not only do demons believe in God, but demons also have a real fear of God. This brilliant and humorous assessment by James puts those who have faith without works on a level lower than demons.

Perhaps James used a bit of holy humor or spiritual sarcasm to communicate his point when he said that demons believe and tremble. Albert Barnes notes, “The word here used (tremble) occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It means, properly, ‘to be rough, uneven, jaggy, with bristling hair; to bristle, to stand on end, as the hair does in a fright; and then to shudder or quake with fear.’ Here the meaning is that there was much more in the case referred to than mere speculative faith. There was a faith that produced some effect, and an effect of a very decided character. It did not, indeed, produce good works or a holy life, but it made it manifest that there was faith; and, consequently, it followed that the existence of mere faith was not all that was necessary to save men or to make it certain that they would be secure, unless it were held that the devils would be justified and saved by it. If they might hold such faith and still remain in perdition, men might hold it and go to perdition. A man should not infer, therefore, because he has faith, even that faith in God which will fill him with alarm, that therefore he is safe. He must have a faith which will produce another effect altogether—that which will lead to a holy life” (Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the General Epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude).

In verse 20, James resorted to labeling those as foolish who insist on faith without significant works to support their faith. To prove his point, he gave an impromptu history lesson on the life of father Abraham. The mere mention of Abraham would have carried much weight in the hearts and minds of any Jewish listener. How painful and difficult it must have been for Abraham to be willing to put action to his faith and be willing to sacrifice his son Isaac! If Abraham had to demonstrate true faith in such a significant and sacrificial manner, who are we to decline in much smaller matters?

Although Abraham did not actually sacrifice his son, his readiness to do so was observed through binding him and raising the knife. Consequently, Abraham was considered righteous by the almighty God just
as if he had actually performed the sacrifice on Isaac. Matthew Poole agrees regarding the righteousness of Abraham: “He was by his works justified as a righteous person, but not made righteous, or constituted in a justified state, by his works. The design of the apostle is not to show how sinners are justified in God’s court, but only what kind of faith it is whereby they are justified, viz. such a one as purifies the heart (Acts 15:9), and looks to Christ, not only as made righteous, but sanctification to them (1 Corinthians 1:30); and consequently not only rests on him for justification, but stirs them up to yield obedience to him.”

C. True Righteousness by Faith Alone
(James 2:24-26)

Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

After offering such a cleverly powerful example in the life of father Abraham in order to solidly prove his point about faith and works, James seemed to take a moment to relish the brilliance of it all. It is obvious that Abraham’s faith did not consist merely of believing that there is a God. Abraham’s faith operated by love, and he demonstrated beyond question the absolute fruit of his righteousness. Adam Clarke notes, “Obedience to God is essentially requisite to maintain faith. Faith lives, under God, by works; and works have their being and excellence from faith. Neither can subsist without the other, and this is the point which St. James labors to prove, in order to convince the Antinomians of his time that their faith was a delusion, and that the hopes built on it must needs perish” (Commentary on the Bible).

James took his readers for a loop and shocked them by first examining the righteousness of Abraham, the father of the family of faith, then contrasting it with the righteousness of Rahab, a prostitute in the family of faith. Surely many were not prepared for this comparison and the elements of similarity that James proposed. Albert Barnes concurs: “In the same sense in which Abraham was, as explained above—showing by her act that her faith was genuine, and that it was not a mere cold and speculative assent to the truths of religion. Her act showed that she truly believed God. If that act had not been performed, the fact would have shown that her faith was not genuine, and she could not have been justified. God saw her faith as it was; he saw that it would produce acts of obedience, and he accepted her as righteous. The act which she performed was the public manifestation of her faith, the evidence that she was justified.”

James’s example of Rahab’s faith was not based on everything in her life being spotless. For that matter, not even Abraham’s life could be labeled as absolutely perfect. James focused on her faith rather than on her faults. That is the same choice that we all have whenever we regard or assess anyone, including ourselves. So often we look on the outward appearance, but God looks upon the heart of the person. As a result of her heart being examined, Rahab was commended for her faith in receiving and protecting the messengers of God. When we commend the faith of a man who has been a profane swearer, or an adulterer, or a robber, or a drunkard, we do not commend his former
life, or give a sanction to it. We commend that which has induced him to abandon his evil course, and to turn to the ways of righteousness. The more evil his former course has been, the more wonderful, and the more worthy of commendation, is that faith by which he is reformed and saved.

Here at the end of his well-illustrated, well-articulated, well-substantiated argument, James restated his thesis and rested his case. Many people may make displays of compassion and benevolence. But if those displays are divorced from faith, then the action was nothing more than a spectacle designed to elevate self rather than glorify God. People who give or help in a gratuitous or ill-conceived manner will eventually be revealed for who they really are. Those who do good deeds for self-aggrandizement or any other impure motive already have their reward. In the words of Adam Clarke, “Where true faith is, there is God; his Spirit gives life, and his love affords motives to righteous actions. The use of any divine principle leads to its increase. The more a man exercises faith in Christ, the more he is enabled to believe; the more he believes, the more he receives; and the more he receives, the more able he is to work for God. Obedience is his delight, because love to God and man is the element in which his soul lives.”

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Our talk must be supported by actions, and they must not be in conflict with each other. It has been said that talk is cheap. But when talk is supported by actions, that talk becomes much more valuable. When our honorable speech and professions are matched by honorable actions, then we gain the right to be heard and believed. Let us have a marriage of our words and our deeds; and what God has joined together, let no one put asunder.

PRAYER

Lord, we know that the power of life and death is in the tongue. May our mouths and deeds always be in sync with each other so that everything that we say or do be for Your ultimate glory. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(January 29–February 4, 2018)

Faith without Works Is Dead
MONDAY, January 29: “Fulfilling the Law” (James 2:8-13)
TUESDAY, January 30: “The Royal Law” (Leviticus 19:13-18)
WEDNESDAY, January 31: “Teach Me to Do Your Will” (Psalm 143)
THURSDAY, February 1: “Justified by Faith” (Romans 3:21-31)
FRIDAY, February 2: “Christ Lives in Me” (Galatians 2:15-21)
SATURDAY, February 3: “The Spirit Comes through Faith, Not Law” (Galatians 3:6-14)
SUNDAY, February 4: “Faith without Works Is Dead” (James 2:14-26)
A DISCIPLINED FAITH

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT TOPIC: Taming the Tongue
YOUTH TOPIC: Watch Your Mouth

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Keeping the Faith
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Watch Your Tongue!

DEVOTIONAL READING
Psalm 34:1-14

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 3:1-12
PRINT PASSAGE: James 3:1-12
KEY VERSE: James 3:8

CHILDREN
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 3:1-12
PRINT PASSAGE: James 3:1-12
KEY VERSE: James 3:8a

James 3:1-12—KJV
MY BRETHREN, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.
2 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.
3 Behold, we put bits in the horses’ mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.
4 Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.
5 Even so the tongue is a small member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!
6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.
7 For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind:

James 3:1-12—NIV
NOT MANY of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.
2 We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.
3 When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.
4 Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.
5 Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.
6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.
7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind,
8 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.
9 Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.
10 Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.
11 Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?
12 Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.
9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness.
10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.
11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?
12 My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

**UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE:** Everyone knows the pain and destruction that result from hurtful words. How do we keep from causing such pain and destruction? James said that we should control our tongues so that only blessings come from them.

**LESSON OBJECTIVES**

*Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:*
1. Comprehend James’s analogies regarding use of the tongue.
2. Value a controlled tongue.
3. Pray for God’s help in using the tongue in ways that only result in blessings.

**AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED**

**Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH**
― These Scriptures emphasize personal speech ethics and that one’s faithfulness is demonstrated through one’s disciplined tongue.
― By saying “we” in verse 1, James identified himself as a teacher and acknowledged that he, too, was to be held to a higher standard.
― Although it is human nature for people to make mistakes, this text calls for a goal of perfection in controlling the tongue.
― A series of analogies about horses (verse 3), ships (verse 4), forest fires (verse 5), and animals (verse 7) develops the argument about perfect speech.
― The themes of controlling the tongue and negative speech are formally and foundationally introduced in the preceding chapters: (1) everyone should be quick to listen, but slow to speak (1:19); (2) if anyone thinks he or she is religious and does not bridle his or her tongue, his or her religion is worthless (1:26); (3) the unsympathetic language of persons wishing the poor well, but doing nothing to help them (2:3-6); and (3) persons claiming faith without works (2:18).
― In verse 9, the reference to “likeness of God” means human beings.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**
― It is easier to tame wild animals, birds, reptiles, and fish than it is to tame the tongue.
― The tongue is like a fire that burns out of control.
― Words once said cannot be called back.
THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The book of James is one of the general epistles, including 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude. These letters were sent out as circular letters to be passed around and read in several locations. The writer identified himself only as “James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1). Out of the four men named James in the New Testament, only two have ever been suggested as the author—James the brother of John (sons of Zebedee), and James the half-brother of Jesus Christ. Since the brother of John was martyred very early, about AD 44 (Acts 12:2), he is ruled out. The other James, the Lord’s half-brother, later became the leader of the Jerusalem church. There are parallels in the language of this letter and the speech of James at the Jerusalem council. The author spoke with a tone of authority and familiarity that would parallel with the position of James, the half-brother of Jesus.

The book of James is considered to be the earliest of the New Testament epistles. The letter clearly indicates the writer’s purpose and theme that believers should meet trials with faith and wisdom, resulting in joy (James 1:2-5).

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

There are many parallels between the literature of the New Testament and that of the Old Testament. The book of James in the New Testament can be compared to the book of Job in the Old Testament. Both are considered by biblical scholars to be the earliest books of each Testament. Both deal with the question of suffering in the lives of believers. There are also several similarities between the book of James and the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus focuses on “spiritual poverty” (Matthew 5:3) as did James (1:9-10). Jesus focuses on “meekness” (Matthew 5:5) as did James (1:21). Jesus highlights “the merciful” (Matthew 5:7) as did James (2:13). Jesus highlights “the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9) as did James (3:18). Jesus warns of the danger of “taking oaths” (Matthew 5:34-37), and James warned of the same (5:12) and even quoted the words of Jesus. Jesus warns of the “deception of riches” (Matthew 6:19) and James agreed (5:2). Jesus says, “a tree is known by its fruit” (Matthew 7:16), to which James again agreed (3:12). In fact, the more one reads the Sermon on the Mount and the book of James, the more parallels seem to emerge.

PROFUSE CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

The Tongue: By definition, the tongue is the fleshy muscular organ in the mouth of a mammal, used for tasting, licking, swallowing, and (in humans) articulating speech. But according to the Word of God in James 3:6, the tongue is “a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.” Obviously, there is quite a difference in these two descriptions. The first definition reveals the physical capacity of the tongue. The second definition articulates the capacity for spiritual healing or destruction by the tongue.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Curse (verse 9)—Greek: kataraoymi (kä-tä-rä-o-mī): to imprecate evil upon, to doom. Teach (verse 1, NIV)—Greek: didaskalos (dē-dä’-skä-los): one who is fitted to teach. Tongue (verse 5)—Greek: glōssa (glō’s-sä): a member of the body, the organ of speech.
I. INTRODUCTION
A. Requirements for Teachers

One of the most important characteristics for a spiritual leader is the ability to control his or her tongue. True wisdom produces humility and avoidance of strife and envy. Every spiritual gift has a positive and a negative side. For example, those who lead well must guard against arrogance and selfishness. Those who serve must guard against wrong motives and desire for recognition. In this scriptural context, when it comes to teachers, they must be careful with wrong ways of using their tongues.

In order to consistently speak with godly wisdom, we must be connected to the source of godly wisdom. As long as we operate in the flesh, our wisdom is very limited. James did a remarkable job of expertly and comprehensively describing and explaining the characteristics of godly wisdom. He used seven characteristics to identify godly wisdom:

1. Godly wisdom is pure. The Greek word for “pure” means “unmixed and untainted by any substandard extraneous matter.” In order to act with godly wisdom, our motives must be pure.
2. Godly wisdom is peaceable. Peace and harmony in relationships should be pursued with ferocity as if our relationships depended on it, because they do.
3. Godly wisdom is gentle. Gentleness reflects an easygoing nature that is saturated with love and peace.
4. Godly wisdom is reasonable. This term literally means “easily persuaded,” but that does not mean it is gullible or superficial. It indicates a willingness to listen, learn, love, and lift relationships to the next level.
5. Godly wisdom is full of mercy and good fruit. Mercy means we do not receive the penalties we deserve.
6. Godly wisdom is unwavering: This kind of wisdom is not temperamental but consistent. You can depend on this kind of wisdom in a wide variety of situations.
7. Godly wisdom is without hypocrisy. This wisdom is real, genuine, stable, and trustworthy.

B. Biblical Background

The subject of controlling the tongue is one that is practical and applicable for every time period of life. James emphasized the fact that tongue control is made possible when
we are controlled by the Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit’s guiding our thoughts, we would give in to a flesh-controlled life. Below are several biblical Background Scriptures that reflect and underscore the Bible’s strong emphasis on the tongue and various ways that we can use it to uplift, encourage, and instruct. **Proverbs 18:21**—“Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.” **First Peter 3:10**—“For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile.” **Proverbs 15:1**—“A soft answer turns away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.” **Proverbs 10:19**—“In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refrains his lips is wise.” **Ephesians 4:29**—“Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.” **Matthew 12:36**—“But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.” **Psalm 127:3**—“Children are an heritage of the Lord. The fruit of the womb is his reward.” **Psalm 19:14**—“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.” **Proverbs 15:28**—“The heart of the righteous studieth to answer: but the mouth of the wicked poureth out evil things.”

These are a few examples of the power and importance of how and what we say to one another. We can use our words to edify, deify, or even crucify others. The text today sets the record straight as to the right course for disciples of Jesus Christ.

**II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE**

**A. Teachers Beware!**

*(James 3:1-4)*

MY BRETHREN, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. Behold, we put bits in the horses’ mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

The tremendous responsibility of spiritual teachers is accentuated in this first verse of the chapter. Due to this great burden that is upon teachers, James concluded that spiritual teaching should not be a position and ministry that is pursued in a cavalier manner. James wanted to weed out those individuals who want to teach in order to promote their own selfish interests. Counting the cost would be a necessary procedure prior to becoming a spiritual teacher. The reason for this is that spiritual teachers will be held to a greater level of responsibility than others. Why are spiritual teachers judged more strictly than those in the ministry of helping or the ministry of music, for example? Luke 12:48 provides insight: “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” In James’s day, what distinguished teachers from other types of leaders was that they were the ones responsible for disseminating the catechetical tradition which included an established body of doctrine. If that was
incorrectly taught, it could negatively affect whole generations. Teachers were also expected to display in their words and in their lifestyle whatever they taught in their lessons.

Verse 2: We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what he or she says is perfect, able to keep his or her whole body in check. The word picture regarding stumbling in verse 2 means “to fail, to fall, to commit errors, and make mistakes.” James squarely placed everyone in this category. Due to our sinful nature, everyone falls into one of two categories: the caught or the uncaught. Romans 3:23 firmly establishes that all have sinned and come short of the full glory of God. Since we all have the struggle, we all need the Savior. There is no point in our pilgrimage when we can afford to relax and pretend that we are beyond sin or any of its kin. Not only do we have single faults, but we are also susceptible to multiple flaws. Sin has the capacity to attack us from several different vantage points, and that is why we need the full armor of God rather than just a few random pieces. The ability to control one’s tongue is given as an example and a test of perfection. Of course absolute perfection is impossible because, as Romans 3:10 states, “there is no one righteous, not even one.” That is precisely why we stand in need of the Savior.

James furthered his argument in verse 3. Even though the horse is a large and strong animal, one can successfully control the horse through controlling the mouth of the horse. Just as horses are unruly animals and must be controlled by bit and bridle, so the tongue is also unruly and must be controlled by the Spirit of God and intentional acts of discipline. It is from this metaphor that we get the admonition “Bridle your tongue.” Exercising the discipline of controlling the tongue results in gaining the discipline to control the whole person.

In verse 4, James continued the analogy about small things having a controlling influence on larger things. This time the metaphor shifts from a horse and bit to a rudder and ship. A ship is even larger than a horse and is constructed to successfully navigate through boisterous waves and tempestuous winds. The key to controlling a ship is the proper operation of the rudder. Proper rudder control could mean the difference between a successful voyage and a disastrous shipwreck. Likewise, effective control of the human tongue builds up people; failure to do so tears them down.

B. The Untamable Tongue
(James 3:5-8)

Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

Once again in verses 5-6 the cause-and-effect principle is employed by James to describe the tongue. This time the metaphor is that of a large forest which potentially can be consumed by just a small spark. Each of the metaphors used casts the horse, ship, or forest fire as something that is a challenge to control but not impossible to control. As Matthew Henry records, “Pious and edifying language is the genuine produce of a sanctified heart; and none who understand Christianity expect to hear curses, lies, boastings, and reviling from a true believer’s mouth, any more than they
look for the fruit of one tree from another. But facts prove that more professors succeed in bridling their senses and appetites, than in duly restraining their tongues.”

James exhausted the analogy by suggesting a long list of other creatures that have been tamed by humans such as one might see in a circus or zoo. Through time, patience, training, and persistence, people have been able to suspend and redirect the animalistic tendencies of birds, snakes, fish, and porpoises. The training exerted results in a gentler beast that submits to the will of the trainer. The untamed tongue never seems to tire of its temperamental activation and aggravation. Just as poison from the mouth of a viper or asp can bring damage and death to a human body, so the poison that drips from an untamed tongue can also produce damage to reputations and death to friendships. John Gill wisely notes, “Though in nature the tongue is fenced by a double fence of the lips and teeth, this is not sufficient to restrain it; it breaks all bounds, and is not to be kept in by nature, art, or argument: nothing but the grace of God can in any measure govern it, or lay an embargo on it. Its poison privately, secretly, and gradually destroys the characters, credit, and reputation of men; and is of fatal consequence in families, neighborhoods, churches, and states.”

C. Profanity and Praise Do Not Mix
(James 3:9-12)

Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

James created a distinct dichotomy between curses and praises in verses 9-10. When these two entities and sources become intermingled and confused, chaos ensues. Using the same mouth to offer both curses and blessings is a misuse of the tongue’s purpose and a misappropriation of the tongue’s potential. The purpose of the disciple’s tongue is to elevate rather than denigrate. When disciples pin other people with profane labels it is an egregious insult to God who is the Creator of those individuals. The situation described above is reminiscent of the church of Laodicea about which John wrote in Revelation 3:15-16: “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (NIV).

A double-minded person is always torn in at least two different directions. One of the best descriptions of a doubleminded dilemma is by Dan Delzell, who details seven characteristics of a double-minded disciple: “(1) There are two major influences which fuel your thought life. (2) You have a history with both of your major influences. (3) You find yourself compromising your thought life in one primary area. (4) You are led by the Holy Spirit except when that other issue is driving your thinking. (5) You only experience real peace in your heart when your mind is under God’s control. (6) You find yourself giving in to old habits very easily. (7) You would love to be drawn to the things of God only.” Ungodly habits are the fruit of an unstable heart and mind. The only way to overcome doublemindedness and to experience God’s guidance, peace, and joy is to fully embrace a single-minded approach to thinking, acting, and living.

Verses 11-12: Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My
brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. God hates inconsistency. The opposite of inconsistency is integrity. An example of inconsistency is having a semi-obedient relationship with the Lord as well as a semi-obedient relationship with the ways of the world. A practical approach to maintaining integrity is provided by Dr. Steven C. Riser in “Integrity: The Key to Character and the Cure for Inconsistency” (www.jashow.org):

“(1) Seek out godly mentors who can model consistent character. (2) Employ clear, direct, encouraging and edifying communication. (3) Place a high value on humility, sincerity, and transparency. (4) Engage in regular and radical self-confrontation (Psalm 139:23-24). (5) Esteem others better than yourself and be willing to sacrifice for others. (6) Always fulfill promises and do not make promises you cannot keep. (7) Develop a servant spirit as a significant part of who you are in Christ. (8) Commit yourself to adding value to others and helping them succeed. (9) Encourage those whom you serve to add value to others. (10) Regularly assimilate God’s Word and continuously submit to His Spirit.”

The daily practice of integrity is a process that guards against double-mindedness. People of character and integrity serve as positive influences on the lives of others to the glory of God. It is not easy to develop and maintain a life of integrity, but it is worth it in the long run. It has been said that many succeed momentarily by what they know (knowledge), others succeed temporarily by what they do (actions), but few succeed permanently by who they are (character).

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Words and communication are things that everyone uses regularly as we interact with one another. There is a great need to give intentional energy and spiritual focus toward loving God through the words that we speak to each other. There is a good reason that James 3 is included in the canon. Make sure you harness the Holy Spirit’s power and obey God’s guidelines so that your words will be a blessing to everyone that you encounter.

PRAYER

Lord, let our words be a blessing to everyone who hears us. Keep our minds in line with Your grace divine. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(February 5-11, 2018)

A Disciplined Faith
MONDAY, February 5: “People Live by God’s Word” (Deuteronomy 8:1-3)
TUESDAY, February 6: “Set a Guard over My Mouth” (Psalm 141:1-4)
WEDNESDAY, February 7: “Judged by Your Words” (Matthew 12:33-37)
THURSDAY, February 8: “From the Heart the Mouth Speaks” (Luke 6:43-45)
FRIDAY, February 9: “Infants and Babies Speak” (Matthew 21:14-16)
SATURDAY, February 10: “Say Only Yes or No” (Matthew 5:33-37)
SUNDAY, February 11: “Control Your Tongue” (James 3:1-12)
FAITHFUL DISCIPLES

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: Looking for Help
YOUTH TOPIC: Amazing Help

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Faithful Followers
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Doing for Others

DEVOTIONAL READING
1 Peter 1:3-9; 4:7-11

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 9:36-43
PRINT PASSAGE: Acts 9:36-43
KEY VERSE: Acts 9:40

CHILDREN
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 9:36-43
PRINT PASSAGE: Acts 9:36-43
KEY VERSE: Acts 9:36b

Acts 9:36-43—KJV
36 Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did.
37 And it came to pass in those days, that she was sick, and died: whom when they had washed, they laid her in an upper chamber.
38 And forasmuch as Lydda was nigh to Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent unto him two men, desiring him that he would not delay to come to them.
39 Then Peter arose and went with them. When he was come, they brought him into the upper chamber: and all the widows stood by him weeping, and shewing the coats and garments which Dorcas made, while she was with them.
40 But Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up.

Acts 9:36-43—NIV
36 In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor.
37 About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room.
38 Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, “Please come at once!”
39 Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.
40 Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, “Tabitha, get up.” She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up.
41 And he gave her his hand, and lifted her up, and when he had called the saints and widows, presented her alive.
42 And it was known throughout all Joppa; and many believed in the Lord.
43 And it came to pass, that he tarried many days in Joppa with one Simon a tanner.

41 He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive.
42 This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.
43 Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.


LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Identify key elements of active faith in the account of the resurrection of Tabitha.
2. Identify with both the feelings of loss and faith of those who sent for Peter after Tabitha had already died.
3. Adopt the faith of those who sent for Peter.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—The healing story, a demonstration of miraculous power (verses 36-43), took place in Joppa, which was a harbor in ancient Palestine and is now a suburb (Jaffa) in Tel Aviv. However, Peter was in the nearby town of Lydda when the disciples came to get him (verse 38).
—When the disciples heard Peter was in Lydda, two of the men went there and encouraged him to come to Joppa immediately. The text does not say, but the urgency (verses 38-39a) could have been based upon several things: (1) they expected Peter to bring Tabitha (Dorcas) back to life, (2) they needed to get back before the third day because the Jewish belief was that the soul passed permanently into the realm of the dead (Sheol) on the third day (cf. Psalm 6:5), or (3) because it was Tabitha, a woman of good works and generosity.
—When Tabitha died, her body was washed and placed in an upper room (verse 37). Washing of the body was the standard preparation or custom practiced by both the Jews and the Gentiles.
—The widows present in the upper room mourned deeply for the loss of their sister, fellow congregant, and benefactor (cf. Acts 6:1-2).
—Peter put them out, closed the door, prayed, and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Afterward, “Many believed in the Lord” (verses 40-42). Some commentators say that both physical healing and bodily resuscitation serve to point persons to the promise of “rising” to the new life that believers will eventually share with Christ.

Teachers of CHILDREN
—Dorcas/Tabitha was engaged in social service.
—Sewing was Dorcas’s gift.
—When Dorcas died, the Christians prepared her for burial.
—The people sent for Peter because they believed he could raise Dorcas from the dead.
—Widows showed Peter the results of Dorcas’s ministry.
—Through service to others, Dorcas demonstrated God’s love.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

Approximately between AD 63 and 70 was the time when a Gentile physician named Luke wrote the book of Acts. He was a disciple of Jesus Christ and therefore had an important perspective to share as he chronicled the events regarding the early church’s formation and foundation. Luke wrote to provide an accurate account of the birth and growth of the Christian church. In order to get a perspective of this chronological timeline, the events below immediately preceded the writing of Acts: AD 30, Jesus was crucified and the church started; AD 35, Stephen was martyred and Paul was converted; AD 44, James was martyred and Peter imprisoned; AD 46–48, Paul’s first missionary journey; AD 50–52, Paul’s second missionary journey; AD 53–57, Paul’s third missionary journey; AD 54, Nero becomes emperor; AD 57–59, Paul imprisoned in Caesarea; AD 59, Paul’s journey to Rome; AD 62, Paul released from prison; AD 67(?), Paul martyred; AD 70, Rome destroyed Jerusalem. This is the chronological backdrop of the writing of the book of Acts.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The book of Acts is addressed to Theophilus and all lovers of God. This piece of literature is vitally important because it provides a crucial link between the life and works of Jesus Christ and the life and works of the early church. It serves as a bridge connecting the four gospels with the epistles, or letters of Paul and others. Perhaps the most well-known verse of the entire work and one that serves as a touchstone for the atmosphere of the letter is Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Acts is ambitious in covering a wide variety of spiritual and ordinary happenings—actions or “acts”—in a wide variety of different cities and towns including Jerusalem, Samaria, Lydda, Joppa, Antioch, Cyprus, Psidian, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Philippi-Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinthis, Ephesus, Caesarea, Malta, and Rome. The introduction of the Holy Spirit as an abiding source of power happens in Acts, and the influence of this power and message cannot be contained in Jerusalem. Since Jerusalem was a melting pot of humanity with merchants and travelers from all over the world, wherever they returned following the Day of Pentecost, the power and story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ accompanied them to their destinations. The book of Acts provides a primary source historical account of the church as well as a theological handbook on church organization, Christian relationships, and the claims of Christ. Although the Gospel first went to the Jews, they largely rejected it. It was then presented to the Gentiles. The journey through Acts reveals the boldness of the believers, the suffering of the saints, and the preaching of the Gospel to the world.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Tabitha/Dorcas: The name Tabitha is Aramaic for “gazelle,” and the Greek translation of her name is Dorcas. In the Scriptures, she is introduced as a
disciple of Jesus who lived in Joppa and was known for her excellent garment artistry, her good works, and her giving to those in need. After Tabitha’s death, the disciples had heard that Peter was in Lydda (which is about twelve miles from Joppa), so they sent two men to ask him to come to them. Peter: Born as Simon, his name was changed by Jesus to Peter, meaning “rock” or “stone.” The apostle Peter was one of the primary disciples of Jesus who accompanied Him on almost every significant occasion. He was a Galilean fisherman and was the brother of Andrew. The brothers came from the village of Bethsaida (see John 1:43; 12:21). Peter was married and was also a follower of John the Baptist. Jesus made him into a fisher of men.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON
Believed (verse 42)—Greek: pisteuō (pē-styü’-ō): to entrust, have faith in.
Simon (verse 43)—Greek: Simōn (sē’-mōn): Simon the tanner.

Tabitha (verse 36)—Greek: Tabitha (tā-bē-thā’): a Christian woman, also called Dorcas. Her name means “gazelle” in Greek as it does Tabitha, its Aramaic equivalent.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON
I. Introduction
   A. The Makeup of Miracles
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. Death of a Dear Disciple (Acts 9:36-38)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION
A. The Makeup of Miracles

The value of miracles has been debated throughout the years. Should we believe God because of the miracle or in spite of the miracle? After the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples, but Thomas was not present. When Thomas heard of that miracle, he boldly declared that until he placed his finger in the nail holes of Jesus’ hand, he would not believe. When Jesus finally appeared to the disciples again and this time with Thomas present, Thomas declared, “My Lord and my God.” Jesus then uttered these iconic words: “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” That is John 20:29. The very next verse reads, “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book.” So which is better, signs and miracles to be performed in order to generate faith, or faith that is demonstrated with no miracle in sight? It seems that Jesus leans toward the ideal of faith based on belief with no visible signs of support.

In other situations, not only did Jesus show a sign or miracle, but also He actually initiated the performance of the miracle. Once when Jesus encountered a man who had
been lame for thirty-eight years, He asked the man if he wanted to be healed. The man began to explain how he was not able to get into what he believed was a healing pool and that no one helped him. Assessing his desire to be healed, Jesus told him to get up, and the man got up. This scenario reveals three components of a miracle: (1) There must be a power source present to produce the miracle. (2) There must be a desire for the miracle to happen. (3) There must be action exercised on behalf of the miracle’s recipient. Only when all three aspects are present is the process complete.

On some of the occasions when Jesus healed individuals privately (see Mark 1:41-42, for example), He instructed them not to divulge or publicize the fact that Jesus was the source of the miracle. Why would Jesus request such a thing? This is especially curious in light of the fact that Christ’s followers are commissioned to make Christ known. Jesus was keenly aware of His purpose and His season. Consequently, He did not want the excitement of His miracles to overshadow the centrality, importance, and necessity of the Word conveyed through His teachings. Miracle faith has a tendency to be shallow faith and also has a need to be reinflated by bigger, better miracles over time. The thrill of excitement over the miracles of God can never compare to steady and consistent love and obedience as faith puts on its everyday work clothes.

B. Biblical Background

Acts was written to evangelize people; to defend Christianity (apologetics); to protect against and reject false teachings; to introduce the presence, power, and purpose of the Holy Spirit; to chronicle the establishment of the church and of missionary activity; to showcase the normative relationships and organization within the church; and to address spiritual, historical, and cultural issues of Jewish and Gentile concern.

The book of Acts makes up about 28 percent of the New Testament. It contains crucial clues as to the construction of the early church and serves as a bridge between the Gospels and the letters of Paul and others. Acts is the forty-fourth book in the Bible and the fifth book in the New Testament. Acts is the first and only book of history in the New Testament. The last recorded words of Jesus prior to His ascension are recorded in Acts 1:8: “You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The book of Acts is the record of the Great Commission being performed. Acts begins to show the impact that the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus accomplished and what the presence of the Holy Spirit is capable of accomplishing. Acts covers the first thirty to thirty-five years of the history of the church and is the only book in the Bible that asks the question, “What must I do to be saved?” It then provides the answer, which is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Acts records ten specific examples of conversion, and three thousand in a group conversion on the Day of Pentecost (see 2:37-41). Through the first twelve chapters of Acts, the book centers on Peter. Through the final sixteen chapters, it focuses on Paul and his three important missionary journeys. These journeys included the establishment and strengthening of churches through various regions, and the product of communication with those churches are the various Pauline letters found in the New Testament (biblecharts.org).
II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Death of a Dear Disciple
   (Acts 9:36-38)

Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did. And it came to pass in those days, that she was sick, and died: whom when they had washed, they laid her in an upper chamber. And forasmuch as Lydda was nigh to Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent unto him two men, desiring him that he would not delay to come to them.

When someone who was widely known for doing good and helping people dies unexpectedly, there is a natural tendency to ask, “Why, Lord?” We silently or verbally wonder and question why some person who constantly causes trouble could not have been the one to die. Why not let them go instead of the good people? In our text today, Tabitha was one of those good people. It seemed to have been a part of her nature to make a positive difference in the lives of everyone she met. This tendency did not just apply to her friends and the lovely people, but Tabitha’s love and care extended to her helping the poor and the unlovely people. Tabitha’s designation in verse 36 as a “disciple” is evidence of the cross-gender application and utilization of that particular spiritual status and terminology both then and now.

Question for Discussion: Why do we as a people so often tend to give love to the lovely who need it the least, and withhold love from the unlovely who need it the most?

Sickness and death are not conditions that discriminate between the good and the bad, as verse 37 makes painfully clear. Death is an equal-opportunity attacker who touches the lives of the just and the unjust. Even though no one has ever escaped death, no one seems to expect death. Tabitha’s sickness seems to have occurred quickly and unexpectedly in the midst of her doing good. That is why we all should strive to live every day as if it were our last because no one knows the day or hour that will be our last.

During that time Jewish people customarily buried their dead quickly after death, usually on the same day. There were two reasons for this tradition. First, dead bodies decompose quickly in the hot Middle Eastern climate. Second, according to the thinking of the time, leaving a body unburied for days showed dishonor to the deceased and the grieving family. Consequently, Tabitha’s body was washed and placed in an upper room awaiting burial preparations.

As you read verse 38, listen for the sense of urgency conveyed by the two men sent by the disciples who compelled Peter to come to the house where Tabitha’s body lay. Several issues arise here: Surely they were aware of the fact that Tabitha was already dead. Did the disciples anticipate the possibility that Peter could help raise Tabitha from the dead? Why could the local disciples not exercise that kind of faith without Peter’s presence?

Questions for Discussion: What spiritual activities should be left up to the pastor, and which ones should we do for ourselves? In what ways do we cripple our ability when we depend on the pastor to do things that we could or should do for ourselves?

B. Prayer Changes Things
   (Acts 9:39-40)

Then Peter arose and went with them. When he was come, they brought him into the upper chamber: and all the widows stood by him weeping, and shewing the
coats and garments which Dorcas made, while she was with them. But Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up.

Widows crowded into the upstairs room to mourn the death of Tabitha. It was a Jewish custom to gather at the site of the deceased and to loudly wail over the passing of a community member. Some eastern communities hired wailing women to lament over a deceased family member at a given time. But the women who were wailing over Tabitha/Dorcas had a personal stake in the grief they expressed. In fact, they demonstrated their connection to Tabitha with the garments she had made for them and by proudly showing them to Peter. (One wonders if these same women had been as effusive with their gratitude when Tabitha was still alive.) Our great God of wisdom distributes gifts and abilities throughout the body as deemed necessary. One need not possess the gift of great oratory or outstanding musical skill to make a difference in someone else’s life. God desires for us simply to use whatever gifts and talents we have to make a positive difference in the kingdom of God. In Tabitha’s case, she used her talent for sewing and developed a tailoring ministry to the glory of God. No gift is too big or too small for God to use.

Question for Discussion: What ability, gift, or skill can you harness to bring glory to almighty God? Identify some ways and specific plans to express your gratitude to someone that you appreciate.

The question that immediately arises upon reading verse 40 is, “Peter, why did you put the people out?” Perhaps Peter was following the example of Jesus his Master who had done the same thing with Peter present in Luke 9:49-53. Jesus excluded the mourning widows perhaps to eliminate any distractions from operating in focus and with faith. Although the mourning widows were sincere, they allowed their emotion to surpass their devotion. Even born-again Christians can allow the circumstances of life to overpower God-ordained opportunities in life. Sometimes we must get radical in order to get results. In order to activate God’s power, we must put out the doubt.

C. Proof of God’s Power
(Acts 9:41-43)

And he gave her his hand, and lifted her up, and when he had called the saints and widows, presented her alive. And it was known throughout all Joppa; and many believed in the Lord. And it came to pass, that he tarried many days in Joppa with one Simon a tanner.

Even after a miracle is performed, people sometimes still need a little assistance, such as in verse 41 when Peter took Tabitha by the hand and raised her to her feet. Peter wanted to make sure that there was no doubt or no mistake regarding this miracle, so he had her to stand on her own power. It was an obvious miracle with unmistakable, undeniable evidence that was live and in living color. Now that Dorcas was raised, Peter, who had previously personally put the widows out, now specifically called for them to return in order for them to behold the miracle with their own eyes. Some people have to see in order to believe. Perhaps Peter was recalling when Jesus made sure that Thomas saw Him after Thomas had expressed doubt regarding the Resurrection.
Through the provision of a miracle performed in the life of a well-loved woman, God used Peter to put on a daring, dynamic display of the undeniable power of God to raise the dead and to heal us from whatever killed us. The job was not done halfway, but completely. It was unfortunate that Dorcas got sick. It was heartbreaking for Dorcas to die. Many people assumed her untimely death to be the end of a beautiful life. But instead of placing a period there, God inserted a comma and the restored life of Dorcas was even more powerful and effective than her former life as a generous and kind-hearted seamstress. As a result of her miracle, many people turned to God and believed in Jesus. God can use seemingly dreadful circumstances for building the kingdom. As we trust God to work even in mysterious ways, we will see the puzzle of God’s purpose come together one piece at a time. Take some time to identify some instances in which you did not initially understand why God would allow certain things to happen but later you understood the value. Identify some circumstances that you still do not currently understand.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION
Every gift and talent God gives, no matter how great or small, can be harnessed for God’s glory. Never underestimate any gift from God. Life is full of crisis situations that we often do not understand. Whenever we cannot trace God’s hand, we are called to trust God’s heart. God desires to challenge us in our walk and to stretch our faith to the point of trusting Him in whatever God allows.

PRAYER
Lord, use us for Your glory, and help us to activate every gift and ability to fulfill our purpose and potential. Help us to trust You in all circumstances and situations whether we understand them or not. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(Feb 12-18, 2018)

Faithful Disciples
MONDAY, February 12: “Widow’s Son Restored to Life” (1 Kings 17:17-24)
TUESDAY, February 13: “Jesus Raises Widow’s Son” (Luke 7:11-17)
WEDNESDAY, February 14: “Care for Widows and Orphans” (James 1:22-27)
THURSDAY, February 15: “Peter’s Healing Ministry” (Acts 5:12-16)
FRIDAY, February 16: “Philip’s Preaching Ministry” (Acts 8:4-8)
SATURDAY, February 17: “Aeneas Healed, Residents Turn to God” (Acts 9:32-35)
SUNDAY, February 18: “Calling the Church to Active Service” (Acts 9:36-43)
February 25, 2018
Lesson 13

THE GOOD FIGHT OF FAITH

DEVOTIONAL READING
1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:10

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 1 Timothy 6:11-21
PRINT PASSAGE: 1 Timothy 6:11-21
KEY VERSE: 1 Timothy 6:12

CHILDREN
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 1 Timothy 6:11-21
PRINT PASSAGE: 1 Timothy 6:11-21
KEY VERSE: 1 Timothy 6:18

1 Timothy 6:11-21—KJV
11 But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.
12 Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses.
13 I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession;
14 That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ:
15 Which in his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords;
16 Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.

1 Timothy 6:11-21—NIV
11 But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.
12 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.
13 In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you
14 to keep this commandment without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ,
15 which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords,
16 who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.

17 Command those who are rich in this present world
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Explore the attitudes and actions Paul charged Timothy to embrace and avoid.
2. Value personally the attitudes and actions Paul charged Timothy to embrace.
3. Identify personal actions and attitudes that need to be changed and commit to doing so.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: We are surrounded by all kinds of advice. What is the best advice to follow? Paul charged Timothy to embrace certain attitudes and actions and avoid others in order to strengthen his faith.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—Paul admonished Christians to run away from trouble and to run toward godly characteristics.
—The phrase man of God (verse 11) often refers to prophets in the Old Testament. It is characteristic of one who belongs to God. “Shun” (pheugō) is a present imperative verb, which suggests an ongoing action, “to flee” (verse 11).
—Timothy was given a list of positive commandments to follow. He was to pursue six virtues: righteousness (dikaiosynè), godliness (eusebeia), faith (pistis), love (agapē), endurance (hypomonē), and gentleness (praupathia). Commentators differ on whether these six should be read as three sets of two or two sets of three. If the latter, the first set of three is directed toward God; the second set is directed toward others.
—The pursuit of these virtues enabled Timothy and will enable others to “fight a good fight of faith” and “to take hold of the eternal life,” a victorious end.
—Timothy’s public confession before witnesses that “Jesus Christ is Lord” is indicative of persons giving their lives to Christ and declaring Him as Lord.
—The warnings in verses 17-19 are against the improper use of wealth.
The chapter concludes with a short benediction (verse 21), “Grace be with you.” This is one of Paul’s only letters that ends abruptly and perhaps signifies the seriousness of the situation.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**

—Paul urged Timothy to pursue godly characteristics.
—We are called to eternal life by God by confessing Jesus the Christ as Lord.

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**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The book of 1 Timothy is a letter written in approximately AD 64 from Rome or Macedonia. It was probably written just prior to Paul’s final imprisonment in Rome. Timothy was mentored by Paul, who had sent Timothy to Ephesus to resist and correct false teachings that were prevalent (according to 1 Timothy 1:3-4). Although Paul had hoped to visit Timothy (see 3:14-15; 4:13), he wrote this letter in case that was not possible. As a wise mentor and spiritual father, Paul wrote to Timothy regarding practical avenues toward successful ministry. Paul was preparing Timothy for successful leadership through helping to equip him in the areas of manhood, servanthood, and ministry.

Timothy came from a rich spiritual family heritage due to the personal examples set by his grandmother Lois and his mother, Eunice, Jewish disciples who helped to nurture Timothy’s spiritual life and growth (see 2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15). The topics covered in the book of 1 Timothy include a wide range of subjects that are pertinent to church life, spiritual health, and church leadership.

In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul said, “Follow me as I follow Christ.” Jesus obeyed God, Paul obeyed Jesus, Timothy followed Paul, and many generations since that time have followed the sound advice set forth in the book of 1 Timothy.

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**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The book of 1 Timothy was probably written from Rome or Macedonia just prior to Paul’s last imprisonment in Rome. Timothy had been sent to the church at Ephesus in order to counteract the false, spurious teaching that had begun to creep in and negatively impact the church. As a young church leader, Timothy probably had his hands full with trying to organize and vitalize the congregation. Paul had hoped to make a personal visit, but since he was unable to do so he sent the letter as the next best thing to being there (see 3:14-15; 4:13). Paul was like a long-distance supervisor or bishop to Timothy and the Ephesian church. One of the primary challenges to the growing group of disciples in Ephesus was the combination of Gnosticism, decadent Judaism (see 1:3-7), and false asceticism (see 4:1-5). Gnosticism was a prominent heretical movement of the early Christian church, partly of pre-Christian origin. Gnostic doctrine taught that the world was created and ruled by a lesser divinity, a demiurge, and that Christ was an emissary of the remote supreme divine being, esoteric knowledge (gnosis) of whom enabled the redemption of the human spirit.

Timothy helped Paul evangelize Macedonia and Achaia (see Acts 17:14-15; 18:5) and was with
him during much of his long preaching ministry at Ephesus (see Acts 19:22). Interestingly, Paul’s advice on the issues of life, church, conflict, and relationships in the book of 1 Timothy are still relevant in contemporary culture today.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**Paul:** In Philippians 3:5-7, Paul said this of himself: “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.”

**Timothy:** a special, closely trusted assistant to Paul who helped Paul to start churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea (see Acts 16:1–17:14). By the time Paul had been imprisoned in Rome, Timothy had been mentored by Paul for at least thirteen years, and Paul considered Timothy to be a spiritual son.

**Pontius Pilate:** governor of Judea during the earthly life of Jesus Christ. During the trial of Jesus, Pontius asked Jesus if He was King of the Jews. Claiming to be king would be considered an act of treason worthy of death according to the Roman government. All four of the Gospels describe Pilate as a weak and indecisive leader who succumbed to the Jewish authorities’ pressure on him to crucify Jesus.

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

*Flee (verse 11)—Greek: pheugō (fyü’-gō): seek safety by flight; to flee away.*

*Godless chatter (verse 20)—Greek: enophōnia (ke-no-fō'-nē'-ä): empty disputing, worthless babble; “babblings” (KJV).*

*Pursue (verse 11)—Greek: diōkō (dē-ō’-kō): a prolonged ensuing; to “follow after” (KJV); press forward.*

**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

**I. Introduction**

A. Take It from Me

   In the New Testament, each of the three pastoral epistles takes the form of a letter from the apostle Paul giving counsel to one of his co-laborers in the Gospel ministry. In the book of 1 Timothy, Paul gave instructions to his younger colleague and son in the ministry Timothy about how to be an effective minister in the church and how to deal with false teachers. As with each book of the Bible, even though Paul was writing specifically to Timothy, the last words of the letter—“Grace be with you [plural]” (1 Timothy 6:21)—indicate that the letter is meant to be utilized by the entire church
so that all may benefit from Paul’s counsel to Timothy (knowing-jesus.com).

First Timothy is the first of the Pastoral Epistles to be written, and Paul instructed and encouraged young pastoral recipients of the letter about the importance of godliness and holiness in life. Paul soundly instructed them that their lifestyle is the backdrop to their teaching and that their lifestyles give validity to their ministries. Oswald Chambers put it this way: “conscious repentance makes unconscious holiness.” Integrity is a lifestyle, and Paul encouraged his readers to imitate him.

Paul instructed the young pastor in how to deal with different demographics in the congregation. Furthermore, Jesus said, “For I have given you these things as an example that you should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15). Jesus is the ultimate example for us to follow, and we are fortunate to have the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to walk in truth and victory. When we are consecrated to God, we then begin to draw closer to God. Paul told these young pastors to “give themselves wholly to the scriptures” because through giving ourselves completely over to God, the Word can become life and transform our behavior patterns in order to make us more like Christ.

B. Biblical Background

Key themes explored and included in the book of 1 Timothy include the following thoughts, ideas, guidelines, and principles: (1) The Gospel produces holiness in the lives of believers. There is no legitimate separation between belief and behavior. Thus, those who profess faith but show no progress in godliness should question their spiritual health (see 1:5; 2:8-15; 3:1-16; 4:6-16; 5:4-6, 8; 6:3-5, 11-14, 18-19). (2) Worldwide evangelism is essential. It is rooted in God’s own evangelistic desire (see 1:15; 2:1-7; 3:16; 4:10). (3) Key evidence of receiving the Gospel is proper behavior in corporate worship—in matters like evangelistic prayer, unity, modesty, and submission (see 2:1-15). (4) Church leaders should be people whose lives are shaped by the Gospel (see 3:1-13; 4:6-16). (5) Appropriate honor is a key element in how Christians should relate to one another in the church (see 5:1–6:2). (6) Everything God created is good. It is to be appreciated but not worshipped (see 4:4-5; 6:17-19). (7) It is important to protect the purity of the Gospel (see 1:3-7, 18-20; 4:6-16; 6:2b-3, 12, 20-21) (ESV Bible Commentary).

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. The Fight of Faith

(1 Timothy 6:11-14)

But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses. I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession;

That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As a minister and as a man or woman of God, there are many things that could possibly serve as distractions. Distractions create distance from God, and distance from God leads to disobedience to God. The definition of sin is “missing the mark,” and Paul urged
Timothy to run away from the things of the flesh and to run toward the things of the Spirit of God. These godly traits are itemized, and they include the following: **righteousness**—being morally right and justifiable; **godliness**—being spiritually pure with characteristics like that of God; **faith**—unshakable trust and confidence in God; **love**—unconditional, favorable commitment for another person’s best interests; **endurance**—the ability to press past unpleasant things or difficulties in order to arrive at a desired destination; **gentleness**—the quality of being calm, kind, and careful. All of these characteristics combine to create a powerful pastoral pathway of peace and progress.

In verse 11, Paul instructed Timothy to run. Now Paul told him to fight. But this fight is not a bad street fight. This is a good, holy fight. We are to run from evil and fight for our faith. In 2 Timothy 4:7, this metaphor of the good fight is also used: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” The bad fight would be against flesh and blood, but the good fight is against “the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Just because Jesus won the war on the cross does not mean that the battle is over. We are not called to live a carefree life but a life of diligence, struggle, perseverance, and intentionality. There can be no real victory without a fight. In the words of Frederick Douglass, “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” Our focus should not be only on the present but also on the prize of eternal life.

In verses 13-14, Paul undergirded the gravity and seriousness of his charge to young Timothy as he reminded Timothy that Timothy’s ultimate responsibility and accountability were not before Paul but before God and Christ Jesus. Just as Jesus bravely stood before Pilate and declared His commitment to God, this same boldness and determination was required of Timothy. The good confession of the Gospel is like the flame carried by an Olympic runner that cannot be allowed to go out until reaching the Olympic stadium in the presence of the multitude and the government officials. The phrase “without spot or blame” generally means without error or defect. Does this mean that perfection is required of people who claim the name of Jesus? No. But it does mean that a disciple of Christ should be actively striving toward spiritual maturity and not still be on a diet of mere spiritual milk without spiritual meat.

**B. Careful Commands**

(1 Timothy 6:15-18)

Which in his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen. Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate.

There are many theologians and philosophers who have tried to predict the movement of God but, because God is sovereign, God alone decides what will be done and when it will be done. One of the biggest lessons of spiritual obedience is to learn how to wait on God and to operate in God’s timing. Isaiah 55:8 records, “For my thoughts are
not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. When we cease trying to have things our way and decide to wait on the Lord, then we will renew our strength and mount up with wings as eagles. We will run and not be weary, and we will walk and not faint (see Isaiah 40:31).

Several terms and titles are used for God in this verse: Ruler, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. One term alone is insufficient to describe the almighty God because God is so big and so great that God cannot fit into any box. The facets of God are unlimited and, like a high-quality diamond, the greatness of God may sparkle from any angle of approach—and because of God’s immortality and inapproachability, we cannot literally see God. Yet, in spite of this seeming divine distance, the God of the universe still desires spiritual closeness with us. This seems to be a complex, paradoxical notion, but God’s distance and desire for closeness can be explained by the power and presence of God’s unconditional love relationship with God’s creation. For this reason, God deserves the honor and glory forever.

In verse 17, Paul did not address those who wish to be rich, but those who already are rich. They have a special set of problems, which is not necessarily running after wealth, but being distracted by wealth. Riches have a tendency to distract those who have them, and that leads to a priority problem. When we seek wealth first, it naturally follows that we squeeze God into a lower position on the priority list. But when we seek God first, God assists us in properly arranging our priorities. It is not that money is inherently evil, but the love of money is the root of all evil (see 1 Timothy 6:10). God is a better choice for placing our hope because riches are so limited and so uncertain, while God is so unlimited and so certain.

In verse 18, Paul continued the train of thought regarding riches, but he added another car to that train by telling Timothy to affirm riches, but not necessarily in monetary form. True riches are manifested through works rather than perks. From a spiritual perspective, everything worth anything in this life must be measured and valued based upon its ability to help people and promote the kingdom of God. A selfish perspective on life is a shallow perspective on life. God is not against people having money per se, but God is against people who do not see wealth as merely a tool to assist in the realization of God’s kingdom coming and God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven. A closed heart is a cold heart, but an open heart is a warm heart. Only warm hearts can serve God and grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

C. Guard Your Heart
(1 Timothy 6:19-21)

Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life. O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: Which some professing have erred concerning the faith. Grace be with thee. Amen.

Paul continued the comparative interplay between wealth and good works in verse 19. Just as some people accumulate wealth to be used for an uncertain future, God’s people are encouraged to store up good works for a sure and certain spiritual future in Christ. Wealth and riches are not dependable because they
create a false sense of security. Love and good works are dependable because they are built on the true foundation of the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Riches falter under pressure, but obedience to God's promises produces maturity and security.

The final two verses in the chapter serve as a summary of everything that has been stated before them. Soldiers or law enforcement officers are posted at the entrance of a storehouse of riches in order to protect the contents from thieves and robbers. Similarly, we as spiritual soldiers are called to guard or protect our spiritual riches from anyone or anything that might attempt to steal, kill, or destroy what has been accumulated. Some things that could potentially qualify as “robbers” of our good works and spiritual riches might include ungodly verbal interaction and incorrect, contentious spiritual teaching. These ungodly acts have the ability to lead one down the unfortunate path of departure from the faith. Fortunately, this need not be the outcome for the people of God. Instead, we are grateful recipients of God's grace that is generously imparted to us all.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

The words of wisdom shared by Paul to Timothy are still true, relevant, and practical today. Paul's words are still powerful because those words came from a true, relevant, and practical God who loves His children and, like any good parent, wants to see them succeed in life.

PRAYER

Lord, help us to focus our attention on things that truly matter for eternity rather than things that matter for the moment. Let us build our hopes on things eternal and hold on to Your unchanging hand. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(Feb 19-2018)

The Good Fight of Faith
MONDAY, February 19: “Timothy Joins Paul’s Team” (Acts 16:1-5)
TUESDAY, February 20: “Timothy, an Active Teacher with Paul” (1 Corinthians 4:14-21)
WEDNESDAY, February 21: “Epaphroditus, Paul’s Coworker and Minister”
(Philippians 2:25-30)
THURSDAY, February 22: “Timothy, Paul’s Envoy to the Churches” (1 Thessalonians 3:1-10)
FRIDAY, February 23: “Teach the Sound Words of Christ” (1 Timothy 6:2b-8)
SATURDAY, February 24: “Money, Root of Many Evils” (1 Timothy 6:9-10)
SUNDAY, February 25: “The Good Fight of Faith” (1 Timothy 6:11-21)
Acknowledging God

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This quarter focuses on ways God’s people have acknowledged the greatness of their God. The quarter begins with guidance for following God. Then, with Easter, the quarter turns to ways Jesus provided a channel for giving God glory and honor. The quarter concludes with a look at times when the Hebrew people sang praises to God.

Unit I, “Follow in My Ways,” provides four sessions, drawn from the books of Genesis and 2 Chronicles, showing how Abraham and Solomon acknowledged God by following God’s guidance.

Unit II, “All Glory and Honor,” has five sessions. The sessions from the book of Luke and John deal with how Jesus’ resurrection opened the way to honor God. The visions in Revelation praise God with majestic symbolism.

Unit III, “Give Praise to God,” has four sessions that emphasize the people’s response by bringing offerings and dedicating their lives to God’s work. Three of the responses are found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and 2 Corinthians. The unit concludes with one session drawn from the books of Psalms and Hebrews that rejoices in God’s reconciling action on behalf of the people.
Savior. He Can Move The Mountains
March 4, 2018

Lesson 1

THE LORD WILL PROVIDE

**ADULT/YOUTH**

**ADULT TOPIC:** A Test of Truth  
**YOUTH TOPIC:** A Most Difficult Task

**CHILDREN**

**GENERAL LESSON TITLE:** The Lord Will Provide  
**CHILDREN’S TOPIC:** Everything Will Be All Right

**DEVOTIONAL READING**
Psalm 20

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**Genesis 22:1-3, 6-14—KJV**

AND IT came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.

2 And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

3 And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

6 And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.

7 And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

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**Genesis 22:1-3, 6-14—NIV**

SOME TIME later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied.

2 Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”

3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.

6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together,

7 Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire
8 And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.
9 And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.
10 And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.
11 And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.
12 And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.
13 And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.
14 And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People are reluctant to make challenging personal sacrifices for fear of losing everything. How can they learn to offer difficult sacrifices even in the face of fear? By being willing to offer his son, Abraham learned to trust God, who provided everything he needed.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Explore God’s call to radical personal sacrifice.
2. Appreciate the difficulty of following God’s directives.
3. Emulate those who make extreme personal sacrifices for God.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—“Tested” (Genesis 22:1), not “tempted”—as God does not tempt (James 1:13) as Satan does (1 Corinthians 7:5), but tests in order to confirm our faith.
—“Land of Moriah” (Genesis 22:1)—according to 2 Chronicles 3:1, Solomon constructed the Temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem.
—“God will provide” (Genesis 22:8)—the immediate fulfillment of this promise was with a ram in 22:13, but its ultimate fulfillment is with the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36).
—Abraham’s trust in God was demonstrated by his obedience. His actions were more important than his words. New Testament writers praised Abraham as a role model for active faith based on his willingness to sacrifice Isaac (see Hebrews 11:17-19; James 2:21-23).
—During the Israelite monarchy, “Mount of the Lord” (Genesis 22:14) referred to the Temple mount in Jerusalem (Psalm 24:3; Isaiah 2:3).
—Verses 7-8 are the heart of this passage. They demonstrate the trusting relationship between father and son, and they offer Abraham’s statement of faith: “God Himself will provide.”
—Why did God put Abraham’s faith to the test? Was this the only way God would know whether Abraham’s faith was genuine, as verse 12 implies? Was the test ultimately for God’s sake or for Abraham’s?

Teachers of CHILDREN
—God told Abraham to go to the region of Mount Moriah and offer Isaac as a sacrifice.
—Abraham responded to God’s call immediately, and departed to Moriah early the next morning.
—Isaac questioned his father Abraham when they made preparations for the sacrifice and no lamb was on the altar.
—Abraham exhibited total trust in God in his response to Isaac, even believing that God would raise Isaac from the dead if sacrificed.
—Abraham offered a ram caught in a thicket as a sacrificial substitute for Isaac.
—The ram was God’s provision.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
The book of Genesis starts at the beginning. In approaching and understanding the book of Genesis, it is important to realize that it was not written primarily as a science book but as an explanation of God’s redemptive work among humanity. Consequently, one should not attempt to use Genesis to explain all the technical methodology and scientific functionality of the universe.

The years 1450–1410 BC is the timeframe biblical scholars attribute to the Genesis narrative being written. It is estimated to have been written around the period of Israel’s redemption and exodus from Egypt. The historical context of the book of Genesis is revealed in a wide range of events, beginning with the Creation and ending with the death of Joseph. The historical context for the book of Genesis continually changes as the Genesis narrative progresses from the beginning to the end.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
The socio-cultural context of the book of Genesis is clearly evident in the historical narrative format of the text itself. The events unfold in the region we currently and commonly identify as the Middle East. The first part of Genesis (chapters 1–38) contains relevant information regarding general life and culture in ancient Mesopotamia.

The author appears to locate Eden, humankind’s first home, in or near Mesopotamia; the tower of Babel was built there, Abram was born there, Isaac took a wife from there, and Jacob lived there for twenty years. Although these patriarchs settled in Canaan, their original homeland was Mesopotamia.
(International Bible Society, *Introduction to Genesis*).

The second part of Genesis (chapters 38–50) outlines the story of Joseph as he is sold by his brothers and leaves his homeland of Canaan, travels to Egypt, gains employment in Potiphar’s house, is falsely accused of sexual abuse by his employer, is thrown into prison, interprets Pharaoh’s dream, is promoted to Egypt’s second-in-command, meets his long-lost brothers, and sends for his entire family to come to Egypt to live in peace and prosperity.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**Abraham:** Abraham is referred to as the first Hebrew and is also called the “father of the faith.” It is estimated that he lived around 2,000 BC. He demonstrated sublime obedience to God and walked by faith rather than by sight.

**Isaac:** Isaac was the “miracle baby” son born when his father, Abraham, was one hundred and his mother, Sarah, was ninety. Any child born under such prophetic circumstances obviously had a divine purpose and a special calling in his life. Like his father, Isaac had two sons who went in different directions in their relationship with the Lord: Genesis 27:41; 28:9; 33 (Michael L. Williams, *What Christians Want to Know*).

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

**Fearest (verse 12)—Hebrew: yare’ (yaw-ray’):** fearing, reverent, afraid.

**Forth (verse 10)—Hebrew: shalach (shaw-lakh’):** to send, send away, let go, stretch out; “reached out” (NIV).

**Jehovah-Jireh (verse 14)—Hebrew: Yahovah yireh (yeh-ho-vaw’ yir-eh’):** symbolic name given by Abraham to Mount Moriah in commemoration of the interposition of the angel of Jehovah who prevented the sacrifice of Isaac and provided a substitute; “The Lord Will Provide” (NIV).

**Laid (verse 6)—Hebrew: suwm (soom):** to put, place, set, appoint, make; “placed” (NIV).

**Offering (verse 2)—Hebrew: ‘olah (o-law’):** burnt offering; sacrifice.

**Provide (verse 8)—Hebrew: ra’ah (raw-aw’):** to see, look at, inspect, perceive, consider.

**Withheld (verse 12)—Hebrew: chasak (khaw-sak’):** to withhold, restrain, hold back, keep in check, refrain.

**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

I. Introduction
   A. Father of the Faith
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. The Testing of Your Faith (Genesis 22:1-3)
   B. The God of Provision (Genesis 22:6-8)
   C. Divine Intervention (Genesis 22:9-14)

III. Concluding Reflection
I. INTRODUCTION
A. Father of the Faith

This personal glimpse into the life of the “father of the faith” reveals Abraham’s stellar sense of trust in God. It also shows how personal and intimate of a relationship that God desires to have with His creation. God’s provision of a ram in the bush has become a part of contemporary nomenclature whenever unexpected ways are made in difficult situations. His absolute, unflinching faith was the offering that Abraham gave to God. But the ram in the bush was the offering that God gave to Abraham. Abraham lived and left a lasting legacy of living faith as an example to all believers that indeed God will provide in difficult situations. If God did it for Abraham, God will do it for us today. The same God who loved Abraham also loves us. Therefore, we can take heart and rejoice in all of the many different ways that God provides for us every day. Many of those ways that God consistently provides for us are taken for granted because they occur so frequently. In an article entitled “Seven Blessings from God You Might Take for Granted,” David Peach identifies God’s provisions we often fail to fully appreciate: (1) God’s love, (2) our life, (3) God’s forgiveness of our sins, (4) the Holy Spirit, (5) spiritual understanding, (6) our spiritual gifts, and (7) opportunities to be ambassadors for Christ. There are many other ways that we typically undervalue God’s many provisions; a challenge for you is to make a list of the ways God personally provides for you and for which you need to be more aware and more appreciative. The more we trust God’s spiritual and natural provisions, the more God can trust us with spiritual and natural visions.

God calls us as disciples to radical personal sacrifice. The great author and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about radical personal sacrifice in his seminal book, The Cost of Discipleship. He said,

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: You were bought at a price, and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon His Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered Him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.
Following God’s directives is not always an easy task. Sometimes God asks us to do things that from our limited human vantage point seem utterly impossible. It is on these occasions that we must remind ourselves that God’s ways are not our ways. Our ways are finite, and God’s ways are infinite. Our ways are pragmatic, but God’s ways are often powerfully dramatic. We are able to rest in God’s promises and take God at His word because of God’s perfect track record of all wins and no losses for all of eternity. Although God’s requests may seem daunting, we must remember that they are still doable because we do not have to rely on our own human power to accomplish them.

B. Biblical Background

In order to fully understand and appreciate Abraham’s obedience on the mountain we must revisit his earlier experience with God over fifteen years prior to the sacrifice. While Abram was in Haran, one day God spoke to Abram (prior to his name change) and gave him an unusual directive which is recorded in Genesis 12:1-4: “The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran” (NIV).

Imagine you are a senior citizen past retirement age and one day, out of the blue, God tells you to pack up everything and move immediately. To make matters worse, He does not even tell you where to move! Just leave now and you will receive instructions on the way. How would you react to such an assignment? Can you imagine the conversation with Abram’s wife, Sarai?

Abram: Hey honey, start packing.
Sarai: Packing? Why?
Abram: God said to.
Sarai: Where are we going?
Abram: Uh…I’m not really sure.
God said He would tell me as we go.

So Abram set out on the journey with no maps, no GPS—just faith. Great faith is now and has always been impressive to God. Great faith will always be impressive to God.

When God sees that someone can be absolutely trusted with a divine assignment, that person will never lack for attention from God. In fact, in Hebrews 11:6-8 faith is explained and Abraham is referenced because of his great faith.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. The Testing of Your Faith
(Genesis 22:1-3)

AND IT came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his
son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

Why did God test Abraham? And by extension, why does God test us? Before answering that, it is important to make a clear distinction between tempting and testing. James 1:13-15 provides some clarification between the two: “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” Yielding to temptation generally results in sinfulness and greater distance from God. However, passing a test generally results in godliness and greater closeness to God. Romans 5:3-5 (NKJV) provides greater insight on the significance of times of testing: “And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

There is no mention of Abraham’s immediate reaction to the bombshell dropped by God in verse 2. One can only imagine what Abraham must have been thinking: “You want me to do WHAT?! Wait, let me get this straight. You wait until Sarah is ninety years old to give us a son and now You want me to sacrifice him?! Lord, that doesn’t make sense to me.” Has God ever asked you to do anything in your life that did not make sense? What are the lessons to be learned here for Abraham and for ourselves? Perhaps one very important lesson is that even when God gives us something, at the end of the day whatever God gave us is still His! Ultimately we are not owners of anything, even though we might hold a legal deed or title. We are merely stewards of all our possessions and God is the true owner. The sooner we understand this, the better we are able to properly handle our so-called possessions.

It is interesting in verse 3 that Abraham rose “early” in the morning to sacrifice their only son. Do you really think he told Sarah about his plans? It may be that we are not told about this discussion because it did not occur. What husband in his right mind would try to persuade a mother to allow her miracle son to be sacrificed, and she be okay with it? What we do know about Abraham at this juncture is that he was putting everything in place to follow through with his divine assignment.

B. The God of Provision
(Genesis 22:6-8)

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

Verses 6-7 provide a gentle glimpse into the interior relationship of love, trust, and provision on the part of Abraham and his son Isaac. What a heart-rending position to be in to have to choose between one’s obedience to God and one’s love for one’s son. Perhaps it would have been easier for Abraham to choose had Isaac been a wild child who was disobedient and disrespectful. But Isaac was
the exact opposite. He was gentle, loving, and totally trusting of his father. Now imagine how God must have felt in sending His only Son to die for our sins. Romans 5:7-8 (NIV) superbly summarizes this scenario: “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

In verse 8, Abraham gave the perfect response to his son’s innocent question. What puts people in position to be able to give the best response on the spur of the moment? First Peter 3:15-16 sheds some light: “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (NIV). As we walk in the Spirit, we become sensitive to our surroundings. As we walk in wisdom, we gain experience and skill in giving the right answer at the right time.

C. Divine Intervention
(Genesis 22:9-14)

And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen.

One can only imagine what must have been going through the mind of Isaac while being bound by his father and laid on the altar. No doubt he had seen this done many times, only with a lamb. Now he was the sacrifice! Isaac’s trust and confidence in his father and his willingness to follow through with the sacrifice is nothing short of amazing. Which position do you think would have been the most difficult and challenging, Abraham’s or Isaac’s? How would you have responded in either situation?

One of the characteristics of God’s interruption of the sacrifice is the sense of urgency that is present. God’s relationship with us is not casual and generic. God is passionately involved with us and desires for us to be passionately involved in return. There are few things in a relationship worse than to be in love with somebody who does not love you back. As soon as God passionately called Abraham, Abraham passionately answered God back in verse 11. (Fortunately for Isaac, Abraham had retained his hearing in his old age and was able to detect God’s interruption of the sacrifice.) Then in verse 12, God twice underscores and reaffirms His command to halt the proceedings. God first told Abraham not to lay a hand on the boy, then God followed up by telling Abraham not to do “anything” to Isaac. Clarity is important in matters of life and death.

God reveals in verse 12b the reason God tested Abraham and the reason the sacrifice was stopped: God wanted to know for sure
that Abraham feared (respected, esteemed, revered) God. But consider this: since God is omniscient and already knows everything, why does it seem that God does not already know that Abraham feared God?

Sometimes God’s provisions come in places we least expect. Sometimes God’s provisions are very close to us but we need God to open our eyes and show us the way. “Jehovah-Jireh” is one of the many different names of God found in the Old Testament. “Jehovah-Jireh” is the King James Version’s translation of YHWH-Yireh and means “the Lord will provide.” This term is directly associated with the provision God made for Abraham when he was about to sacrifice his son Isaac. There are many different facets of God’s nature. The best way to organically know and truly understand these different sides of God is to read about them in Scripture and then to personally experience them for yourself. Only when you personally have God to miraculously intervene and provide for you will you truly understand God to be Jehovah-Jireh, your Provider. There is great power and connection in having a personal experience with God.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Abraham’s trust in God was demonstrated by his obedience. It has often been said that our actions speak louder than our words. Abraham’s experience can be used as an example for contemporary Christians to emulate. The more we place our trust in God, the more God will make a way for us. Would you be willing to sacrifice your most precious relationship or possession if God requested it?

PRAYER

Thank You, Lord, for the marvelous example of Abraham. We want to always stay open to any request You may have of us. “Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.” In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(February 26–March 4, 2018)

The Lord Will Provide

MONDAY, February 26: “Don’t Forget the Lord’s Provisions” (Deuteronomy 8:11-20)
TUESDAY, February 27: “Jesus Tested in the Wilderness” (Matthew 4:1-11)
THURSDAY, March 1: “Prayer for Help in a Time of Crisis” (Psalm 20)
FRIDAY, March 2: “Family Lineage of Abraham Preserved” (Hebrews 11:17-22)
SATURDAY, March 3: “God Blesses Abraham for Obedience” (Genesis 22:15-19)
SUNDAY, March 4: “God Provides the Sacrificial Ram” (Genesis 22:1-3, 6-14)
### THERE IS NO GOD LIKE YOU

**ADULT/YOUTH**  
**ADULT TOPIC:** Promises Kept  
**YOUTH TOPIC:** Fulfilling a Promise

**CHILDREN**  
**GENERAL LESSON TITLE:** A Prayer of Dedication  
**CHILDREN’S TOPIC:** A Special Event

#### DEVOTIONAL READING

**Psalm 132**

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**2 Chronicles 6:12-21—KJV**

12 And he stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands:  
13 For Solomon had made a brasen scaffold of five cubits long, and five cubits broad, and three cubits high, and had set it in the midst of the court: and upon it he stood, and kneeled down upon his knees before all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven.  
14 And said, O Lord God of Israel, there is no God like thee in the heaven, nor in the earth—unto thee only doth it belong, that thou shouldest keep promise to the father,  
15 Thou which hast kept with thy servant David my father that which thou hast promised him; and spakest with thy mouth, and hast fulfilled it with thine hand, as it is this day.  
16 Now therefore, O Lord God of Israel, keep with thy servant David my father that which thou hast promised him, saying, There shall not fail thee a man

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**2 Chronicles 6:12-21—NIV**

12 Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in front of the whole assembly of Israel and spread out his hands.  
13 Now he had made a bronze platform, five cubits long, five cubits wide and three cubits high, and had placed it in the center of the outer court. He stood on the platform and then knelt down before the whole assembly of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven.  
14 He said: “Lord, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven or on earth—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way.  
15 “You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it—as it is today.  
16 “Now, Lord, the God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, ‘You shall never fail to have a successor
LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Identify God’s promise to perpetually provide Jerusalem a Davidic king.
2. Affirm the faithfulness of God and the Christian conviction that Jesus is that Davidic heir.
3. Develop a prayer life that affirms and trusts God’s promises and maintains faithfulness when God’s promises remain seemingly unfulfilled.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—King David’s plan to build a house for the name of the Lord had been transferred to his son Solomon for completion.
—Solomon’s prayer of dedication was offered in front of the Temple entrance, before the altar of burnt offerings, rather than at the inner court reserved for priests.
—Solomon’s prayer of dedication is also reported in 1 Kings 8:22-53.
—Solomon’s prayer defined the role of the Temple as a place of prayer and worship.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People want to know that others will keep their word. How can they respond to a fulfilled promise? At the Temple dedication, Solomon thanked the Lord for keeping His promise.
THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The book of 2 Chronicles was written in approximately 430 BC, and it records events from the start of Solomon’s reign (970 BC) to the start of the Babylonian captivity (586 BC). This book serves as a kind of commentary for the books of 1 and 2 Kings because of their parallel nature. The books of 1 and 2 Chronicles were originally one book and were later divided into two. Scholars believe that all of the Old Testament book pairs (1 and 2 Samuel; 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles) were originally single entities split between two scrolls. The scrolls of Samuel and Kings form an integrated political history of the Israelite monarchies. (Life Application Study Bible).

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

After approximately two hundred years of uneven governmental leadership by a succession of “judges” (temporary leaders), Israel was in disarray. The books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles provide insight into God’s intervention in Israel’s leadership as they progress from a flailing group of tribes to an established kingdom. Even their strong monarchy eventually declined and dissolved as future generations of kings abandoned God’s will and God’s ways. Unfortunately, when Israel was destroyed as a nation it would never be restored to its former glorious position. God’s guidance is always present as a backdrop in the narrative, whether people choose to follow it or not. Although this story unfolded thousands of years ago, contemporary readers can still learn from their successes and their failures.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Solomon: King Solomon and his father, David, represented the zenith of political power in Israel. David’s military mastery had allowed Solomon to maintain an environment that was free of the persistent threat of foreign invasion.

David: David appeared on the biblical landscape as

—Solomon offered his prayer in the outer court, where lay people prayed, instead of in the inner court reserved for the priests. Even important lay people were not permitted to get too close to the glory of God in the Holy of Holies.
—To pray, Solomon kneeled and spread out his hands (verse 13). These gestures were commonly associated with prayer in the Old Testament.
—The Temple represented the fulfillment of part of God’s promise to David—that one of his sons would build a temple (2 Samuel 7:13)—but not all of it. Solomon prayed that God would also fulfill the promise to make a permanent Davidic dynasty (see 2 Samuel 7:11-16).
—Solomon believed that God’s faithfulness was related to Israel’s ability to abide by the Torah/law.

Teachers of CHILDREN
—Solomon stood at the altar before the assembly as he dedicated the Temple.
—Solomon stood on a platform (90 inches long, 90 inches wide, and 54 inches high) in the outer court of the Temple and then knelt to pray.
—Solomon said a prayer for the dedication of the Temple.
—Solomon prayed to God to keep the promise that He made to David.
—Solomon appealed to God for mercy and asked God to hear his prayer and the prayers of the people of Israel.
the youngest son of Jesse and a forgotten shepherd boy. However, with time and life experiences, God raised him up to become ruler of Israel. David became Israel’s most celebrated king, and the nation thrived under him.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON
Blessed (verse 3 [Background Scripture])—Hebrew: barak (baw-rak): to be blessed; to bless, kneel.
Chosen (verse 6 [Background Scripture])—Hebrew: bachar (baw-khar'): to choose, elect, decide for.
Habitation (verse 2 [Background Scripture])—Hebrew: zebuwl (ze-bool'): exalted, residence, elevation, lofty abode, height, habitation.
Heart (verse 7 [Background Scripture])—Hebrew: lebab (lay-bawb'): inner man, mind, will, heart, soul, understanding.
Name (verse 9 [Background Scripture])—Hebrew: shem (shame): the name (as designation of God).

Spoken (verse 10)—Hebrew: dabar (daw-bar'): to speak, declare, converse, command, promise.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON
I. Introduction
A. Solomon’s Prayer of Dedication
B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
A. Worship Requires Preparation (2 Chronicles 6:12-13)
B. Worship Requires Realization (2 Chronicles 6:14-15)
C. Worship Requires Identification (2 Chronicles 6:16-17)
D. Worship Requires Glorification (2 Chronicles 6:18-21)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION
A. Solomon’s Prayer of Dedication
Solomon’s prayer of dedication is a sample and a reflection of his understanding of God and worship. The prayer contains Solomon’s description of God and how that description makes an impact on worship. The prayer holds God accountable to God’s promises and also reflects the personal responsibility we have to be faithful in our obedience to God. Only then can we expect to see God’s promises fulfilled. The prayer reflects God’s promise to perpetually provide Jerusalem with a king. We must affirm and trust God’s promises and maintain faithfulness when God’s promises seem to remain unfulfilled.

Solomon’s prayer was offered in the outer court where laypeople prayed, rather than in the inner court which was reserved for the priests. No one, regardless of social status, was permitted to get too close to the glory of God in the Holy of Holies (or, the most holy place, where the ark of the covenant was placed). The same prayer that is recorded in the book of 2 Chronicles is also reported, with some differences, in 1 Kings 8:22-53. In
order to pray, Solomon knelt down and spread out his hands (see verse 13). These gestures were commonly associated with prayer in the Old Testament.

B. Biblical Background
The Temple played a significant part in God’s fulfillment of the promise to David, which included the promise of an unending dynasty. Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of that promise (see Isaiah 9:6-7; Matthew 1:1-17). In the verses previous to the Print Passage for today’s lesson, Solomon showed the essential nature of the relationship between God and Israel and what a symbolic image that the Temple represented in the eyes of the Lord. In 2 Chronicles 6:10-11 we see the emphasis upon the promises of God and the promise of fulfillment. Solomon stated, “The LORD has kept the promise he made. I have succeeded David my father and now I sit on the throne of Israel, just as the Lord promised, and I have built the temple for the Name of the Lord, the God of Israel. There I have placed the ark, in which is the covenant of the Lord that he made with the people of Israel” (NIV). This review of Solomon’s action must have solidified in Solomon’s heart and mind that he had been obedient to his heavenly Father as well as fulfilling the desires and instructions of his earthly father. It was important for him to go on public record to declare and to affirm these observations.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Worship Requires Preparation
(2 Chronicles 6:12-13)
And he stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands: For Solomon had made a brasen scaffold of five cubits long, and five cubits broad, and three cubits high, and had set it in the midst of the court: and upon it he stood, and kneeled down upon his knees before all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven.

Worship is not something that is to be treated lightly or without contemplation and preparation. Unfortunately, the moments prior to the invocation in churches are too often filled with chatter, giggles, and catching up on the latest community news. But Habakkuk 2:20 provides a powerful perspective on preparation for worship: “The LORD is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him.” Anything worth participating in is worth taking the time for which to make proper preparation. Some of the things one can do to prepare for worship include the following: remove distractions, humble oneself, intentionally focus, and expect God to speak.

Solomon’s physical posture was one of surrender, humility, and receptivity. The position of our physical bodies do not guarantee connection with God, but it does assist and remind us that we are in worship of a great God who is worthy of our praise. Alek and Stephen Kendrick’s enlightening article provides useful instruction on the many different postures of prayer which include bowing (see Exodus 34:8), kneeling (see Daniel 6:10), lying prostrate (see Nehemiah 8:3), lifted eyes (see Luke 9:16), silence (see Psalm 46:10), lifted voices (see Psalm 141:1), and crying out (see Psalm 55:17).
The dimensions of the items in the place of worship were very definitive and quite specific (verse 13). Solomon did not allow his governmental position or his elevated social status to prevent him from freely and openly worshipping the almighty God without shame or regret. There was no fear of ridicule or of what people might think of him. Even though he had high visibility, he also demonstrated personal humility.

**B. Worship Requires Realization**
*(2 Chronicles 6:14-15)*

And said, O Lord God of Israel, there is no God like thee in the heaven, nor in the earth; which keepest covenant, and shewest mercy unto thy servants, that walk before thee with all their hearts: Thou which hast kept with thy servant David my father that which thou hast promised him; and spakest with thy mouth, and hast fulfilled it with thine hand, as it is this day.

Solomon had an internal realization and made an external expression of that realization. As important as was to be king of Israel, Solomon realized there is no God like the God of Israel in heaven or on earth. King Solomon even alluded that even though he was the king of Israel, when it came to his relationship with almighty God, he considered himself to be only a servant. Solomon identified God and described God as a promise-keeping God (verse 15). Second Corinthians 1:20 (NIV) reminds us of God’s track record and penchant for keeping promises: “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God.”

**Truthful** *(Titus 1:2)—since truth is the very essence of His nature, it’s impossible for Him to lie.* Therefore, we can believe in His promises because He always tells the truth. **Faithful** *(Hebrews 10:23)—if the Lord ever breaks a promise, our Christian theology falls apart because He would cease to be who He says He is. But since God has never failed to keep His word in the past, we can trust Him for the future. However, we must remember that He might not do so according to our schedules, in the ways we desire, or through the people or situations we expect. **Immutable** *(Malachi 3:6)—this means He never changes.* Therefore, we don’t have to worry that He will alter a promise. If conditions are attached, it may seem like He’s had a change of heart, but the truth is we just haven’t met the requirements set before us.

**Love** *(1 John 4:7-10)—His promises are always based on our best interests. The cross is the ultimate proof of His love for us. Jesus said He would die for our sins, and He did. If He loved us enough to keep that promise, we have no reason to doubt Him.* *(Our Trustworthy God, InTouch Ministries, www.intouch.org).*

**C. Worship Requires Identification**
*(2 Chronicles 6:16-17)*

Now therefore, O Lord God of Israel, keep with thy servant David my father that which thou hast promised him, saying, There shall not fail thee a man in my sight to sit upon the throne of Israel; yet so that thy children take
heed to their way to walk in my law, as thou hast walked before me. Now then, O Lord God of Israel, let thy word be verified, which thou hast spoken unto thy servant David.

In this part of Solomon’s prayer, he identified with God’s ways, God’s history, and God’s pattern of promise. Solomon reminded God of God’s words from the past and was profoundly aware that God is obligated to follow through with whatever God has promised to accomplish. In order for God’s promises to be fulfilled, God’s people in turn must also fulfill their part of the agreement, which is to walk before God according to God’s Law.

D. Worship Requires Glorification
(2 Chronicles 6:18-21)

But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth? behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built! Have respect therefore to the prayer of thy servant, and to his supplication, O Lord my God, to hearken unto the cry and the prayer which thy servant prayeth before thee: That thine eyes may be open upon this house day and night, upon the place whereof thou hast said that thou wouldest put thy name there; to hearken unto the prayer which thy servant prayeth toward this place: Hearken therefore unto the supplications of thy servant, and of thy people Israel, which they shall make toward this place: hear thou from thy dwelling place, even from heaven; and when thou hearest, forgive.

After completing a spectacular edifice for God, the likes of which the world had never seen or probably would ever see again, Solomon surveyed his handiwork, considered all his great efforts, and simply had to conclude that even all of this splendor was inadequate and undersized to be able to contain the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. There is frankly no real comparison between the unlimited God and limited humans because our thoughts are not God’s thoughts, neither are our ways God’s ways. Just like the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God’s ways higher than our ways, and God’s thoughts higher than our thoughts (see Isaiah 55:8-9). People look on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart (see 1 Samuel 16:7).

Solomon cried out for mercy in verse 19, which is the default action when God’s people have run out of options and can only appeal to God’s never-ending mercy and grace. Solomon repeated God’s words to God because God is bound to hear and answer the prayers of the righteous and the repentant. As James 5:16 notes, “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” Matthew 7:11 further affirms this powerful prayer principle: “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (NIV).

Solomon put a great deal of time, thought, planning, energy, effort, and expense into the building of the Temple. No expense was spared, and no material was considered too rare. For example, “He overlaid the inside with pure gold. He paneled the main hall with juniper and covered it with fine gold and decorated it with palm tree and chain designs. He adorned the temple with precious stones. And the gold he used was gold of Parvaim. He overlaid the ceiling beams, doorframes, walls and doors of the temple with gold, and he carved cherubim on the walls” (2 Chronicles 3:4-7, NIV). Solomon spared
no expense because this place was the focus of the people’s prayers. Their prayers were to the almighty God, who spared no grace and mercy toward Solomon, David’s house, and the Israelite people. Solomon connected his prayer request to God’s love for David and to God’s own immutable promised word that must stand true.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

It is important to live our lives according to the teachings and example of God and to thank God for helping us to maximize the potential that has been placed inside of all God’s people. God makes promises to us, and God specializes in keeping those promises. Just as Solomon took seriously the holy Temple in Israel, God desires us to take seriously the temples of our bodies and our lives. God is not contained within the walls of churches, but lives in every believing heart. First Corinthians 6:19-20 (NIV) tells us, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.” Look for practical ways to present your physical sanctuaries to God today.

PRAYER

Lord, thank You for our temple. Thank You for trusting us to house Your precious Holy Spirit. May You be pleased with our stewardship of Your gifting. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(March 5-11, 2018)

There Is No God like You

MONDAY, March 5: “God Selects the Family of David” (Psalm 132:8-12)
TUESDAY, March 6: “God Chooses to Dwell in Zion” (Psalm 132:13-18)
WEDNESDAY, March 7: “Jesus, Heir of David’s Throne” (Acts 2:29-36)
THURSDAY, March 8: “Solomon Completes the Temple” (2 Chronicles 6:1-11)
FRIDAY, March 9: “Foreigners Welcome in God’s Temple” (2 Chronicles 6:28-33)
SATURDAY, March 10: “Prayers of Repentance during Captivity” (2 Chronicles 6:36-40)
SUNDAY, March 11: “Solomon’s Prayer of Dedication” (2 Chronicles 6:12-21)
THE PEOPLE GAVE THANKS TO GOD

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT TOPIC: Finding Inspiration
YOUTH TOPIC: I Just Want to Say Thank You!

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Worshipping in God’s House
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Let’s Celebrate!

DEVOTIONAL READING
Psalm 138

2 Chronicles 7:1-9—KJV
NOW WHEN Solomon had made an end of praying, the fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the LORD filled the house.
2 And the priests could not enter into the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD had filled the LORD’S house.
3 And when all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the Lord upon the house, they bowed themselves with their faces to the ground upon the pavement, and worshipped, and praised the Lord, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever.
4 Then the king and all the people offered sacrifices before the LORD.
5 And king Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty and two thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep: so the king and all the people dedicated the house of God.
6 And the priests waited on their offices: the Levites

2 Chronicles 7:1-9—NIV
WHEN SOLOMON finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple.
2 The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it.
3 When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the Lord above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, “He is good; his love endures forever.”
4 Then the king and all the people offered sacrifices before the LORD.
5 And King Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty-two thousand head of cattle and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep and goats. So the king and all the people dedicated the temple of God.
6 The priests took their positions, as did the Levites with the LORD’S musical instruments, which King David had made for praising the LORD and which were...
also with instruments of musick of the Lord, which David the king had made to praise the Lord, because his mercy endureth for ever, when David praised by their ministry; and the priests sounded trumpets before them, and all Israel stood.

7 Moreover Solomon hallowed the middle of the court that was before the house of the Lord: for there he offered burnt offerings, and the fat of the peace offerings, because the brasen altar which Solomon had made was not able to receive the burnt offerings, and the meat offerings, and the fat.

8 Also at the same time Solomon kept the feast seven days, and all Israel with him, a very great congregation, from the entering in of Hamath unto the river of Egypt.

9 And in the eighth day they made a solemn assembly: for they kept the dedication of the altar seven days, and the feast seven days.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People often celebrate what seems important to them. How can their celebrations become a form of worship? As they dedicated the Temple, Solomon and the people worshipped the Lord by bowing on their knees, making burnt offerings, playing music, and praying.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Identify ways that the passage shows the people’s thankful worship of God.
2. Aspire to worship God in simple and grand ways.
3. Plan a worship service to celebrate God’s promises.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—Fire coming down from heaven and consuming the sacrifice signaled the acceptance of the priests’ ministry at the Temple (see 2 Chronicles 7:1).

—The site where the Temple was built was the threshing floor of Ornan, where Yahweh had appeared to David during the great plague (see 1 Chronicles 21:18–22:1).

—In the dedication, the Levites even used musical instruments that King David had made and played (verse 6). Even though God had not allowed David to build the Temple, the writer communicated that David still played an important part in setting the stage for its construction.

—The dedication during the Feast of Tabernacles (see 2 Chronicles 5:3) included vast numbers of sacrifices and included the whole kingdom in the broadest sense with unity, joy, and gratitude to God as the primary foci of the festival (2 Chronicles 7:4-10).
—The events of this passage can be viewed as a record of God’s response to the dedication of the Temple—including the transfer of the ark and Solomon’s long prayer.
—Yahweh’s presence and the fire from heaven give legitimacy to the new sanctuary.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**
—Solomon prayed during the dedication of the Temple.
—Fire fell from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the Lord’s glory filled the Temple.

**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The word *chronicles* is related to the word *chronological* and comes from the Greek *ta khronia*, which means “annals of time.” Events are usually chronicled in the order in which they occurred. The noun “chronicle” is a record of things that happened told in chronological order (*vocabulary.com*). The book of 2 Chronicles is projected to have been written in approximately 430 BC and records events from the start of Solomon’s career (970 BC) to the start of the Babylonian captivity (586 BC). The chronological writing order of some of the Old Testament books of the Bible are as follows: Genesis, Job, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, Psalms, Song of Solomon, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, and 2 Chronicles (*Life Application Study Bible*).

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The book of 2 Chronicles was written to unify the nation around true worship of God by emphasizing God’s standard for judging kings. The sins of the evil kings are exposed, and the righteous rulers are exalted. The book of 2 Chronicles starts with the death of King David. His son Solomon assumed the kingship of Israel, and the entire country prospers. Solomon oversaw the building of an impressive and expensive Temple in Jerusalem. This solidified Jerusalem as the cultural and religious capital of the nation. After Solomon died, Israel split into two nations identified as the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The rest of the book of 2 Chronicles describes the constant war and conflict between these two entities. Both Israel and Judah attacked and battled each other and many other local and foreign tribes and nations.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**King David:** King David was a man of extremes. He was wholeheartedly committed to God, yet was also absolutely guilty of some of the most serious sins recorded in biblical history. David’s life was often troubling after he came into power. David was engaged in perpetual warfare with attackers in order to protect the kingdom. Although he was a great military king, David was ultimately unable to completely conquer himself. However, he still went down in history as the author of the majority of the Psalms and also as a man after God’s own heart.
Solomon: the third king of Israel who reigned from about 971 to 931 BC. He was the second son of David and Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 12:23-25). He was called Jedidiah (“beloved of YHWH”) by Nathan the prophet. Solomon consolidated his position by eliminating all of his opponents ruthlessly as soon as he became king. Once rid of his foes, he placed his loyal friends in the key posts of the military, governmental, and religious institutions. Solomon also reinforced his position through the development of superior military strength.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Bowed (verse 3)—Hebrew: kara’ (kaw-rah’): to bend, kneel, bow, bow down, sink down to one’s knees, kneel down to rest (of animals), kneel in reverence; “knelt” (NIV).

Consumed (verse 1)—Hebrew: ’akal (aw-kal’): to consume; to eat, devour, burn up, feed.

Dedicated (verse 5)—Hebrew: chanak (khaw-nak’): to dedicate; train up.

Mercy (verse 6)—Hebrew: checed (kheh’-sed): goodness, kindness, faithfulness; favor; lovingkindness; “love” (NIV).

Glory (verse 1)—Hebrew: kabowd (kaw-bode’): glory, honor, glorious, abundance.

Sacrifice(s) (verse 4)—Hebrew: zebach (zeh’-bach): sacrifice; offering; thank offering.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction

A. Glorify God for the Manifestation of Godly Visions

B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture

A. The Glory of the Lord
   (2 Chronicles 7:1-2)

B. Fervent Worship and Thanksgiving
   (2 Chronicles 7:3-5)

C. Great Praise for God’s Great Love
   (2 Chronicles 7:6)

D. Extravagant Worship for an Extravagant God
   (2 Chronicles 7:7-9)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Glorify God for the Manifestation of Godly Visions

The vision for building the Temple was planted like a seed in the heart and mind of David. But it was his son Solomon who watered that vision, and God gave the increase. During the dedication of the Temple, Solomon prayed and gave thanks for the provision of the intelligence, the skill, and the perseverance necessary to complete the construction of the Temple, which was an extraordinarily massive undertaking requiring extensive materials, manpower, and coordination. During the process of the Temple dedication, Solomon prayed a prayer of worship, thanksgiving, and praise for the manifestation of the Temple vision that had been birthed in the heart of his father, David. Fire fell from heaven and consumed the burnt offering, and the Lord’s glory filled the Temple. This
occurrence was a visual manifestation of God’s power and presence, His acceptance of the offering, and an affirmation of God’s pleasure in the construction of the Temple.

After witnessing the Lord’s glory in the Temple, the people fell to their knees and worshipped the Lord. This posture was just one of the ways that the people indicated their humility and acknowledged the mighty power of God. The next step was the sacrifices of sheep, goats, and cattle, totaling thousands. This extravagant display of sacrifice was unparalleled. Such an extreme sacrifice was commensurate with the extravagance of the Temple. Everything about the dedication of the Temple was exceptional and extraordinary. Nothing was ordinary because these ordinary people served an extraordinary God. One of the characteristics of God is that God consistently exceeds human expectations. Consequently, a one-day celebration of the Temple or a weekend inauguration of the Temple was woefully inadequate. Instead, the celebration was more than a week long and on the eighth day of the ceremony, a solemn assembly was held.

Perhaps this practice of a solemn assembly would be a good idea to periodically embrace in our contemporary times in order to correct our direction and to realign ourselves with the will of God.

B. Biblical Background

Leading up to the dedication of the Temple, Solomon petitioned God for wisdom. Great insight was required for such a great project. God was pleased with the building of the Temple and God indeed granted the wisdom necessary for its completion. Some scholars suggest that 2 Chronicles 7:1-9 is another telling of the events in 2 Chronicles 5:13-14.

The site where the Temple was built was the threshing floor of Ornan, where Yahweh had appeared to David during the great plague (see 1 Chronicles 21:18–22:1). In the dedication, the Levites even used musical instruments that King David had made and played (see verse 6).

Even though God did not allow David to build the Temple, the writer communicates that David still played an important part by setting the stage for its construction. The dedication during the Feast of Tabernacles (see 2 Chronicles 5:3) included vast numbers of sacrifices and included the whole kingdom in the broadest sense with unity, joy, and gratitude to God as the primary foci of the festival (see 2 Chronicles 7:4-10). From “Lebo-hamath to the Wadi of Egypt” designates the idealized boundaries of Israel (see 2 Chronicles 7:8).

The people responded to the presence of God with worship and praise because worship and praise had a central place of value and importance in the life of God’s people. All those who are children of God should desire to celebrate the sovereignty and faithfulness of God through the process of worship. Worship is the official process God has designed and designated for us to connect with God and express our love and appreciation to Him. Even without the presence of a temple, God is still worthy to be praised. The Temple merely provided an atmosphere to compliment the awesomeness of God and made it easier to remember God’s greatness in simple and grand ways. The Temple was a reminder of the importance of taking the spotlight off us and our resources in order to acknowledge and elevate God for what God is worth to us.
II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. The Glory of the Lord
   (2 Chronicles 7:1-2)

NOW WHEN Solomon had made an end of praying, the fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord filled the house. And the priests could not enter into the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord had filled the Lord's house.

When God sent fire from heaven, the purpose was to consume the offering and to serve as the initial spark that was to be kept burning underneath the altar (see Leviticus 6:8-13). This continuous fire was a reminder of God’s perpetual presence and a foreshadowing of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart of God’s people.

In verse 2, we see that God’s glory was so powerful and overwhelming that not even the priests could enter such a holy atmosphere. Isaiah 64:6 reveals why such a marked division exists between holy God and even righteous humanity: “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (NIV). This perspective of God’s holiness may seem to be in stark contrast to other instances where God seems to desire closeness and fellowship, as is reflected in Acts 17:27: “So that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us” (NKJV). How could the vast difference between God and humanity create such distance but God still desire to share so much closeness?

B. Fervent Worship and Thanksgiving
   (2 Chronicles 7:3-5)

And when all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the Lord upon the house, they bowed themselves with their faces to the ground upon the pavement, and worshipped, and praised the Lord, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever. Then the king and all the people offered sacrifices before the Lord. And king Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty and two thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep: so the king and all the people dedicated the house of God.

The automatic, instinctual response of the people was to bow in reverent worship when they personally encountered the powerful and holy presence of God in the form of the consuming fire from heaven (verse 3). There is a distinct difference between fear and worship. Fear does not necessarily lead to worship, but to further distance and disconnection from the object of the fear. But holy humility does result in worship as well as in a closer connection to the object of one’s worship. This form of prostration (lying on one’s knees with the forehead touching the earth) is still practiced today in many faith traditions, including Islam. It is “the manner in which the Hebrews, and Orientals in general, express the most profound sentiments of reverence and humility. The courts of the Temple were densely crowded on the occasion, and the immense multitude threw themselves on the ground. What led the Israelites suddenly to assume that prostrate attitude on the occasion referred to was the spectacle of the . . . cloud slowly and majestically descending upon the Temple, and then entering it” (BibleStudyTools.com).

It is not clear from the rendering of verse 4 whether the sacrifices were literally offered by
the priests who presented the blood and the fat upon the altar, or if the people just presented the sacrifices to the priests. With the enormous size of the offerings being presented, it would seem that the latter would be the most logical procedure in order to successfully accommodate such a large number of sacrifices and people desiring to worship. It must have been a time-intensive process to navigate so many animals into place for the sacrificial offering, to slaughter them, to collect their blood, to burn their carcasses, and to manage any remains. The ceremony of the Temple dedication essentially involved initially placing the ark of the covenant into the Temple and making the sacrificial offerings by the king, the priests, and the people.

C. Great Praise for God’s Great Love (2 Chronicles 7:6)

And the priests waited on their offices: the Levites also with instruments of musick of the Lord, which David the king had made to praise the Lord, because his mercy endureth for ever, when David praised by their ministry; and the priests sounded trumpets before them, and all Israel stood.

Opposite the Levites, the priests blew their trumpets, and all the Israelites were standing. “While great numbers would be occupied with the preparation and offering of the victims, others sounded with their trumpets, and the different bands of the Levites praised the Lord with vocal and instrumental music, by Psalms 136:1-26, the oft-recurring chorus of which is, ‘for His mercy endureth for ever’” (BibleStudyTools.com). There are many indications that the mechanical instrument of music was authorized of God in Old Testament worship. They are even called “instruments of God.”

“And with them Heman and Jeduthun with trumpets and cymbals for those that should make a sound, and with musical instruments of God. And the sons of Jeduthun were porters” (1 Chronicles 16:42). “And the priests waited on their offices: the Levites also with instruments of musick of the Lord, which David the king had made to praise the Lord, because his mercy endureth for ever, when David praised by their ministry; and the priests sounded trumpets before them, and all Israel stood” (2 Chronicles 7:6).

D. Extravagant Worship for an Extravagant God (2 Chronicles 7:7-9)

Moreover Solomon hallowed the middle of the court that was before the house of the Lord: for there he offered burnt offerings, and the fat of the peace offerings, because the brasen altar which Solomon had made was not able to receive the burnt offerings, and the meat offerings, and the fat. Also at the same time Solomon kept the feast seven days, and all Israel with him, a very great congregation, from the entering in of Hamath unto the river of Egypt. And in the eighth day they made a solemn assembly: for they kept the dedication of the altar seven days, and the feast seven days.

The Hebrews distinguished between the pure fat of an animal and the fat which was intermixed with the lean (see Nehemiah 8:10). Certain restrictions were imposed upon them in reference to the former; some parts of the pure fat located near the stomach, the intestines, the kidneys, and the tail of a sheep, which grows to an excessive size in many eastern countries, and produces a large quantity of rich fat, were forbidden to be eaten in the case of animals offered to Jehovah in sacrifice (see Leviticus 3:3, 9, 17; 7:3, 23). The grounds of the prohibition was that the fat was the richest part of the animal, and therefore belonged to
[the Lord] (see Leviticus 3:16). The burning of the fat of sacrifices was particularly specified in each kind of offering (BibleStudyTools.com).

The time chosen for the dedication of the Temple was immediately before the Feast of Tabernacles harvest (verse 8). This time period corresponded to our September and October and it lasted for seven days. With such a long festival, there was time for offering the large number of sacrifices listed in the passage. Many of these were peace offerings, which would have been offered in a festive atmosphere of celebration and great enjoyment.

In reading verse 9, one might wonder how the people could afford to consistently celebrate anything for fourteen days straight. What about their employment or other family responsibilities? Obviously, they highly elevated the worship of God on this very special occasion, and anything else that was urgent or important simply had to become secondary to the priority of worship. They were willing to alter their schedules and their lives in order to appropriately and emphatically accommodate the worship of God. How does this level of commitment compare to today’s church?

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Sometimes people celebrate trivial things such as sports, jobs, romantic relationships, and even material possessions, such as the purchase of a new house or car. These accomplishments are not bad or wrong in themselves, but they can become objects of worship. As they dedicated the Temple, Solomon and the people worshipped the Lord by bowing on their knees, making burnt offerings, playing music, and praying. God has a special, faithful way of honoring true sacrifice and true worship.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, thank You for the example and the inspiration of Solomon and the people as they worshipped You with utter abandon. We humble ourselves before You, almighty God, and You have promised to honor our worship with Your presence. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(March 12-18, 2018)

The People Gave Thanks to God
MONDAY, March 12: “God Listens to Obedient Worshippers” (John 9:24-38)
WEDNESDAY, March 14: “Hezekiah Arranges a Worship Service” (2 Chronicles 29:25-30)
THURSDAY, March 15: “Deliverance from Many Troubles” (Psalm 107:1-9)
FRIDAY, March 16: “Healed and Forgiven” (Psalm 107:17-22)
SATURDAY, March 17: “Assembly Attendees Blessed by Solomon” (1 Kings 8:54-61)
SUNDAY, March 18: “Solomon Dedicates the Temple” (2 Chronicles 7:1-9)
## KEEP MY STATUTES AND ORDINANCES

**ADULT/YOUTH**

**ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC:** Get It Together  
**YOUTH TOPIC:** Actions and Consequences

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** 2 Chronicles 7:12-22  
**PRINT PASSAGE:** 2 Chronicles 7:12-22  
**KEY VERSE:** 2 Chronicles 7:14

**CHILDREN**

**GENERAL LESSON TITLE:** Obeying God in All Things  
**CHILDREN’S TOPIC:** It Is Better to Obey

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** 2 Chronicles 7:12-22  
**PRINT PASSAGE:** 2 Chronicles 7:12-22  
**KEY VERSE:** 2 Chronicles 7:14

### Devotional Reading

Isaiah 58:6-12

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### 2 Chronicles 7:12-22—KJV

12 And the LORD appeared to Solomon by night, and said unto him, I have heard thy prayer, and have chosen this place to myself for an house of sacrifice.
13 If I shut up heaven that there be no rain, or if I command the locusts to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among my people;
14 If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.
15 Now mine eyes shall be open, and mine ears attent unto the prayer that is made in this place.
16 For now have I chosen and sanctified this house, that my name may be there for ever: and mine eyes and mine heart shall be there perpetually.
17 And as for thee, if thou wilt walk before me, as David thy father walked, and do according to all that I have commanded thee, and shalt observe my statutes and my judgments;
18 Then will I establish the throne of thy kingdom,

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### 2 Chronicles 7:12-22—NIV

12 the LORD appeared to him at night and said: “I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices.
13 “When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people,
14 “if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.
15 “Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.
16 “I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.
17 “As for you, if you walk before me faithfully as David your father did, and do all I command, and observe my decrees and laws,
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Examine the harsh consequences of disobedience to God.
2. Repent of present-day idolatry and other behaviors that separate us from God.
3. Commit to lives of obedient worship.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Living a just and merciful life requires people to sacrifice their own desires and thoughts. What are consequences for not choosing to be just and merciful? God told Solomon that if he did not follow the statutes and ordinances given to him by the Lord, then calamity would come upon the people and the Temple would be abandoned.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—God’s response to Solomon’s prayer (see 2 Chronicles 7:12-22) was presented immediately after the dedication. However, thirteen years had passed and during this time the palace was completed (see 1 Kings 7:1).

—Second Chronicles 7:12 tells of the second time God appeared to Solomon. The first was when...
The genealogical listing in the book of 1 Chronicles starts with Adam and moves forward to the founding of the first kingdom of Israel (see 1 Chronicles 1–9). Most of the rest of the book of 1 Chronicles deals with the reign of King David (see 1 Chronicles 11–29). Next comes David’s son Solomon (see 2 Chronicles 1–9), and the book ends with the kingdom of Judah and the second kingdom of Israel (see 2 Chronicles 10–36). The final chapter involves Judah’s being destroyed and its inhabitants being taken into exile to Babylon. In the final verses, the Persian king Cyrus the Great conquered the Neo-Babylonian Empire, and ordered the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem and the return of the exiles to their homeland.

The books of 1 and 2 Chronicles were originally a single work but was later divided into two in a Greek translation produced in the centuries immediately preceding the birth and life of Jesus. Chronicles has three broad divisions, including the genealogies, the reigns of David and Solomon, and the story of the divided kingdom. Within this framework, the author drew parallels between David and Solomon. David became king, elevated the worship of Israel God in Jerusalem, and engaged in battles that would enable the Temple to be built. His son Solomon then became king, built and dedicated the Temple, and experienced widespread prosperity and peace.
so strong that silver and gold were “as common as stones” (2 Chronicles 1:15). Enemies paid tribute to Israel and provided “forced labor” (see 2 Chronicles 8). Solomon, the leader of Israel, “surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom” (2 Chronicles 9:22). Israel was the world power of the day, economically and spiritually. They were God’s chosen people, and they enjoyed God’s richest blessings. In 2 Chronicles 6, Solomon had just finished building God’s Temple; and in the dedication ceremony prayer, Solomon acknowledged the following: “Lord, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven or on earth—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it—as it is today” (2 Chronicles 6:14-15, NIV).

Solomon glorified God for Israel’s blessings and admitted that God’s mercy and covenant were kept with “servants who walked before Him with all their hearts.” Israel was never perfect, but when they obeyed God and made the Lord their sole priority, God provided abundant blessings. However, Solomon was well versed in their history and their tendency to follow a pattern of obey and stray. Because of this tendency, Solomon prayed the following prayer: “If Your people Israel are defeated before an enemy because they have sinned against You, and return and confess Your name, and pray and make supplication before You in this temple, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of Your people Israel, and bring them back to the land which You gave to them and their fathers. When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against You, when they pray toward this place and confess Your name, and turn from their sin because You afflict them, then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of Your servants, Your people Israel, that You may teach them the good way in which they should walk; and send rain on Your land which You have given to Your people as an inheritance. When there is famine in the land, pestilence or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers; when their enemies besiege them in the land of their cities; whatever plague or whatever sickness there is; whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, or by all Your people Israel, when each one knows his own burden and his own grief, and spreads out his hands to this temple: then hear from heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know (for You alone know the hearts of the sons of men), that they may fear You, to walk in Your ways as long as they live in the land which You gave to our fathers” (2 Chronicles 6:24-31).

In this prayer, Solomon was “acknowledging that the nation of Israel is prone to the same weakness as their ancestors: in times of prosperity and ease they will be tempted to become proud, fall into sin, worship other gods, and drift away from God. Solomon is asking for the Lord’s grace and mercy ahead of time, petitioning for forgiveness and restoration when His people turn away from Him” (www.2chronicles714.net).

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**Solomon:** Solomon was a man of great wisdom, great wealth, and great writings. After beginning his kingly reign in approximately 967 BC, Solomon culminated his achievements through the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Solomon was a child of privilege, having been born the son of King David. David promised Solomon’s mother, Bathsheba, that Solomon would become the next king, and this promise was kept despite the fact that David’s elder son had declared himself king (Jewish Virtual Library).

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

**Command (verse 13)—Hebrew: tsavah (tsaw-vaw):** to command, charge, give orders, lay charge, give charge to, order.
Heal (verse 14)—Hebrew: *rapha* (raw-faw’): to heal, make healthful; to cure.

Heard (verse 12)—Hebrew: *shama* (shaw-mah’): to hear, listen to, obey; to hearken.

Humble (verse 14)—Hebrew: *kana* (kaw-nah’): to be humble, be humbled, be subdued, be brought down, be low, be under, be brought into subjection.

Open (verse 15)—Hebrew: *pathach* (paw-thakh’): to loose; to be opened, be let loose, be thrown open.

Turn (verse 14)—Hebrew: *shuwb* (shoob): to return unto, go back, come back.

**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

I. Introduction
   A. God Answers Prayers
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. God Answers Prayers
      (2 Chronicles 7:12-13)
   B. Potential Responses to God’s Gracious Actions
      (2 Chronicles 7:14-16)
   C. The Importance of Faithfulness
      (2 Chronicles 7:17-18)
   D. Penalty for Disobedience
      (2 Chronicles 7:19-22)

III. Concluding Reflection

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

**A. God Answers Prayers**

When Solomon prayed to God, God gave a very gracious answer to Solomon’s prayer. “The mercies of God to sinners are made known in a manner well suited to impress all who receive them, with His majesty and holiness. The people worshipped and praised God. When He manifests Himself as a consuming fire to sinners, His people can rejoice in Him as their Light. Nay, they had reason to say, that God was good in this. It is of the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed, but the sacrifice in our stead, for which we should be very thankful. And whoever beholds with true faith, the Savior agonizing and dying for [humanity’s] sin, will, by that view, find his godly sorrow enlarged, his hatred of sin increased, his soul made more watchful, and his life more holy. Solomon prosperously effected all he designed, for adorning both God’s house and his own. Those who begin with the service of God are likely to go on successfully in their own affairs. It was Solomon’s praise that what he undertook, he went through with; it was by the grace of God that he prospered in it. Let us then stand in awe, and sin not. Let us fear the Lord’s displeasure, hope in His mercy, and walk in his commandments” *(Matthew Henry’s Commentary).*
II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. God Answers Prayers
(2 Chronicles 7:12-13)

And the Lord appeared to Solomon by night, and said unto him, I have heard thy prayer, and have chosen this place to myself for an house of sacrifice. If I shut up heaven that there be no rain, or if I command the locusts to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among my people.

God chose to directly address Solomon in response to the prayers he prayed. But God’s answers to prayers can come in a wide variety of forms. God can say yes, no, or wait. God can even choose to say nothing at all, because God is sovereign and possesses supreme, ultimate power over everyone and everything. In an article for Christianity Today, Luis Palau identifies five of God’s frequent answers to prayers: (1) “No, I love you too much.” Sometimes, we ask for things that we do not need and God is loving enough to withhold and deny our request because of God’s wisdom and great love. (2) “Yes, but you’ll have to wait.” Sometimes waiting a while is what is needed for our hearts or the situation to ripen and mature into the necessary state of ripeness. (3) “Yes, and here’s more!” One of God’s character traits is the tendency to do exceedingly and abundantly above anything we could ask or think. (4) “Yes, I thought you’d never ask.” (5) “Yes, I’ve been waiting on you to ask.” This response is similar to the previous one, but this one carries with it God’s own premeditated desire to bless the recipient with the same object of the request. This fifth response is reflective of God’s response to Solomon.

This verse is a setup for the one that follows, and it accentuates the astounding power of God to command and create or to withhold and annihilate. God identifies Himself as being in control over the natural elements, and this was important because rain was a key factor in the successful growth of crops—for Israel was an agriculturally based society. God also revealed the ability to influence plant and

B. Biblical Background

The Israelites had come back to their country after seventy years in exile. The writer wanted to encourage them. He wanted to give them hope for the future. So in his book, he showed how the Lord was in control throughout all of their history, and now the Lord had brought them back to their own country. The Lord wanted them to rebuild His Temple and to serve Him. Then the Lord would establish again the kingdom called Israel. This kingdom would include all of Israel, and not be divided as before.

This second book continues the history of Israel through the rule of King Solomon. It carefully describes how Solomon built the Temple. Israel split into two kingdoms during the rule of Solomon’s son Rehoboam. Two tribes accepted Rehoboam as their king, and they became the kingdom called Judah. The other ten tribes refused to accept Rehoboam as their king and became the kingdom called Israel. Second Chronicles records the history of Judah until the time of the exile in Babylon. It finishes with the return of the Jews to Jerusalem after the Exile (Ian Mackervoy).
animal life, including the dreaded locusts which could totally destroy an entire season’s harvest in a matter of hours. God affirmed His capacity to provide or protect people from the various physical plagues that were so feared by the population. In what ways would God choose to get our attention today, since most people no longer primarily make their living through raising crops?

B. Potential Responses to God’s Gracious Actions
(2 Chronicles 7:14-16)

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land. Now mine eyes shall be open, and mine ears attent unto the prayer that is made in this place. For now have I chosen and sanctified this house, that my name may be there for ever: and mine eyes and mine heart shall be there perpetually.

This verse is one of the most powerful, memorable, and iconic verses in all of the Old Testament. Listen to its conditions, its cadence, and its careful articulation of the bountiful benefits of obedience to God. Having established all the potentially negative circumstances that could occur as a result of disobedience, God then focused on all of the potentially beneficial circumstances that could possibly occur as a result of obedience. The word if is a conjunction that means “in the event that, allowing that, on the assumption that, or on condition that.” Even though God is the Author and source of unconditional love, that does not mean that God puts no conditions on God’s favor. Those who desire unconditional favor from God should also be prepared to offer their unconditional obedience to God. People who desire to be identified as persons called by God’s name should also walk in God’s ways. Luke 6:46-48 expresses this spiritual sentiment: “But why call you Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not the things which I say? Whoever comes to Me, and hears My sayings, and doeth them, I will show you whom he is like: He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently against that house, and could not shake it, for it was founded on the rock” (NKJV).

The first condition listed in order to receive God’s blessings is humility. “Biblical humility is grounded in the character of God. The Father stoops down to help the poor and needy (Psalm 113:4-9; 138:6-7); the incarnate Son exhibits humility from the manger to the cross (Matthew 11:29; Acts 8:32-33; Philippians 2:5-8). The dual usage of meek and humble in Matthew 11:29 emphasizes Christ’s humility before humankind, whom he came to serve (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27) and His submission before God. Humility and meekness are often inseparable (2 Corinthians 10:1; Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:12)” (Bible Study Tools).

The second and third conditions for God’s blessings are prayer and seeking God’s face. Prayer is a paramount prerequisite for God’s people to truly experience God’s power. One may wonder why God places such a pronounced emphasis on prayer and a seemingly personal value on prayer. Prayer connects people with the heart of God and prepares them to see life and circumstances from God’s perspective rather than from their own. Selfishness limits our potential, but obedient prayerfulness leads to unlimited potential. Selfish saints seek God’s
hand, or what God can provide for them. Spiritual saints seek God’s face, or what God desires of them. The fourth condition for God’s blessings is repentance. To repent is to feel or express sincere regret or remorse regarding one’s wrongdoing or sin. It means to view or think of an action or omission with deep regret or remorse. Sins of commission result in grieving the Spirit of God, and sins of omission result in quenching the Spirit of God. True repentance not only involves feeling remorseful about one’s sin, it also involves correcting the error, moving in the opposite direction, and exhibiting evidence of a change of heart and action. Matthew 3:8 calls this “fruit in keeping with repentance” (NIV).

The reward for meeting these conditions is that God listens from heaven and hears their prayers, extending forgiveness for their sins and healing their land. What more could be asked of God who is offering the total package in a fair exchange? Repentance is the knock on the door of forgiveness that prompts God to open wide in order for healing to happen in the lives and the land of God’s people.

To consecrate something, as the word is used in verse 16, is to make or declare it sacred and dedicated to a divine purpose. Another word for “consecrated” is “sanctified.” Not only does God desire for His temple of worship to be consecrated and sanctified, but God also desires for our bodies and lives to be consecrated and sanctified. We are to be set apart for God’s special usage and not available for sinful purposes. The verse makes usage of anthropomorphism in order to give God eyes and a heart. The metaphoric imagery in this verse communicates the notion that although God is Spirit, God is able to watch our actions and to feel what is occurring in our lives.

C. The Importance of Faithfulness
(2 Chronicles 7:17-18)

And as for thee, if thou wilt walk before me, as David thy father walked, and do according to all that I have commanded thee, and shalt observe my statutes and my judgments; Then will I establish the throne of thy kingdom, according as I have covenanted with David thy father, saying, There shall not fail thee a man to be ruler in Israel.

In verse 17, God addresses Solomon directly and presents a conditional scenario to him that is similar to the one that was presented to the people. God recalls the walk and works of Solomon’s father David and the rich spiritual legacy that was demonstrated by him. God’s grace and mercy is in full effect as God refuses to taint the name and legacy of David by characterizing him as anything less than being a man after God’s own heart. God promised that David’s family would always have a descendant to perpetually rule on the throne of Israel. The eternal throne was unconditional and is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

D. Penalty for Disobedience
(2 Chronicles 7:19-22)

But if ye turn away, and forsake my statutes and my commandments, which I have set before you, and shall go and serve other gods, and worship them; Then will I pluck them up by the roots out of my land which I have given them; and this house, which I have sanctified for my name, will I cast out of my sight, and will make it to be a proverb and a byword among all nations. And this house, which is high, shall be an astonishment to every one that passeth by it; so that he shall say, Why hath the Lord done thus unto this land, and unto this house? And it shall be answered, Because they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, which brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, and laid hold on other gods, and worshipped them, and served them: therefore hath he brought all this evil upon them.
This series of verses begins with a conditional promise and ends with a conditional warning. There are a few things that God does not tolerate, and several of these are mentioned in verse 19. Like an earthly parent, there is a strong dislike on God’s part for those who disobey God’s expressed commands. This is especially true for those who are well acquainted with the things that God had already gone on record as commanding. The consequences are worse for defying known commands than the consequences for defying unknown commands. Serving other gods is one of the most well-known infractions of God’s laws. The name given for this is idolatry. The consequences for Israel’s defying God’s commandments forbidding idol worship were an uprooting from the land and destruction of the Temple that had just been constructed and consecrated.

The solemn assembly that was held provided an appropriate setting in which to deliver and receive the sobering message regarding the consequence for disobeying God’s commands. Just as the exquisite Temple would be a physical symbol of the harmonious, obedient relationship between God and Israel, so also a burned heap of rubble would be a visual reminder if the people of God chose a tumultuous, disobedient relationship with God (verse 21).

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

God clearly explained the spiritual principle of sowing and reaping later stated in Galatians 6:7-9: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.” Sin often results in negative consequences. Daily we must choose whom we will serve. When we do make unwise decisions one of God’s greatest blessings is the extension of undeserved grace and mercy instead of the divine punishment and negative consequences that are deserved.

PRAYER

Lord, please keep us ever mindful of the important part we have to play in the process of living life as disciples of Jesus Christ. Let us never take You for granted, and always follow Your example. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(March 19-25, 2018)

Keep My Statutes and Ordinances

MONDAY, March 19: “God Wants Activists Who Fast” (Isaiah 58:6-12)
TUESDAY, March 20: “Reconciliation Makes Gift Giving Just” (Matthew 5:21-26)
WEDNESDAY, March 21: “Treat Others Fairly with Compassion” (Exodus 22:21-29)
THURSDAY, March 22: “Life Is the Best Choice” (Deuteronomy 30:15-20)
FRIDAY, March 23: “Faithful Walking Is Key to Solomon’s Rule” (1 Kings 9:1-5)
SATURDAY, March 24: “Dangerous Results of Unfaithful Actions” (1 Kings 9:6-9)
SUNDAY, March 25: “Results of Solomon’s Decisions and Actions” (2 Chronicles 7:12-22)
Luke 24:1-12, 30-35—KJV

NOW UPON the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them.

2 And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre.
3 And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus.
4 And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments:
5 And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead?
6 He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee,
7 Saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.

Luke 24:1-12, 30-35—NIV

ON THE first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.

2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,
3 but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.
4 While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them.
5 “In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”
6 “He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee:
7 “The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.”
8 Then they remembered his words.
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Remember the story of the Resurrection that binds us to Christ and to one another.
2. Value the promise that Christ is with us in the breaking of bread.
3. Rejoice in the knowledge of Christ’s resurrection and presence among us.
AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
— All four Gospels (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1) indicate that the Resurrection took place on Sunday.
— A tomb’s entrance was ordinarily closed to keep vandals and animals from disturbing the bodies. This stone, however, had been sealed by the Roman authority for a different reason (Luke 24:2; see Matthew 27:62-66).
— Jesus prophesied His death and resurrection many times during His ministry but the disciples failed to comprehend or accept what He was saying (Luke 24:6).
— “Eleven” is sometimes used to refer to the group of apostles after Judas’s betrayal (Luke 24:9). Judas was already dead when the apostles first met the risen Christ.
— The “two men” who greeted the women at Jesus’ tomb appear as a single “angel” in Matthew 28:2 and 5, and as a “young man” in Mark 16:5.
— The two men at Jesus’ tomb not only confirmed for the women that Jesus had been raised but also recalled for them what Jesus had predicted about Himself before He had begun His journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:22).
— Jesus’ method of teaching on the Emmaus road, “opening the Scriptures,” was so powerful as to cause the disciples’ hearts to “burn” within them (verse 32).
— The appearance to “Simon” (Peter) mentioned in verse 34 is never detailed in any of the Gospels. Paul, however, mentioned it in 1 Corinthians 15:5 (calling him Cephas).
— Though the travelers were the ones who invited Jesus to partake of their hospitality, Jesus assumed the role of the host in the breaking and sharing of the bread (verses 29-30).

Teachers of CHILDREN
— In this passage, Luke emphasized that Jesus’ resurrection was promised in Scripture.
— The women had dismissed Jesus’ promise about His resurrection, for their reaction at the tomb reveals that they had forgotten it.
— Because the men at the tomb are described as wearing “dazzling clothes,” they are assumed to have been angels and a personage is identified as such in Matthew 28:5.
— While the early focus of the passage is on the tomb, the tomb quickly becomes irrelevant.
— The last verses in the Print Passage reveal the two disciples’ reaction to their encounter with Jesus after they walked the Emmaus road with Him and later had supper with Him.
— Three immediate reactions to the awareness of Jesus’ resurrection are included in the Print Passage: that of the women who were first perplexed and then excited, that of Peter who was first curious and then amazed (apparently because he believed), and that of the two disciples who did not see but later knew they had seen the Lord and experienced a great sense of fulfillment.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
The most commonly suggested periods for the creation of the gospel of Luke is AD 59–63. “Although the author of Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, a historical narrative of the travels and ministries of prominent followers of Jesus, neither manuscript preserves Luke-Acts as a single textual unit. Many scholars contend that the two texts were originally fused, only to be separated as the canon of the New Testament took shape. While most scholars no longer hold that the same
author wrote the gospel of John and three Johannine Epistles, their thematic and stylistic similarities suggest that the texts were written by persons from the same community.” Luke-Acts, though, shares no such doubt, as the writer refers to the gospel in his introduction to the Acts (Historical Context for Luke/John, Columbia College).

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

Rome is probably where the book of Luke was written, although Achaia, Ephesus, and Caesarea have also been suggested. The place to which it was sent would depend on the residence of Theophilus, its original recipient. By its detailed designations of places in the Holy Land, the gospel seems to be intended for readers who were unfamiliar with that land. Antioch, Achaia, and Ephesus are possible destinations. Luke had a superb command of the Greek language with an extensive, expressive vocabulary. Sometimes his style resembles classical Greek, and other times it seems to be more Semitic. The book of Luke presents the works and teachings of Jesus as they are connected to understanding salvation. The book of Luke orderly presents the salvation narrative from the birth of Christ to His ascension, and appeals to both Jews and Gentiles. The literary content is excellent, and the history is detailed and warm.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Mary Magdalene: Also known as Mary of Magdala (her hometown was a village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee), she was a leading figure among those drawn to Jesus. When the men in that company abandoned Him at the hour of mortal danger, Mary of Magdala was one of the women who stayed with Jesus even to the Crucifixion. (Smithsonian Magazine).

Joanna: The Hebrew name of this woman who was numbered among Christ’s disciples is the same as that of Joannes, Johanan, or John, and means “Jehovah has shown favor” or “the Lord is grace” or “the Lord gives graciously.” It was because the Savior showed favor unto Joanna that she rose up and followed Him. All we know of Joanna’s history is that she was the wife of Chuzu, the house-steward of Herod the Tetrarch, whom some writers identify as the nobleman of John 4:46-54.

Mary, the mother of James: We are told practically nothing about this particular Mary except that she was the mother of two children, one of whom Jesus chose as an apostle whose name was James. Some writers identify her as “the other Mary” (see Matthew 27:61), or as the wife of Cleopas or Alphaeus (see Matthew 10:3; Luke 24:18), or as a sister of Mary the mother of Jesus. We do know that she was one of the women who followed Jesus and, having sufficient wealth, ministered unto Him and His disciples in material things, thereby assisting them in their work (see Luke 8:2-3).

Simon: Although Simon, like the majority of the apostles, was probably a Galilean, the designation “Canaanean” is regarded as political rather than of geographical significance (compare Luke’s rendering). The Zealots, of whom he was a part, were a faction headed by Judas of Galilee, who “in the days of the enrollment” (compare Acts 5:37; Luke 2:1-2) bitterly opposed the threatened increase of taxation at the census of Quirinius, and would have hastened by the sword the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Delivered (verse 7)—Greek: paradidomi (par-ad-id’-o-mee): to deliver; to give over; to give up; to commit.

Garments (verse 4)—Greek: esthesis (es’-thay-sis): clothing, apparel; “clothes” (NIV).

Perplexed (verse 4, KJV)—Greek: diaporeo
Remembered (verse 8)—Greek: mnaomai (mnah’-om-ahee): to remind; to be recalled or to return to one’s mind, to remind one’s self of, to remember.

Risen (verse 6)—Greek: egeiro (eg-i’-ro): to rise; arise, cause to rise.

Sepulchre (verse 2)—Greek: mnemeion (mnay-mi’-on): a grave; a sepulchre, a “tomb” (NIV).

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Meaning of Easter

Easter is really an entire season of the Christian church year, as opposed to a single-day observance. As is the case for most religious holidays, including Thanksgiving and Christmas, Easter has been commercialized into something altogether different from its original purpose. Christmas has become synonymous with Christmas shopping, Christmas tree decoration, and Santa Claus. Thanksgiving is now focused on turkey dinner, football games, and the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade. During Easter, many people turn their attention toward new clothes, Easter bunnies, and Easter egg hunts. Discuss whether you think Christian holidays have been hijacked and their original meanings distorted, or if this is all just good, innocent fun that does not distract from the central meaning and significance of the days and the events they represent.

“The week preceding Easter is called Holy Week and includes Maundy Thursday, which commemorates Jesus’ last supper with His disciples; Good Friday, which honors the day of His crucifixion; and Holy Saturday, which focuses on the transition between the crucifixion and resurrection. The fifty-day period following Easter Sunday is called Eastertide and includes a celebration of Jesus’ ascension into heaven” (History.com).

B. Biblical Background

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) report many of the same episodes in Jesus’ life, so there are many similarities. But it is the things that are different that reveal the
uniqueness of the individual writers. “Luke’s themes include: (1) universality, recognition of Gentiles as well as Jews in God’s plan (see, for example, 2:30–32, and notes on 2:31; 3:6); (2) emphasis on prayer, especially Jesus’ praying before important occasions (see note on 3:21); (3) joy at the announcement of the Gospel or “Good News” (see note on 1:14); (4) special concern for the role of women (see, for example, 8:1-3 and notes); (5) special interest in the poor (some of the rich were included among Jesus’ followers, but he seemed closest to the poor; see note on 12:33); (6) concern for sinners (Jesus was a friend to those deep in sin); (7) stress on the family circle (Jesus’ activity included men, women, and children, with the setting frequently in the home); (8) repeated use of the Messianic title “Son of Man” (used twenty-five times; see 19:10; Daniel 7:13 and notes); (9) emphasis on the Holy Spirit (see note on 4:1); (10) inclusion of more parables than any other Gospel; (11) emphasis on praising God (see 1:64; 24:53 and notes)” (International Bible Society).

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Looking for a Dead Jesus
   (Luke 24:1-8)

NOW UPON the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them. And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre. And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus. And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments: And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, Saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again. And they remembered his words.

It was the custom in the Middle East to wrap the dead in strips of cloth as a part of the burial procedure. According to tradition, the spices were tucked between the strips of cloth to counteract the foul scent of death. Embalming spices were costly but were used when they could be afforded. Several of these aromatic substances are mentioned in Exodus 30. These spices include cinnamon and myrrh, which were sometimes mixed with olive oil to create holy anointing oil. Temple officials managed the spices, and spices were also used in preparation of a bride for a royal marriage. Another spice product originated from the balsam plant which grew in Arabia and was cultivated at Jericho after having been brought to Israel by the queen of Sheba. It is not clear why the women found it necessary to bring extra spices to the tomb, but perhaps it was an instinctive act of love, care, and nurture on their part (Bible-history.com).

The women’s search for Jesus at the tomb was a reflection of their natural inability to transcend the usual in order to spiritually comprehend the unusual (verse 2). Even after Jesus consistently assured His followers that He would be crucified and after three days would rise from the dead, the reality of that fact just did not seem to register. Any time we attempt to understand Jesus from a usual, regular, expected, traditional, limited point of
view, we end up with nothing but an empty tomb to show for all our well-intentioned efforts (verse 3).

Throughout the Scriptures, angels were dispatched as special delivery messengers from God to personally and powerfully communicate messages that are too important to be confused and misunderstood by their recipients. This is the case in verse 4. The word *angel* literally means “messenger.”

The question that is raised here in verse 5 deserves a good answer. If these women could give an answer to this question perhaps they would say, “We were looking for Jesus in the tomb because we thought He was not alive, and we did not honestly believe that He would actually rise from the dead.” This acknowledgment begs the question, “Just how much of what Jesus has said do we actually believe?” In what specific ways do we in contemporary times still figuratively search for living substance in dead places? In what ways do we sometimes look for Jesus among the dead?

A verb that is very important from a spiritual perspective is *remember*. The word *remember* means “to be able to bring to one’s mind an awareness of someone or something that one has seen, known, or experienced in the past.”

Interestingly, it was the female followers of Jesus who ended up being trusted with the historic and signal honor of being the very first conveyers of the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (verse 9). It was the women who ended up having to tell the disciples about the miracle of the Resurrection. Each of the women mentioned in the text played pivotal roles in the ministry of Jesus (verse 10), and now they had the privilege of inaugurating the telling of the Gospel. This act of telling the Gospel would be repeated by the disciples and countless other believers, evangelists, and preachers even up until this day.

Just as back then, some people believe and some do not (verse 11). Nevertheless, one’s disbelief about a true message does not discredit or diminish the validity of the message. The message of the Gospel does not need to be debated, just investigated. The Gospel stands on its own in truth, power, and ability to help and heal.

There must have been something special, though, about the message that the women conveyed. It must have registered with the heart and spirit of Peter (verse 12). He did not wait to debate the matter, but he made haste to investigate the claims of the women. Just as
some people respond to the Gospel with doubt and disbelief, others like Peter respond to the truth of the Gospel with confusion and personal deliberation about what it all really means.

C. Jesus Hidden in Plain View

(Luke 24:30-31)

And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight.

How is it that these followers of Christ could be so close to Jesus but still not recognize Him? “And their eyes were opened.” Not that they were shut before or closed up, but what held them before was removed, and what hindered their sight and knowledge was taken away; and perhaps these actions of His taking the bread, blessing it, and breaking it, and giving it to them, might put them in mind of Him, and cause them to look wistfully at Him. When what beclouded their sight was gone, and He appeared in His usual form, they perceived who He was and they knew Him to be their dear Lord and Master, for whose death they had been sorrowing, and of redemption by Him, and of whose resurrection they had been doubting (Gill’s Exposition of the Bible).

D. What Does It Take to Recognize Jesus?


And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures? And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them, Saying, The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon. And they told what things were done in the way, and how he was known of them in breaking of bread.

There was something special occurring in the minds and spirits of the travelers as they walked and listened to Jesus speak under the power and control of the Spirit of God (verse 32). It was not just some usual, ordinary conversation. Anointed words find their mark in the heart of the hearer. One of the ways to know if one’s words are anointed lies in the response to the words. Some preach and teach to impress and if performance is the motive, the response may be loud, but the result will be limited. When the travelers mentioned their hearts burning, this was “an expression denoting the deep interest and pleasure which they had felt in His discourse before they knew who He was. They now recalled His instruction; they remembered how His words reached the ‘heart’ as He spoke to them; how convincingly He had showed them that the Messiah ought to suffer, and how, while He talked to them of the Christ that they so much loved, their hearts glowed with intense love. This feeling was not confined to them alone. All the followers of Jesus know how precious and tender are the communications of the Savior, and how the heart glows with love as they think or hear of His life, and sufferings, and death” (Albert Barnes’ Notes on the Whole Bible).

Once again, the disciples received proof and heard eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. Even after all of these witnesses, there were some who still did not believe.

The two disciples recognized Jesus when He began to break the bread (verse 35). After so many of His followers had forgotten the prophetic promise of His resurrection, it is notable that these travelers recognized Jesus as He broke bread. It was this same activity of bread breaking that Jesus chose to utilize to help His
followers remember Him through the ritual of communion or the Lord’s Supper. “Those that have experienced the pleasure and profit of communion with Him cannot but desire more of His company. He took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. This He did with His usual authority and affection, with the same manner, perhaps with the same words. He here teaches us to crave a blessing on every meal. See how Christ by His Spirit and grace makes Himself known to the souls of His people. He opens the Scriptures to them. He meets them at His table, in the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper; is known to them in breaking of bread. But the work is completed by the opening of the eyes of their mind; yet it is but short views we have of Christ in this world, but when we enter heaven, we shall see Him forever. They had found the preaching powerful, even when they knew not the preacher. Those Scriptures which speak of Christ will warm the hearts of His true disciples. That is likely to do most good, which affects us with the love of Jesus in dying for us. It is the duty of those to whom He has shown Himself to let others know what He has done for their souls. It is of great use for the disciples of Christ to compare their experiences and tell them to each other” (Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary).

Is communion just another ritual for you, or does it truly help you to remember Jesus and His teachings in a significant way?

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Contemporary disciples are in need of clear and compelling exposition of the Scripture by preachers and teachers whose lives are wholeheartedly committed to God. No matter how many times we have heard a Scripture verse, there is always a possibility of learning something new and receiving a greater revelation, because the Word of God is living and active and sharper than a two-edged sword.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, thank You for what You did on Resurrection morning so many years ago. Because You got up, we can get up from whatever might try to hold us down. We can live victoriously because of Your victory on Calvary. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(March 26–April 1, 2018)

He Has Risen
MONDAY, March 26: “Jesus Foretells His Suffering and Death” (Mark 8:31–9:1)
TUESDAY, March 27: “Do This in Remembrance of Me” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)
WEDNESDAY, March 28: “First Examine Yourselves, Then Eat” (1 Corinthians 11:27-34)
THURSDAY, March 29: “Wash One Another’s Feet” (John 13:1-5, 12-17)
SUNDAY, April 1: “Jesus Lives Again” (Luke 24:1-12, 30-35)
The Risen Lord Appears

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: Taking Directions
YOUTH TOPIC: Choosing to Follow

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: It Is the Lord!
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Following Good Directions

Devotional Reading
Psalms 19:7-10; 119:105-112

Adult/Youth
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: John 21:1-14
PRINT PASSAGE: John 21:1-14
KEY VERSE: John 21:12

Children
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: John 21:1-14
PRINT PASSAGE: John 21:1-14
KEY VERSE: John 21:7a

John 21:1-14—KJV
AFTER THESE things Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he himself.
2 There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples.
3 Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee. They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing.
4 But when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus.
5 Then Jesus saith unto them, Children, have ye any meat? They answered him, No.
6 And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes.
7 Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, It is the Lord. Now when Simon Peter heard

John 21:1-14—NIV
AFTERWARD JESUS appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way:
2 Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.
3 “I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.
4 Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.
5 He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “No,” they answered.
6 He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.
7 Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water.
that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher’s coat unto him,  
(for he was naked,) and did cast himself into the sea.  
8 And the other disciples came in a little ship; (for they  
were not far from land, but as it were two hundred  
cubits,) dragging the net with fishes.  
9 As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a  
fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread.  
10 Jesus saith unto them, Bring of the fish which ye  
have now caught.  
11 Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land full  
of great fishes, an hundred and fifty and three: and for  
all there were so many, yet was not the net broken.  
12 Jesus saith unto them, Come and dine. And none of  
the disciples durst ask him, Who art thou? knowing  
that it was the Lord.  
13 Jesus then cometh, and taketh bread, and giveth  
them, and fish likewise.  
14 This is now the third time that Jesus shewed himself  
to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Sometimes life seems humdrum and unproductive. Where can people recognize purpose and direction for their lives? When the disciples followed guidance given by a man on the shore, they recognized it was Jesus who had given the directions and they joined Him in fellowship.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Summarize the account of the risen Christ’s appearance to seven disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.
2. Affirm the symbolic and real presence of Christ in our communal meals.
3. Practice the presence of Christ by eating together often.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—Night was the preferred time for fishing in ancient times, as fish caught during the night could be sold fresh in the morning (John 21:3).
—“The disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:7) is almost certainly John the son of Zebedee, the author of the gospel.
—Jews regarded a greeting as a religious act that could only be done when one was fully clothed (John 21:7).
—Attempts have been made to interpret the number 153 symbolically, but it is likely just the
THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The gospel of John was written approximately AD 85–90, prior to John's exile to the island of Patmos, which was around AD 90–95. The book of John has the earliest fragments dating to the early second century.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

During the writing of this gospel, “John and any Jews connected with the new Christian sect movement were being severely harassed and/or had already been expelled from the synagogue and their family and cultural structures. This was [also] a time of tough, antagonistic Jewish persecution, giving the Christians a squeeze in the middle of harassment and hostility from the Romans too—the city officials in the Roman providence such as Asia Minor to which the Jews and Christians fled after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. They were also betrayed by family and falsely accused by fellow Jews. In addition, the Jews kicked them out of their fellowships, a scandalous consequence for a Jew, leaving them without family or social contacts, or the ability to work and earn a living. This was a time of real tribulation. Some of the Christians were starting to lose their focus, and this Gospel provided a fresh beacon of hope and inspiration.”

Through his writing of this gospel, John sought to “win over his fellow Jews and the Temple leadership who were fixated on the Law and on reinventing the past traditions; they were convinced the Law supported their position. John proved the converse—that Jesus fulfilled the Law and Prophets. John used Scripture and classic rabbinic logic to state that Jesus was in fact the promised Messiah and moreover, God incarnate” (Into Thy Word).

PROFESSIONAL CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Simon Peter: The name Simon means “listen” or “he has heard.” But the name Peter means “rock or number of fish counted (John 21:11; fishermen routinely counted their catches in those days).

— John 21:14 identified this as the third appearance of the risen Jesus to a group (see also 20:19-23, 24-29), though there had been other appearances to individuals.

— John’s account contrasted the disciples’ ineffective labor in Jesus’ absence with amazing power and effectiveness in Jesus’ presence. In the Gospel accounts, the disciples never caught a fish without Jesus’ help.

— This marks the third time Jesus appeared to the disciples. “Three” is a number of wholeness, completion, and perfection in Jewish tradition. With this occasion, Jesus’ post-Resurrection appearances and revelations were complete.

Teachers of CHILDREN

— This passage is an account of the third post-Resurrection appearance of the Christ among His male disciples as a group.

— The Christology of Jesus is apparent, not only in His post-Resurrection appearance, but also in the miracle of the abundance of fish and the fact that the net did not tear although overfilled.

— The abundance of fish is specified twice in this passage.

— The disciples found direction and fulfillment in following the directions of Jesus.

— The right side of the boat can be seen as symbolic of living in a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

— Following Jesus’ directions changed a humdrum existence into one of success and fulfillment.
stone” in Aramaic. He was born in Bethsaida in Galilee, and his father was named Jonah (see John 1:42), and his brother was Andrew (John 1:40). He was one of the chief apostles and author of two New Testament books.

Thomas (Didymus): Thomas is first mentioned in Matthew 10:3 and last mentioned in Acts 1:13. The meaning of the name Thomas is “twin” (from the Greek); Didymus also means “twin” (from Aramaic). Thomas had an unnamed twin brother (see John 11:16; 20:24; 21:2).

Bartholomew (Nathanael): His name means “gift of God” and he was one of the twelve apostles generally supposed to have been the same as Nathanael. In the Synoptic Gospels, Philip and Bartholomew are always mentioned together, while Nathanael is never mentioned. In the gospel of John, Philip and Nathanael are similarly mentioned together but nothing is said of Bartholomew.

Sons of Zebedee: The sons of Zebedee are James and his brother John (Jesus gave them the name Boanerges, which means “sons of thunder”; see Mark 3:17.) This is the only place in Scripture that mentions the designation of the sons of Zebedee as the “sons of thunder,” and there is no stated explanation as to why Jesus referred to them in this manner.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON
Bring (verse 10)—Greek: phero (fer’-o): to bring forth; to bring; to carry some burden.
Cast (verse 6)—Greek: ballo (bal’-lo): to thrust; to “throw” (NIV) or let go of a thing without caring where it falls.

Come (verse 12)—Greek: deute (dyoo’-teh): come hither, come here, come.
Loved (verse 7)—Greek: agapao (ag-ap-ah’-o): love, beloved.
Nothing (verse 3)—Greek: oudeis (oo-dice’): no one, nothing.
Shewed (verse 1)—Greek: phaneroo (fan-er-o’-o): to make manifest or visible or known what has been hidden or unknown, to manifest, whether by words, or deeds, or in any other way; appeared” (NIV).

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON
I. INTRODUCTION
A. The Last Miracle of Jesus
B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
A. Sitting on the Dock of the Bay
   (John 21:1-3)
B. Early in the Morning
   (John 21:4-6)
C. It’s Him!
   (John 21:7-10)
D. Jesus, the Cook
   (John 21:11-14)

III. Concluding Reflection
be seen as symbolic of living in a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Following Jesus can transform our lives into success and fulfillment, but that success should not be our primary motive for following Jesus. We follow Jesus because we are convinced that He is the way, the truth, and the life. We follow Jesus because no one comes to the Father God but through Jesus the Son. We follow Jesus because His earthly life and teaching provide a positive, practical pattern for us to follow as we live our own lives.

B. Biblical Background

John 21 presents some difficult questions to biblical scholars who seek to understand its contents. Some of those questions include the following: “Why are the disciples back fishing in Galilee after having been commissioned by Jesus and having received the Spirit? Why don’t they recognize Him after having seen Him more than once at this point? Why is this called the third appearance of Jesus when there were already three appearances in chapter 20? If the Gospel has prepared the disciples for the time of Jesus’ absence and has come to a climax with a blessing on those who have believed without having seen, what place is there for these further stories about Jesus’ presence?” (Biblegateway.com).

This chapter provides a glimpse into the post-Crucifixion mentality and activity of the disciples. For three long years, they had awakened each morning with the pre-established purpose of following Jesus that day. Now that Jesus was gone, they had to fend for themselves in terms of food and finances. So, they defaulted to what many of them had done prior to encountering Jesus Christ: They went fishing. The fishing done by the disciples was not accomplished with a pole, line, and hook. Rather, this style of fishing utilized nets that could potentially catch a much larger number of fish in one outing. “Fishermen would either stand on the shore and repeatedly cast their nets into the water, or drop their nets from a boat. In Matthew 4, the nets used were those tossed from the shoreline. The occupation of fisherman was rather labor-intensive. The imagery of using a lure and a line (and waiting for the fish to strike!) is thus foreign to this text. Jesus is not speaking about finesse (as in fly fishing), or using the right kind of bait. The imagery has nothing to do with ‘hooking’ the unbeliever with the Gospel. Further, the picture is not individualistic: the point is not one person being reeled in at a time. All of this has to do with line-fishing, but this is not the picture seen in this text. Rather, the imagery of a fisherman involved much strain, long hours, and often little results” (Daniel B. Wallace). Those who fished with a net did so at night when the net would be even less visible to the fish which produced a larger catch. The night catch could then be sold fresh in the morning (see John 21:3).

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Sitting on the Dock of the Bay

(John 21:1-3)

AFTER THESE things Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he himself. There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples. Simon
Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee. They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing.

The visual and emotional scene that is depicted by verses 1 and 2 is of a group of men who are sitting around feeling defeated and depleted. They may have even been trying to figure out the next steps for their day and for their lives. It seems that seven of the disciples were gathered together by the sea. No information is provided regarding the location of the others, but we do know that at least three of the disciples mentioned were fishermen by profession: Peter and John (see Mark 1:19-20) and James (see Luke 5:10). Therefore, it would have been instinctual for them to return to what they knew before encountering Jesus. In Mark 1:17, we read how Jesus had called the disciples away from a life of fishing: “Jesus said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men” (NKJV). Jesus had called them away from killing and collecting fish and toward lives of healing and discipling humanity. It is said that misery loves company and uncertainty flocks together. No one else had experienced exactly what they had experienced, and being together was probably as close to normal as they could manage at the time.

People who are natural leaders are usually the first ones to speak up when a group is being indecisive or idle. Donald Griffith wrote an article entitled, “Personality Traits that Define a Leader,” and some of these traits include the following: (1) **Social ability**—Good-natured, extroverted, outgoing, friendly, gregarious, neighborly, congenial, warmhearted individuals who enjoy interacting and participating with others. They greet strangers openly, are quick to form friendships, and enjoy careers dealing with people rather than things. They are rarely content in solitary work. This is a personality trait that shows how well someone will interact with everyone in their sphere of influence (spouse, boss, associate, friend, employee). (2) **Self-confidence**—This is the number-one trait that determines a successful, self-assured, certain, secure, brave, fulfilled, poised, self-reliant leader. They believe they have the knowledge and ability to be successful at whatever they attempt. They cope successfully with challenges and are not easily discouraged. They handle unexpected situations well, make decisions with assurance, and are quick to express ideas and opinions. (3) **Assertiveness**—Aggressive, persuasive, influential, headstrong, opinionated, possibly argumentative and hostile; believe that being assertive and taking the offensive is essential to attaining success. They make things happen, rather than waiting for them to happen, and are willing to be forceful in order to get a job done. They may be authoritarian. (4) **Boldness**—They are adventurous, daring, carefree, brave, courageous, audacious, fearless, uninhibited individuals who are willing to try new and different experiences. They can function normally even in unfamiliar environments, and are quick to accept challenges and willing to take risks to accomplish their objectives. They may be pushy and ignore warning signs.

**B. Early in the Morning**

(John 21:4-6)

But when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus. Then Jesus saith unto them, Children, have ye any meat? They answered him, No. And he said unto them, Cast the net
on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes.

The disciples had spent three years in an intense relationship with Jesus, and it would seem that this high level of closeness would have enabled the disciples to easily recognize the voice and image of Jesus as He called out to them from the seashore. Perhaps one of the reasons the disciples may not have recognized Jesus was because they had been up all night fishing and were tired and sleepy as a result of the effort. Another possible reason for their lack of recognition could have been because they were not expecting to encounter Jesus in such a casual manner in such everyday circumstances. Whatever the reason, Jesus directed their conversational exchange to the subject of the disciples’ immediate perceived needs rather than their ultimate spiritual needs. Like the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well, Jesus first dealt with the disciples’ perceived needs before revealing and fulfilling their ultimate spiritual needs.

The scenario in verse 6 is reminiscent of the occasion when Jesus first recruited His disciples in Luke 5:4-6: “When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.’ When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break” (NKJV). Both of these fishing scenarios combine to underscore the fact that even though Jesus did not have years of experience as a fisherman, He was still able to accurately instruct the seasoned fishermen on how to secure a record-breaking catch. There is not one single area of life that the Lord God does not know about, care about, or have control over. This principle provides a reasonable rationale for inviting the presence and power of God into every human endeavor that we may ever undertake. Anything plus God is always much better. Some people spend a lifetime laboring on the wrong side of the boat when all they needed to do was to cast their nets on the right side of the boat and would have experienced God’s abundance through spiritual obedience.

C. It’s Him!
(John 21:7-10)

Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, It is the Lord. Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher’s coat unto him, (for he was naked,) and did cast himself into the sea. And the other disciples came in a little ship; (for they were not far from land, but as it were two hundred cubits,) dragging the net with fishes. As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread. Jesus saith unto them, Bring of the fish which ye have now caught.

Why did Peter jump into the water? Contrary to some speculation, in all probability it was a matter of Peter’s impulse due to his excitement of recognizing Jesus (verse 7). He was about a hundred yards away at the time and the text places him in front of the slow and heavily laden boat (verse 8).

Out of all the other disciples, it was only John, the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” who was able to recognize and identify Jesus (verse 7). Why was John the only disciple able to recognize Jesus? Perhaps there is a direct correlation between adoration of Jesus and
identification of Jesus. The closer we get to Him, the better we are able to recognize Him. Conversely, the less we love Him, the less we recognize Him. Why was John given the title of the disciple whom Jesus loved? Below are the instances in Scripture in which this phrase was used: The disciple whom Jesus loved is referred to, specifically, a number of times times in John’s gospel:

- It is this disciple who, while reclining beside Jesus at the Last Supper, asks Jesus, after being requested by Peter to do so, who it is that will betray him (13:23-25).
- At the Crucifixion, Jesus tells his mother, “Woman, here is your son,” and to the beloved disciple he says, “Here is your mother” (19:26-27).
- When Mary Magdalene discovers the empty tomb, she runs to tell the beloved disciple and Peter. The two men rush to the empty tomb and the beloved disciple is the first to reach the empty tomb. However, Peter is the first to enter (20:1-10).
- In John 21, the last chapter of the gospel of John, the beloved disciple is one of seven fishermen involved in the miraculous catch of 153 fish (21:1-25).
- In the book’s final chapter, after Jesus hints to Peter how Peter will die, Peter sees the beloved disciple following them and asks, “What about him?” Jesus answers, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow Me” (21:20-23, NJKV).

- The Gospel’s last chapter states that the very book itself is based on the written testimony of the disciple whom Jesus loved (21:24). (Quora.com).

Is there anything from the above instances that would indicate a reason why John was set apart? Did John give himself this title? Did Jesus show favoritism? Why John? Is it possible today to be considered a disciple whom Jesus loves? What would we need to be or to do in order to be designated in this manner?

Verses 9-10 present a scenario that identifies the elaborate forethought and incredible advanced preparation of Jesus. Before those disciples were even born, Jesus had already planned the menu! God’s extreme awareness of our minute, individual needs exceeds our human comprehension. It is reassuring to know that God knows what we need before we know we need it. Even the things we think we need may not qualify from God’s perspective because our knowledge and accuracy are limited while God’s knowledge are unlimited.

**D. Jesus, the Cook**

*(John 21:11-14)*

Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land full of great fishes, an hundred and fifty and three: and for all there were so many, yet was not the net broken. Jesus saith unto them, Come and dine. And none of the disciples durst ask him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus then cometh, and taketh bread, and giveth them, and fish likewise. This is now the third time that Jesus shewed himself to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead.

Various attempts have been made to interpret the number 153 symbolically, but it is likely that the fisherman routinely counted their catches in those days just as they do in
contemporary times (verse 11). This incident is simply a firsthand account of an amazing occurrence. It highlights a trademark of Jesus’ manner of operation. Everything He touched was enhanced.

The act of Jesus serving breakfast highlights His charity and His humanity in the midst of His divinity (verse 12). Most likely He also partook of the fish and bread as an act of reassuring the disciples that what they were witnessing was not an apparition, but was indeed the resurrected Jesus in the flesh. The reverent attitude of the disciples is understandable if they knew themselves to be in the presence of Deity. They were in a surreal moment with the resurrected Christ, and not even Peter had the nerve to interrupt the atmosphere with insignificant chatter.

The first appearance of Jesus was described in John 20:19-23, and the second in John 20:26-29. The reference in this instance should probably be understood as a reference to appearances to the disciples as a group, since at least one additional appearance is mentioned in the fourth gospel itself in John 20:14-17 when Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene. Luke and Paul both mention a prior appearance to Peter which may or may not constitute a separate appearance.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

A personal experience can be a powerful thing. No matter how many sermons we hear and no matter how many Bible studies we may attend, there is simply no substitute for a personal experience with the living Lord Jesus. A personal experience can transform us from cowardly congregants who deny the Gospel into courageous Christians who transform the world to the glory of God. Although we may not be able to literally walk, talk, and dine with Jesus in the flesh, we can commune with Christ in worship and personal devotion. In 1907, Homer L. Cox wrote a song that beautifully expresses the value of a personal experience with God. The title of the song is “It’s Real” (see Total Praise Hymnal, p. 419).

PRAYER

Dear Lord, thank You for being so real! So many people doubt You, but we can’t live without You. That is why we love You so, Jesus, You are real to us. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(April 2-8, 2018)

The Risen Lord Appears
TUESDAY, April 3: “Paul—Witness to the Resurrected Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:1-8)
WEDNESDAY, April 4: “Scriptures Equip Disciples for Good Work” (2 Timothy 3:14-17)
THURSDAY, April 5: “Ethiopian Eunuch Hears the Good News” (Acts 8:26-35)
FRIDAY, April 6: “Lead My People and Follow Me” (John 21:15-23)
SATURDAY, April 7: “John’s Testimony to Jesus Is True” (John 20:30-31; 21:24-25)
SUNDAY, April 8: “Jesus Serves Breakfast to the Disciples” (John 21:1-14)
John 21:15-25—KJV
15 So when they had dined, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.
16 He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep.
17 The third time he said to him, “Simon son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” Peter was grieved because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.
18 “Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”
19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

John 21:15-25—NIV
15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”
16 Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”
17 The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.
18 “Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”
19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”
glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.
20 Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee?
21 Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do?
22 Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.
23 Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?
24 This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true.
25 And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People are sometimes reluctant to show love and care for others. How can they be encouraged to show compassion for others? Jesus called Peter and all disciples to show their love for Him by taking care of His sheep.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Analyze Jesus’ questions and Peter’s responses in the passage and how they lead to Jesus’ command, “Follow me.”
2. Affirm the restoration of Peter after his threefold denial of Jesus.
3. Find ways to obey Jesus’ commands to “Feed My lambs,” “Tend My sheep,” and “Feed My sheep.”

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—The Greek word for “love” in Jesus’ first two questions (John 21:15-16) is different from that in His third question and in all of Peter’s answers. It is uncertain whether a distinction in meaning is intended, though in this passage the variations seem deliberate as John often made such distinctions.
—The terms sheep, lamb, and shepherd in this passage refer to Christ followers and to Christ.
—Jesus asked Peter three times whether he loved Jesus; Peter responded three times; Jesus told Peter what to do as a result three times. This
triune question-and-answer coupling suggested completeness and wholeness; it also reestablished Peter in his leadership role after his threefold denial of Jesus (18:17, 25-27).

—Jesus’ questions to Peter were, in effect, asking if Peter really understood who Jesus is and who Peter was in relation to Jesus. With each question and answer, while Peter seems to have become more exasperated, he also seems to have come to a fuller realization of exactly what Jesus was asking of him.

—Jesus’ instructions to Peter to feed His lambs and sheep recall His sayings throughout John 10 where He explained Himself as being the Shepherd of the sheep.

—The prophecy of Peter’s martyrdom (verses 18-19) further rehabilitated Peter and affirmed his status as an apostle.

—Verses 20-23 underscore that the call of each of Christ’s disciples is determined by God rather than by conformity to human reasoning and expectation.

Teachers of CHILDREN

—The Print Passage contains two focuses that occur prior to Jesus’ ascension: Jesus’ last meal with seven of the disciples, and Peter and John’s witness after Jesus left the earth.

—In the first narrative, Jesus predicted Peter’s martyrdom; in the second story, Jesus predicted that John would witness for Jesus by telling others about Jesus.

—This passage is sometimes referred to as the “Restoration of Peter” because it narrates the occasion of Peter’s reaffirmation of his love for Christ after the three denials prior to the Crucifixion.

—Peter’s reaffirmation of his love for Jesus was behavioral as well as verbal.

—When Jesus told the disciples to “follow me,” He indicated that they should show their love for Him by doing what He did: loving others.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The book of John was probably written around AD 85–90 after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, and before John’s exile to the island of Patmos. Although all four of the Gospel books tell the story of the life of Jesus, only one—the gospel of John—claims to be an eyewitness account. This testimony is from the unnamed “disciple whom Jesus loved.” “This is the disciple who testifies of these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true” (John 21:24). It was indeed John the disciple who penned this important biblical book.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The author of the book of John was obviously well acquainted with the geography of Jerusalem because of the geographic and place name information that is included throughout the book. He mentioned, among others, the Sheep Gate Pool (Bethesda), the Siloam Pool, and Jacob’s Well. The geographic specificity adds authenticity to the author’s account. “Another aspect of John that may be more historically accurate than the Synoptics is the account of the crucifixion and the events that led up to it. The Synoptics say that Jesus’ Last Supper was the Passover meal—held that year on a Thursday evening (Jewish holidays begin at sunset)—and they would have us believe that the Sanhedrin, the high court, gathered at the beginning of a major holiday to interrogate Jesus and hand him over to the Romans. John, in contrast, has Jesus handed over for crucifixion on the day of Preparation of Passover week, about the
sixth hour. According to John, the Last Supper is not a Passover meal (because the holiday that year did not start until Friday evening), and Jesus is crucified and buried before Passover begins. In John’s account Jesus becomes the Passover sacrificial lamb, which was offered the afternoon before the Passover holiday. Some scholars suggest that John may be more historical regarding the crucifixion than the other three Gospels” (Biblearcheology.org). Moreover, since John was familiar with Jerusalem and its surrounding territory, he more than likely had visited the Pool of Siloam, which is mentioned in connection with the story of the curing of the blind man. This account appears only in John’s gospel.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Simon Peter: Peter was the son of Jonas and more than likely a native of Bethsaida in Galilee. Peter and his brother Andrew were fishermen on the Sea of Tiberias (sometimes called the Sea or Lake of Galilee) and were fellow fishermen of James and John. Peter and his brother Andrew were disciples of John the Baptist. When John pointed out Jesus to Andrew as the Lamb of God, Andrew went to Peter and told him, “We have found the Messiah.” He brought him to Jesus, who looked at him, and said, “You are Simon, the son of Jonas; you shall be called Cephas.” The special designation of Peter and his eleven fellow disciples took place sometime afterward when they were set apart as Jesus’ close friends.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Feed (verse 15)—Greek: bosko (bos’-ko): to feed; to keep; portraying the duty of a Christian teacher to promote in every way the spiritual welfare of the members of the church.

Follow (verse 22)—Greek: akoloutheo (ak-ol-o-theh’-o): to follow one who precedes, join him as his attendant, accompany him.

Glorify (verse 19)—Greek: doxazo (dox-ad’-zo): to magnify; to honor; to praise, extol, magnify, celebrate.

Grieved (verse 17)—Greek: lupeo (loo-peh’-o): to cause grief; to make sorrowful; “hurt” (NIV).

Love (verse 16)—Greek: phileo (fil-eh’-o): to love; to approve of.

Testimony (verse 24)—Greek: marturia (mar-too-ree’-ah): a witness; a record.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction
   A. What Do You Believe?
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I. INTRODUCTION
A. What Do You Believe?

In John 20:30-31, the purpose of the book of John is clearly stated: “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

John desired to lead people to eternal life by convincing them of the deity of Christ, the miracles that were recorded as “signs” to confirm His deity, and that Jesus was Jehovah God, the incarnate Word made flesh. John called Jesus the Bread of Life; the Light of the World; the Good Shepherd; the Way, the Truth, and the Life; the True Vine—all clearly pointing to the deity of Jesus. In fact, John pointed to everything in His life and teachings as a sign that Jesus of Nazareth was truly the Eternal Word of God who “became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The underlying thematic thread of the book of John is the importance of people believing in Jesus. Belief is the first critical step toward successful discipleship and eventually spiritual maturity. Eternal life comes from believing God, and further knowledge comes from a deeper relationship with God. “Knowing and believing are key terms for John. Both occur over ninety times in this Gospel and are always used as verbs. Jesus’ teaching in John reminds us that knowing God and believing in Jesus are expressed in action” (HCSB Study Bible).

B. Biblical Background

This chapter is somewhat puzzling to some biblical experts. Some of the questions that arise from a simple reading of the text are “Why are the disciples fishing back in Galilee after having been commissioned by Jesus and having received the Spirit? Why don’t they recognize him after having seen him more than once at this point? Why is this called the third appearance of Jesus when there were already three appearances in chapter 20? If the Gospel has prepared the disciples for the time of Jesus’ absence and has come to a climax with a blessing on those who have believed without having seen, what place is there for these further stories about Jesus’ presence?” (Biblegateway.com).

These questions and others cause most scholars to believe that this chapter was added later by one of the disciples or by the same author. There are several examples among the narratives included in this chapter that clearly reveal how expertly Jesus gradually and intentionally crafted a closer relationship of trust and obedience with His disciples and especially with Peter. In their lost state without their spiritual leader they had been so used to following, they naturally reverted back to the familiar path of least resistance and Jesus graciously met them at the place where they currently were, in order to take them to the place where they needed to go.
II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Do You Love Me?  
(John 21:15-17)

So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

The name that Jesus used to address Peter is more closely aligned to his natural birth name than his spiritually acquired name. The name Peter signifies “rock,” which was the designation given to him by Jesus; but Jesus here identified him as merely Simon, son of John, or as one who had fallen from the steadfastness of the rock-man. When we accept Jesus Christ and pass from spiritual darkness into the life of divine light, we would like to think that our old ways are past and we are walking a different walk. However, the reality is that sometimes we revert to our old nature and begin to reflect characteristics from our former life without Christ. Some people might equate temptation with taking over our wills.

Some scholars have debated the meaning of the phrase “more than these” (emphasis added). Some have suggested that the word these might refer to the huge haul of fish that had just been caught and to the vocation of natural fishing in general rather than spiritual fishing. However, most researchers conclude that this term refers to the other disciples which were present. Perhaps Jesus was alluding to His previous conversation with Peter on the subject of commitment and fidelity in Matthew 26:31-35a (NIV): “Then Jesus told them, ‘This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.’ Peter replied, ‘Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.’ ‘Truly I tell you,’ Jesus answered, ‘this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’ But Peter declared, ‘Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.’”

Three times Jesus asked the same question of Peter ostensibly to drive home the point of its significance: “Do you love me?” Did Jesus doubt Peter’s love and loyalty? Did He have reason to doubt Peter’s love and loyalty? Did Peter himself doubt his own love and loyalty to Jesus? Perhaps in this moment “burning thoughts of penitence and shame may have come to his mind, and these may have been the true preparation for the words which follow” (Biblehub.com).

Why ask the same thing three times? Perhaps since there had been a public denial, there also had to be a public confession. If Peter had been allowed to slip back into the circle of the disciples without acknowledgment of his failure, denial may have seemed trivial to the others, and maybe even to Peter himself. Was it unkind of Jesus to hold Peter’s feet to the interrogational fire in the midst of his peers? MacLaren’s Commentary responds that Jesus was indeed showing kindness to Peter through His questioning, because it was used to open
Peter’s eyes to himself and his inner condition: “So long as a man is disturbed by the dread of consequences, so long as he is doubtful as to his relation to the forgiving Love, he is not in a position beneficially and sanely to consider his evil in its moral quality only. But when the conviction comes to a man, ‘God is pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done’; and when he can look at his own evil without the smallest disturbance rising from slavish fear of issues, then he is in a position rightly to estimate its darkness and its depth. And there can be no better discipline for us all than to remember our faults, and penitently to travel back over the road of our sins, just because we are sure that God in Christ has forgotten them. The beginning of Christ’s merciful treatment of the forgiven man is to compel him to remember, that he may learn and be ashamed.” How would you respond if Jesus were to ask you today, “Do you love me?” In what specific ways do you show Jesus your love?

Peter answered Jesus’ triple question with the same triple answer: “Lord, you know I love you.” This triple answer is followed by a triple commission: “Feed my sheep.” For Jesus, the way He desired for love to be displayed for Him was through feeding and caring for His spiritual sheep. MacLaren continues: “Love to Jesus Christ is the qualification for all such service. If we are knit to Him by true affection, which is based upon our consciousness of our own falls and evils, and our reception of His forgiving mercy, then we shall have the qualities that fit us, and the impulse that drives us, to serve and help our fellows.”

B. Peter’s Death Predicted
   (John 21:18-19)

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.

This oblique passage seems difficult to interpret at first reading. The immediate reference in these verses is regarding the predicted martyrdom of Peter. The contrast here is between the self-willed life of youth and the coercive life of maturity which will involve bondage, violence, and ultimately death. In the midst of this bleak prediction, Jesus still bid Peter to walk in obedience and to faithfully follow Him. Matthew Poole’s Commentary sheds some light on the meaning of Jesus’ comments to Peter: “. . . if we may believe what the ancients have generally reported, and we can have no other proof (that Peter was killed by crucifixion) in which kind of death the hands of the person crucified are stretched out and nailed to the cross. But which way he died we cannot certainly affirm. The evangelist assures us that our Savior spoke these words with reference to that kind of death by which Peter as a martyr was to glorify God; nor is it any objection against his martyrdom, that our Savior here said, that he should be carried whither he would not; for he was not better than his Lord, whose spirit was willing, and flesh weak. Whether our Savior by His command, Follow me, intended the imitation of Him, His death, or the particular kind of
His death, is uncertain; unless we will allow this text to be interpreted by John 13:36 and 2 Peter 1:14.”

C. Competition and Rumors
(John 21:20-23)

Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee? Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me. Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?

Peter by nature was compulsively impulsive and tended to frequently engage his mouth before activating his sense of tact. Here he saw John, the writer of this gospel, who referred to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved (verse 20). Interestingly, in the Synoptic Gospels, the designation applied to John as “the disciple who Jesus loved” is only used by John to describe himself.

In the original language, verse 21 is very short and concise: “Lord, and this what?” The Arabic version states, “And this, of what mind is he?” Or it could be, “What shall this man do?” Or it may be rendered, “And what shall this man suffer?” Perhaps acknowledging the preference of Jesus for John, maybe Peter was asking, “Will he suffer at all and if he will suffer, what kind of death will he undergo?” (Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible). Matthew Henry concurs with this interpretation and adds, “But it is impossible to ascertain certainly why Peter asked this question. John was a favorite disciple, and perhaps Peter suspected that he would have a happier lot, and not be put to death in this manner. Peter was grieved at the question of Jesus; he was probably deeply affected with the account of his own approaching sufferings; and, with perhaps a mixture of grief and envy, he asked what would be his lot. But it is possible, also, that it was from kindness to John—a deep solicitude about him, and a wish that he might not die in the same manner as one who had denied his Lord. Whatever the motive was, it was a curiosity which the Lord Jesus did not choose to gratify” (Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary).

The tone of Jesus’ response to Peter’s inquiry can only be taken as correction and reproof (verse 22). In other words, Jesus was telling Peter to take six months to mind his own business and six months to leave other people’s business alone. Now that Peter obviously believed Jesus, the next step would be for Peter to completely trust and obey Jesus. Peter was merely reflecting the human tendency to be focused on the affairs of others without adequately dealing with our own responsibilities. The phrase “If I want him to remain alive until I return” has a cloudy meaning and to which, therefore, many different writers have given guesses as to the exact interpretation.

Even for believers, it is easy for rumors to spread (verse 23) when misunderstandings go unaddressed and assumptions go uncorrected. This problem can be attributed to the reality of human nature and all of the shortcomings that go along with that common condition. “They took as a statement what had been said as a supposition, and understood it in the then current belief that the Second Advent would come in their own generation (see
1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:17). The mistake and its correction are both interesting in their bearing upon the date of the Gospel, and they furnish that kind of evidence which is perfectly natural as a growth, but which cannot possibly be made” (Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers).

D. So Many Wonderful Things about Jesus (John 21:24-25)

This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true. And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.

John reinforced the fact that he wrote this gospel and was indeed that disciple whom Jesus loved (verse 24). This chapter of John in particular, though, bears unmistakable marks and evidence of John’s authorship in its style and language. John was an eyewitness and an ear-witness to all of the things that were accomplished by Jesus, and there were so many things that occurred that not everything can be written in the Scriptures (verse 25).

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Following Jesus involves concrete actions and demonstrations of love. As Christians, we are called to live with the assurance of God’s forgiveness and restoration and to understand that our lives should bear witness to Him at all times and in all places. Getting to know Jesus fully enables us to be effective witnesses for Him. Our relationship with God finds expression through love, compassion, and care for others. While some aspects of our service and faith practice may be similar to that of other believers, there are other people whom God may call to follow a distinctly different path. Let us all use the gifts that God has given to us and bloom where we are planted. Let God be God in me and let God be God in you.

PRAYER

Lord, thank You for the invitation to follow You. Help us to remove the distractions that we use as attractions. Let us press toward the goal of making You Lord of our lives and following You no matter the cost. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(April 9-15, 2018)

Follow Me
MONDAY, April 9: “Peter Denies Jesus Three Times” (John 18:15-18, 25-27)
TUESDAY, April 10: “Thomas Moves from Doubt to Faith” (John 20:24-28)
WEDNESDAY, April 11: “Go Proclaim the Good News” (Matthew 10:5-15)
THURSDAY, April 12: “As Laborers Go into the Harvest” (Matthew 9:35-38)
FRIDAY, April 13: “Other Sheep Will Listen to Me” (John 10:11-18)
SATURDAY, April 14: “Lose Your Life for My Sake” (Matthew 10:34-39)
SUNDAY, April 15: “Follow Me and Feed My Sheep” (John 21:15-25)
The Lord God the Almighty

Revelation 4:1-6, 8-11—KJV
AFTER THIS I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter.

2 And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne.

3 And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald.

4 And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold.

5 And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps which are the seven Spirits of God.

6 And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and
round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind.

8 And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. 9 And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, 10 The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, 11 Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People wonder to whom they should give ultimate allegiance. Who deserves to be worshipped and praised? The book of Revelation teaches that God alone is worthy of all praise, wonder, and awe.

LESON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Research the significance of the symbolism of the heavenly worship in the book of Revelation.
2. Long for the time when God will be worshipped in eternity.
3. Worship and give praise to our awesome, fearsome God.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—What John was about to experience was a continuation of the vision he began to experience in chapter 1. The voice John heard is the same voice that commanded him in Revelation 1:19 to write what he witnessed. We draw this conclusion because the voice’s nature “like a trumpet” (Revelation 4:1) matches the description in 1:10-12.

—Thunder and lightning (Revelation 4:5) are symbolic of the awesome majesty and power of God. In the book of Revelation, thunder and lightning always mark an important event connected with the heavenly Temple.

—The idea of a sea as smooth as glass (verse 6) is an image of peace, serenity, and even the sovereignty of God in His control over nature (compare Psalms 89:8-9; Mark 4:39).

—The hymn that the “four living creatures” sing (verse 8) acknowledges the holiness and
sovereignty of God. What is important here in this verse is the role that the living creatures have: they offer continuous praise, which is the sense of day and night. The threefold holy, holy, holy matches Isaiah 6:3. We can think of these beasts as the worship leaders of heaven (see verses 9-10, next).

—The twenty-four elders may symbolize the whole people of God—the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles—thus tying together the Old and New Testaments.

—While the sea is an ancient symbol of chaos, in the presence of God, it is smooth as glass (verse 6). Those in the ancient world were unable to make clear glass; the best they could produce was uneven and dark, often opaque. This image of clear glass was striking for John’s readers and suggested something unlike anything they had ever seen.

—The seven flaming torches . . . which are the seven Spirits of God (verse 5) echo Revelation 1:4, where John talked of the “seven spirits who are before his throne.” Scholars differ in their interpretation of these spirits. Some propose that the seven spirits represent the fullness of God’s Holy Spirit. Others see a symbol of angelic beings. The number “7” is quite important in the book of Revelation, occurring more than fifty times (about 14 percent of all the Bible’s uses).

**Teachers of CHILDREN**

—The Scripture passage is devoted to the glory and praise of the one God, who is the Creator and ultimate ruler of the universe.

—In this passage, John provided a description of heaven that he received while he was in a visionary trance (“in the spirit,” verse 2).

—God is portrayed in this passage like an earthly monarch.

—Several symbols are used in this passage: the rainbow that symbolizes God’s promise to preserve the earth; the twenty-four elders, who symbolize God’s people; the four creatures representing all of animal life; and the many eyes on the creatures signifying the omniscience of God.

—The fullness of God is represented in the seven flaming torches, “which are the seven spirits of God” (verse 5).

—All animal and human life give praise to God because of His glory and God’s creation and care of all things (verse 11).

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**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The book of Revelation has given rise to a wide-ranging amount of speculation, interpretation, and contemplation. The fact that Revelation was purposely written in code language due to John’s incarceration in a prison setting for preaching the Word of God makes interpreting this book even more challenging. Fortunately, understanding Revelation is not impossible, and God actually desires for us to comprehend the instructions and activate the commandments that are contained in the contents of this book. There is a general consensus that Revelation was written in about AD 95 by the apostle John near the end of the harsh and notorious reign of the Emperor Domitian. Revelation is a book of hope intended to ignite faith and obedience rather than a book of hype intended to ignite fear and confusion. Revelation is a serious book about a serious subject intended to convey an important spiritual and practical message to the church at large regarding the present and the future.

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

As the emperor during the time that the book of
Revelation was written, Domitian, like his predecessor Nero, did not take kindly to Christians and their unwillingness to submit completely and fully to the authority of the Roman Empire. Consequently, Christians were persecuted and subjected to unthinkable treatment because of their faith. When Rome caught fire, some people blamed Nero for starting the fire for his amusement. To deflect the blame, Nero randomly rounded up Christians to point toward as the culprits.

In reading the book of Revelation, the descriptive physical setting constantly meanders from place to place, ranging from the depths of the bottomless pit in the center of the earth to the top of Mount Zion. The sources of this fanciful travel are the visions that emanate from the mind of the apostle John. Although he was physically stationary as a religious/political prisoner on the island of Patmos, John took his readers on a fantastic voyage by providing narrated insight into his many spiritual visions. These visions include divine visions of the heavenly realms (see 4:1-8) where God is on His throne and the atmosphere is gleaming and beautiful. Here God shines in all His majesty and glory along with a heavenly throng of worshippers. The streets are paved with gold, and the walls are encrusted with jewels. But not everything is bright and beautiful inside John's visions. John also described the bottomless pit (see 9:1-3) where smoke comes out and blocks the sun. Beyond that is the lake of fire (see 19:20), which is a place of ultimate punishment where the damned burn in a sea of boiling hot sulfur for all eternity (www.shmoop.com/revelation).

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**Spirit:** The Holy Spirit is considered the third person of the Trinity and is not first mentioned in the book of Acts but first mentioned in Genesis 1:2. In John 16:13 (NIV), we see what is described as the role of the Holy Spirit: “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.” The Holy Spirit was given so that the power and presence of God can live inside those who believe in Jesus in order to produce God’s character in their lives.

**Twenty-four Elders:** Although the book of Revelation does not specifically identify who the twenty-four elders are, they are most likely representatives of the church. “It is unlikely that they are angelic beings, as some suggest. The fact that they sit on thrones indicates that they reign with Christ. Nowhere in Scripture do angels ever rule or sit on thrones. The church, however, is repeatedly said to rule and reign with Christ (see Revelation 2:26-27, 5:10, 20:4; Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30). In addition, the Greek word translated here as ‘elders’ is never used to refer to angels, only to men, particularly to men of a certain age who are mature and able to rule the church. The word elder then would be inappropriate to refer to angels, since they do not age. Their mode of dress would also indicate these are men. While angels do appear in white, white garments are more commonly found on believers, symbolizing Christ’s righteousness imputed to us at salvation” (Revelation 3:5, 18; 19:8) (gotquestions.org).

**Four Living Creatures:** Christian tradition dating back as far as St. Irenaeus has interpreted these four creatures as representing the four evangelists because they “carry” Jesus Christ to men. “The one with the face of a man is St. Matthew, who starts his book with the human genealogy of Christ; the lion stands for St. Mark: his Gospel begins with the voice crying in the wilderness (which is where the lion’s roar can be heard); the ox is a reference to the sacrifices in the temple of Jerusalem, which is where St. Luke begins his account of Christ’s life, and the eagle represents St. John, who soars to the heights to contemplate the divinity of the Word” (Christianity.stackexchange.com).

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

**Behold (verse 1, KJV)**—Greek: *idou* (id-oo’): behold, see, lo.

**Heaven (verse 2)**—Greek: *ouranos* (oo-ran-os’): heaven, air; sky.
**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

I. Introduction
   A. Spiritual Symbolism
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. Invitation to Worship (Revelation 4:1-2)
   B. To Him Who Sits on the Throne (Revelation 4:3-6)
   C. The Heart of Worship (Revelation 4:8-11)

III. Concluding Reflection

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### I. INTRODUCTION

**A. Spiritual Symbolism**

The book of Revelation is a good example of the apocalyptic style of literature. This type of Jewish literature uses highly symbolic imagery and visionary symbolism to communicate spiritual truth. Chapter 4 contains an account of the second vision that John saw and prepares the way for the opening of the sealed book. Chapter 4 delves into the things that will take place after “the things present” in chapters 2 and 3 (or the church age). In the section that follows, the apostle John described the series of events that will occur sometime after the Rapture as they are described in chapters 6-22. “Following what many believe is God’s own inspired outline of the book of Revelation (see Revelation 1:19), chapter 4 introduces us to the things future, the prophetic part of the book: the seals, the trumpets and vials; Satan and his last day activities; the future of Israel; the 144,000; Babylon; the beast and false prophet; the two witnesses; the marriage of the Lamb and the return of Christ” (Bible.org).

**B. Biblical Background**

The book of Revelation was written to seven Christian churches in the Roman province of Asia. These churches were identified by the name of the city in which they were located, as seen in Revelation 1. Below is a list of those churches/cities and a brief description of them: The city of Ephesus was a center of culture and trade. One of its most prominent and most notorious features was the temple dedicated to Artemis, daughter of Zeus and the goddess of chastity, virginity, the hunt, the moon, and the natural environment. The temple was one of the “Seven Wonders of the World” and its amphitheater was capable of...
holding 24,000 people (see also Acts 19:21-41). **Smyrna** was located in a port city chosen to be the center of the imperial cult which worshipped the emperor. **Pergamum** was a city of 180,000 people and was probably the official center of the Roman government and was also noted for its practice of emperor worship. **Thyatira** held a temple dedicated to Apollo (son of Zeus) and the sungod Helios, but it was more noted as a center of trade guilds and commerce (see also Acts 16:14). **Sardis** was located at the junction of the imperial highways linking Pergamum, Smyrna, and Ephesus. It had a reputation for its glorious past when it was the capital of the wealthy Croesus. **Philadelphia** was devastated by an earthquake of AD 17 and today is known as Alasehir. **Laodicea** was a very prosperous city whose wealth and reputation were based on its wool and linen industry, and its manufacture of an eye ointment (see Revelation 3:18).

There are several important terms and concepts that are helpful in acquiring a broad understanding and appreciation of the book of Revelation. These terms include the following: **144,000**—Revelation 7:1-8; 14:1-5—The number of Jews; 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. **Antichrist:** The word *antichrist* appears four times in the Bible: 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; and 2 John 7. In these instances, it refers to teachers who are supposedly Christian but who are false and deceptive. **Armageddon:** The word *Armageddon* occurs only once in the Bible in Revelation 16:16, where it is used to locate the mythical place where the last battle would be fought. **Rapture:** The word *rapture* comes from the Latin translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, where, in describing the Resurrection and return of the Lord, Paul said that “we who are still alive and are left will be *caught up* together with them [the dead in Christ] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” NIV; (emphasis added). Texts like Revelation 11:15-19 and 14:14-16 claim a “rapture” that will occur following a great tribulation.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Invitation to Worship

(Revelation 4:1-2)

**AFTER THIS I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter. And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne.**

In John’s vision, the image of an open door communicates a metaphoric passageway leading from one dimension to another. For John, it must have indicated an invitation for him to move from an earthly perception as we know it into a heavenly perception that was on a totally different level of understanding. The voice that he heard is so clear and forceful that it reminded John of the sound of a trumpet. This voice both invited John to come and reassured John that what he would hear is authentic and would reveal things that are to happen in the future.

In Revelation 4, John described his heavenly vision that in many ways is reminiscent of Ezekiel’s vision in Ezekiel 1:4-28. John saw
a throne room which is also a place of worship (verse 2). The book of Ezekiel, which is also classified as apocalyptic literature, features Ezekiel’s vision of “a throne of sapphire” and sitting on it was “a figure like that of a man” (Ezekiel 1:26), which is identified as “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord” (Ezekiel 1:28). John, by contrast, spoke only of a throne in heaven and someone seated on the throne (verse 2).

B. To Him Who Sits on the Throne
(Revelation 4:3-6)

And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald. And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold. And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind.

From John’s perspective, the throne represents glory, power, honor, and majesty. These attributes did not just describe the physical throne itself, but the one who sits on the throne. The regard given to the one inhabiting the throne was far above any regard and accolades given to any earthly ruler or king. The sheer beauty of the sight creates an ethereal atmosphere accentuated by a rainbow, resembling an emerald (verse 3). The twenty-four elders are present in support and also presumably at the service of the one who sits on the throne. The magnitude of the spectacle is understood by the fact that even the circle of twenty-four elders who were dressed in white also wore gold crowns (verse 4). One can only imagine the majesty of the One who sits on the throne if even the attendants themselves wore gold crowns.

The flashes of lightning and peals of thunder are understood by some to represent the coming judgments (verse 5). Others see it as visual and audible demonstrations of God’s holy power, presence, and potential.

The seven lamps of fire represented the seven Spirits of God (verse 5). “The baptism of the Holy Spirit is a baptism of fire (see Matthew 3:11-12). The flaming presence purges the spirit from sin. The Holy Spirit consumes evil. It is an unquenchable fire against all evils, whether in men’s hearts or in men’s lives, or in the world” (Ellicot’s Commentary for English Readers).

John saw a heavenly throne which represented the power and authority of almighty God. The throne was not vacant, but was filled by the only one worthy to occupy the control seat of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. The sea and other bodies of water have been commonly compared to glass or even a mirror (verse 6). The word crystal refers to something that is congealed or frozen as ice. It could refer to anything resembling a certain species of stone known for its clearness: as the transparent crystals of quartz; limpid and colorless quartz; rock or mountain quartz. “The word crystal in mineralogy means an inorganic body which, by the operation of affinity, has assumed the form of a regular solid, by a certain number of plain and smooth faces. It is used here manifestly in its popular sense to denote anything that is perfectly clear like ice. The comparison, in the representation of
the expanse spread around the throne, turns on these points: (1) It appeared like a sea, stretching far. (2) It resembled, in its general appearance, glass; and this idea is strengthened by the addition of another image of the same character, that it was like an expanse of crystal, perfectly clear. This would seem to be designed to represent the floor or pavement on which the throne stood. It may denote: (a) that the empire of God is vast, as if it were spread out like the sea; or (b) it may represent the calmness and placidity of the divine administration, like an undisturbed and unruffled ocean of glass” (Barnes Notes on the Bible).

C. The Heart of Worship
(Revelation 4:8-11)

And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

What an unusual sight it must have been to view four creatures with six wings and covered with eyes even under its wings (verse 8)! No other known creatures can be compared to these creatures, and some of their features honestly seem somewhat horrible. Perhaps this is part of the reason why so many Christians tend to shy away from reading and studying the book of Revelation. Other biblical references to such fantastic sightings and visions include Isaiah 6:2; Psalms 18:10; 104:3; and Jeremiah 48:40. The design of the multiple wings and the multiple eyes symbolically denote God’s omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. Since the power of God is always working, there is no room for rest. There is never a time when God ceases to strongly support those whose hearts are completely His own. Likewise, we should never take a vacation from praising and adoring the one who has given us abundant life. From John’s vision, we can see that in heaven, praise takes no rest breaks, and the declaration of God’s holiness is the prime subject of interest all day, every day (see also Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 1:4).

The fantastic winged creatures were created with the purpose of praising God (verse 9). The chorus of worship rises to a grand crescendo when the praise by the winged creatures is combined with the praise of the twenty-four elders (verse 10). Ellicott observes, “The connection between the praise given by creation, and the consequent homage of the twenty-four elders expresses a truth. The church of Christ does not always hear the voice of praise from created things. Often the creation groans and travails; but her chorus of praise rises when she perceives that ‘everything that hath breath praises the Lord.’ The converse of this thought—the earth brings forth her fruit when the people praise God—is hinted in Psalm 67:5-6, ‘the earth ceases her travail when the sons of God are made manifest’ (see also Romans 8:19-21).” He continues: “The crowns are not royal crowns, but the crowns of conquerors. These are laid down before the throne by those who overcame, not in their own might, but through the blood of the Lamb” (Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers).
The absolute worthiness of God to receive glory, honor, and power is accepted and affirmed without question or debate (verse 11). God does not have to perform any act or pass some test in order to deserve this righteous designation. Verse 11 expresses the essence of the “is-ness” of almighty God. Matthew Henry beautifully sums up this lofty notion of righteous worship: “All true believers wholly ascribe their redemption and conversion, their present privileges and future hopes, to the eternal and most holy God. Thus rise the forever harmonious, thankful songs of the redeemed in heaven. Would we on earth do like them, let our praises be constant, not interrupted; united, not divided; thankful, not cold and formal; humble, not self-confident” *(Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary)*.

### III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Genuine believers in God and dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ understand the importance of offering to God unqualified worship in Spirit and in truth. This worship of God does not just take place once or twice per week in the four walls of a sanctuary, but our very bodies serve as living, portable sanctuaries and temples of righteousness dedicated to the glory of our great God. This worship cannot stop with lip service, but must be reinforced with obedient actions that reflect the commandments of God and the character of God. The book of Psalms encourages everything that has breath to praise the Lord. Authentic expressions of praise may include a variety of sounds, instruments, and singing in their worship of God. Believers may worship God through well-crafted music or singing, or through loud and triumphant expressions of adoration in their worship of God.

### PRAYER

*Lord, please prepare us to be a sanctuary. Help us to live lives that are pure and holy, tried and true. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.*

### HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

*(April 16-22 2018)*

**The Lord God the Almighty**

**MONDAY,** April 16: “God Promises Mercy to All People” *(Genesis 9:8-17)*

**TUESDAY,** April 17: “Job’s Pain Determined in Heavenly Court” *(Job 1:6-12)*

**WEDNESDAY,** April 18: “Moses Summoned by God” *(Exodus 19:20-25)*

**THURSDAY,** April 19: “Jesus, Our Example on the Throne” *(Hebrews 12:1-6)*

**FRIDAY,** April 20: “Vision of Four Living Creatures” *(Ezekiel 1:5-14)*

**SATURDAY,** April 21: “Elders Worship and Praise God Together” *(Revelation 19:1-8)*

**SUNDAY,** April 22: “Heavenly Worship” *(Revelation 4:1-6, 8-11)*
BLESSING, GLORY, HONOR, FOREVER

**Adult/Youth**

**Adult/Youth Topic:** A World of Joy

**Youth Topic:** Let’s Celebrate!

**Background Scripture:** Revelation 5:6-14

**Print Passage:** Revelation 5:6-14

**Key Verse:** Revelation 5:12

**Devotional Reading**

Philippians 2:1-11

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**Children**

**General Lesson Title:** All Praise to God Forever

**Children’s Topic:** Rejoicing and Praising

**Background Scripture:** Revelation 5:6-14

**Print Passage:** Revelation 5:6-14

**Key Verse:** Revelation 5:12

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**Revelation 5:6-14—KJV**

6 And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.

7 And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne.

8 And when he had taken it, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints.

9 And they sang a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;

10 And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.

11 And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders:

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**Revelation 5:6-14—NIV**

6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

7 He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne.

8 And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people.

9 And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.

10 “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”
and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand; and thousands of thousands;
12 Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing,
13 And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.
14 And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.

12 In a loud voice they were saying: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”
13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”
14 The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People find it difficult to find a source of allegiance that is permanent and lasting. What type of response do they give when they find this lasting allegiance? The book of Revelation speaks of joyful praise and eternal worship of God.

LESSON OBJECTIVES
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Analyze the symbols of the heavenly worship of the Lamb.
2. Reflect on the significance of the whole world worshipping the Lamb who was slain.
3. Celebrate with joy the faithfulness of God, who promises that the whole world will unite in worship of Christ.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED
Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—The harp referenced in verse 8 is an ancient stringed instrument (not like large, modern harps) used especially to accompany songs.
—In the Old Testament, a “new song” (verse 9) celebrated a new act of divine deliverance or blessing. That is also the case in this passage.
—The worship of the Lamb in this passage testifies to His deity (verses 11-12).
—Opening the seven seals that bind the scroll shut will both reveal God’s plan and set it in motion.

Only one who is worthy has the right or the power to open the scroll.
—In Revelation 5:5, the phrase “Lion of the tribe of Judah” comes from Genesis 49:9 and depicts Israel as a great power. The phrase “Root of David” comes from Isaiah 11:1-10 and points to a new king and deliverer of Israel. In John’s vision, these two phrases take on new meaning in and through Christ, the slain and risen Lamb who is worthy to open the scroll.
—“Horns” symbolize power and “eyes” symbolize insight (verse 6). The Lamb is presented as having full power and vision that sees all, attributes otherwise given only to God.
—The hymn of praise beginning in verse 9 explains why the Lamb is worthy to open the scroll: it was slain to ransom people for God, and it made of those people a kingdom and priests of God.
—That the hymn of praise is “new” is significant. The newness began with the Lamb and His sacrifice. The series of events that will unfold will result in a new heaven and a new earth. When God ushers in the new age completely, the faithful will have new names and they will live in the new Jerusalem, set in the new heaven and new earth.

Teachers of CHILDREN
—This passage focuses on Jesus the Christ, who is symbolized as the “Lamb” who was sacrificed.
—The Lamb receives the scroll from the right hand of God, the scroll that no one else had been able to open.
—An earlier passage suggests that the contents of the scroll may have been the names of the redeemed.
—Because the Lamb could open the scroll, He is worshipped by everyone.
—This passage incorporates the three manifestations of the Godhead: the Creator seated on the throne, Christ who is seated at the Creator’s right, and the Holy Spirit (“the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth,” verse 6).
—Because the Lamb could open the scroll that reveals all truth, everyone—the angels, the creatures, the elders, and the myriads—sings a new song: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered” (verse 12).

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
The book of Revelation has traditionally been dated around AD 96. The church in Ephesus was not founded by Paul until the latter part of Claudius’s reign, and when he wrote to them from Rome around AD 61, instead of reproving them for any lack of love, he commended their love and faith (see Ephesians 1:15). Yet when Revelation was written, “in spite of the fact that the Ephesians had been patient (2:2), they had also left their first love (verse 4), and this would seem to require a greater length of time than seven or eight years, as suggested by the early date. Another piece of internal evidence of a late date is that this book was penned while John was banished to Patmos (1:9). It is well known that Domitian had a fondness for this type of persecution” (Wayne Jackson, Christian Courier).

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
There is only one book in the New Testament that clearly stipulates the location where the writing takes place. That book is Revelation, and that location is the island of Patmos. According to the tradition noted by Irenaeus, Eusebius, and Jerome, John was exiled in AD 95 during the reign of Domitian the Emperor. John’s exile ended when Nerva ascended the throne in AD 96. “The small island of Patmos is about 7.5 miles (12 km) long from north to south and at its widest is 6 miles (10 km) from east to west. It is the northernmost island of the Dodecanese. With an area of 13 square miles (35 sq. km) and a circumference of 25 miles (37 km), the volcanic island presents a largely rocky and treeless landscape” (BiblePlaces.com).

Around the time of the writing of Revelation, Roman authorities were demanding that people...
worship the emperor. However, since the disciples of Jesus Christ (later called Christians, first at Antioch) believed that only Christ, not Caesar, was to be worshipped, they faced hostility and persecution.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Lamb: The title of “Lamb” is recorded twenty-eight times in the book of Revelation alone, and only four other times in all of the rest of the New Testament (see John 1:29, 36; Acts 8:32; 1 Peter 1:19). This precious title for Jesus is replete with imagery and highlights the gentle character and the sacrificial acts of Jesus. The “Lamb” designation effectively captures the traits of beauty, holiness, purity, and perfection, while also indicating His humility and willingness to die on our behalf.

The Four Living Creatures: This term is found in Revelation 4:6-9; 5:6-14; 6:1-8; 14:3; 15:7; and 19:4. The four living creatures are not figurative but are literal, actual beings that possess the status of “a special, exalted order of angelic being or cherubim. This is clear by their close proximity to the throne of God. The purpose of the four living creatures also has to do with declaring the holiness of God and leading in worship and adoration of God, and they are involved in some way with God’s justice” (GotQuestions.org).

The Twenty-four Elders: There is some disagreement about the identity of the twenty-four elders. Textual and biblical evidence strongly suggest they are humans as opposed to angels. They have been given positions of responsibility in the government of God and finally surrender their exaltation and authority to the King of Kings.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Book (verse 9)—Greek: biblion (bib-lee’-on): a book, a “scroll” (NIV), a written document.

Earth (verse 6)—Greek: ge (ghay): earth; ground; country; the ground, the earth as a standing place.

Hand (verse 7)—Greek: dexios (dex-ee-os): the right, the right hand; place of authority.

Lamb (verse 8)—Greek: arnion (ar-nee’-on): Lamb; Christ.

Redeemed (verse 9)—Greek: agorazo (ag-or-ad’-zo): to buy; redeem; “purchased” (NIV).

Slain (verse 6)—Greek: sphazo (sfad’-zo): to slay, slaughter; to kill.

Worthy (verse 12)—Greek: axios (ax’-ee-os): worthy; having value.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction
   A. A Glimpse of Heavenly Worship
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. Now Behold the Lamb (Revelation 5:6)
   B. The Scroll and the Bowl (Revelation 5:7-8)
   C. Sing a New Song (Revelation 5:9-12)
   D. To Him Who Sits on the Throne (Revelation 5:13-14)

III. Concluding Reflection
I. INTRODUCTION

A. A Glimpse of Heavenly Worship

In Revelation 4–5, the scene changes from the earth to heaven. The focus is on worship at the throne of God, which is mentioned twelve times in chapter 4 and five times in chapter 5. In this fifth chapter of the final book of the Bible, we see a scene of God on His throne with a scroll in His right hand. An angel asks a simple question: “Who is worthy to open the scroll?” This scene continues with the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Jesus) being found worthy to open the scroll. This wonderful scene shows us just how important Jesus’ life and sacrifice truly were and are. He lived a sinless life and showed true obedience to God’s will in all things.

B. Biblical Background

The word revelation translates the Greek word apokalypsis, which means “disclosure” or “unveiling.” The book of Revelation unveils the unseen spiritual war in which the church is engaged: the cosmic conflict between God and His Christ on the one hand, and Satan and his evil allies (both demonic and human) on the other. In this conflict, Jesus the Lamb has already won the decisive victory through His sacrificial death, but His church continues to be assaulted by the dragon, in its death-throes, through persecution (the beast), deceptive heresy (the false prophet), and the allure of material affluence and cultural approval (the prostitute). By revealing the spiritual realities behind the church’s trials and temptations, and by affirming the certainty of Christ’s triumph in the new heaven and earth, the visions of Revelation fortify believers to endure suffering. The reader of Revelation is encouraged to stay pure from the defiling enticements of the present world order (English Standard Version, “Introduction to Revelation”).

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Now Behold the Lamb

(Revelation 5:6)

And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.

In verse 6, John’s vision reveals a lamb that is presumably bloody since it is labeled as a “slain” Lamb. This is an oddity because even though the lamb seems slain, it is still standing upright. A lamb would have been a fairly common sight in the cuisine of a culture that feasted on roasted lamb as one of the staples in their diet. In addition to the Lamb standing at the center of the throne, the Lamb is encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. Through His death, the sacrificial Savior...
is identified as the slain Lamb who is able to cleanse and to make clean and whole again.

The pardon and power available from the Lamb is not easily attained, but a heavy price had to be paid. This is not an isolated notion with an opportunity that was once opened but now is closed. It is the slain Lamb that makes possible access to the Spirit of God. We must therefore look to that Lamb as our hope and confidence. If we trust His sacrifice and rest our hopes on the Cross, then our hearts will receive His grace, and “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus will make you free from the law of sin and death” (*MacLauren’s Expositions*).

**B. The Scroll and the Bowl**  
*(Revelation 5:7-8)*

And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne. And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints.

The *Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary* notes that this introductory vision “presents before us, in summary, the consummation to which all the events in the seals, trumpets, and vials converge, namely, the setting up of Christ’s kingdom visibly. Prophecy ever hurries to the grand crisis or end, and dwells on intermediate events only in their typical relation to, and representation of, the end.” The four living creatures represent the entire living creation, whereas the twenty-four elders represent the whole of redeemed humanity. Interestingly, both groups unite in their praise to God as they bow down in humble adoration. “This song of praise finds a response first in Revelation 5:12 in the angelic hosts, and then in Revelation 5:13, is taken up by all creatures everywhere, so that at the close a doxology, in a manner concentrated, sounds forth at the same time to the One sitting on the throne and to the Lamb, and finally dies away in the amens of the four beings who had begun the praise of the enthroned God” (*Meyer’s New Testament Commentary*).

In these verses, it is evident that God is aware of everything that transpires on the earth, including the suffering and persecution of the saints. But despite the obstacles and opposition, God’s kingdom will ultimately triumph and the Lamb of God will prevail in spite of being wounded. Better stated, the Lamb of God will prevail, not in spite of being wounded, but *because* of being wounded. This notion is supported by Isaiah 53:4-5, which states, “Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.” God knows and sees all that is happening on the earth. God knows their persecution and suffering. However, God’s plans cannot be stopped. The Lamb will rule and will conquer. God’s Spirit is always at work, and God will fulfill His precious promises and powerful prophecies. The Lamb of God is the spiritual instrument through which God’s plans will be fulfilled. When it comes to prayer, have you ever wondered if there is any real value in prayer, or if your prayers are actually heard by God? Have you ever thought that praying seems like talking to one’s self? Look for ways that Revelation 5 shows us that prayer reaches the very throne room of God.
C. Sing a New Song
   (Revelation 5:9-12)

And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take
the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast
slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of
every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And
hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall
reign on the earth. And I beheld, and I heard the voice of
many angels round about the throne and the beasts and
the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand
times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; Saying
with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to
receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and
honour, and glory, and blessing.

The phrase a new song is to be understood
as an excellent song and an uncommon song. Not only is this song excellent and uncommon, but it is also a song that very specifically fits the occasion for which it is written. The song of the nobles or princes standing by the throne consisted of a publication of the praise of Christ and a confirmation of the same for His blessings (Geneva Study Bible). It is established that Christ is worthy to be entrusted with His church, and to open the revelations of the counsels of God (verse 9). Christ was slain and has redeemed us from sin, death, and hell. Therefore, our responsibility is to obey God, serve God, carry the message of God, and worship God (Matthew Poole’s Commentary).

Those living in heaven join with representatives of the church to give honor to the Lamb of God. The purpose is to demonstrate harmony in heaven, and that every living creature will unite in giving praise to the King of Kings. The angels, creatures, and elders all belong to the same family and are worshippers of God. The angels “are the guards that encamp round about them that fear the Lord, and often protect them from enemies and dangers; and it may be observed, that the saints are nearer the Lamb and the throne than the angels . . . . The saints are the heirs of salvation, and the bride . . . . the Lamb’s wife, and therefore nearer Him” (Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible).

The number of angels is absolutely astronomical and is far beyond what most people can mentally fathom (verse 11). The sum total of ten thousand times ten thousand equals one hundred million. This term is not to be taken literally, but is a figurative term meaning a number so great that it is virtually impossible to count.

Verse 12 brilliantly illustrates a royal crescendo of praise and worship climaxing with a magnificent sevenfold doxology. An utter sense of completion and absoluteness pervades this passage as the heavenly chorus in spiritually euphoric terminology triumphantly proclaims the wonderful worth of the slain Lamb. Barnes Notes on The Bible shares insight on seven aspects of this worship that the slain Lamb is worthy to receive:

- **Power:** This word represents authority and ability to rule over all things. This sentiment is echoed in the New Testament by Jesus in Matthew 28:18 when He declares, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’” (NIV). The idea in both instances is that He was worthy of all these things to be ascribed to Him, or to be addressed and acknowledged as possessing them.

- **Riches:** This word indicates a sense of abundance in which the slain Lamb is worthy of whatever contributes to honor, glory, and happiness, and all
this should be conferred on Him in abundance. He is the original proprietor of all things; it is fitting that He should be recognized as such. Having performed the work which He has, it is proper that whatever may be made to contribute to His honor should be regarded as His.

• **Wisdom:** This word indicates the ability to choose the best ends and the best means by which to accomplish something. “If wisdom was anywhere demanded, it was in reconciling a lost world to God; if it has been anywhere displayed, it has been in the arrangements for that work, and in its execution by the Redeemer” ([Barnes’ Notes on the Bible](https://www.biblegateway.com/)).

• **Strength:** The fourth word indicates the ability to accomplish God’s purposes. This strength or power was manifested in overcoming the great enemy of humanity. God has control over winds, storms, diseases, and ultimately over death.

• **Honor:** The fifth word indicates esteem, high respect, recognition, and appropriate placement within one’s personal priority system. The place of honor is a rare place that only a chosen few can occupy. Honor involves distinction, recognition, and privilege.

• **Glory:** This sixth word refers to a higher ascription of praise than the word *honor*. Perhaps that might refer to the honor which we feel in our hearts; this to the expression of that by the language of praise.

• **Praise/Blessing:** This seventh and final word expresses the extension of praise, honor, and adoration. To bless someone is to confer a sense of joy, prosperity, and goodwill. “To bless God, or to ascribe blessing to Him, is that state where the heart is full of love and gratitude, and where it desires that He may be everywhere honored, loved, and obeyed as He should be.”

**D. To Him Who Sits on the Throne**

(Revelation 5:13-14)

And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.

In this scene, everything that has breath joins together in order to pay holy homage to the slain Lamb. No living thing is excluded from participating in this exercise of divine worship. This includes everything on the earth, under the earth, on the sea, under the sea, and over the sea. Psalm 150:6 emphasizes this same perspective: “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.” In fact, the entire content of Psalm 150 and other places in the Psalms celebrate this concept of inclusive worship, and the writer even extended to inanimate objects the grand invitation to praise. Barnes concurs: “The hills, the streams, the floods; the fowls of the air, the dwellers in the deep, and the beasts that roam over the earth; the songsters in the grove, and the insects that play in the sunbeam, in fact, declare the glory
of their Creator; and it requires no very strong effort of the fancy to imagine the universe as sending up a constant voice of thanksgiving.”

Verse 14 finalizes the chapter and arrives at a place of resolve as if to reflect the notion of “What more can be said or done?” Sometimes mere words are not enough to adequately express the depth of emotion and spiritual awe that one is experiencing. Thought and feeling assert themselves above all language. There are times when silence is the most eloquent applause; there are times when it is also the most real worship. Sometimes the most expressive prayers are without words.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

To truly know God is to also know that God is worthy of all blessing and honor and power and glory forever. There are many ways to praise our great God but only two times to praise God: (1) when we feel like it, and (2) when we don’t. Worship gives us hope, assurance, and a solid sense of who is in control of our world. We should never become complacent about worship or satisfied with the level of worship we have experienced. God is constantly inviting us to rise to another level of worship in order to discover new facets of God’s character and God’s nature that have not yet been discovered. Take the time to raise your level of worship and praise.

PRAYER

Dear God, let us never become satisfied with what we already know about You. Help us to see that our growth in You will always be connected to our experiences with You. The greater we will be able to be when the more we have of You and the less we have ourselves. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(April 23-29, 2018)

Blessing, Glory, Honor, Forever

MONDAY, April 23: “Rejoice! Your Salvation Is in Christ” (1 Peter 1:3-9)
TUESDAY, April 24: “All Subject to God through Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:20-28)
WEDNESDAY, April 25: “Sanctified by Lambs Sacrificed Daily” (Exodus 29:38-46)
THURSDAY, April 26: “Christ, Our Suffering, and Salvation” (Romans 8:31-39)
FRIDAY, April 27: “Eat the Scroll, Speak My Words” (Ezekiel 2:8–3:11)
SATURDAY, April 28: “Only One Can Open the Scroll” (Revelation 5:1-5)
SUNDAY, April 29: “All Creatures Worship the Lamb” (Revelation 5:6-14)
GIVING FROM A GENEROUS HEART

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT TOPIC: Generous Giving
YOUTH TOPIC: Cheerful Giving

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Giving from a Generous Heart
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Giving Is Good

DEVO TIONAL READING
Psalm 112

EXODUS 35:20-29; 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-8
—KJV
20 And all the congregation of the children of Israel departed from the presence of Moses.
21 And they came, every one whose heart stirred him up, and every one whom his spirit made willing, and they brought the LORD’s offering to the work of the tabernacle of the congregation, and for all his service, and for the holy garments.
22 And they came, both men and women, as many as were willing hearted, and brought bracelets, and earrings, and rings, and tablets, all jewels of gold: and every man that offered offered an offering of gold unto the LORD.
23 And every man, with whom was found blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and goats’ hair, and red skins of rams, and badgers’ skins, brought them.
24 Every one that did offer an offering of silver and gold

EXODUS 35:20-29; 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-8
—NIV
20 Then the whole Israelite community withdrew from Moses’ presence,
21 and everyone who was willing and whose heart moved them came and brought an offering to the LORD for the work on the tent of meeting, for all its service, and for the sacred garments.
22 All who were willing, men and women alike, came and brought gold jewelry of all kinds: brooches, earrings, rings and ornaments. They all presented their gold as a wave offering to the LORD.
23 Everyone who had blue, purple or scarlet yarn or fine linen, or goat hair, ram skins dyed red or the other durable leather brought them.
brass brought the LORD’s offering; and every man, with whom was found shittim wood for any work of the service, brought it. 
25 And all the women that were wise hearted did spin with their hands, and brought that which they had spun, both of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, and of fine linen.
26 And all the women whose heart stirred them up in wisdom spun goats’ hair.
27 And the rulers brought onyx stones, and stones to be set, for the ephod, and for the breastplate; 
28 And spice, and oil for the light, and for the anointing oil, and for the sweet incense.
29 The children of Israel brought a willing offering unto the LORD, every man and woman, whose heart made them willing to bring for all manner of work, which the LORD had commanded to be made by the hand of Moses.

6 But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully.
7 Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.
8 And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work.

24 Those presenting an offering of silver or bronze brought it as an offering to the LORD, and everyone who had acacia wood for any part of the work brought it.
25 Every skilled woman spun with her hands and brought what she had spun—blue, purple or scarlet yarn or fine linen.
26 And all the women who were willing and had the skill spun the goat hair.
27 The leaders brought onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece.
28 They also brought spices and olive oil for the light and for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense.
29 All the Israelite men and women who were willing brought to the LORD freewill offerings for all the work the LORD through Moses had commanded them to do.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People want to live lives of gratitude. How can they express their thankfulness properly? God welcomes the offerings of those who give with generous and cheerful hearts.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Understand the account of Israel’s offering to build and furnish the tabernacle.
2. Appreciate the call to cheerful and generous giving to God.
3. Embrace cheerful and generous giving as a Christian way of life.
AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—The description of all the contributed materials emphasized the people’s willingness of heart and showed their repentance for making the golden calf (Exodus 35:20-29).

—The Israelites, after spending 430 years in Egyptian oppression, had now entered into a covenant relationship with God on Mount Sinai and were in need of some offerings to build a tabernacle.

—Exodus 35 marks the first time the offerings of women for the tabernacle are mentioned (verses 22, 25, 26, 29).

—In 2 Corinthians 9:6, Paul expanded a well-known proverb, “You reap what you sow” (Job 4:8; Proverb 22:8; Jeremiah 12:13; etc.). God does not require Christians to give a certain amount, but provides opportunities to give generously.

—Second Corinthians 9:7 is alluding to Proverbs 22:9 in the Septuagint. God loves joy-motivated giving to others because it expresses contentment in God’s gracious giving to the believer.

—Through abounding grace, God can enable each Christian to abound in generous deeds (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Teachers of CHILDREN

—The Israelites were allowed to construct the tabernacle after renewing the covenant that had been violated when they worshipped the golden calf.

—To build the tabernacle, the people gave not only materials, but also the use of their talents.

—Those who contributed to the building of the tabernacle did so not because they were required to give.

—The materials that were given to build the tabernacle were precious, not castoffs.

—The Second Corinthians passage emphasizes God’s love of a “cheerful giver,” or one who does so because of the generosity in his or her heart, not because he or she is compelled.

—The last verse in the Print Passage articulates the “sufficiency principle,” which is twofold: the believer is satisfied with God’s provision and God rewards the faithful believer with abundance.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

First Kings 6:1 and 1 Chronicles 6:33-37 place the date for the beginning of the biblical Exodus as 1406 BC. Other scriptural support for this date can be found in Judges 11:26. According to Bryant Wood (Associates for Biblical Research), most contemporary biblical research scholars tend to reject and discount the historical validity of the Exodus narrative. One of the reasons given is that there is no mention of Israelites in Egypt in Egyptian historical records. However, Gerald Wheeler notes that “surviving Egyptian inscriptions were, for the most part, propagandistic records carved in stone extolling the accomplishments of the god-king Pharaohs. An event that demeaned Pharaoh or Egypt would never be recorded. Moreover, writing was believed to be sacred, giving reality to the statements being recorded. If an event was not recorded, then it was as though it had never happened” (Ancient Egypt’s Silence about the Exodus, Andrews University Seminary Studies).

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The historical and cultural context of the book of Exodus is identified in the first chapter
of the book of Exodus. The children of Israel had migrated to Egypt, having been invited there by Joseph. After the death of Joseph, there arose a king who did not know Joseph, nor was he familiar with the circumstances that gave rise to the royal treatment of Joseph and his kindred. That leader began to be uneasy about the large number of Israelites who were living in the land. Pharaoh’s solution was to enslave the Israelites to underscore Egyptian superiority and to denigrate the Israelites’ sense of humanity and esteem.

The sociocultural context of the book of Exodus reflects several distinctly different aspects as the book progresses. The event of Egyptian slavery was a major factor in this. During this time, the living conditions were made to be very difficult, but the Israelites lived in a social community and were organized around tribal clans. They worked hard by day, but they maintained some degree of community life and mutual support. After departing Egypt and entering the desert, “they lived in tents and are wandering in the wilderness and then encamped at Mount Sinai. Furthermore, food and water which was plentiful in Egypt are now scarce in both quantity and type, and they are totally dependent on Yahweh to provide everything for them” (Bible.org).

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Cheerful (2 Corinthians 9:7)—Greek: ηλαρός (hil-ar-os’): cheerful, joyous, prompt to do anything.
Grace (2 Corinthians 9:8, KJV)—Greek: χαρίς (khar’-ece): grace; favor; loving-kindness.
Heart (2 Corinthians 9:7)—Greek: καρδία (kar-dee’-ah): the heart; the centre and seat of spiritual life.
Reap (2 Corinthians 9:6)—Greek: θερίζω (ther-id’-zo): to reap, harvest.
Soweth (2 Corinthians 9:6)—Greek: σπείρω (spi’-ro): to sow, scatter, seed; “sows” (NIV).

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction
   A. The Love Language of Giving
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. The Power of a Willing Heart (Exodus 35:20-23)
   B. Bring God Your Very Best (Exodus 35:24-26)
   C. The Power of Unity (Exodus 35:27-29)
   D. We Reap What We Sow (2 Corinthians 9:6-8)

III. Concluding Reflection

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Moses: According to the Torah, the name Moses comes from the Hebrew verb meaning “to pull out, draw out [of water],” and the infant Moses was given this name by Pharaoh’s daughter after rescuing him from the Nile (see Exodus 2:10). Moses was born in the Land of Goshen to Amram and Jochebed. His brother was Aaron, and his sister was Miriam. His children were Gershom and Eliezer.
I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Love Language of Giving

In the book *The Five Love Languages*, Gary Chapman identifies five ways that humans tend to give and receive love: gift giving, quality time, words of affirmation, acts of service (devotion), and physical touch. Similar avenues can be used to express love and adoration to God. Here we will explore the giving of sacrificial gifts as a way to demonstrate our love for God.

The Old Testament is replete with examples of offerings and sacrifices. “Offerings and sacrifices were a key part of the practice of relationship with God from Cain and Abel, to Noah, to the patriarchs, to Jethro the priest of Midian, to the ratification of the Mosaic covenant by sacrifice before the tabernacle was built. They remained central to the ritual systems of the tabernacle and the first and second Temples and, therefore, to the Old Testament theology of God’s ‘presence’ and His relationship to ancient Israel as His ‘kingdom of priests.’ When God became present with us by means of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Old Testament offerings and sacrifices continued to yield much in terms of Jesus as our sacrifice, Jesus as our High Priest, and our Christian commitment and ministry as a sacrifice to God of ourselves and our kingdom labors” (Biblestudytools.com).

B. Biblical Background

Offerings and Sacrifices: From an Old Testament perspective, there were several types of offerings and sacrifices offered inside the sanctuary including the burnt offerings, grain offerings, and peace offerings reflected in Leviticus 1–3. Here, we will examine these three different kinds of offerings.

The burnt offering: Burnt offerings could be in the forms of cattle (see Leviticus 1:3-17), sheep and goats, or birds, usually limited to the poor (see Leviticus 12:8; 14:22). In addition to the different kinds of animals, there were also a variety of ways that they could be sacrificed, including the laying on of hands if more than one person was involved in the sacrifice. “In the scapegoat ritual the high priest was to lay both hands on the animal and confess the sins of the whole congregation in order to expressly transfer the sins to the goat. But in that case the animal was not offered upon the altar but instead sent as far away from the altar as possible (see Leviticus 16:21-22). The worshipper normally slaughtered the animal, but the priests placed its various parts on the altar fire (see Leviticus 1:7-9a) ‘to burn all of it on the altar’ as a ‘burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the Lord’” (verse 9b) (BibleStudyTools.com).

The grain and drink offering: The Hebrew term for “grain offering” is *minha*, which can mean “gift, present, tribute.” In the book of Leviticus, the word always refers to the grain offering. The grain offering in Leviticus 2 stands between the burnt and peace offering
chapters. The grain offering and drink offering (libations) alike “predates the tabernacle system and continued at other altars even after the tabernacle and Temple were available. However, within the sanctuary system they constituted a significant part of the ritual procedures even on a regular daily basis. It was specifically legislated that libations along with grain offerings should normally accompany any burnt or peace offering (see Numbers 15:1-5)” (BibleStudyTools.com).

The peace (or fellowship) offering: The peace offering establishes that opportunity for the people to have close fellowship with God. Consuming an animal that had been consecrated to God signified unity and oneness between God and the people of God (see Leviticus 3:1-2; 7:11-21). According to Deuteronomy 32:13-14, the Lord fed the people the best of the land including, among other things, the “fat” of lambs, rams, goats, and even wheat as well as the “blood” of grapes. These play on words reflect the acceptability of both grain and meat as offerings.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. The Power of a Willing Heart
   (Exodus 35:20-23)

And all the congregation of the children of Israel departed from the presence of Moses. And they came, every one whose heart stirred him up, and every one whom his spirit made willing, and they brought the Lord’s offering to the work of the tabernacle of the congregation, and for all his service, and for the holy garments. And they came, both men and women, as many as were willing hearted, and brought bracelets, and earrings, and rings, and tablets, all jewels of gold: and every man that offered offered an offering of gold unto the Lord. And every man, with whom was found blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and goats’ hair, and red skins of rams, and badgers’ skins, brought them.

What a powerful picture of presenting sacrifices to God. The people were motivated to give to God based upon the request by God as translated by God’s proven servant Joshua. Notice the two important characteristics that identify these effective givers. First of all, they were willing (verse 22).

Willing givers always make a greater impact and are more appreciated by God than reluctant givers. Second Corinthians 9:6-7 confirms this: “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (NIV). A sacrificial offering in any form that is freely given to God is an indication of a heart and a will that are available to God. The manner in which the physical, tangible gift is given is only an extension of the giver’s will. Not only did they have a will that was active, but they also had a heart that was moved. Some people may be intellectually convinced that they should give to God, but nothing happens because their emotions never match their mental state in order for their will to be activated.

The colors of blue, purple, and scarlet are often used as symbols of royalty, luxury, and divinity. They can be found in places such as the tabernacle hangings and on garments worn by nobles and kings. Blue has been used
to describe the color of a wound but may also refer to the wound itself (see Proverbs 20:30). It also describes the sky, heaven, and the Holy Spirit.

Purple represents kingship and royalty. This was a difficult color to create and reportedly required 250,000 mollusks to make one ounce of purple dye. Scarlet represents blood atonement and sacrifice. It was used in the Tabernacle (see Exodus 25:4) and was considered a mark of prosperity (see 2 Samuel 1:24) (ChristCenteredMall.com).

**B. Bring God Your Very Best**  
(Exodus 35:24-26)

Every one that did offer an offering of silver and brass brought the Lord’s offering: and every man, with whom was found shittim wood for any work of the service, brought it. And all the women that were wise hearted did spin with their hands, and brought that which they had spun, both of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, and of fine linen. And all the women whose heart stirred them up in wisdom spun goats’ hair.

A significant sense of synergy and momentum was created through this coordinated effort to create something beautiful, purposeful, and valuable for the benefit of God’s kingdom. The acacia wood is mentioned only in connection with the tabernacle (Exodus 37–38). The acacia division includes more than one hundred species of trees and shrubs which are found mainly in the arid and semiarid regions of Africa where they are ecologically the most important plants. “From a practical standpoint, acacia trees would have been one of the only types of trees growing in the wilderness regions traveled by Israel. In addition, acacia wood is dense and extremely strong, making it a great option for any type of wooden construction.”

The art of weaving appears to date back almost to the dawning of civilization. It was practiced by the Egyptians who weaved skillfully at a very early period. Obviously, the Israelites participated in weaving before they went to Egypt, but it was there that they attained the proficiency to construct the hangings of the tabernacle (see Exodus 35:35; 1 Chronicles 4:21). “The textures produced by the Jewish weavers were very various. The coarser kinds, such tent-cloth, sack-cloth and the hairy garments of the poor, were made of goat’s or camel’s hair (see Exodus 26:7; Matthew 3:4). Wool was extensively used for ordinary clothing (see Leviticus 13:47; Proverbs 27:26; 31:13; Ezekiel 27:18), while for finer work flax was used—varying in quality, and producing the different textures described in the Bible as “linen” and “fine linen.” The mixture of wool and flax in cloth intended for a garment was interdicted (see Leviticus 19:19; 22:11)” (Smith’s Bible Dictionary).

Goat hair was used by Moses in making the curtains of the tabernacle (see Exodus 25:4; 26:7; 35:6). “Hair of the goats of Asia, Phrygia, and Cilicia, is very bright and fine, and hangs to the ground; in beauty it almost equals silk, and is never sheared, but combed off. The shepherds carefully and frequently wash these goats in rivers. The women of the country spin the hair, which is carried to Angora, where it is worked and dyed, and a considerable trade in the article carried on. The natives attribute the quality of the hair to the soil of the country. The ordinary goats-hair cloth of the Arabs, used for the coverings of tents and the like, is coarse and black; and this is the kind of which the garments of the Hebrew prophets and of the poor were made” (ATS Bible Dictionary).
C. The Power of Unity
(Exodus 35:27-29)

And the rulers brought onyx stones, and stones to be set, for the ephod, and for the breastplate; And spice, and oil for the light, and for the anointing oil, and for the sweet incense. The children of Israel brought a willing offering unto the Lord, every man and woman, whose heart made them willing to bring for all manner of work, which the Lord had commanded to be made by the hand of Moses.

The ephod was a priestly garment originally only worn on the front of the chest by the high priest (see Exodus 28:4), but later they were also worn by ordinary priests (see 1 Samuel 22:18). “It was made of fine linen, and consisted of two pieces, which hung from the neck, and covered both the back and front, above the tunic and outer garment (see Exodus 28:31). That of the high priest was embroidered with many colors” (Biblestudytools.com).

Although olive trees required a significant time to grow and mature, they lasted for hundreds of years. This characteristic in itself is a fitting metaphor for the position played by olive oil in anointing and signifying spiritual assignment and spiritual maturity. Consequently, anyone who possessed a good supply of olive oil also reflected a sign of stability and prosperity (see Deuteronomy 8:8; 33:24; 2 Kings 20:13; Psalm 92:10; Proverbs 21:20; Isaiah 39; Joel 2:19 Joel 2:24). The opposite is also true as is reflected in the lack of oil as a sign of economic deficiency and even the curse of God (see Deuteronomy 28:40; Joel 1:10). Oil was used “as a commodity of trade or personal income, for various kinds of common daily consumption (as part of the bread diet in tabernacle grain offerings) as fuel for lamps in the tabernacle, or homes, as a lubricant for one’s hair and skin, sometimes with a special sense of honor, as an aromatic substance, as a medication, or in healing contexts, for royal and religious ritual procedures, and in figurative expressions” (Biblestudytools.com).

D. We Reap What We Sow
(2 Corinthians 9:6-8)

But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work.

Sowing and reaping is a spiritual principle that is espoused throughout Scripture. One of the most well-known Scriptures that highlights this perspective is Galatians 6:7-8: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.” Sowing and reaping is an effective spiritual principle that is patterned after an effective natural principle. On the third day of creation, God commanded the earth to bring forth living plants bearing seed and fruit with seed in it (Genesis 1:12). These plants were then given to humanity for food (verse 29). Ever since the beginning, people have understood the process of sowing and reaping and have applied it to his benefit (GotQuestions.org).

The way that God uses the sowing and reaping principle from a spiritual point of view is that there are positive and negative consequences to our actions. Time is often a factor in the sowing and reaping process, and
nothing good grows up overnight. Just as the farmer must be patient in order to see the fruit of his labors, so the disciple must be patient. No one is able to outgive God who is the ultimate Giver. The more we give to God, the more we ultimately receive.

Paul noted, “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). “Cheerful giving, therefore, should be a way of life for the Christian who understands the grace of God. When we give generously and with a willing heart, God assures us He will watch over us and provide for us (see Isaiah 58:9; Psalm 41:1-3; Proverbs 22:9; 2 Corinthians 9:8, 11). And we need to remember that it’s not just our treasure that we are to cheerfully give back to God” (GotQuestions.org).

Jesus came to earth not only to die for our sins but also to model before us the way to live everyday life. That life was not designed to be mediocre, but full and abundant. Jesus said in John 10:10 (NIV), “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” To be abundant is to be more full than empty in terms of reaching one’s potential. When we by faith activate the spiritual gifts we have given, our potential will blossom and our abundance will spring forth to bless our world.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

The way that we give or do not give to God provides insight into the spiritual condition of our hearts and spirits. It is a healthy exercise for us to periodically explore our attitudes and actions regarding giving. Our attitude affects our actions, and we must overcome our fear of lack by walking in faith and not by sight. We can also overcome by remembering what God has done for us in the past through trust and the many ways that God has blessed others. Giving actually helps us to be better stewards of our resources. Count your blessings, and you will discover that you have plenty to share with others.

PRAYER

Lord, thank You for blessing us in more ways than we deserve. Keep us focused on Your kingdom and our purpose so that we can remember that it is better to give than to receive. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(April 30–May 6, 2018)

Giving from a Generous Heart
MONDAY, April 30: “Give as Your Heart Prompts You” (Exodus 25:1-9)
TUESDAY, May 1: “Give Alms Quietly” (Matthew 6:1-4)
WEDNESDAY, May 2: “Gather Together Your Bountiful Gift” (2 Corinthians 9:1-5)
THURSDAY, May 3: “All Tithes Are Holy” (Leviticus 27:30-33)
FRIDAY, May 4: “Blessings of the Righteous” (Psalm 112)
SATURDAY, May 5: “Gifts for the Tabernacle” (Exodus 35:10-19)
SUNDAY, May 6: “Give Cheerfully and Generously” (Exodus 35:20-29; 2 Corinthians 9:6-8)
BRINGING FIRST FRUITS

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: Reasons to Give
YOUTH TOPIC: Giving Your Best

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Give God the Best Gifts
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Giving Your Best

DEVOTIONAL READING
Ephesians 4:25–5:2

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Leviticus 2:14; 23:9-22
PRINT PASSAGE: Leviticus 23:9-14, 22
KEY VERSE: Leviticus 23:10

CHILDREN
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Leviticus 23:9-22
PRINT PASSAGE: Leviticus 23:9-14, 22
KEY VERSE: Leviticus 23:10b

Leviticus 23:9-14, 22—KJV
9 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,
10 Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye be come into the land which I give unto you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then ye shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest unto the priest:
11 And he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted for you: on the morrow after the sabbath the priest shall wave it.
12 And ye shall offer that day when ye wave the sheaf an he lamb without blemish of the first year for a burnt offering unto the LORD.
13 And the meat offering thereof shall be two tenth deals of fine flour mingled with oil, an offering made by fire unto the LORD for a sweet savour: and the drink offering thereof shall be of wine, the fourth part of an hin.
14 And ye shall eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor green ears, until the selfsame day that ye have brought an offering unto your God: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.

Leviticus 23:9-14, 22—NIV
9 The LORD said to Moses,
10 “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest.
11 “He is to wave the sheaf before the LORD so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath.
12 “On the day you wave the sheaf, you must sacrifice as a burnt offering to the LORD a lamb a year old without defect,
13 “together with its grain offering of two-tenths of an ephah of the finest flour mixed with olive oil—a food offering presented to the LORD, a pleasing aroma—and its drink offering of a quarter of a hin of wine.
14 “You must not eat any bread, or roasted or new grain, until the very day you bring this offering to your God. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live.”
22 And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not make clean riddance of the corners of thy field when thou reapest, neither shalt thou gather any gleaning of thy harvest: thou shalt leave them unto the poor, and to the stranger: I am the LORD your God.

22 “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God.”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: In a culture of scarcity, people acquire and hoard the best they can afford. How can they live less fearfully and more joyfully during difficult economic times? God called the people of God to worship the Lord with the first and best of their lives.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Explore the biblical call for offering the first fruits.
2. Regret giving God leftovers.
3. Develop a practice of giving God the first and best of everything we offer.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
— The festivals mandated by God were holy, solemn celebrations to remind the Israelites of God’s holiness and goodness and the call to be God’s holy, set-apart people. They were corporate, not individually observed annual events.
— The mandates in Leviticus prepared Israel to shift from a nomadic people to an agrarian one.
— The land, as a gift from God, required Israel’s proper stewardship of it.
— The Festival of First Fruits served to help the Israelites recognize the Lord’s bounty in the land.
— The concept of giving “First Fruits” is also referenced in the New Testament (see Romans 8:23 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-23).
— Bringing the first sheaf of the harvest as an offering to God was an act of faith that God would bless the remainder of the harvest and thus provide for God’s people.

Teachers of CHILDREN
— This passage provides a commandment of the Lord to the Israelites in a chapter that includes discussion about several special observances (festivals).
— The Israelites were to bring an armful of barley and give it to the priests as an offering to the Lord.
— Offerings in this period of the history of the Israelites were based in the agrarian culture and economy.
— Barley was the first grain that the Israelites harvested, and therefore it was the “first fruits” of the harvest.
— Giving the fruits of the first harvest as an offering to the priest was representative of giving the best to the Lord.
—Verse 22 emphasizes that God is also worshipped by giving to others. A portion of the harvest was to be left in the fields to be gleaned by the poor and alien residents.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The precise date of when the book of Leviticus was written remains somewhat uncertain; however, it is believed to have occurred during the wilderness wandering prior to Moses’ death in 1406 BC. Assuming Mosaic authorship, the book of Leviticus would have been written sometime between the beginning of the second year after the Exodus (around 1445 BC) and the end of the fortieth year when Moses died (around 1406 BC; see Deuteronomy 34:5-7). More likely, Moses would have immediately written down the instructions from Yahweh as he had received them, even as he did for the instructions recorded in the book of Exodus (see Exodus 24:4). If this were the case, Leviticus would have been written as early as 1445 BC (Bible.org).

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

This lesson finds Israel encamped at Mount Sinai. Consequently, the geo-cultural context for this lesson is the same as it was at the end of the book of Exodus. The laws for worship and for personal/national holiness seen in Leviticus establishes a unique culture which dedicates Israel to Yahweh as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This is the primary context by which all the other writings must be understood when referring to Israel in the Old Testament as well as the Gospels (Bible.org).

The book of Leviticus is part of a much larger story that extends to the narrative presented in Exodus: God delivers the people from slavery with mighty signs and wonders (1–15) and brings them to Sinai (16–19), telling them there that they are to be His kingdom of priests and holy nation. “God confirms their kingdom status by entering into a covenant with them as their king and giving them kingdom laws to follow (20–24). He is going to be a king who is near to them, dwelling in their very midst, and this is why He proceeds to give them directions for His tabernacle, His earthly palace (25–31; 35–40)” (thegospelcoalition.org).

PROFICIENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Moses: Moses is one of the most well-known figures in the entire Bible. The name Moses in Hebrew means “to pull out/draw out” (of water), and the infant Moses was given this name by Pharaoh’s daughter after rescuing him from the Nile (see Exodus 2:10) (Reference.com).

Israelites: The Israelites are direct descendants of Jacob and are distinctly known as worshippers of Yahweh, the God of Israel. The Israelites are also known as Hebrews and the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The Jewish people are also descended from the southern Israelite kingdom of Judah, particularly the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and partially Levi. References are found in 2 Kings 16:6; 1 Chronicles 4:18; and in several passages in the books of Jeremiah, Zechariah, and Esther.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Accepted (verse 11)—Hebrew: ratson (raw-tsone’): acceptable, acceptance, suitable.

Blemish (verse 12)—Hebrew: tamiym (taw-meem’): complete, whole, entire; “defect” (NIV).

Generations (verse 14)—Hebrew: dowr (dore): period, generation, all; many.

Offer (verse 12, KJV)—Hebrew: ‘asah (aw-saw’): to make (an offering).
Reap (verse 10)—Hebrew: qatsar (kaw-tsar’): to reap, harvest, gather.
Speak (verse 10)—Hebrew: dabar (daw-bar’): to speak, declare, converse, command, promise, warn, threaten, sing.

TOPICAL OUTLINE
OF THE LESSON
I. Introduction
   A. The Levites: A Tribe of Priests
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application
    of the Scripture
   A. Prioritize God in Your Giving
      (Leviticus 23:9-10)
   B. Wave Offering
      (Leviticus 23:11-12)
   C. Grain Offering
      (Leviticus 23:13-14)
   D. Live Generously, Give Generously
      (Leviticus 23:22)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION
   A. The Levites: A Tribe of Priests
      The name Leviticus comes from the Latin form of the Greek and means “about Levites.” The Levites were the tribe of Israel dedicated to the service of the priesthood. They were given the responsibility of maintaining the worship facilities and to perpetuate pure worship practices. The book of Leviticus focuses on humanity in every age and reminds us of our sin, but also points toward the sacrifice of the One whose blood is more effective than that of bulls or goats. Although it may be a challenge to understand and relate to Leviticus because of the unfamiliar ceremonies, still it is important to try to understand the rituals in Leviticus. This is because rituals enshrine, express, and teach those values and ideals that a society holds most dear. Through understanding the ceremonies, we are able to appreciate what was important from the perspective of the Old Testament Israelites. Understanding the ceremonies helps us to understand the Israelites. The concepts expressed in the book of Leviticus can also be observed in the New Testament. These concepts include sin, sacrifice, atonement for sin, and God’s divine presence and holiness (Ligonier.org).

      Like that of all the other books of the Pentateuch, the author of the book of Leviticus is still debated. Although the text clearly states that the Law was given to Israel through Moses (“Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying;” 4:1; 5:14; 6:1, 8), there is no definitive statement that Moses wrote what he heard. There is scriptural support for Mosaic authorship for the entire Pentateuch; it is reasonable to assume Mosaic authorship of Leviticus. “The book of Leviticus is specifically addressed to the sons of Israel (see for example, 1:2; 4:2; 7:23; and 11:2), and Aaron and his descendants (see for example, 6:9 and 8:2). In view of the fact that the covenant Israel entered was not just for the Exodus generation but for all succeeding generations, Moses’ wider audience must necessarily include later generations of Israelites as well” (BibleStudyTools.com).
B. Biblical Background

The name “Pentateuch” is derived from two Greek words: *pente*, meaning “five”; and *teuchos*, meaning “volume.” When combined, the opening books of the Old Testament create a five-fold volume. Originally, these books were one continuous work, and it is not known when they were divided into five portions. The names of each of the books reflect their primary content or subject matter. The five books have always been placed at the beginning of the Bible, not only on account of their priority in point of time but also in order to create an introduction to the rest of the sacred books. “The numerous and oft-recurring references made in the later Scriptures to the events, the rituals, and the doctrines of the ancient church would have not only lost much of their point and significance, but have been absolutely unintelligible without the information which these five books contain. They constitute the groundwork or basis on which the whole fabric of revelation rests, and a knowledge of the authority and importance that is thus attached to them will sufficiently account for the determined assaults that infidels have made on these books, as well as for the zeal and earnestness which the friends of the truth have displayed in their defense” (biblestudytools.com).

There are several interesting observations in comparing and contrasting the books of Leviticus and Numbers. At the beginning of Leviticus, Moses is outside the tabernacle (see Leviticus 1:1), while at the beginning of the book of Numbers he is inside the tabernacle (Numbers 1:1). The book of Exodus ends with Yahweh on the inside of the tabernacle (tent of meeting) and Moses outside, not able to enter because the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle (Exodus 40:35). These observations suggest a progression in interpersonal relationship after the Law was given in Leviticus.

The central core of Leviticus is found in chapters 8–10, which “continue the narrative of the tabernacle as recorded at the end of the book of Exodus. One would expect the narrative account of the building of the tabernacle (see Exodus 35–40) to be followed by the narrative account of its dedication (see Leviticus 8). Yet in between these two narrative accounts stands Leviticus 1–7 which presents the laws pertaining to sacrifices, and which seem like an insertion because it breaks the continuity in the narrative about the tabernacle. But the insertion of Leviticus 1–7 makes sense from a structural perspective because the dedicatory and inaugural sacrifices that follow (8:14-29; 9:1-21) cannot be understood without it” (Bible.org).

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Prioritize God in Your Giving

(Leviticus 23:9-10)

*And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye be come into the land which I give unto you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then ye shall bring a sheaf of the first-fruits of your harvest unto the priest.*

While they were in the wilderness, the Israelites did not sow corn and therefore could not be expected to present a grain offering to God. The present-day principle in this precept is that God only expects us to give from what we have, and not from
what we do not have. The original word for “sheaf” was *omer*, which means either a sheaf (see Deuteronomy 24:19; Ruth 2:7) or a measure (see Exodus 16:16). “The offering which was waved (see Leviticus 7:30) was most likely a small sheaf of barley, the grain which is first ripe. The first fruits of the wheat harvest were offered seven weeks later in the loaves of Pentecost (see Leviticus 23:15-17). The two offerings thus figure the very commencement and the completion of the grain harvest (compare Ruth 1:22; 2:23)” (*Barnes’ Notes on the Bible*).

Since the barley crop tended to ripen sooner than other grains, the reaping of the barley crop signaled the start of the general harvest season. The offering that is described in this passage was made on the sixteenth of the first month. This day marked the day after the first Passover Sabbath. The sheaf was brought to the court of the tabernacle, where the grain was processed (This process brings to mind the spiritually figurative aspect of the old hymn “Bringing in the Sheaves.”) After incense was sprinkled on the sheaves, the priest would wave them before the Lord toward the north, south, east, and west. The priest would then save a part of it and throw the rest on the altar fire to be offered up to God. “It was a proper and beautiful act, expressive of dependence on the God of nature and providence—common among all people, but more especially becoming the Israelites, who owed their land itself as well as all it produced to the divine bounty. The offering of the wave-sheaf sanctified the whole harvest” (*Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary*).

### B. Wave Offering
*(Leviticus 23:11-12)*

And he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, to be accepted for you: on the morrow after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. And ye shall offer that day when ye wave the sheaf an he lamb without blemish of the first year for a burnt offering unto the Lord.

The Sabbath does not always necessarily mean the seventh day of the week, but it always signifies a day of rest. The weekly Sabbath was always the seventh or last day of the week. Therefore, it was not just the seventh day of the week (as in Exodus 31:15 and others), but the Day of Atonement is also called Sabbath (see Leviticus 16:31; 23:32). “By offering the sheaf of first-fruits of the harvest, the Israelites were to consecrate their daily bread to the Lord their God, and practically to acknowledge that they owed the blessing of the harvest to the grace of God. They were not to eat any bread or roasted grains of the new corn till they had presented the offering of their God (see Leviticus 23:14)” (*Keil and Delitzsch Bible Commentary on the Old Testament*).

The established time for the Feast of the Passover to last was seven full days. This time was not to be wasted being idle or spent in entertainment. This was a focused time of spiritual discipline, and offerings were made to God at His altar. It was a time for prayer, praise, and godly meditation. This practice is often in stark contrast to some of the ways the contemporary Christians spend their days. “We are taught by this law to honor the Lord with our substance, and with the first-fruits of all our increase (see Proverbs 3:9). Sabbath observers were not to eat of their new corn, till God’s part was offered to him out of it; and we must always begin with God: begin every
day with Him, begin every meal with Him, begin every affair and business with Him; seek first the kingdom of God” (Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary).

C. Grain Offering
(Leviticus 23:13-14)

And the meat offering thereof shall be two tenth deals of fine flour mingled with oil, an offering made by fire unto the Lord for a sweet savour: and the drink offering thereof shall be of wine, the fourth part of an hin. And ye shall eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor green ears, until the selfsame day that ye have brought an offering unto your God: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.

Usually about one-tenth of an ephah of flour was required for a meat (that is, meal or grain) offering (see Exodus 29:40; Numbers 15:4; 28:9; 28:13) to exhibit the plentiful harvest. This flour, oil, and frankincense was a required offering (see Leviticus 2:2-3). The double quantity (see Exodus 29:40; Numbers 15:4; 28:19-21) was an indication of greater liberality and a sacrifice that was beyond the expected call of duty. When we only give what is required we cheat ourselves out of our own blessings. But, in the church, talking about giving seems to make people uncomfortable. The very idea of giving sets off an internal war in us. Whose money is it? The biblical foundation of stewardship is that God owns everything. The concept of stewardship assumes that as believers, we are each assigned different amounts of material things to manage for God, and that really is a test from God. We are God’s money managers. “The heart is often a metaphor of our will. It’s where we make up our mind if we will do what God wants. We can only understand what God says about financial giving if we align our heart with His” (Bible.org). Our attitude toward money and material things is a window into the true condition of our heart.

The Israelites recognized God’s favorable harvest by refusing to partake of any of it until after the first fruit had been dedicated to the Lord. The reference to the bread refers to the final product of the grain in its edible form. The honoring of the first-fruits principle allows wage earners to be ever mindful of life’s true source of support and sustenance. An old gospel song contains the line “All of my help comes from the Lord.” “The unleavened bread for the first and the second days of Passover was prepared from the last year’s harvest, but the bread for the following days could only be made from the new harvest after the normal dedication of it to the Lord. The wheat, rye, oats, and two kinds of barley were forbidden to be used in any form whatsoever prior to the public dedication of the harvest to the Lord” (Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers). When we acknowledge that fact by giving back to God off the top of our income or produce, we perpetuate the principle of seeking first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness so that everything else can be added.

D. Live Generously, Give Generously
(Leviticus 23:22)

And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not make clean riddance of the corners of thy field when thou reapest, neither shalt thou gather any gleaning of thy harvest: thou shalt leave them unto the poor, and to the stranger: I am the Lord your God.
When we as a people are experiencing our own personal blessings, it is sometimes easy to forget that not everyone may be sharing in the same abundance. Therefore, in the midst of rejoicing and thankfulness to God for a bountiful harvest, it is important to remember the poor and to empower them to be sustained and to experience provision. Our devotion to God matters little to God if it does not also include sacrificial acts of love and provision toward others who may be less fortunate. Those who are truly sensitive to the Spirit of God and the mercy and grace received from God will show mercy to the poor ungrudgingly (Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary).

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

People of God are called to demonstrate the love of God by sharing the resources of God with those who need it the most. This is especially true when we personally experience times of blessings and abundance. We honor God when we give to others without expecting anything in return. We demonstrate our faith in God by putting our trust in God. God is the giver of all good gifts, and we absolutely cannot beat God giving no matter how we may try.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, thank You for blessing us with the privilege of giving to those who are in need. Help us always to view blessing others as a privilege and never as a burden. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(May 7-13, 2018)

Bringing First Fruits

MONDAY, May 7: “Honor God with Your First Fruits” (Proverbs 3:1-10)
TUESDAY, May 8: “Martyrs, First Fruits for God” (Revelation 14:1-5)
WEDNESDAY, May 9: “Gifts, a Pleasing Sacrifice to God” (Philippians 4:15-20)
THURSDAY, May 10: “Preparing Grain Offerings” (Leviticus 2:1-10, 14)
FRIDAY, May 11: “Acceptable Offerings Are without Blemish” (Leviticus 22:17-20)
SATURDAY, May 12: “Observing the Sabbaths and the Festivals” (Leviticus 23:1-8)
SUNDAY, May 13: “Present Your Fruits to God First” (Leviticus 23:9-14, 22)
May 20, 2018 Lesson 12

REMEMBERING WITH JOY

**ADULT/YOUTH**
**ADULT TOPIC:** Creating an Equitable Economy  
**YOUTH TOPIC:** Joyful Responsibility

**CHILDREN**
**GENERAL LESSON TITLE:** Joyfully Care for God’s Land  
**CHILDREN’S TOPIC:** Take Care of the Land and Yourself

**DEVOOTIONAL READING**
Psalm 50:1-15

**ADULT/YOUTH**
**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Leviticus 25  
**PRINT PASSAGE:** Leviticus 25:1-12  
**ADULT KEY VERSE:** Leviticus 25:10  
**YOUTH KEY VERSE:** Leviticus 25:2

**CHILDREN**
**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Leviticus 25  
**PRINT PASSAGE:** Leviticus 25:1-12  
**KEY VERSE:** Leviticus 25:2

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**Leviticus 25:1-12—KJV**

AND THE LORD spake unto Moses in mount Sinai, saying,
2 Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye come into the land which I give you, then shall the land keep a sabbath unto the LORD.
3 Six years thou shalt sow thy field, and six years thou shalt prune thy vineyard, and gather in the fruit thereof;
4 But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land, a sabbath for the LORD: thou shalt neither sow thy field, nor prune thy vineyard.
5 That which groweth of its own accord of thy harvest thou shalt not reap, neither gather the grapes of thy vine undressed: for it is a year of rest unto the land.
6 And the sabbath of the land shall be meat for you; for thee, and for thy servant, and for thy maid, and for thy hired servant, and for thy stranger that sojourneth with thee.

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**Leviticus 25:1-12—NIV**

THE LORD said to Moses at Mount Sinai,
2 “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the LORD.
3 “For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops.
4 “But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.
5 “Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest.
6 “Whatever the land yields during the sabbath year will be food for you—for yourself, your male and female servants, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you,
7 And for thy cattle, and for the beast that are in thy land, shall all the increase thereof be meat.
8 And thou shalt number seven sabbaths of years unto thee, seven times seven years; and the space of the seven sabbaths of years shall be unto thee forty and nine years.

9 Then shalt thou cause the trumpet of the jubile to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month, in the day of atonement shall ye make the trumpet sound throughout all your land.
10 And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubile unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family.

11 A jubile shall that fiftieth year be unto you: ye shall not sow, neither reap that which groweth of itself in it, nor gather the grapes in it of thy vine undressed.
12 For it is the jubile; it shall be holy unto you: ye shall eat the increase thereof out of the field.

7 “as well as for your livestock and the wild animals in your land. Whatever the land produces may be eaten.
8 “Count off seven sabbath years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years.
9 “‘Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land.
10 “‘Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan.
11 “‘The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines.
12 “‘For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields.’”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People hold a sense of entitlement when it comes to their wealth, possessions, and land. How can they be freed from their possessions’ possessing them? God called the covenant people to active, responsible, and joyful stewardship of all God had given them.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Explore the Year of Jubilee and its implications for land ownership in Israel.
2. Aspire to own less and give more.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—Israel was required to keep the holy times of the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee Year as a symbol that they were a holy people.
—The Sabbatical Year was clearly a benefit to the soil, but it was also a recognition that all produce belongs to God and that God bestows it freely on His people.
—The Year of Jubilee provided a periodic restoration of the means to earn a living for each family in an agrarian society. The Jubilee did not equalize all possessions in Israel—possessions like cattle and money were not reallocated.
—The Year of Jubilee protected against the amassing of large estates, which would reduce many Israelites to tenant status on their ancestral land (see also Isaiah 5:8).
—The meaning of jubilee (25:10) comes from a Hebrew word for “ram,” an animal that provided horns to blow for signals of certain events to begin. Jubilee points toward God’s grace.
—Jesus announced His ministry with the language and hope of Jubilee (Luke 4:18-19).
—“The land is mine” (verse 23) was a recurring reminder of God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah.
—The trumpet marks a call to a joyous festival; in this case, to celebrate liberty for all, complete relaxation with family, and the renewal of nature’s cycles.
—Jubilee freedom leans in the direction of God’s grace.

Teachers of CHILDREN
—This passage focuses on God’s commandments to the Israelites for preserving the land.
—The passage also has socioeconomic implications for wealth and land.
—The Lord commanded a Sabbath year, which was to occur every seventh year, when no cultivation of the earth would take place, although the people could eat the naturally occurring yield of the fields and vineyard (verse 3-7).
—The Lord also commanded a Jubilee every fiftieth year when the land would not be cultivated, but returned to the original owner.
—The Jubilee year was to be considered a holy year dedicated to God.
—The meaning of jubilee (25:10) comes from a Hebrew word for “ram,” an animal that provided horns to blow for signals of certain events to begin. Jubilee pointed toward God’s grace.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The book of Leviticus is believed to be written by Moses about 1440–1400 BC. The purpose of the writing was to emphasize and elevate the holiness of God, along with the need for holiness in God’s people, especially about obedience to God. The word holy is mentioned more often in Leviticus than in any other book in the Bible. Leviticus gives the laws and regulations for Israelite worship, including instructions on ceremonial cleanness, moral laws, holy days, the Sabbath year, and the Year of Jubilee.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The book of Leviticus is a record of God’s requirements for holiness and of the prerequisites for God to establish an earthly throne. The key to effectiveness is absolute holiness with regard to how humanity relates to God and with regard to how the people manage their thoughts, words, and actions. Leviticus uses physical perfection to symbolize spiritual holiness. Examples include the requirement that the priests must be without deformity (see chapters 8–10). Other physical issues highlighted include the following: a woman’s hemorrhaging after giving birth (chapter 12); sores, burns, or baldness (chapters 13–14); a man’s bodily discharge (5:1-18); and specific activities during a woman’s monthly period (15:19–33). These are all examples of a lack of perfection and may symbolize human spiritual defects, which break spiritual wholeness.

Extreme attention to detail was given to Israel’s religious rituals. Specific sacrifices were to be offered at an approved sanctuary, and this represented God’s holiness and compassion. The priests were in control of the process, and the priests exercised great care and precaution to be ceremonially clean.
in order to successfully fulfill their function of spiritual intercessors between God and the people.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

*Moses*: Moses was born in Egypt at a time when the Israelites were enslaved to the Egyptian rulers of the land and subject to much harsh treatment.

*Israelites*: The Israelites are an ancient people group designated under the general category of Semites. Their countries extended “from the Mediterranean Sea to the other side of the Euphrates and Tigris, and from the mountains of Armenia to the southern coast of Arabia” (newadvent.org).

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

*Atonement (verse 9)—Hebrew: kippur (kip-poor’):* reparation, recompense.

*Gather (verse 5, KJV)—Hebrew: bartsar (baw-tsar’):* to gather, restrain, fence, fortify, make inaccessible, enclose.

*Increase (verse 7, KJV)—Hebrew: tabuw’ah (teb-oo-aw’):* increase; fruit, revenue.

*Rest (verse 5)—Hebrew: shabbathown (shab-baw-thone’):* Sabbath; rest.

*Sabbath (verse 2)—Hebrew: shabbath (shab-bawth’):* Sabbath; day of atonement.

*Sow (verse 3)—Hebrew: zara’ (zaw-rah’):* to sow, scatter seed.

**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

**I. Introduction**

A. The Importance of the Sabbath in Judaism

B. Biblical Background

**II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture**

A. Everything Needs Rest (Leviticus 25:1-5)

B. Seven Sabbath Years (Leviticus 25:6-8)

C. The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 25:9-10)

D. The Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:11-12)

**III. Concluding Reflection**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

**A. The Importance of the Sabbath in Judaism**

When the Israelites left Egypt for the Promised Land, God provided manna from heaven for five days out of the week, and on the sixth day a double portion was provided so that they would not have to gather manna on the Sabbath. Furthermore, the observance of the Sabbath or “Shabbat” is included as one of the Ten Commandments as well as in the Genesis account of creation found in Genesis 2:2-3. There we see another reason to rest: “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done” (NIV).

The admonition to rest extended beyond the Israelites themselves and also included slaves and even draft animals that were used for plowing. The Shabbat is described by
some Jewish authorities as one of the best known and least understood of all Jewish observances: “People who do not generally observe the stringencies of the day think of it as a day filled with stifling restrictions, or as a day of prayer like the Christian Shabbat. But to those who observe Shabbat, it is a day of great joy awaited throughout the week, a time when we can set aside all our weekday concerns and devote ourselves to higher pursuits. The word ‘Shabbat’ comes from the root Shin-Bet-Tav, meaning to cease, to end, or to rest. Shabbat is not specifically a day of prayer. Although substantial time is usually spent in synagogue praying, prayer is not what distinguishes Shabbat from the rest of the week. Observant Jews pray every day, three times a day. To say that Shabbat is a day of prayer is no more accurate than to say that Shabbat is a day of feasting: we eat every day, but on Shabbat, we eat more elaborately and in a more leisurely fashion” (JewishVirtualLibrary.org).

B. Biblical Background

Leviticus is a book of the Law that focuses on many different aspects of daily life which were relevant within the culture at the time the book was written. There are detailed directions regarding a wide variety of everyday life events, including the offering of sacrifices; the duties of priests; the liturgical calendar; the sexual, dietary, and economic practices of the Israelites; and many other issues of ritual and moral holiness. Leviticus can be a tough read because of the detailed instructions regarding unfamiliar subjects and practices that were common at the time of the writing. Leviticus is not a theological narrative but is about theology as revealed through ritual. Although some of the practices no longer exist, it is helpful to examine and, in many instances, apply the principles of the passages in order to profit from their wisdom and, from their broad intent.

Leviticus issues a clarion call for holiness for those who claim a covenant with God. While this call may manifest itself in different ways in contemporary times, the basic concept of holy living that is pleasing to God is still very much in effect today.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Everything Needs Rest

(Leviticus 25:1-5)

AND THE LORD spake unto Moses in mount Sinai, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye come into the land which I give you, then shall the land keep a sabbath unto the LORD. Six years thou shalt sow thy field, and six years thou shalt prune thy vineyard, and gather in the fruit thereof; But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land, a sabbath for the LORD: thou shalt neither sow thy field, nor prune thy vineyard. That which groweth of its own accord of thy harvest thou shalt not reap, neither gather the grapes of thy vine undressed: for it is a year of rest unto the land.

The guidelines regarding the Sabbath observance are designed to operate in concert with other commandments such as “You shall have no other gods before Me”; “You shall not steal”; and “You shall not covet.” Money and possessions have a tendency to compete with God for our supreme allegiance. When we focus our attention and our priorities on things rather than the Creator of the things,
we are making the money or possessions our gods. Likewise, when we see our neighbor with something that we do not possess and we began to crave that material thing, we are slipping down the slope of covetousness. When God created humanity, we already had the innate capacity to overwork ourselves in the pursuit of material gain. The establishment of the Sabbath provides opportunity for the necessary emotional and psychological recalibration of our priority system to reflect God as being most important and our driving force rather than material wealth. When we overwork, we tend to under-worship. But when we are well-rested, we have the focus to think and the energy to give due praise to our great God.

Not only was there a weekly rest of the workers and the land, there was also a rest every seventh year (verses 3 and 4). Such a sabbatical is rare in contemporary times, but it is quite beneficial for those in a position to exercise such a privilege. Perhaps this option should be reinstated in order to avoid so many cases of physical and emotional burnout that are so often associated with being overworked. Periodic sabbaticals have a tendency to significantly increase a person’s ability to focus and be productive. “Not only all agricultural processes were to be intermitted every seventh year, but the cultivators had no right to the soil. It lay entirely fallow, and its spontaneous produce was the common property of the poor and the stranger, the cattle and game. This year of rest was to invigorate the productive powers of the land, as the weekly Sabbath was a refreshment to men and cattle. It commenced immediately after the feast of ingathering, and it was calculated to teach the people, in a remarkable manner, the reality of the presence and providential power of God” (Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Commentary).

By today’s standards, the Sabbath laws may have seemed stringent and overly harsh. Not only were landowners forbidden from cultivating their land, but any spontaneous growth that just happened to sprout up could not be harvested by the landowner (verse 5). No incidental growth of their own crop could be either harvested or sold for profit. Anything that grew in the seventh year was literally the Nazirite vine and was therefore consecrated to God (Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers).

B. Seven Sabbath Years
(Leviticus 25:6-8)

And the sabbath of the land shall be meat for you; for thee, and for thy servant, and for thy maid, and for thy hired servant, and for thy stranger that sojourneth with thee. And for thy cattle, and for the beast that are in thy land, shall all the increase thereof be meat. And thou shalt number seven sabbaths of years unto thee, seven times seven years; and the space of the seven sabbaths of years shall be unto thee forty and nine years.

According to Hebrew tradition, landowners were not allowed to store up any food during the Sabbath year. Consequently, the produce of the sabbatical year could only be used for direct consumption (verses 6 and 7). This produce could not be converted into other articles and then used. For example, “though wood of that year could be used as firewood, yet it was illegal to convert it first into coal and then use the coal thus obtained from the wood, nor was it legal to convert vegetables into medicines, or to give human food to animals. The produce was to be left in the field for the free use of the poor” (Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers). There was a generous, collaborative, communal effort
put forth to ensure that everyone who was in need had access to an available food source.

This community welfare mindset and disposition is later reflected within the initial formation of the New Testament church found in Acts 4:32-35: “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need” (NIV).

In addition to the Sabbath rest that was experienced and enjoyed on the seventh day and in the seventh year, God also designated every fiftieth year as a Jubilee year (verse 8). The practice of a Jubilee year dates back to ancient Jewish tradition and is evidence of its origin in the Old Testament (see Leviticus 25). The Jubilee year was called every fifty years and was a time for forgiveness. It stood as a reminder of God’s providence and mercy. The dedication of a year for this emphasis provided the community with a time to come back into right relationship with one another and with God. As the practice of the Jubilee year was adopted into the Catholic church, these themes of mercy, forgiveness, and solidarity continued” (usccb.org).

C. The Day of Atonement
(Leviticus 25:9-10)

Then shalt thou cause the trumpet of the jubile to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month, in the day of atonement shall ye make the trumpet sound throughout all your land. And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubile unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family.

The original word for “jubilee” first occurs in Exodus 19:13, where it uses the word trumpet or cornet. It most likely refers to the sound of the cornet rather than the cornet itself (verse 9). The root word means “to flow abundantly.” Metaphorically, the Jubilee represented freedom from spiritual oppression and deliverance from spiritual bondage. During the Jubilee, “All prisoners and captives obtained their liberties, slaves were declared free, and debtors were absolved. The land, as on the sabbatical year, was neither sowed nor reaped, but allowed to enjoy with its inhabitants a Sabbath of repose; and its natural produce was the common property of all. Moreover, every inheritance throughout the land of Judea was restored to its original owner” (Jamieson-Faussett-Brown Bible Commentary). Verse 10 contains a short statement of the two purposes of the Jubilee: (1) to proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants, and (2) to return to the family’s original property.

D. The Year of Jubilee
(Leviticus 25:11-12)

A jubile shall that fiftieth year be unto you: ye shall not sow, neither reap that which groweth of itself in it, nor gather the grapes in it of thy vine undressed. For it is the jubile; it shall be holy unto you: ye shall eat the increase thereof out of the field.

The Year of Jubilee was the time for the land and the people to partake in holy rest and rejuvenation. Constant work and activity without rest tends to have an exhausting and
depleting effect upon land, animals, and people. “The earth was to be saved from the hand of man exhausting its power for earthly purposes as his own property, and to enjoy the holy rest with which God had blessed the earth and all its productions after the creation. From this Israel, as the nation of God, was to learn, on the one hand, that although the earth was created for man, it was not merely created for him to draw out its powers for his own use, but also to be holy to the Lord, and participate in His blessed rest” (Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament). The life lesson for Israel back then and for us today is that life and earth both require rest in order to thrive. Sometimes less is more, and more results in less productivity. Life and earth will serve us well when we serve it well.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

When we free ourselves from the enslavement of constant work, we will find God’s blessings. Our success does not depend on how hard we work, but on how much we trust God to supply our needs. It is possible to possess material things without those things possessing us. This is possible through exercising thoughtful, intentional, responsible, and joyful stewardship of all that God has given to us. Life does not consist in how much we can acquire, but in how much we can share in order to help enhance the existence of others. It is said that the United States consumes 30 percent of the world’s resources despite making up only 5 percent of the world’s population (greenanswers.com). With all of our abundance, we seldom realize that we are truly blessed.

PRAYER

Dear God, thank You for the blessing of rest. Help us to have the good sense to slow down long enough to savor and enjoy all the provisions and experiences that You have so graciously provided. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(May 14-20, 2018)

Remembering with Joy

MONDAY, May 14: “Keeping the Sabbath Yields Good Crops” (Leviticus 26:3-6)
TUESDAY, May 15: “Lands and Houses Shared with All” (Acts 4:32-37)
WEDNESDAY, May 16: “Bear Each Other’s Burdens” (Galatians 6:1-5)
THURSDAY, May 17: “I Will Maintain Covenant with You” (Leviticus 26:9-13)
FRIDAY, May 18: “Fairness in Buying and Selling Property” (Leviticus 25:13-17)
SATURDAY, May 19: “Helping One Another Face Difficulties” (Leviticus 25:35-38)
SUNDAY, May 20: “Sabbatical Year and Year of Jubilee” (Leviticus 25:1-12)
REJOICING IN RESTORATION

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT TOPIC: More than Good
YOUTH TOPIC: Restoration Project

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Joyfully Return to God
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Who Can Help?

Devotional Reading
Hebrews 7:20-28

Psalm 34:1-10; Hebrews 2:17-18—KJV
I WILL bless the LORD at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
2 My soul shall make her boast in the LORD: the humble shall hear thereof, and be glad.
3 O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together.
4 I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears.
5 They looked unto him, and were lightened: and their faces were not ashamed.
6 This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.
7 The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.
8 O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.

Psalm 34:1-10; Hebrews 2:17-18—NIV
I WILL extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.
2 I will glory in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice.
3 Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.
4 I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears.
5 Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.
6 This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.
7 The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.
8 Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.
9 O fear the LORD, ye his saints: for there is no want to them that fear him.
10 The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger: but they that seek the LORD shall not want any good thing.

17 Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.
18 For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Identify the mercy and faithfulness of God when experiencing fear and brokenness.
2. Appreciate the psalmist’s invitation to taste and see the faithfulness of God.
3. Pray for God’s will for restoration in and for all people to be realized.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People want relief from their fears and brokenness. Where does such hope come from? Hopes for restoration are found through God’s gift of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—Psalm 34 is an expression of thanksgiving for God’s protection and care of those who trust in God.
—The idea behind “bless” (verse 1) is to kneel, symbolizing worship.
—In verse 6 and in many places in the Psalms, poor does not necessarily refer to those lacking possessions but rather to those who recognize themselves as being without the resources to effect their own deliverance and thus recognize their need to depend on God.
—The words “encamps around” (verse 7) speak to the security with which the Lord surrounds His people.
—The verb taste (verse 8) is a metaphor for personal experience. This metaphor is used widely in the New Testament.
—In order for Christ to turn aside the wrath of God from guilty sinners, He had to become one with them and die as a substitute for them (Hebrews 2:17).
—Hebrews 2:17-18 establishes Jesus’ solidarity with us, which qualifies Him to represent us before God as our High Priest. Our relationship with Jesus makes it possible for us to live out Psalm 34.

Teachers of CHILDREN
—Psalm 34:1-10 is a testimony of praise and thanksgiving.
It is a challenging attempt to determine an exact or even approximate date of the writing of the book of Psalms. One of the reasons for this is because the Psalms were not written in sequence like a regular book or letter, but were collected over time and combined into five different books through an editorial process. The collection of the Psalms was composed over a period of about a thousand years. There is a possibility that the writing could have occurred between 1440 BC and 586 BC (Life Application Study Bible, “Introduction to Psalms”). Jewish tradition holds that the Psalms are collected from a wide variety of sources other than the seventy-three psalms that are indicated to have been written by King David. While other sources include Moses (90) and Solomon (Psalms 72; 127), undoubtedly it was David who was the primary contributor to the collection of Psalms—having been a musical composer, player, and singer in his own right (see 1 Samuel 16:16-18). He even organized the Levitical music groups, or Temple singers (see 1 Chronicles 15:1–16:43; 2 Chronicles 29:25-30).

Unlike our modern poetry which is often designed to rhyme, Hebrew poetry is characterized by a rhythmic arrangement of thought patterns called parallelism. Scholars distinguish several kinds of parallelism. Synonymous parallelism involves a thought that is initially expressed and is followed by the same idea repeated in a slightly different manner. For example, “O Jehovah my God, in thee do I take refuge: Save me from all them that pursue me, and deliver me” (Psalm 7:1, ASV).

Another type of parallelism is antithetic parallelism, which draws a contrast between the second line and the previous line. For example: “For Jehovah knows the way of the righteous; But the way of the wicked shall perish” (1:6, ASV). At some point, the psalms were divided into five sections, all of which are still reflected in our modern Bibles. These are Book I (1–41), Book II (42–72), Book III (73–89), Book IV (90–106), and Book V (107–150) (ChristianCourier.com).

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**Holy People:** humble and righteous people who are dedicated to obeying God and accomplishing God’s will in everyday life.

**High Priest:** supreme religious leader of the Israelites. “The high priest had to be ‘whole’ physically (without any physical defects) and holy in his conduct (see Leviticus 21:6-8). Because the high priest held the leadership position, one of his roles was overseeing the responsibilities of all the subordinate priests (see 2 Chronicles 19:11). Though
the high priest could participate in ordinary priestly ministries, only certain functions were given to him. Only the high priest could wear the Urim and the Thummin (engraved dice-like stones used to determine truth or falsity). For this reason, the Hebrew people would go to the high priest in order to know the will of God (see Numbers 27:21)” (GotQuestions.org).

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON
Delivered (Psalm 34:4)—Hebrew: natsal (nawtsal’): to snatch away, deliver, rescue, save, strip, plunder.
Magnify (Psalm 34:3)—Hebrew: gadal (gawdal’): to grow, become great or important, promote, make powerful, praise, magnify, do great things.
Praise (Psalm 34:1)—Hebrew: tabillah (teh-hill-law’): praise, adoration, thanksgiving (paid to God).
Saved (Psalm 34:6)—Hebrew: yasha’ (yaw-shah’): to save, be saved, be delivered.

Seek (Psalm 34:10)—Hebrew: darash (daw-rash’): seek; enquire; search.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON
I. Introduction
   A. God Hears When We Call
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. The Great Power of Corporate Praise (Psalm 34:1-3)
   B. God, Our Great Deliverer (Psalm 34:4-7)
   C. The Great God of Righteousness (Psalm 34:8-10)
   D. The Great God of Atonement (Hebrews 2:17-18)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION
   A. God Hears When We Call

   The central focus of Psalm 34 is that God hears the cries of God’s children when they call out in need and with sincerity. Like a human parent, God is particularly sensitive to those who claim God as Father. David is the author of this psalm, which he wrote after pretending to be insane in order to escape harm or death at the hands of King Achish (or, Abimelech).

   Psalm 34 makes it very clear that God’s powerful help is available to those in need. However, it is also important to realize that people’s active participation is also necessary in order for the miracle or the deliverance to take place. We cannot expect to be the beneficiaries of God’s power without being willing to give God our praise. Similarly, we cannot expect to receive forgiveness for our sins without confession (see 1 John 1:9). This participatory perspective is showcased in the New Testament by the Great Commission (see Matthew 28:19-20). The concept of a “co-mission” suggests that the mission is not unilateral, but is a collaborative process. We are called to participate in our own
breakthrough and not solely depend on God to do everything for us. This is one of the reasons why praise is so paramount. When we praise God, we are drawn into a powerful process of appreciating God’s power while also appropriating our own resources to overcome the challenge at hand.

B. Biblical Background

Many biblical commentators classify Psalm 34 as a psalm of thanksgiving. However, this psalm does not directly address God in the same way as in Psalm 30. Instead of speaking to the Lord, the psalmist spoke about the Lord. The tone is personal, experiential, and testimonial in nature. One of the purposes of this psalm is to teach the congregation about God and to lead the congregation in the praise of God. This purpose is clearly expressed in the central verse of the poem (verse 11): “Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.”

Learning the fear (respect) of the Lord enables us to put life in the correct perspective. “Contemporary culture defines life and good things in terms of material abundance and fun. Unfortunately, however, this definition fosters greed, baseness, and corruption. From the perspective of Psalm 34 these attitudes and actions are the works of evildoers and those who hate the righteous. In the midst of these troubles how then does one pursue genuine happiness? The simple answer from the perspective of Psalm 34 is take it to the LORD in prayer. On the sure knowledge that the LORD is near, watches over the righteous, and delivers them when they cry to Him, the righteous should take refuge in his temple where they can plead their case with the LORD” (worship.calvin.edu).

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. The Great Power of Corporate Praise
(Psalm 34:1-3)

I WILL bless the LORD at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul shall make her boast in the LORD: the humble shall hear thereof, and be glad. O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together.

Praise is not just a fair-weather function, but an all-condition activity (verse 1). It is easy to celebrate the goodness of God when all is going well, but the test of true praise is whether or not we can still praise when the storms of life threaten our well-being and challenge our very existence. David’s experiences in life had brought him to the conclusion that no phase of life should be a praiseless phase. “The idea is, that he would do it publicly and privately; in prosperity and in adversity; in safety and in danger; in joy and in sorrow. It would be a great principle of his life, expressive of the deep feeling of his soul, that God was always to be regarded as an object of adoration and praise” (Barnes’ Notes on the Bible). Consequently, it can be said that there are only two times in life when we should give praise to God: when we feel like it, and when we don’t.

For those who do not have a relationship with God, they may be tempted to boast or brag about their own abilities or accomplishments. However, the safest boast or bet is to place one’s trust in God, who is a sure winner with a proven track record. The proud people are contrasted with the humble people who place their relationship with God
above themselves. The important life lesson of personal humility is often learned through experiences of personal suffering (verse 2).

It is possible for praise to happen from an individual perspective. However, another dimension of praise is reached when the praises of many are combined in a corporate setting (verse 3). In an article, Debbie McDaniel notes that corporate praise can accomplish the following: (1) get our focus off ourselves and back on God; (2) help develop humility; (3) resist complaining and negativity; (4) invite God’s presence; and (5) prepare for God’s power and for miracles to take place (CrossWalk.com). Acknowledging and celebrating God’s greatness give life perspective, and attempts to give to God what God is worth.

### B. God, Our Great Deliverer

**Psalm 34:4-7**

I sought the Lord, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears. They looked unto him, and were lightened: and their faces were not ashamed. This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.

Matthew 7:7 records a spiritual principle that works for the one who exercises faith in God: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (NIV). David delves into his vast storehouse of significant memories and personal experiences with God in order to apply those experiences to the present. When it comes to deliverance, David’s reasoning is that if God did it before, God can and will do it again (verse 4). Whenever David started to think, David started to thank. What an example this is for us today to remember to connect our thinking with our thanking.

David was not alone when he fled to Abimelech, and the ones who were with the psalmist looked to God and found light and comfort in Him (verse 5). “The psalmist seems to have had his thoughts here suddenly turned from himself to those who were with him, and to have called to his remembrance how they ‘all’ looked to God in their troubles, and how they all found relief. ... [When they found light, their faces] ‘brightened up,’ or they became cheerful. Their minds were made calm, for they felt assured that God would protect them. Nothing could better express what often occurs in the time of trouble, when the heart is sad, and when the countenance is sorrowful—a dark cloud apparently having come over all things—if one thus looks to God. The burden is removed from the heart, and the countenance becomes radiant with hope and joy.” (Barnes Notes on the Bible). The bottom line is that they were not disappointed in God’s response to them. Just as God did it for them, God will still fulfill the needs of those who diligently ask, seek, and knock.

The afflicted man called out to God, and God heard his cry (verse 6). Like a concerned and diligent parent, God listens closely to the distress calls of God’s children and intervenes to change their circumstances. It is not directly stated whether David is referring to himself or to another person who is in need of God’s deliverance. However, since this verse is a reflection and repetition of verse 4, it is probably safe to conclude that David is referring to himself here.

This reference to the “angel of the Lord” (verse 7) is used by the psalmist to indicate the
general sense of divine protection. “The singular number is here put for the plural; for the psalmist does not speak of one single angel, but of a guard of angels, as unanimous, however, in their service as if they were but one” (Benson Commentary). The angel protects the people and defends the country. To fight against God would mean to get ready for defeat.

C. The Great God of Righteousness
(Psalms 34:8-10)

O taste and see that the Lord is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him. O fear the Lord, ye his saints: for there is no want to them that fear him. The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger: but they that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing.

David employed and applied one of the five senses in order to vividly convey his point regarding the goodness of the Lord. The sense of taste is very familiar to most people, so the readers would have readily identified with the analogy (verse 8). Several years ago, this writer’s three young sons were riding in the back seat of the car and eating three different flavors of popsicles. They came up with the bright idea to allow each other to taste the other’s treat. After everyone’s popsicle had been tasted except the youngest one’s, the other two asked to taste his. He refused, and his verbal response was priceless. He said to them, “I’ll tell you how it tastes!” Just as it is almost impossible to adequately describe the taste of a grape or cherry popsicle, so it is also impossible to adequately convey the fullness of God’s goodness without one personally experiencing it for oneself. Having trust and confidence in God is an experience that is a blessing within itself.

In its context in verse 9, the word fear does not refer to being afraid, but refers to having a sense of reverence, trust, and respect. “Fear of God, a reverent and godly fear, will always accompany trust in God, such as God approves. The saints of God both love and fear Him (see Psalm 31:23). There is no want to them that fear Him since God supplies all their wants” (Pulpit Commentary).

The reference to “lions” in verse 10 is best taken literally, with the intention being that even though the lion is an exceptionally strong beast of prey and is quite capable of providing for itself, the reality is that even lions sometimes suffer lack (see Job 4:11). But this is not the case for God’s people (see also Psalm 23:1). “If such are the blessings promised to those who fear the Lord, how essential to know what the fear of the Lord is! Accordingly, the poet adopts the language of a teacher and addresses his sons. So the teacher in Proverbs 1–8 constantly addresses his disciples as ‘sons’ (see Psalm 4:1), or ‘my son’” (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges).

D. The Great God of Atonement
(Hebrews 2:17-18)

Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.

The high-priesthood of Jesus Christ is prominently showcased in this letter to the Hebrews, and is perfectly capsuled in verse 17. This concept is introduced in Hebrews 4:14 and continues to develop as the letter progresses. Jesus was introduced into the world and the Word became flesh (see John
It can be argued that Jesus’ incarnation was meant to instill in the believer confidence of His empathy for our plight. In Hebrews 4:15, it is revealed, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (NIV). This personal identification with the frailties of humanity allows God to display more sensitivity toward the shortcomings of individuals. This sensitivity blends with the New Testament era of grace ushered in by the teachings of Jesus and makes Him more than qualified to serve in the position of making atonement.

Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness shortly before the start of His earthly ministry (Matthew 4:1-11). Jesus was also tempted shortly before His death (verse 18). Although there are not any other specific recorded instances of Jesus being tempted by humans or human circumstances, it is written that He was tempted at all points, and this reference could have included many other possibilities. Jesus is able to understand and help the tempted because He Himself was tempted. Jesus is able to identify with the poor and mistreated simply because He Himself was born poor and was mistreated. It is comforting to know that Jesus can personally identify with you and me.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Among the primary signature attributes of God are mercy and faithfulness. God extends these powerful spiritual blessings in the midst of our human fear and brokenness. Throughout the Scripture, humanity is constantly reminded to fear not, because the God of love is present with us and is willing to help us. Through the psalmist David, God extends an open invitation to all of humanity for us to taste and see that the Lord is good.

PRAYER

Lord, we pray for Your open invitation to be accepted so that You can begin Your divine restoration in all of creation. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(May 21-27, 2018)

Rejoicing in Restoration

MONDAY, May 21: “The Atoning Sacrifice for the People” (Leviticus 16:15-19)
TUESDAY, May 22: “The Lord Hears the Righteous Cry” (Psalm 34:11-18)
WEDNESDAY, May 23: “Jesus Tasted Death for Everyone” (Hebrews 2:5-9)
THURSDAY, May 24: “Jesus Brings Salvation through Suffering” (Hebrews 2:10-13)
FRIDAY, May 25: “Jesus Destroys the Devil’s Power” (Hebrews 2:14-16)
SATURDAY, May 26: “Jesus, the People’s High Priest Forever” (Hebrews 7:18-28)
SUNDAY, May 27: “Jesus, Our Redeemer and Deliverer” (Psalm 34:1-10; Hebrews 2:17-18)
Justice in the New Testament

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The study this quarter focuses on justice as presented in the New Testament. Justice is portrayed as a primary characteristic of God’s nature. Human beings are called to emulate God’s justice toward one another.

Unit I, “God Is Just and Merciful,” has four lessons that remind us that human interpretations of the Law must not conflict with mercy and justice as acted out in our daily lives. The lessons from the book of Matthew look at conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees on questions of mercy and justice. The lesson from the book of Luke looks at how God dispenses justice and mercy.

Unit II, “Jesus Calls for Justice and Mercy,” has five lessons that explore Jesus’ teachings on God’s justice in the books of Matthew and Luke. Included is Jesus’ demand for leaders to practice justice as well as to understand the universality of God’s justice and mercy.

Unit III, “Paul Teaches about New Life in Christ,” has four lessons that offer Paul’s teachings about just and merciful behaviors. Those who live the new life in Christ are called to imitate God’s just and merciful nature through their actions toward others, including their enemies.
JUSTICE AND SABBATH LAWS

ADULT/YOUTH

ADULT TOPIC: Compliance versus Compassion

YOUTH TOPIC: A Desire for Mercy

CHILDREN

GENERAL LESSON TITLE: God’s Law Is Fair

CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Do What Is Right

DEVOTIONAL READING
Psalm 10

Matthew 12:1-14—KJV

AT THAT time Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and his disciples were an hungred, and began to pluck the ears of corn and to eat.
2 But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.
3 But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him;
4 How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?
5 Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?
6 But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple.
7 But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless.

Matthew 12:1-14—NIV

AT THAT time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them.
2 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.”
3 He answered, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?
4 “He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests.
5 “Or haven’t you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent?
6 “I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.
7 If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Explore Jesus’ approach to questions of how to properly observe the Sabbath.
2. Affirm the importance of responding to human needs.
3. Identify ways that believers can prioritize compassionate service over external religious obligations.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Our justice system was established to provide equity. What should we do when certain interpretations of the law interfere with responding to human need? Two events in Jesus’ life, plucking grain and healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, illustrate the priority of responding to human need.

LEARN OBJECTIVES

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—Jesus emphasized that the human concern was greater than the law of the Sabbath.
—The Pharisees missed Jesus’ focus on mercy, instead conspiring against Him.
—Jesus healed on the Sabbath despite religious law. Healing was connected to justice.
—Sheep were considered a very valuable commodity; human life is much more valuable. The Law permitted rescuing sheep on the Sabbath.

Teachers of CHILDREN
—This passage demonstrates Jesus’ exercise of authority and His legal interpretation.
—When Jesus offered a legal interpretation or entered a dispute with religious authorities, He usually cited Scripture (verse 7) to support His argument.
—God's demand for mercy outranked both the requirements of the Temple authorities and the Sabbath rules.

8 For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day.
9 And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue:
10 And, behold, there was a man which had his hand withered. And they asked him, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath days? that they might accuse him.
11 And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?
12 How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days.
13 Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other.
14 Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him.

8 “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”
9 Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue,
10 and a man with a shiveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”
11 He said to them, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?
12 “How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”
13 Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.
14 But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.
—The basic contrast here is between showing concern for the person as an act of justice and mercy versus a strict literal interpretation of the Law.
—The fundamental issue here is this: Who has the right to interpret God’s will as expressed in the Torah? The answer in this passage is clear: Jesus!
—This passage concludes (verse 14) with the first mention of a plan to destroy Jesus.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
Matthew’s version of the controversy generated by plucking grain on the Sabbath immediately follows Jesus’ invitation to take His yoke of teaching upon oneself, to learn from Him, and to find rest (Matthew 11:28-30). Set in this context, the Sabbath controversy involving plucking grain from a field and healing a man with a withered hand illustrates the heavy and unreasonable burden that the yoke of the Pharisees places on people. Opposition to Jesus began to develop in Israel after His early ministry in Galilee, and Matthew brought this fierce opposition of the Jewish leaders to the fore.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
In Matthew 12, we find Jesus willing to fight for something that is close to His heart: the transformation of His broken creation, especially the transformation of human beings. That is the essence of Jesus’ conflict over the Sabbath in this passage. Some Christians read this story and conclude that Jesus was abolishing the Sabbath, but that misses the point entirely. The Sabbath was God’s gift to human beings, a beautiful gift that symbolized His desire to restore His tired and tattered creation. Once a week, God set aside a twenty-four-hour period for us to focus on one thing: enjoying God’s good creation and receiving His gift of restoration. Unfortunately, in Jesus’ day this gift had degenerated into a spiritual burden. So, Jesus fought not just for the integrity of the Sabbath but for the transformation of the human beings for whom the Sabbath was made.

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON
Pharisees: members of an ancient Jewish sect, distinguished by strict observance of the traditional and written Law, and commonly held to have pretensions to superior sanctity. They were close students of the sacred text; this is especially the case regarding Sabbath Law with its burdensome minutiae.
Disciple (Mathetes): a word found in the Bible only in the Gospels and the book of Acts. It means the pupil of someone in contrast to the master or teacher.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON
Grain fields (verse 1, NIV)—Greek: sporimos (spo’rē-mos): a planted field; cornfield.
Mercy (verse 7)—Greek: eleos (e’-le-os): compassion, pity.
Pharisees (verse 2)—Greek: Pharisaios (fä-rē-sī’-os): a sect that seems to have started after Jewish exile. In addition to Old Testament books, the Pharisees recognized in oral tradition a standard of belief and life.
Sabbath (verse 1)—Greek: sabbaton (sä’b-bä-ton): the seventh day of each week which was a sacred festival on which the Israelites were required to abstain from all work.
I. INTRODUCTION

A. The God Who Demands Justice

Justice is one of the most frequently recurring topics in the Bible. For example, the main vocabulary for “sexual sins” appears about ninety times in the Bible, while the main words for “justice” in the Hebrew and Greek occur more than one thousand times. Since Christians regard the Bible as their final source of authority in all matters of faith and practice, what the Bible has to say about justice is of great significance for Christian thought and action today. However, coming to grips with the biblical teachings on justice is no easy task. We must keep in mind that those Scriptures that speak of justice reflect a culture and religious worldview quite unlike that of our contemporary society.

Even when we are not able to define justice with accuracy and precision, most people have a strong intuitive sense of what justice is. They also have a sense of when they are being treated unfairly. We appeal to the criterion of justice all the time and we instinctively recognize when it has been violated.

B. Biblical Background

The book of Matthew has often been called the gospel of the church. In fact, it is the only gospel to use the word church (ekklesia: 16:18; 18:17). Its content and structure indicate an interest in providing clear and coherent guidance to a community of believers. From the beginning, Matthew has been the gospel most used by the church in its worship, and thus it has provided the text for most preaching and commentary throughout the history of the church. What has made the book of Matthew so precious to generation after generation of Christians is its fusion of Gospel and ethics, of faith and morality. Matthew’s gospel wants what we say as people of faith to line up with what we do as people of faith.

The dominant characteristic of the first gospel is its moral earnestness. Matthew was in full-throated disagreement with those who claim that accepting Jesus as Lord and
Savior is all that is required of them. He is all too aware that there are too many in the church whose lives do not conform to their confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, he did not take for granted that they will take seriously Jesus’ moral imperatives. The purpose of his writing is to convince Christians that genuine faith in Christ must be demonstrated in daily obedience to the way of life that Jesus proclaimed and the daily embrace of God’s justice that is inextricably tied to Matthew’s understanding of the kingdom of God. Faith and ethics, Matthew insisted, are two sides of the same coin, or the coin is counterfeit.

The story of the disciples eating ears of grain and the story of the man with the withered hand are both concerned with keeping the Sabbath. The Sabbath and circumcision were the most distinguishing marks of the Jews as the people of God. The controversy centers not on whether the Sabbath should be observed (there is no suggestion that Jesus questioned that), but on what that observance entailed in practical terms.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Loving the Sabbath for the Right Reasons

(Matthew 12:1-2)

AT THAT time Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and his disciples were an hungred, and began to pluck the ears of corn and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.

Much to their dismay, the Pharisees watched as the disciples, following Jesus through a grainfield on the Sabbath, began to pluck heads of grain to satisfy their hunger. Judging from the ripeness of the grain, it must have been April, near the time of the Passover. The hunger of the disciples is mentioned only to explain their action. However, Matthew’s specific notation that the disciples were hungry is to be taken seriously. He was not trying to paint a picture of well-fed disciples enjoying a snack, but he was calling attention to those who have left all to follow Jesus, pointing out that they were genuinely poor and hungry. The Law, in the interest of mercy and fair treatment toward the poor, provided that such people could pluck grain in fields that did not belong to them. The issue was whether it could be done on the Sabbath. In their questioning of the actions of Jesus’ disciples on the Sabbath, the Pharisees were neglecting the real will of God expressed in the Sabbath commandment: showing mercy and fair treatment to all people, especially the poor and hungry.

When the Pharisees saw this blatant violation of the Sabbath, they turned to Jesus and said, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” The Pharisees considered plucking ears of grain to be a flagrant breaking of the Law. Jewish tradition listed thirty-nine major kinds of work which was forbidden on the Sabbath, including the plucking and rubbing out of grain. Jewish Law clearly stated that those who reaped on the Sabbath were in violation of keeping the Sabbath. The hunger of the disciples notwithstanding, in the eyes of the Pharisees the law of the Sabbath was more important than the human need of satisfying one’s hunger. Jesus defended His disciples on the principle that human need and comfort are more important.
than Sabbath observance. Mercy is always to be desired over rules and religious procedures.

To understand this text, one must gain some sense of the meaning of the Sabbath in first-century Judaism. The Sabbath was not only commanded by God as part of the Decalogue, but was also observed and blessed by God at the beginning of creation (see Genesis 2:2-3). The Sabbath had served for centuries as the distinctive mark of the people of God that separated them from Gentiles and presented a constant testimony to their faith in the one God. Keeping of the Sabbath was not superficial or casual; in times of duress, faithful Israelites would die rather than break God’s law by profaning the Sabbath. To observant Jews, the Sabbath was a joy, not a burden. The Sabbath was a festive day of rest from labor, a day of eating and drinking on which it was forbidden to fast. From the beginning, an element of social justice had been expressed in the Law—for servants and slaves received much-needed rest of which they could not be deprived, and the poor and hungry joined in the eating and drinking.

Since the Sabbath was important in Jewish life, its proper observance was important. Over time, a body of tradition having the force of religious law had developed to guide the proper celebration of the Sabbath. Some rabbis taught that an animal that fell into a pit on the Sabbath could be helped out of the pit on that day; however, others rejected this. Some considered healing on the Sabbath to be permitted, while others said it was permitted only if the life of an individual was threatened.

Jesus entered this debate over the Sabbath as an observant Jew. His quest was to determine where and how the laws of God were to be applied in such a way that love was at the center. He comes down on the side of mercy in the interest of fair treatment of human beings—especially the poor and those who are in genuine need. Had the Pharisees loved the Sabbath for the right reasons they would have paid more attention to the law that allowed the hungry and the poor to pluck grain from fields they did not own and not so much attention to laws that restricted what people could and could not do on the Sabbath.

B. King David and King Jesus Overruling Sabbath Restrictions

(Matthew 12:3-4)

But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him; How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?

When called upon by the Pharisees to explain the actions of His disciples, Jesus asked them, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered into the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests” (see verses 3-4). Jesus lays His finger on the real trouble: the Pharisees were guilty of too much reading of rabbinical law and not enough awareness of divine intent.

The bread to which Jesus referred were the twelve loaves of bread set out in two rows on a gold-covered table in the Holy Place every Sabbath Day. When it was removed, it was only to be eaten by the priests. Jesus assumed that the complaining Pharisees agreed with Him that David, whom they esteemed so highly, did the right thing when he and those who were with him ate of the bread that had been removed from the Holy Place. The point that
Jesus makes is just as great. David was permitted to profane the holy bread of the tabernacle because of his importance in God’s plan for Israel, so the Son of Man has the authority to permit His followers to profane the Sabbath, not simply because they are hungry but because they are associated with Him in the great work of the kingdom—the rule and reign of God upon the earth.

If David could disregard bread intended as a sacrifice to God, how much more can the Messiah’s followers be allowed to observe the Sabbath less rigorously than is demanded by the extreme Sabbath legalists? If David, based on human need, could legitimately overrule standard ritual laws and even violate the normal sanctity of the house of God, how much more in the interest of human need—hungry disciples—can Jesus do so? Jesus’ authority is illustrated by David’s authority. The example of David illustrates the possibility of breaking the Law for the sake of some greater good. So, the point is that one divine demand may legitimately overrule another; and since the commandment to love is the greatest command of all, observance of it may occasionally lead to overruling certain restrictions and regulations of Jewish law. The point is this: If David and his followers could break the Torah, how much more so can Jesus Christ, God’s final revelation for humankind who has broken into human history to bring us into a right relationship with God the Father and one another? King David and King Jesus acted out of love in their overruling of cultic regulations.

C. Mercy Takes Priority over Sacrifice (Matthew 12:5-8)

Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless? But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple. But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day.

The second point Jesus made about the Sabbath laws was equally valid in His argument before the Pharisees. He noted that not only David, but also the priests in the Temple broke the Sabbath and yet were guiltless. Matthew now added a second argument to the legitimacy of His disciples’ plucking grain on the Sabbath. The Law required priests to perform certain kinds of work on the Sabbath that would be forbidden to ordinary citizens; thus, the priestly cult takes precedence over the laws of the Sabbath. But how does the faithfulness of priests in the Temple justify the action of the disciples, who, after all, are not ministering to the priestly cult but to their own hunger? Jesus here employed the traditional “light and heavy” argument of Jewish hermeneutics: “Something more important than the temple is here.” If the Temple took precedence over the Sabbath, how much more will something greater than the Temple outrank the Sabbath?

Why was this infraction of the laws permissible for the priests? Jesus explained the behavior of the priests by citing a passage from Hosea 6:6—“I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” Jesus’ reference to this Old Testament passage suggested that God’s demand for mercy outranks both Temple and Sabbath requirements. The “mercy not sacrifice” text from Hosea 6:6 is not an abolition or negation of the sacrificial system or other ritualized practices of worship, but rather Matthew’s way of expressing priority: mercy is more important than sacrifice. The Pharisees ought to have shown mercy to the
disciples in their need, instead of condemning them for what, at the very most, was a minor infraction of the Sabbath law and probably was not regarded as a transgression at all by more lenient interpreters of the Law.

While rules and regulations have their place, they must never be allowed to become more important in our treatment of one another than care and compassion for one another. Compliance should never take priority over compassion.

D. Compassion for Suffering Humanity
(Matthew 12:9-14)

And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue: And, behold, there was a man which had his hand withered. And they asked him, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath days? that they might accuse him. And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days. Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other. Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him.

The second Sabbath story was presented as a direct sequel to the first, occurring on the same day and involving presumably the same group of Pharisees. We have heard of Jesus’ presence and teaching in their synagogues, but this is the first account of a specific synagogue visit, even though this was presumably Jesus’ regular practice. In this case, the Pharisees, instead of criticizing after the event, took the initiative in raising the issue of Sabbath observance in the form of a test case—a man with a withered hand. While there were presumably other people in bad health in the synagogue, why is only one mentioned? Why, because they were planning to use the man with a withered hand to bring a charge against Jesus.

In all the Gospel accounts of Sabbath controversies, except for the grainfield incident, the specific issue is healing. Healing was not in itself included among the thirty-nine forbidden acts, and was less easy to associate with one of them, especially as Jesus’ method of healing usually involved little or no physical action and, in this case, was simply a word of command. He did not so much as touch the hand, He did not even command that it be healed; He only asked the man to raise his hand—that was all. However, the scribes and Pharisees in the Gospel stories assume that no healing was allowed on the Sabbath. An exception might be permitted where there was an imminent danger of death. There was no such urgency in any of Jesus’ Sabbath healings and that was particularly obvious in the test case here chosen. A paralyzed man, though very inconvenient, is not a threat to life, and the healing can be safely left until tomorrow.

In His defense of His healing of the man on the Sabbath, Jesus appealed not to a legal authority but to the common sense which normal people would follow. While Jesus’ question was addressed to the Pharisees, it was surely intended to be heard and reflected on by everyone in the synagogue: “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out?” (verse 11). The point that Jesus made was that the relief of animal suffering should be allowed to override the Sabbath regulation. The further assumption, which appeared to need no argument, is that a human being is more
important than an animal. Here again we see an appeal to mercy. Jesus said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” Jesus’ decisive command resolved the tension in favor of “doing good” over the Pharisaic rules. That it was permissible to do good on the Sabbath went far beyond the specific issue under discussion. While the Pharisees held that only emergency cases could be helped on the Sabbath, Jesus favored any ministry to human need regardless of the day. He sided on the value of human life and for the lawfulness of doing good at any time. In effect, Jesus placed the love commandment and the just treatment of other human beings above the Sabbath and the cultic regulations that grew up around its observance.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

The Sabbath was almost a national emblem for Israel. Jesus shook the foundation of Pharisaic religion when by word and deed He asserted His lordship over the Sabbath, placed humans above it, and reminded humankind that God prizes mercy above the whole cultic system. How we treat one another takes priority over submission to religious rules and regulations. The rabbis often spoke of the Jewish Law, sacrifices, and acts of love as the three pillars that together bear up the world. Jesus saw acts of love as the fulfillment of the other two. Since mercy (love in action) excels the others, it negates them in cases of conflict.

There are people today who are more concerned about dos and don’ts than about the spirit of God’s law. Some are more concerned with what people wear to church than what they believe in their hearts about the Lord. Some are more concerned with strict regulations about who qualifies for help than with extending a hand of mercy to those who are in crisis.

PRAYER

O Lord, we pray for the wisdom to give priority to human need whenever the opportunity arises. Help us not to become stuck in custom and tradition to the neglect of the just and fair treatment of all humankind. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(May 28–June 3, 2018)

Justice and Sabbath Laws

MONDAY, May 28: “David Eats the Bread of Presence” (1 Samuel 21:1-6)
TUESDAY, May 29: “Lord Desires Mercy, Not Sacrifice” (Hosea 6:1-6)
WEDNESDAY, May 30: “Plucking Grain” (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 23:25)
FRIDAY, June 1: “The Father and I Are Working” (John 5:9-18)
SATURDAY, June 2: “Deliver Justice for the Oppressed” (Psalm 10:12-18)
SUNDAY, June 3: “Meet Human Need on the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:1-14)
PARABLES OF GOD’S JUST KINGDOM

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: You Reap What You Sow
YOUTH TOPIC: Just Citizens

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Parables about God’s Just Kingdom
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Separate the Good from the Bad

DEVOTIONAL READING
Psalm 78:1-8

Matthew 13:24-33—KJV
24 Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field:
25 But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way.
26 But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also.
27 So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares?
28 He said unto them, An enemy did this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up?
29 Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them.
30 Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

Matthew 13:24-33—NIV
24 Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field.
25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away.
26 When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.
27 The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’
28 ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’
29 ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them.
30 ‘Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”
31 Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field:
32 Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.
33 Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.
31 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field.
32 “Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”
33 He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People want to experience living in a world filled with justice. Where can we find justice? Jesus’ parables describe the kingdom of heaven, where God’s justice is merciful, pervasive, and certain.

LESLSSON OBJECTIVES
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Explore the vision of justice presented in Jesus’ parables of the wheat and the weeds, the mustard seed, and the leaven.
2. Aspire to experience greater depths of God’s redemptive justice.
3. Commit to embody the values of divine justice that these parables express.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED
Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—God promises to execute justice, but only within its proper season.
—God gives us time to grow and mature.
—God will gather the faithful at the right time.
—God does not want us to be preoccupied with who is a wheat or a weed, but strive to be in right relationships with all.
—The kingdom of heaven may have small beginnings, but will have a far-reaching impact when it extends.
—The significance of the mustard seed is the ability of something so small to produce greatness.
—The parable of the weeds among the wheat (verses 24-30) is the second parable about sowing seed in this chapter. In the first (the parable of the sower in verses 3-9, not included in this lesson text), the difference in the result was due to the soils in which the seeds were sowed. In this parable, the difference is the result of two kinds of seed.
—This series of parables illustrates the need to interpret Scripture in context. Taken by itself, the parable of the weeds among the wheat might be seen to teach that the “children of the evil one” (illustrated by the weeds) are destined for damnation with no chance to change their destiny. But the parable of the yeast shows that the unleavened can become leavened—that is,
those outside the kingdom can be made part of the kingdom.
—All three parables teach that the kingdom of God is a growing thing.
—The parable of the mustard seed is also found in Mark (4:30-32) and Luke (13:18-19), and the parable of the yeast is repeated in Luke (13:20-21). Only Matthew, however, included the parable of the weeds among the wheat.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**
—The explanation of the weeds-in-the-wheat parable (verses 24-30) occurs in verses 36-43.

**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The parable of the wheat and the weeds is the second allegorical parable in the collection that Matthew had assembled in chapter 13, an assemblage based on Mark 4. The parable of the wheat and the weeds appears only in the book of Matthew. This parable, like the parable of the soils (which appears in all three Synoptic Gospels) and the parable of the seed and harvest (which appears only in the book of Mark), makes symbolic use of seed and sowing. Like the parable of the soils (see Matthew 13:1-23), the parable of the wheat and weeds would also be explained privately to the disciples (Matthew 13:36-43).

Together, the parable of the soils and that of the wheat and weeds tell us about why people respond to Jesus’ word differently and what negative role evil plays in the response. Matthew’s parable of the wheat and weeds (or “tares”) is the first of several parables found only in the book of Matthew that distinguish good from bad, righteous from unrighteous.

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The three parables in this section of the discourse share motifs related to stealth, hiding, and invasion. In the parable of weeds and wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to the story of an enemy who sows dangerous weeds among the good seeds the landowner has planted (Matthew 13:24-35). The parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32) compares the kingdom with an invasive plant that grows beyond all expectations. In the final comparison, a woman “hides” yeast in a quantity of flour sufficient for a banquet so that the whole amount is leavened (Matthew 13:33). Each story contains an element of surprise or extravagance. And each leaves the audience wondering what Jesus means to say about the kingdom of heaven.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**Son of Man:** This is the favorite self-designation of Jesus in the Gospels. It is always in the mouth
of Jesus Himself that it occurs, except once, when the bystanders asked what He meant by this title (John 12:34). The term expresses His function as Messiah and demonstrates that Jesus was conscious of this role in His ministry. He ranged all over the sacred books of the Old Testament and found in them references to His own person.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Enemy (verse 39 [Background Scripture])—Greek: ochthros (ekh-thro’s): the devil, who is the most bitter enemy of the divine government.

Gnashing (verse 42 [Background Scripture])—Greek: brygmos (brüg-mo’s): snarling or growling, in the sense of biting.

Parable (verse 24)—Greek: parabolē (pä-rä-bo-lā’): a narrative, fictitious but agreeable to the laws and usages of human life, by which either the duties of humans or the things of God, particularly the nature and history of God’s kingdom, are figuratively portrayed.

Righteous (verse 43 [Background Scripture])—Greek: dikaios (dē’-kī-os): in a wide sense, upright, virtuous, keeping the commands of God.

Tares (verse 27, KJV)—Greek: zizanion (zē-zā’-nē-on): a kind of darnel, resembling wheat except the grains are black.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction
   A. Being Fair to All in an Imperfect World
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. The Parable of the Wheat and Weeds (Matthew 13:24-30)
   B. The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32)
   C. The Parable of the Yeast (Matthew 13:33)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Being Fair to All in an Imperfect World

Many in America believe that if you work hard, play by the rules, and treat others as you would want to be treated, then a good life with a reasonable amount of happiness and prosperity will be the result. There is an equally strong conviction in the American psyche that those who choose to deceive and hustle their way through life ultimately receive their rightful due and comeuppance. This belief leads to a hard and fast rule that many Americans live by: what you do to others—good or bad—will come back to you. Time and time again we hear these well-worn platitudes that have grown up around this fundamental belief in fair play and just desserts. Among them are “Be careful how you treat people on your way up, because you may meet those same people on your way down.” Another familiar saying is based on Scripture: “You reap what you sow.”

However, our lesson for today clearly shows that sometimes you reap what you did not sow, and yet through it all we are required to act with love and patient understanding toward the just and the unjust. It is incumbent upon us to demonstrate daily in this imperfect world that Christians live their lives in the full confidence that God is still on
the throne; that He is a God who sits high but looks down low. In God’s own time and in God’s own way, He will make things right. We cannot wait for things to get right, but we must work for God and for good in the world as it currently exists. Our challenge is to treat all people with dignity and respect, even when that promise of ultimate justice and vindication seems distant and far off. The poet James Russell Lowell gets at this belief in the ultimate justice of God to make things right in his oft-repeated quote: “Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne—Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown, Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.”

B. Biblical Background

This group of parables centers on the themes of growth, patience, and living justly in an imperfect world. The growth is not necessarily numerical but, rather, it is a spiritual growth that opens us up to the deeper understandings of the ways of God and how God works out His purposes in our lives. These parables are explicitly about “the kingdom of heaven,” and describe different aspects of the new reality that has come into being through Jesus’ ministry. All three concern themselves with the patience that is needed before God’s purpose is fulfilled in all its glory. The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven form a natural pair that speaks encouragingly of spectacular growth from insignificant beginnings. But the parable of the weeds stands apart from them in that it, like the parable of the sower, draws attention to problems and divisions as well as to the ultimate harvest. The parable of the weeds is also distinctive in that it will receive a detailed explanation in verses 37-43, while the mustard seed and the leaven remain uninterpreted. What they tell us is that the work of God goes forward even though human beings seek at times to usurp and thwart the redemptive purposes of God on the earth.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. The Parable of the Wheat and Weeds

(Matthew 13:24-30)

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

This parable is recounted by Matthew alone. It is a straightforward and possibly familiar account of agricultural sabotage; Roman law dealt specifically with the crime of sowing weeds in a wheat field as an act of revenge.

The opening sentence of the parable encounters the same sort of awkwardness we saw in the explanation of the sower: the kingdom of heaven is not like the man himself, but like
the situation that results from his action. In the parable of the sower (see Matthew 13:1-9), which is not included in this lesson, all the seed was good; it was the soil that was the problem. But in this story—the parable of the weeds—the problem arises not from the soil but from a second type of seed; so the first seed is declared to be good.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds needs little comment. This farmer, unlike the one in the parable of the sower, is a landowner with a workforce of slaves. So when we are told that he sowed the seed we should probably understand that he had them sown by his workers. “But while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away” (verse 25, NRSV). The enemy came and re-sowed the field with bad seed, literally sowing over and between the good seeds. That he “went away” after sowing the bad seeds emphasizes the evil of his actions.

The weed in the parable was a type of weed related to rye grass, which in the early stages of growth resembles wheat, though with narrower leaves and a smaller ear. Moreover, these noxious weeds, secretly sown by the enemy, usually came up before the good grain, ripened quickly, and choked out the good grain before it had a chance at healthy growth. Also, the grains of the weeds were poisonous, so that to have mixed them in with the wheat rendered the crop commercially useless as well as potentially harmful. Because of its similar growth, the weed infestation would not be readily apparent until the plants began to form ears, and by that time it would have been too late to eradicate the weeds without doing damage to the wheat with which its roots were intertwined. The only solution to undertake the painstaking job of separating out the wheat from the weeds.

But the landowner forbade them to go into the field to separate the wheat from the weeds. He instead instructed them to let both grow up together until the harvest. The weeds did not worry the farmer, since he would take care of them in due time. He was so concerned about the wheat that he would not risk having any of it uprooted until the weeds had been removed in the appropriate season. While the servants were instructed to allow good and bad to grow up together, it is important to note that at harvest time, the wheat would be victorious. The weeds would be culled out first, indicating that even though the weeds were plentiful, there was more wheat than weeds in the field.

In this parable, emphasis is placed on the farmer’s patience: “Let both grow together until the harvest” (verse 30a). Perhaps Jesus used this parable to point out that human beings are not competent to make the kind of judgments implied in separating wheat from weeds; in plucking out what they think are the weeds, they may very well be pulling up wheat. Only God can make such judgments, and in due course this will be done. In the meantime, we are urged to be more patient with one another and yet to continue in our pursuit of what is just and equitable. Too often some are made to believe that if they cannot fix the whole world then they should not fix any of the world. Much wisdom comes in learning how to be patient with others even when that patience and kindness are not reciprocated.

This lesson also teaches us the importance of learning to live with the tension of good and bad existing in the same place. Some can tolerate no imperfections in what they believe to be
a righteous cause. But often we are called to act justly under less-than-ideal circumstances and with less-than-ideal people.

B. The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32)

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.

Again, in this parable a seed is used as an illustration, except that this seed is not of wheat or of barley, but of the mustard plant. To understand this parable of the mustard seed, one must first recognize that a mustard plant is an annual herb whose proverbially small seeds can produce a plant normally from two to six feet in height, and in some instances nine to ten feet in height. Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed because like it, the rule of Christ among humankind will have phenomenal growth from the tiniest beginnings. He uses a mustard seed to show us that although the presence of the hoped-for kingdom is no more obvious than a small garden herb, it will come in God’s power and glory.

Some think that the mustard seed was chosen for this parable not only because of its size, but also because of its pungent taste. It has heat. It has fiery vigor. And it can only give out its best virtue after it has been bruised—and all this under so insignificant an appearance in so small a compass. In this parable, however, the point of the comparison is the growth of this small seed.

A small, barely perceptible beginning results in a spectacular transformation. So also the kingdom of heaven as presented in Jesus’ ministry may be unnoticed, but the time will come when it will be impossible to ignore it. Despite the ambivalent and hostile reactions to Jesus and His message, God’s purposes will reach their triumphant fulfillment. Those who despised its small beginnings will have to eat their words, while those who have been impatient to see the full working out of God’s redemptive purposes must be prepared to wait. The parable of the mustard seed shows us that people of faith must not become discouraged, though they seem to be small in influence in their community, recognizing that even “small” faith can ultimately have a big impact. Christians remain faithful to doing what is right even in an imperfect world. The promise of the mustard seed is that such influence will grow with the rule and reign of God on the earth. In the end, “right” will be its own reward.

C. The Parable of the Yeast (Matthew 13:33)

Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.

The normal method of bringing about fermentation in bread making in the ancient world was to insert into the new dough a small amount of old, fermented dough reserved from the previous baking; it is this “leaven” (or sourdough) rather than “yeast” proper which the woman was using here. The leaven is unlike the mustard seed in that it is not its own growth which is remarkable, but the expansion which it causes in the new dough. Though leaven (or yeast) is used extensively in an evil purpose to portray something that corrupts, in this parable, leaven is used to indicate the good
power of Christ’s rule of grace which secretly yet effectively produces its beneficent results.

The point of the parable is this: the kingdom of heaven and those who proclaim it will have a dramatic effect on society. We are not told how much leaven was used or what the quantity of the leavened bread was that resulted from the mix, but the point is that a little leaven has a great effect. The kingdom does not come with outward show or with worldly powers. It does come with revolutionary force, changing from within. The kingdom of heaven may be initially insignificant, but it is pervasive.

Though the outcome of doing things God’s way may take time, it is certain—for both the growth of the mustard seed and the effect of the leaven are regular natural processes that, once begun, will surely bring about a desired result.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

The parable of the weeds teaches us that good and bad often exist in the same place and often grow up together. We live in an imperfect world and yet we are required to be God’s redemptive agents in the world. Our command is to love and uphold people with the dignity and worth granted unto them by God almighty even when such treatment is not reciprocated. In God’s own time, and often through human agency, He will make things right.

In the parable of the mustard seed, we are taught that small beginnings can come to great things in time. There are those instances when we can feel that our just work is in vain—that it is of no value to pursue the good and the right at all cost. The good we try to do can seem so infinitesimal in a world filled with injustice and maltreatment. The parable of the mustard seed urges us to be patient while pursuing the just and good for all people. In both the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast we find not the natural and the expected, but the supernatural and the surprising.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, give us the strength to be patient in the working out of Your justice throughout the world. Help us not to grow weary in well-doing, but to keep faith that even small beginnings, in You, can in time come to have a great impact on the world. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(June 4-10, 2018)

Parables of God’s Just Kingdom
MONDAY, June 4: “Rehearse the Deeds of the Lord” (Psalm 78:1-8)
TUESDAY, June 5: “God’s Tree of Justice for All” (Ezekiel 17:22-24)
WEDNESDAY, June 6: “Jesus Affirmed as the Son of Man” (Matthew 16:13-20)
THURSDAY, June 7: “Jesus Not Believed in His Hometown” (Matthew 13:54-58)
FRIDAY, June 8: “Will the Son of Man Find Faith?” (Luke 18:1-8)
SATURDAY, June 9: “Jesus Explains Parable of the Weeds” (Matthew 13:34-43)
SUNDAY, June 10: “Defer Judgment until the Final Day” (Matthew 13:24-33)
JESUS TEACHES ABOUT JUSTICE

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: More than Lip Service
YOUTH TOPIC: More than Lip Service

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Jesus Teaches Fairness
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Put First Things First

DEVOTIONAL READING
Mark 7:1-13

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 15:1-9; Mark 7:1-13
PRINT PASSAGE: Matthew 15:1-9
KEY VERSE: Matthew 15:8

CHILDREN
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 15:1-9; Mark 7:1-13
PRINT PASSAGE: Matthew 15:1-9
KEY VERSE: Matthew 15:3

Matthew 15:1-9—KJV
THEN CAME to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying,
2 Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.
3 But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?
4 For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death.
5 But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me;
6 And honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.
7 Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying,
8 This people draweth nigh unto me with their

Matthew 15:1-9—NIV
THEN SOME Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked,
2 “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”
3 Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?
4 “For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’
5 “But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is ‘devoted to God,’
6 “they are not to ‘honor their father or mother’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.
7 “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:
8 “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.
9 “They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Sometimes things we do out of tradition are not fair to others. How do we act with true fairness and justice? When the Pharisees confronted Jesus on a question of ritual observance, He challenged them to do what was truly fair and just and not merely talk about it.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Contrast Jesus’ concept of obedience to God with that of the Pharisees’.
2. Repent of offering lip service to God while neglecting to honor God inwardly.
3. Commit to follow God wholeheartedly and not merely conform to outward religious tradition.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—Mentioning “tradition of the elders” refers to the Israelite law and the Pharisees’ interpretation of it.
—Here, a hypocrite was referring to Jesus’ opponents, who honored Him with lip service.
—The Pharisees were holding on to certain traditions for selfish reasons while ignoring injustice. God wants sincere commitments that include being just to others.
—Corban is a Hebrew word (used in Mark 7:11) for an offering dedicated to God (translated as “offering” in Leviticus 1:2). However, the Pharisees were using Corban to violate God’s Word by making something a Corban when they did not want to honor their parents.
—The commandment about honoring one’s father and mother is recorded in Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16. It was repeated by Jesus in response to the question of the rich young ruler (see Matthew 19:19; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20), and Paul cited it in instructions about family relationships in Ephesians 6:2.
—While the question was worded, “Why do your disciples . . . ?” the clear intent of the complaint was why Jesus would allow and thus sanction such behavior.
—Jesus went on (in the verses after the Print Passage) to explain that the disciples’ actions had not defiled them, in spite of what the Pharisees taught. In the Mark account, the writer noted that Jesus’ explanation actually declared all foods clean—something that was apparently lost on Peter, given his reaction to his vision in Acts 10.
—Jesus endorsed care for one’s parents as an important aspect of justice and mercy. The Pharisees decided to institute the practice of Corban to give the appearance of law keeping at the expense of caring for one’s parents (see Mark 7:11).
Teachers of CHILDREN
—Jesus challenged the rigorous piety of some of His contemporaries by insisting that they put God’s moral commandments first.
—The basic issue Jesus dealt with in this passage was Scripture versus tradition.
—in the hand-washing discussion, Jesus was asking the Pharisees and scribes where they put their priorities.
—Jesus made His real point in verse 11 (which is outside both the Background and Print Passages) when He said, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”
—Neither His followers nor His foes ever accused Jesus of teaching people to disobey the ritual laws of Judaism; what caused the controversy was His approach in interpreting those laws.
—Jesus’ primary criterion was fidelity to the intent of God’s commandments, as seen in Hebrew Scripture.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The question of ritual purity has arisen in various ways already in the miracle stories of Matthew 8–9. In those chapters, we see that Jesus had already touched a leper, been in contact with an “unclean” Gentile, visited Gentile territory with its herd of pigs and “unclean” demons, been touched by a woman with a menstrual disorder, and touched a dead child in order to restore her to life. The present discussion of eating with unwashed hands, though introduced by a relatively trivial objection on the part of the Pharisees, went to the heart of Jesus’ ministry. The question Jesus posed to them illustrates His willingness to transcend the barriers of Jewish purity laws, especially as those laws were developed and interpreted by religious leaders intent on making others conform to those traditions.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

In this passage, the deteriorating relationship between Jesus and the religious elites took a more ominous turn. Scribes and Pharisees last joined forces to ask Jesus for a sign in Matthew 12:38. The group that was now challenging Jesus in Matthew 15:1-9 was from Jerusalem. Jesus had been ministering around Gennesaret, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:34-36), so the scribes and Pharisees of Jerusalem must have come some distance for this encounter. Perhaps the Jerusalem leaders thought that the locals were not up to dealing with Jesus, so they sent their own people to put Jesus in His place. Jerusalem then loomed on the horizon (Matthew 16:21).

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Hypocrites: This word occurs only once in the Old Testament, but it is used quite frequently in the New Testament, chiefly in Jesus’ discourses in the Gospels. The word hupokrisi meant, generally, “stage playing, pretending, or acting a part in life.” It came to mean the equivalent of bad, wicked, and/or godless, which is the way Jesus uses the word from time to time.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Hypocrites (verse 7)—Greek: hypocrite (hü-po-krē-tā’s): pretenders, dissemblers.
Tradition (verse 2)—Greek: paradosis (pä-rä’-do-sēs): a giving over which is done by word of mouth or in writing (i.e. tradition by instruction, narrative, percept, etc.).
TOPICAL OUTLINE
OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction
   A. When Customs and Traditions Tie Us Down
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. When Tradition Takes Priority over God’s Word
      (Matthew 15:1-2)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION
   A. When Customs and Traditions Tie Us Down

       Not long after graduating from seminary, the young impressionable minister eagerly awaited the day of his ordination. And just as he had hoped, not long after being ordained as a minister of the Gospel, he received a call from a historic church with a storied reputation. Everything seemed to be going fine. The minister received a solid majority of the vote and it appeared that the people in his new charge had minds and hearts to work for God.

       The young minister was filled with ideas and visions of how to grow the church and move it forward. He was ready to implement many of the things he had learned about ministry in his classes at seminary. But the smiling faces that so eagerly greeted him on his first Sunday in the pulpit soon turned sour when it became evident that this young pastor wanted to go much faster and much farther than the members of his staid and stolid historic church wanted to go. Plan after plan, proposal after proposal went down in defeat as this pastor tried his best to get his members to look forward to the future and not reflect so much on their historic past.

       Alas, it was not to be. There was no meeting of the minds about the best way to move forward. Most of the members of this congregation were much older and greyer now. They relished their heyday and were not ready to move into what they considered an uncertain future under an untested new leader. Before the year was out, the church decided that they would have to part company with the young minister in spite of the promised potential so many felt when they extended the call. He broke no laws, he committed no ethical offenses. He was not accused of making off with the money or being untoward with the women of his congregation. His offense was that he was all too eager to break with the long-held customs and traditions of the church.

B. Clean Hands versus a Pure Heart
   (Matthew 15:3-6)

C. Honoring God with Our Lips
   (Matthew 15:7-9)
His congregation had grown comfortable doing things a certain way, and in time those things took on the force of law that even the Scriptures could not upend. Rather than change from their well-worn path of “the way we do things around here,” they decided to let the pastor go and hold on instead to their comfortable past.

B. Biblical Background

For the first time in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus was confronted by opponents from Jerusalem. The Pharisees had apparently travelled north to investigate the teachings of this popular rabbi named Jesus. The confrontation that took place upon their arrival shows us that while Jesus lived within Judaism with true piety, He maintained the freedom to differ radically with Judaism’s strongest leaders and exponents. His conflict with the Pharisees in Matthew 15 was basically over the ritual law, which for the Pharisees distinguished between Jews and non-Jews and even between the “righteous” and “sinners” within Judaism. In the passage before us, Jesus clearly rejected the Pharisaic basis for these distinctions.

The tradition of the elders, which the Pharisees accused Jesus’ disciples of breaking, is the Jewish oral tradition that ultimately formed the Talmud. The Talmud is an authoritative body of Jewish writings that developed over many generations and was transmitted orally from one generation to another. Each generation added to it. This material represents rabbinical interpretation of the Torah, the oldest part of the Old Testament, and its application to all aspects of life. The Pharisees gave the oral tradition a value as great as that of the written Law. They held that Moses received the oral law at Mount Sinai and passed it on to the prophets, who in turn passed it down to the rabbis of the synagogues. The ritual of handwashing fell under the edict of the oral tradition. The issue of handwashing before eating is one of ritual concern rather than hygiene. This was not required by the Old Testament, but the Pharisees considered it a mark of piety.

Jesus not only rejected the authority of the oral tradition in favor of the Scriptures, but also introduced a far-reaching principle for interpreting the Scriptures. He recognized the authority of the Scriptures as the commandment of God, but He stressed the intention of the Law, and not the letter of the Law. He did not stop with repudiating the Pharisaic rule about unwashed hands, but He declared defilement to be a condition of the heart rather than the result of what goes into the mouth.

Matthew left no doubt about the wide gulf between Jesus and the Pharisees with respect to the authority of the Scriptures, the oral interpretative tradition that grew up around them, and the nature of evil. Jesus’ actions are instructive for us today. In His refusal to abide by the Pharisees’ understanding of ritual uncleanness, He made a distinction between Scripture—which He believed to be the Word of God—and tradition and custom which came from human beings. Jesus also understands the importance of the heart—the intention and condition of the inner person—and how that affects decisions we make about our faith and our religious convictions.
II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. When Tradition Takes Priority over God’s Word  
(Matthew 15:1-2)

THEN CAME to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying, Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.

The charge that the disciples of Jesus did not wash their hands before they ate was a ritual that had nothing to do with sanitation or ordinary cleanliness. This ritual to wash before eating grew out of fear that the hands might have brushed against a Gentile or against something belonging to a Gentile. The divine Levitical Law required no such washing. Jesus and His disciples observed the Levitical Law but disregarded the rabbinic tradition that grew up around it. The Pharisees over time came to see the handwashing ritual as being just as important as divine authority.

Jesus did not dismiss their question simply to disregard human customs and traditions; rather, He did it to free us to serve God according to God’s will and God’s way. He freed us to be open to the new things that God is doing and not to be tied down to the past. A god of the past becomes an idol, and the worship of that kind of god leads to empty ritual and cold ceremony. It leaves us stuck in the past while talking about a God whose mercies are new every morning. While we are not bound by custom and tradition, the intense asking after God that opens us up to the new things that God is doing in every era and every age is what Jesus sought to free us up to pursue. Only what we do for Christ will last, and those acts must come from our hearts and not merely from our lips.

B. Clean Hands versus a Pure Heart  
(Matthew 15:3-6)

But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death. But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; And honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.

The issue in Matthew 15:1-9 is the relation of Scripture and tradition. The Pharisees asked Jesus, “Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread” (Matthew 15:2). Jesus responded with a question of His own: “Why do you violate the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother and anyone who curses his mother or his father must be put to death’” (see Matthew 15:3).

Jesus’ reply to their question does not deal directly with the issue of handwashing. He answered them with an appeal to the commandments of God. In so doing, He was not attempting to silence them by pointing out that they, too, were doing an equally wrong thing. Such an argument would be an admission of guilt on Jesus’ part. In His question about the way in which the Pharisees had broken the fifth commandment of God by not honoring their mother and father, Jesus nullified and wiped out their appeal to “the tradition of the elders.” In fact, said Jesus, they had used the tradition of the elders to get around obeying the Word of God. The Pharisees themselves
were guilty of transgression as they pretended to find transgression in others.

“You break the command of God for the sake of your tradition” (Matthew 15:3, NIV). The issue that Jesus raised was a particularly despicable practice of that time. The fifth of the Ten Commandments said that a man must honor his father and mother (see Exodus 20:12). One chapter later, the book of Exodus states, “Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death” (Exodus 21:17). These verses add a divine command to a universally recognized human obligation: for one to provide for his or her parents when a mother or father is in need. But the Pharisees had devised a way of avoiding this obligation. They even had a word for it: *corban* (Mark 7:11). It referred to a gift dedicated to God, and it worked this way: if a parent approached one of their children asking to be helped and the son did not want to help, all he had to do was say “corban,” meaning that the money that might have been used to relieve the parent’s need had been dedicated to God.

What made this practice even worse is that the greedy and uncaring son did not even have to give the money to God. It was enough that he simply promised to give it. He could give it later, on his deathbed perhaps, or not at all. In this way, the parents of such people were dishonored and God’s law was broken. What concerned Jesus most is that by this false piety these people nullified the Bible, making it of no effect, which is the problem with traditions—in time, tradition and custom come to have more authority than the Word of God (Matthew 15:6).

In His stinging critique, Jesus pointed out to the Pharisees that God’s commandment meant nothing to them when it came to their self-invented tradition. Notice in Matthew 15:6 that Jesus does not refer to the tradition “of the elders,” behind whose skirts these Pharisees were trying to hide, but He says “your tradition,” making these Pharisees personally responsible for the tradition they accepted and sought to impose on others.

C. Honoring God with Our Lips
(Matthew 15:7-9)

*Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.*

Jesus concluded His confrontation with the Pharisees with a quote from the book of Isaiah: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” This is strong language for people who considered themselves to be the cream of the crop religiously. Jesus, in effect, read this sanctimonious crowd the riot act, and He was justified in doing so because they used their religion to harm—not to help—people, and they often fell back on their misguided traditions as they sought to enforce their unjust, uncaring, and unkind behavior. Their flowery religious talk was just that—talk—and nothing more. Jesus saw through their hypocrisy and pronounced His judgment on them.

With this quote from the book of Isaiah, Jesus portrayed His opponents in a very negative light. He understood Isaiah’s charge against the false worship of his day as a prophecy against the false worshippers of his day. Service to God is rightly embodied in horizontal relationships among humans, not in
actions that circumvent human relationships in favor of a direct relationship with God. By excluding others, the Pharisees’ pursuit of purity denied the importance of human relationships, thereby making void the Word of God. Jesus buttressed His argument with His appeal to Isaiah 29:13. Because the scribes and Pharisees placed a higher priority on outward piety than on the integrity of their relationships, their worship was in vain and their teachings were to be regarded as human rather than divine.

In the common parlance of today’s language, one could ask of the Pharisees and their pious cultic regulations, “Where’s the beef?” We are not our best selves when we merely follow tradition; we are of most benefit to God’s work in the world when we obey God’s Word and see worth and value in every human being, traditions and customs notwithstanding.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

The scribes and Pharisees’ piety was no doubt sincere, but also competitive, exclusive, self-serving, and ultimately destructive of relationships and community. Jesus, in contrast, emphasizes the relational character of true piety and devotion. What impact does our piety or spirituality have on the quality and integrity of our relationships? Our relationship to God should model our relationship to one another as we attend to matters of human justice, peace, and right relationships. So, too, Jesus’ relationship with the heavenly Father is dramatically demonstrated in His mission of restoration and life, of solidarity with the marginal and broken people of first-century Galilee. In the eyes of some of the religious leaders of His day, Jesus did not appear to be very “pious” (Matthew 11:19), but Jesus shows us what kind of piety God desires. Jesus persistently crosses the boundaries of convention and social distinction. He models purity that is contagious. His spirituality transforms relationships and restores community.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, help us not to get lost in religious rituals and customs, but enable us to hear Your Word and be doers of Your Word every day of our lives. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(June 11-17, 2018)

Jesus Teaches about Justice

MONDAY, June 11: “Wash Away Your Evil Ways” (Isaiah 1:12-17)
TUESDAY, June 12: “Let Justice Roll like Water” (Amos 5:18-24)
WEDNESDAY, June 13: “Honor Your Father and Mother” (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16)
THURSDAY, June 14: “The Spirit Gives Life” (2 Corinthians 3:1-6)
FRIDAY, June 15: “Call No One Profane or Unclean” (Acts 10:23-33)
SATURDAY, June 16: “What Defiles Comes from the Heart” (Mark 7:14-23)
SUNDAY, June 17: “Treat Your Parents Justly” (Matthew 15:1-9)
REAPING GOD’S JUSTICE

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT YOUTH TOPIC: The Tables Are Turned
YOUTH TOPIC: How I Live Now Matters

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Reaping God’s Fair Reward
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Money Isn’t Everything

DEVOTIONAL READING
Luke 6:20-26

ADULT/YOUTH
PRINT PASSAGE: Luke 16:19-31
KEY VERSE: Luke 16:25

CHILDREN
PRINT PASSAGE: Luke 16:19-31
KEY VERSE: Luke 16:13c

Luke 16:19-31—KJV
19 There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day:
20 And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,
21 And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.
22 And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried;
23 And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.
24 And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.
25 But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise

Luke 16:19-31—NIV
19 “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.
20 “At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores
21 “and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.
22 “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried.
23 “In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.
24 “So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’
25 “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.”
Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.

26 And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.

27 Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father’s house:

28 For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.

29 Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.

30 And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.

31 And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

27 “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family,

28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

29 “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

30 “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

31 “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: There is great concern for the inequities in the lives of the poor versus the rich. How will these inequities be resolved? The story of the rich man and Lazarus tells us that the poor will receive their rewards.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Understand what the parable of the rich man and Lazarus teaches about God’s definition of justice.

2. Sense how this passage challenges simplistic understanding of who is or is not included in God’s kingdom.

3. Identify with the most vulnerable members of society in order to minister to them in Jesus’ name.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—Wearing purple and fine linen represents a very wealthy lifestyle (verse 19).
—“Moses and the Prophets” refer to God’s law and Word (verse 29).
—Abraham executed justice on behalf of Lazarus and did not allow the rich man to exploit Lazarus even in the afterlife (verses 24-25).

—Lazarus’s being comforted at Abraham’s side (verse 22) speaks to Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6:20-25).
—This text highlights an urgent call to repentance (verses 17, 27-28).
—This is the only parable of Jesus in which any character is given a name. For this reason, some interpreters believe this is not a parable, but an actual event. (The Lazarus named here is not the same Lazarus as discussed in John 11 and 12.)
---Lazarus is a form of the name Eliezer, which means “God will help.” In Genesis, it was the name of Abraham’s servant, who thus became a paradigm of the faithful servant in Jewish piety.
---The word Hades in verse 23 is sometimes used for the abode of the dead generally and not just the place of torment for the evil dead.
---Verse 31 prophesies the disbelief that would be typical of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem after Jesus’ resurrection.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**
---This is the second parable in Luke 16 in which the subject of money is the focus.

---Jesus and the Pharisees differed greatly on their theological interpretation of wealth and poverty.
---The Pharisees believed that righteous people prosper and wicked people suffer, while Jesus regarded the Pharisees’ view as a gross misinterpretation of the Old Testament.
---The real purpose of this passage is to emphasize the correct interpretation of the Law and the prophets, i.e., that the Law of Moses required that the harvest should be shared with the poor.
---Luke was always careful to show that what Jesus said and did was the proper interpretation of Scripture.
---After their deaths, both the rich man and the poor man received their fair rewards.

**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The dominant concern of Luke 16 reappears in this section, which returns to the issue of the responsibility of wealthy people to the poor. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus expands on verse 9—“Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves.”—by showing what will happen to those who do not make friends among the poor through their wealth. In verse 9, there is reference to “the eternal homes,” but in verses 22-31 a more detailed picture of the post-death situation appears. Jesus was still addressing the Pharisees who were “lovers of money” and who ridiculed His teaching about wealth. The story is told from a Jewish perspective in order to speak clearly to Jesus’ audience.

---Luke was always careful to show that what Jesus said and did was the proper interpretation of Scripture.
---After their deaths, both the rich man and the poor man received their fair rewards.

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The audience for this particular parable was no longer the disciples of Jesus but rather the Pharisees, who are portrayed as lovers of money who made fun of Jesus’ position on money (verse 14). It is not necessary to picture these men as godless materialists whose religion is only a façade, even though our culture has come to suspect that money madness prompts holding up a Bible and talking easily of faith in God. The Pharisees loved money within a theological framework that justified their position (verse 15). Jesus separated God and mammon (verse 13) and they scoffed at His view. This apparently means that theirs was a theology in which God and mammon are comfortably joined together. In such a theology, godliness is in league with riches, and prosperity is a clear sign of God’s favor. Jesus and the Pharisees clearly differed on their theological interpretation of wealth and poverty. Even though the Pharisees justified their position by almsgiving and other acts of charity, Jesus says that God perceives what is really going on, and God’s assessment of our endeavors is frequently a reversal of our own.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

Lazarus: a name quite common among the Jews
and given to two men in the New Testament who have nothing to do with each other. The Lazarus of today’s lesson is pictured as a poor beggar in abject poverty in this world, but highly rewarded in the next. His name means “God has helped.”

**Rich man:** In the Latin Vulgate, “rich man” is translated “dives,” so throughout history many came to refer to him by that name. However, *dives* is not his actual name but rather the Latin translation for “rich man.”

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

- **Abraham (verse 22)**—Greek: *Abraam* (ä-brä-ä’m): the son of Terah and the founder of the Jewish nation.

- **Chasm (verse 26)**—Greek: *chasma* (khä’-smä): a gaping opening; “gulf” (KJV).

- **Hades (verse 23)**—Greek: *hadēs* (hä’-dās): the grave, death, “hell” (KJV).


- **Repent (verse 30)**—Greek: *metanoeō* (me-tä-no-e’-ō): one’s changing his or her mind for the better.

**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

**I. Introduction**

A. God Sees Things Differently

B. Biblical Background

**II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture**

A. Treating the Less Fortunate with Dignity and Respect (Luke 16:19-21)


C. Too Late to Do It God’s Way (Luke 16:25-26)


**III. Concluding Reflection**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

A. God Sees Things Differently

In the parable of today’s lesson, Jesus teaches that when it comes to matters of wealth and poverty, God often does not see things the way we do. In fact, in this parable, Jesus describes a God of paradoxes and reversals who often acts in the exact opposite way we would be inclined to act toward the poor and marginalized. The rich man, who lacked for nothing in this life, ended up in a place of torment—and the poor beggar, who had nothing in this life, ended up in a state of eternal blessedness. In Hades, the abode of the dead, the plea of the rich man to have his thirst quenched by the poor beggar was denied. While on earth, he had plenty of opportunities to help poor Lazarus but chose not to do so. Whether you are on welfare or faring well, it matters in this life how you treat people. Moreover, those who are faring well have a responsibility to be a blessing to others who are yet trying to make it. God rewards those who remember the poor and the needy, but God also remembers those who have opportunity to help but choose not...
to do so. It matters what you do to others and for others in this life.

B. Biblical Background

This biblical story is usually called the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, but it is not called a parable in the New Testament. It does not have the central idea of comparison characteristic of parables, nor does it have the form of a parable—introduction, analogy, story, application. Its form is that of an example story for the purpose of illustration. It is not beyond reason that Jesus’ hearers were acquainted with such a case of a rich man and a beggar who died at the same time.

The purpose of the story is related directly to the Pharisees and their love of money. The story contrasts two men in their material status in this life and in their destiny beyond this life. The point is that when the true situation is known, it is the poor man who has God’s favor and the rich man who has God’s disfavor. Their relative poverty and wealth are not emphasized as the reason for God’s favor or disfavor; no reason is given. Nowhere in Scripture does Jesus say that wealth in itself is a guarantee of Hades, or that poverty is a guarantee of heaven. The story simply shows that the money lovers were wrong in thinking that wealth per se means God’s favor, and that the lack of wealth per se means God’s disfavor. It must be recalled, too, that Jesus used this as a stewardship story and not as a teaching on the nature of heaven and hell. Whatever elements of humankind’s ultimate destiny are present in the story are of secondary application. In other words, the main focus of this story is not to teach us about hell—rather, it is to teach us how to rightly use favor and blessings from God.

The story of the rich man and the beggar is a story that is exclusive to the book of Luke and is best understood as an example. The parable has two points: 1) verses 19-26 depict the reversal of fortunes of this life in the hereafter—in the matter of material possessions there is a counterbalancing of the earthly life with the afterlife; and 2) verses 27-31 insist that even the return of a messenger from the dead will not bring about reform among the obdurate rich.

In the first part of the parable (verses 19-26), Jesus clearly asserts the reversal of fortunes in the afterlife. The luxurious way of life of the rich man and his (implied) lack of concern for poor Lazarus at his door stand in obvious contrast with their destinies after death. When death came to both men, Lazarus ended up in a state of eternal bliss in the bosom of Abraham, while the rich man ended up in torment in Hades. The vivid details of the description need little comment. The rich man, having no need to work, was arrayed in royal purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously; the destitute Lazarus was, on the contrary, ulcerous and famished. After death, their fortunes were reversed, and then not even Lazarus could help the tormented rich man. Their fates were sealed.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Treating the Less Fortunate with Dignity and Respect

(Luke 16:19-21)

There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

The stage of Jesus’ parable is set by the
extravagant parallelisms between the two main characters. The social distance between the two is symbolized, first by the gate (verse 20) and then by the chasm (verse 26) between them. The rich man is depicted in excessive, even outrageous terms. However, poor Lazarus is shown to be one who had fallen prey to the ease with which persons without secure landholding might experience devastating downward mobility.

Clothing is mentioned first. Wool was used to produce vestments that advertised the social status of those who wore them. Clothing colored with purple dye was a striking luxury. Though white garments indicated membership among the elite, they were regarded as modest when compared with clothing dyed purple. White garments underneath a purple robe were considered the highest sign of opulence. In contrast with the wealthy man, the clothes Lazarus wore received no mention. Instead, we are told that he was covered with sores—a condition that undoubtedly marked him as unclean. The term used in his description suggests that Lazarus would even have been regarded as suffering from divine punishment (verse 20). The onlookers listening to Jesus would have thought to themselves that surely the wealthy man was blessed by God, while the beggar was living under a divine curse.

Food is mentioned second. Legends about King Agrippa II have it that, on a daily basis, he hosted a meal of banquet proportions; this is precisely the picture Jesus paints of this wealthy man in Luke 16. Lazarus longed to eat what was apparently scavenged by dogs from the food that fell from the wealthy man’s table. Although we are tempted to think of the dogs in very sentimental terms, the dogs mentioned in Luke 16 had not come to lick Lazarus’s wounds, but to abuse him further. In the story, this adds one more reason for the people of his day to regard him as less than human, unclean, and an outcast in every sense of the word.

Finally, mention is made of their respective places of abode. The wealthy man had a gate, signifying his possession of an estate or house compound appropriate to his station. A gate symbolizes protection and security from the riffraff of society. A gate speaks of grandeur and splendor. But poor Lazarus had no home—thus, he was merely thrown down or dropped at the wealthy man’s gate. The fact that he apparently could not walk on his own marked him as a cripple, a condition that would help to explain his tragic circumstances.

When the Pharisees heard Jesus recount this story you could almost see the contempt and disgust on their faces at the thought of one who had fallen so low in life. Surely, they thought to themselves, “God has abandoned this individual.” But Jesus, in the telling of this story, is clearly indicating to His listeners that God sees things differently; God does not see things the way we do. God will never abandon the poor and needy and, as followers of Christ, neither should we. It is our responsibility to come to their aid in any and every way possible. And we are to treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve.


And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have
mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.

Jesus’ comparison of these two characters in life continues in death. Both Romans and Jews valued proper burials. In Jewish tradition, to be refused burial was to be left exposed as food for scavenger animals (like dogs, verse 21). This was tantamount to bearing the curse of God. It is not by chance that Jesus observes that the rich man received a burial, but provides no such detail in the case of Lazarus. The former was honored even in death; the latter received the final disgrace. However, following death, the one whose only companions in life were scavenger dogs was transported by angels to Abraham. Reference to “the bosom of Abraham,” as previously stated, could refer to Lazarus’s position of intimacy and honor at the heavenly banquet—no insignificant thing in light of the hunger he experienced in this life. Certainly it refers to paradisal bliss and to the care and comfort previously unknown to him. Both Lazarus and the wealthy man had experienced death; but while Lazarus was in a blissful state, numbered with Abraham, the wealthy man experienced Hades as torment and agony.

Amazingly, the wealthy man does not appear to have been humbled by his new and undoubtedly startling circumstances. Instead, he assumed that Abraham was still his “father” and that Lazarus (verses 24-25), whom he knew by name but had never helped, was present with Abraham in order to carry out errands on behalf of a wealthy man. Those who legitimately refer to Abraham as “father,” however, are those whose lives reflect their repentance, their obedience to God’s redemptive aims, and their heartfelt concern for the poor and marginalized in society. The final irony resides in a wordplay easily recognized in the Greek text: the one who now requested mercy (eleos) (verse 24) at the hand of Lazarus seemed never to have contemplated the merciful act of almsgiving (eleemosyne) on behalf of Lazarus. The tables were indeed turned in this story, and they were turned by none other than Jesus Himself. We overlook the poor at our own peril, for a day of reckoning will surely come. God is determined to make things right for all people. We may not ever answer to the poor for the way in which we have treated some of them, but we will have to answer to God!

C. Too Late to Do It God’s Way
(Luke 16:25-26)

But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.

The wealthy man’s requests for mercy and aid were denied on two counts. First, he was denied mercy because he was the victim of his own choices. What we do or do not do in this world has consequences. Lazarus, who received no comfort, was now comforted; the wealthy man, having received his consolation in his luxurious living, would be consoled no more. Second, the gate that could have been opened in order to allow Lazarus the opportunity to be the recipient of the wealthy man’s hospitality had now been fixed shut in Hades. Consequently, in Abraham’s speech, Abraham and Lazarus were classified as “us,” sharply
distinguishing them from the rich man and those like him (“you all”) (verse 26).

This is the only parable of Jesus in which proper names occur: Lazarus and Abraham. It is important to note that the rich man was not condemned because he was rich. Close attention to verses 19-21 shows the reason for the rich man’s punishment. The rich man and Lazarus were introduced in a way that emphasizes the contrast between them. One lived a life of luxury, the other of misery. Lazarus’s misery is depicted through references to his sores (evidently ulcers or oozing sores, which attracted dogs) and his hunger.

As the gravity of the rich man’s ultimate plight dawned on him, he made three requests to father Abraham. He appealed for mercy, water, and a warning to the brothers he left behind—all three of which were denied. Here, the audience is shown the tragedy of a concern that appears too late. In all three cases, Abraham was addressed as “father,” for the speaker was a Jew, a member of Abraham’s family. Abraham recognized him as his “child” (verse 25), but could not grant his requests. First, the rich man asked Abraham to “have mercy on him,” even though he failed to show mercy on Lazarus by giving alms. The second request is minimal—send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water—but even this was not possible. In calling Lazarus by name, the rich man showed that he knew Lazarus from his former life. Apparently, he did recognize Lazarus sitting out by his gate, he simply did not recognize him enough to help him when he needed it the most.

There comes a time in every situation when it is too late to do it God’s way. For those who heard Jesus tell this story it was clearly too late for the rich man to act, but it was not too late for them or for us to do it God’s way when it comes to allowing our actions to be a blessing to others.


Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father’s house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

Abraham reminded the rich man that the present situation compensated for his former injustices to Lazarus, and declared that nothing could be done about the rich man’s situation now. Unable to help himself, the rich man tried to help his brothers, who evidently lived the same luxurious and callous life as he formerly did. Introducing the brothers at this point turned attention to people who could still repent and escape the place of torment. The parable is a warning to just such people. Abraham denied that a special messenger from the dead was needed, for “They have Moses and the prophets” (verse 29). Lazarus was not needed to deliver the message because Scripture had already done it and this parable was doing it again. The rich man pleaded, but Abraham was sure that those who do not heed Moses and the Prophets will not respond “even if someone rises from the dead” (verse 31).

The main point here is that the Jewish Scriptures contain a clear and sufficient call to help the poor. According to this parable, the fate of wealthy Jews depends on their response
to the call of Moses and the Prophets to help the poor.

The rich man ended up in Hades because Jesus is teaching all those within hearing distance that there comes a time in every situation when it is too late to do better, too late to do it God’s way, too late to make the change, too late to help those who are in need. For the rich man it was indeed too late, but for those who hear Jesus tell this parable, they still have time to act in keeping with the will of God for the poor and those who have been treated unjustly by a system that celebrates the well-to-do while at the same time marginalizing the poor and needy. The poor and downtrodden are loved by God, and those who bless the poor will receive God’s favor in this life and in the life to come.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

This parable emphasizes the dangers of wealth, but nowhere implies the unlawfulness of wealth. Jesus does not suggest that the rich man should have renounced his wealth, but that he ought not to have found in riches his highest good. He ought to have made his earthly possessions a means of obtaining something much higher and more abiding. Out of his vast resources he had an opportunity to make Lazarus and others his friends, and in so doing he could have secured for himself a place in God’s kingdom.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, open our eyes that we may see those around us who have been hurt and marginalized by circumstances beyond their control. Use us as agents of Your redemptive purposes on earth to bless them, love them, and care for them in ways that are pleasing to You. Keep us ever humble and grateful for the many blessings You have bestowed on us. Teach us the joy of giving and sharing. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(June 18-24, 2018)

Reaping God’s Justice

MONDAY, June 18: “The Folly of Riches” (Psalm 49:1-4, 16-20)
TUESDAY, June 19: “Oppressing the Poor Leads to Loss” (Proverbs 22:1-2, 7-9, 16)
WEDNESDAY, June 20: “Both Oppressors and the Righteous Receive Justice” (James 5:1-5)
FRIDAY, June 22: “Two Responses to the Light” (John 3:16-21)
SATURDAY, June 23: “Entry into the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 19:23-30)
PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

**ADULT/YOUTH**
**ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC:** To Forgive and Be Forgiven
**YOUTH TOPIC:** Is Your Heart in It?

**CHILDREN**
**GENERAL LESSON TITLE:** Forgiving like God Forgives
**CHILDREN’S TOPIC:** Forgive and Forget

**DEVOTIONAL READING**
Colossians 3:12-17

**ADULT/YOUTH**
**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 18:21-35
**PRINT PASSAGE:** Matthew 18:21-35
**KEY VERSE:** Matthew 18:33

**CHILDREN**
**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 18:21-35
**PRINT PASSAGE:** Matthew 18:21-35
**KEY VERSE:** Matthew 18:35

Matthew 18:21-35—KJV
21 Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?
22 Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.
23 Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.
24 And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents.
25 But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.
26 The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

Matthew 18:21-35—NIV
21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”
22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.
23 “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.
24 “As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.
25 “Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.
26 “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’
LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Contrast the type of answer Peter expected in his question about forgiveness with the type of answer that Jesus gave to him.
2. Aspire to forgive as Jesus said to forgive.
3. Exhibit a forgiving spirit that realizes how much God has forgiven them.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—God does not want us to keep a tally of how many times we forgive someone (verse 22), but to understand that mercy keeps no record of wrong.

—God’s justice includes God’s forgiveness.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People desire forgiveness even though they refuse to forgive. What are consequences of an unforgiving heart? The parable of the unforgiving servant teaches us to forgive as we have been forgiven.
—To be forgiven, we must forgive others.
—The point in verse 22 is that we should not be trying to count how many times to forgive. We should always forgive, because we have been forgiven.
—In the parable, the king represented God and the debt represented sin. God requires disciples to forgive.
—The debt owed by the slave to the king was so large as to be unpayable, no matter how much time he was given.
—While the debt owed the servant (100 denarii) was much less than the debt he owed (10,000 talents), it was not insignificant in its own right. It was equal to more than three months of a day laborer’s pay, and thus represented a small fortune in that day. Forgiveness, then, does not require that one dismiss the offense as insignificant or meaningless. It is an act of love prompted, at least in part, by gratitude for God’s ever-greater forgiveness.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
Matthew brought the discourse on community life and discipline (chapter 18) to a close with the parable of the unforgiving slave. Its point is to warn those who would be part of Jesus’ assembly (or church) to be ready and willing to forgive, which completes the discussion with Peter in verses 21-22. If one is not willing to forgive a brother or sister who is a fellow sinner, then why should those persons think that God, who is sinless, will be willing to forgive them?

PROFICIENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON
Peter: a fisherman by occupation and brother of Andrew, who brought him to Jesus.
Servant: A very common word with a variety of meanings, all implying a greater or lesser degree of inferiority and want of freedom.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Forgive (verse 21)—Greek: ἀφιέμι (ä-fē'-ä-mē): to let go, give up a debt, to remit.

Mercy (verse 33)—Greek: ἐλεός (e'-le-os): have “compassion,” (KJV) have pity.

Peter (verse 21)—Greek: Πέτρος (pe'-tros): one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. His name “Peter” means “a rock or stone.”

Pity (verse 27)—Greek: σπλαγχνίζομαι (splänkh-nē'-zo-mī): “compassion” (KJV); to be moved as to one’s bowels, hence to be moved with compassion (for the bowels were thought to be the seat of love and pity).

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction
   A. A Soldier’s Story
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of Scripture
   A. The Call for Complete Forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-22)
   B. The Ability to Pass Forgiveness Along (Matthew 18:23-27)
   C. Payback Is Fair Play (Matthew 18:28-30)
   D. True Forgiveness Comes from the Heart (Matthew 18:31-35)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION

A. A Soldier’s Story

Human nature is such that we often find it very hard to forgive others, while we desperately hope and pray that what we have done to others will be forgiven. Tony Campolo tells the story of an American soldier fighting for his country in Vietnam. A fierce battle took place one day and in order to protect a dear friend, this brave soldier voluntarily threw himself over a grenade. While he saved his friend’s life, the brave soldier lost his.

A few years later, the parents of the slain soldier were visiting in the hometown of the friend for whom he gave his life. They decided to pay a visit to the surviving soldier to reminisce with him about their departed son and their life together in the army. When they arrived, they found him living in squalor, surrounded by drug paraphernalia, and clearly not making any effort to do anything with the life their son had valiantly died trying to save. The parents were very disappointed that their son had given up so much for someone who cared so little about his own life. It appeared to them that their son’s life had been wasted on this individual and they found it very difficult to forgive the surviving soldier for caring so little about something that had cost them so much. They left in anger and never spoke to the soldier again. They carried their hatred of him in their hearts for many years, until the day they recounted their story to a minister in their hometown.

After hearing of the wasted life their son had died so valiantly trying to save, the minister reminded them of how much Jesus Christ had sacrificed for us all and how little we
deserved what God did for us in Jesus Christ. He then admonished them to make every effort to forgive the soldier whose life had been saved by their son. Forgiveness is so difficult for us to do sometimes until we remind ourselves of just how much God gave up to forgive us.

In like manner, in the lesson before us, Jesus warned His disciples that they must be willing to forgive others, even as God had forgiven them. Humans’ refusal to forgive cannot be excused considering the enormity of human sin that God has forgiven.

B. Biblical Background

In today’s lesson, Peter, the leader of the apostles, approached Jesus to ask a question. He spoke, it seems, not for himself alone and not even for the twelve apostles per se, but as a representative of all disciples. The topic of a Christian brother or sister forgiving another disciple of Jesus who has sinned against him or her applies generally to all who follow the Christ. Jesus’ answer, in fact, explicitly concludes with a second-person plural address, even as at the same time He individualizes the teaching: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless your forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matthew 18:35, NIV).

Although Jesus makes it clear that Peter’s understanding of the scope of forgiveness is inadequate, we should not fail to notice that by normal human standards, His offer to forgive a brother who sins against Him up to seven times is not a trivial one. Nevertheless, whatever normal standard was guiding Peter’s question was dwarfed and then swallowed up by Jesus’ response. Peter was willing to count to seven. Jesus declares that forgiveness eschews all moral arithmetic and the keeping of any record. Echoing and expanding on His earlier teaching about repaying evil with good (see Matthew 5:38-42), now Jesus was saying in effect that there can be no limit to the forgiveness given and received between those who are disciples.

Jesus here imparts a sweeping and divine revelation: be ever and always willing to forgive! The agonizing specifics remain to be worked out in the tug and pull of human existence, but we are to forgive. The Lord knew how impossible His teaching sounded and for that reason He offered the parable of the unforgiving servant.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. The Call for Complete Forgiveness

(Matthew 18:21-22)

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

Jesus’ call to care for offenders and offended alike provoked an immediate response from Peter, who wondered how many times someone may sin against him and yet be forgiven. Peter’s question focuses less on his own capacities to forgive than on those who disregard the offer and implications of forgiveness. Peter’s willingness to forgive “seven times” (verse 22) signifies that he was entertaining the prospect of full, complete forgiveness on his own part. But what about those who take advantage of or refuse the call to forgiveness?
Hearing Peter’s question in this way helps to clarify the function of the parable that came moments later.

Though Peter was being very gracious with the number of times he was willing to forgive someone, Jesus exploded his understanding of what might normally be expected for a follower of Christ willing to forgive many times over. He took Peter’s breath away by calling for no less than seventy times seven remissions, a number that is so great that keeping such a count would be almost impossible. Jesus’ meaning evidently is that we are to forgive all wrongs done to us, no matter how many there are.

Jesus envisions a quantum leap to boundless, over-the-top, absurd, unimaginable levels of forgiveness. Followers of Jesus must renounce the very human intention of getting even with someone who repeatedly injures them. They are called to be Lamech’s polar opposite.

The inaugurated kingdom of God does not trade in such terror or find “justice” in revenge, but stands in contrast to the bloody violence and retribution that stain human experience even to this day. Jesus’ answer also suggests that disciples should not anticipate an end to the sin or violence of the world around them, nor even the end of sin in the community of disciples. But to retaliate, to act in kind, is not permitted. Jesus’ call to enduring, relentless forgiveness made the disciples a new “generation,” the first since the generation of Cain to trust themselves wholly to the power of forgiveness—not only when it seems reasonable or possible, but even when it is unthinkable.

B. The Ability to Pass Forgiveness Along
(Matthew 18:23-27)

Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

The parable of a servant who fails to forgive a small debt after having been forgiven an impossible debt illustrates what happens when the fragile thread of forgiveness is broken. The slave who is the focus of this accounting was probably a highly placed “farmer” of taxes and tributes, for the sum he owed the king was astronomical, equivalent to what Rome extracted as tribute from all of Judea during a decade. When the servant was unable to pay, the king threatened to sell him and his family into the lowest form of slavery until the debt was repaid. Repayment was probably not the real goal, but rather the king’s assertion of power over those who were subservient to him, even at the highest levels. Thus, the king was satisfied when the servant fell prostrate before him (an action that elsewhere in the book of Matthew was directed only toward Jesus) and promised payment (verse 26).

Remarkably, the king not only released him but forgave his whole debt (verse 27). This is the first moment of crisis in the story, the shock no one was expecting. Forgiving the whole debt effectively released the servant from his legal and economic obligations to the king, making the servant a genuinely free man. But the king’s largesse might also be expected to engender a deeper, more heartfelt, perhaps even more onerous, sense of obligation on the part of the servant. What would the servant do with his
newfound, albeit ambiguous, freedom? The answer came immediately.

One would expect that the newly freed servant would respond to others with the same kind of generosity and sensitive thoughtfulness that had been shown to him, but often we too soon forget just how loving, gracious, kind, and forgiving others have been to us. We are required nonetheless to pass the spirit of forgiveness on to others. We should gladly and willingly forgive others in the same spirit in which we are constantly forgiven.

C. Payback Is Fair Play
(Matthew 18:28-30)

But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.

The freshly forgiven servant came upon one who owed him a much smaller sum—about one six-hundred-thousandth part of which the forgiven servant had owed the king—and demanded immediate payment. He acted as the king first had toward him, albeit with greater violence, for he seized his “fellow servant” (a social equal) by the throat (verse 28). Still more important, he turned a deaf ear to this fellow servant’s plea for time to repay and had him tossed into the prison he himself had narrowly avoided. The astounding forgiveness shown the first servant, which might have been expected to ripple down through the system, had instead short-circuited. The forgiven servant proved unable to pass on to others the gift he had been given, and instead reverted to the patterns of domination and violence from which he had escaped only moments earlier. True forgiveness is a most difficult thing for some to achieve. Yet, that is what Jesus calls us to do on a consistent basis. Jesus recognizes that when we engage in true forgiveness it frees us to live lives filled with love and compassion for others. Our inability to pass forgiveness along to others hinders us from coming into a deeper relationship with the ways of God in and for the world.

D. True Forgiveness Comes from the Heart
(Matthew 18:31-35)

So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

The consequences of the failure to forgive—and to “forgive from the heart”—are enormous. The servant’s refusal to practice toward another the kind of mercy the king exercised toward him placed him directly back in a world of punishment, vengeance, anger, and impossible debts (verse 34). He chose the measure by which he would be judged.

We cannot make the matter of forgiveness an occasional matter, or something we do only when it seems reasonable or expedient. The world’s alternatives to disciplined, unending forgiveness are always close at hand, always posing as the rational, necessary course of action. God’s grace and mercy may in fact be so
unsettling, may so deeply disrupt our lives and dislocate us from the patterns of relationship to which we are accustomed, that we flee in terror. We need not look far in our world to recognize that real forgiveness would fundamentally undermine the patterns of domination and exploitation, of terror and vengeance, of suffered injustice and “righteous” retribution that constitute our way of life. We more easily trust in violence and retributive justice to resolve our conflicts than we do in the offer of God’s forgiveness. What will God do with those of us who refuse to accept the reality of forgiveness in God’s kingdom?

In our appropriation of this vivid story, we must be careful to distinguish between parable and allegory. As in many rabbinc parables, the figure of the king serves allegorically as a reference to God, but this does not mean that all the details of the king’s behavior can be taken as statements about the nature of God. Thus, we need not take the concluding detail about unending physical torture as indicative of the divine nature (verse 34). Also to be avoided is the error of treating the concluding statement legalistically. We must not foolishly believe that we can earn God’s forgiveness by forgiving others. We forgive because God has forgiven us.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

 Forgiveness is the defining discipline of the community of disciples. Unlimited forgiveness bears continued witness to the distinctive nature of God’s reign and offers a true alternative, perhaps the only alternative, to the cycles of exploitation, violence, and revenge that plague our world. A church that dedicates itself to the practice of unlimited forgiveness is necessarily diverse, resilient, schooled in dealing with conflict, patient, and supportive. Limitless forgiveness cannot be sustained by individuals alone nor even by a collection of individuals, but requires the sustained attention of a disciplined community that will not gloss over conflicts and differences or settle for words rather than transformed relationships.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, create in us an attitude of forgiveness. Help us to be loving, kind, just, and, above all, forgiving in our day-to-day interactions with one another. Keep ever before us Your example of what it means to live in a spirit of forgiveness. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(June 25–July 1, 2018)

Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

MONDAY, June 25: “Joseph Forgives His Brothers” (Genesis 50:15-21)
TUESDAY, June 26: “Forgiveness and Healing of the Land” (2 Chronicles 7:12-16)
WEDNESDAY, June 27: “Forgiving and Consoling the Offender” (2 Corinthians 2:5-11)
THURSDAY, June 28: “Forgive Each Other’s Complaints” (Colossians 3:12-17)
FRIDAY, June 29: “Keep Forgiving Each Other” (Luke 17:1-4)
SATURDAY, June 30: “God’s Forgiveness Depends on Us” (Matthew 6:9-15)
SUNDAY, July 1: “Offer Mercy and Forgiveness Freely” (Matthew 18:21-35)
JESUS CRITICIZES UNJUST LEADERS

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: Hypocrites!
YOUTH TOPIC: Practice What You Teach!

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Jesus Criticizes Unjust Leaders
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Practice What You Preach

DEVOTIONAL READING
Luke 14:7-14

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 23
ADULT PRINT PASSAGE: Matthew 23:1-8, 23-26
YOUTH PRINT PASSAGE: Matthew 23:1-4, 23-26
KEY VERSES: Matthew 23:2-3

Matthew 23:1-8, 23-26—KJV
THEN SPAKE Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples,
2 Saying The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat:
3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.
4 For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.
5 But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments,
6 And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues,
7 And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.
8 But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.

Matthew 23:1-8, 23-26—NIV
THEN JESUS said to the crowds and to his disciples:
2 “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat.
3 “So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.
4 “They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.
5 “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long;
6 “they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues;
7 they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.
8 “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers.”
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Explain the difference between just and unjust actions.
2. Fear becoming like the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees.
3. Become just leaders.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: We encounter leaders who expect people to do one thing while they themselves do something else. Is there a fair response to such an expectation? Jesus challenged unjust leaders to change or experience destruction.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Explain the difference between just and unjust actions.
2. Fear becoming like the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees.
3. Become just leaders.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—Scribes were writing bureaucrats and scholars. Pharisees, an Israelite group that rigorously applied the Law to everyday living, were Jesus’ major opponents.
—To sit on Moses’ seat meant to succeed Moses as an authoritative leader.
—Phylacteries (verse 5) is translated “amulets,” which are leather boxes containing Scripture verses.
—A tenth of the produce was given to support the Temple and its priests.
—Being called “Rabbi” was a great honor for teachers.
—God desires leaders to reflect His heart and character.
—Jesus criticized the scribes and Pharisees for being so concerned about minor points of the Law (tithing herbs and straining gnats from liquids) that they overlook major, important things.
—The criticism in verses 25-26 was that the leaders were only concerned with external appearances, but they should be concerned about internal integrity.
—The criticism of the scribes and Pharisees...
in Matthew 23 is largely a repetition of denunciations uttered not long before at the table of a Pharisee, as recorded in Luke 11:37-54. (The Luke passage does not include the part about straining out a gnat but swallowing a camel, however.)

**Teachers of CHILDREN**
— This passage is part of a longer statement by Jesus that passed critical judgment on particular religious leaders of His day; it is not a criticism of all Jews or Judaism itself.
— In His “woe to you” statements (verses 13, 15, 16, 23), Jesus denounced empty, meaningless religious observances practiced by certain leaders whom He was challenging.
— Jesus was basically saying that some Jewish leaders, who were given responsibility for leading Israel into the messianic age, failed miserably in carrying out that challenge.
— Jesus was criticizing certain Jewish leaders whose actions and teaching contradicted the faith they received from the Law and the prophets.
— Some scholars believe that, in Jesus’ mind, the early leaders among His own followers were not completely exempt from these same criticisms.
— Jesus criticized religious leaders who taught what they did not practice while expecting others to obey their teachings.

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

Modern readers may find Jesus’ rhetoric in chapter 23 unduly harsh, but it is typical of prophetic diatribes among both Jews and Greeks of that day. Jesus’ scathing depiction of the scribes and Pharisees, who here represent the religious leaders of Jerusalem, is not meant necessarily as historical description but as a theological picture. It is meant, rather, as a warning to the disciples and crowds, whom Matthew identifies as the audience.

Consequently, chapter 23 must be interpreted with great caution, so that it may not be used in support of modern anti-Semitism. All too easily, its scathing denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees can be perceived as eternally damning all Jews and Judaism. That some Pharisees were pious frauds is admitted on all sides and they are roundly condemned in early rabbinic literature. But to suggest that Matthew 23 accurately describes all Jews is
manifestly unjust. The focus of Matthew 23 is on teachers of religion and their responsibility to rank-and-file members—then and now. Jesus engages in criticism of religious opponents who do not have the best interests of the people at heart. While some were Pharisees, many others were not, a point that we should not lose sight of.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**Pharisees:** a sect within Judaism that gave themselves to a strict interpretation of Jewish Law.

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

**Burdens (verse 4)**—Greek: *phortion* (for-tē'-on): “loads” (NIV); burdensome rites.

**Justice (verse 23, NIV)**—Greek: *krisis* (krē'-sēs): decision (subjectively or objectively, for or against) by extension, tribunal, implication.

**Phylacteries (verse 5)**—Greek: *phylaktērion* (fü-läk-tā'-rē-on): boxes containing Scripture verses, worn on the forehead or arm.

**Rabbi (verse 7)**—Greek: *rhabbi* (rhäb-bē’): “my great one,” “my honorable sir.”

**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

I. **Introduction**

A. Hypocrisy that Ultimately Harms the Body of Christ

Christianity is in decline in Western Europe and greatly falling out of favor among people in industrialized societies throughout the world, including the United States of America. Those who are walking away from Christianity voice two fundamental complaints that are causing them to lose interest in the faith. First, there is a desire on the part of many of the faithful for a deep-seated spirituality which many say they find lacking in traditional, institutional churches. Many books have been written by people attempting to explain the sense in which disillusioned churchgoers believe themselves to be religious while not necessarily being committed and/or dedicated to the work of the local church. This sense of disconnect between organized religion and a desire for a closer walk with God is especially palpable among the young millennials, ages 18-34.

B. Biblical Background

II. **Exposition and Application of the Scripture**

A. Do as I Say, Not as I Do (Matthew 23:1-3)

B. Don’t Require of Others What You Don’t Do Yourself (Matthew 23:4)

C. Our Practices Should Please God Rather than Human Beings (Matthew 23:5-7)

D. No Unnecessary Titles in the Kingdom of God (Matthew 23:8)

E. Majoring in Minor Things (Matthew 23:23-26)

III. **Concluding Reflection**
The second reason for the disconnect and loss of favor with respect to Christianity is a deep distrust of ecclesial (church) authority. Far too many people believe that our religious leaders are out of touch with the people to whom they are supposed to be ministering. Many see what our leaders do and how they act and they are put off by such behavior. The black church is awash in the pursuit of material things, and our consumer-oriented love for the things of this world seems at times to claim the attention of our religious leaders more so than the needs of their faithful following. The black church in America today is largely a middle-class church, with middle-class cultural values. The well-to-do, upper-middle-class blacks have in large part written the church off as irrelevant, and the working poor are made to feel that they simply cannot keep up with the monetary and social demands of many of our churches.

While no one is perfect, leadership has a responsibility to live and lead lives commensurate with the faith they proclaim. When this does not happen, people not only vote with their hands but they also vote with their feet and their pocketbooks. Many are choosing to walk away from black clerical leadership that seems to have lost its moral compass.

**B. Biblical Background**

In the lesson before us today, Jesus has repeatedly emphasized the importance of how we behave as the true expression of our beliefs and values. When our actions, both as individuals and as communities, are at odds with our espoused beliefs, our theology itself is called into question. What is the most important thing that distinguished the “scribes and Pharisees” from Jesus and the community of disciples? Not beliefs and confessions, but the integrity of profession and practice. “Faith without works is dead” (see James 2:14-26), and faith in conflict with one’s actions is a lie. What do we really believe? The answer is revealed in what we do.

In Matthew 23, Jesus lambasted the religious leaders of His day who were reflecting negatively on the beauty of the kingdom of God. This chapter is not pretty or nice. Jesus hurled a series of unrelenting, unsparing strikes against hypocrisy. Although we love to cheer Jesus on in His condemnation of the Pharisees, we miss the fact that while this passage takes aim at the first-century religious leaders, it also takes aim at our hearts, especially for those who are leaders in the church. On nearly every page of this gospel, Jesus critiques false religion and distorted spirituality—and the critique is not just for His first-century hearers, but for us as well!

**II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE**

**A. Do as I Say, Not as I Do**  
(Matthew 23:1-3)

THEN SPAKE Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, saying The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.

Here, as elsewhere, the book of Matthew juxtaposes mere talking with actual conduct. Matthew wrote, “The scribes and the Pharisees
sit in Moses’ seat” (verse 2). To what Moses’ seat refers is much debated. It could be figurative—that is, the scribes and Pharisees taught with the authority of Moses or had inherited the great lawgiver’s status. It may also refer to an actual chair or seat on which the scribes and rabbis sat when they taught in the schools and synagogues. About the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus told the crowd and His disciples, “Do whatever they teach you and follow it” (Matthew 23:3a, NRSV). But then Jesus cautioned His audience, “But do not do as they do” (verse 3b, NRSV). Unfortunately, the deeds of the scribes and Pharisees were not always consistent with the teachings of Moses.

Jesus wants to affirm the importance of preserving and teaching the tradition, while training His audience to be discriminating students. Israel needed interpreters of the tradition—Jesus Himself is one—in order for it to remain a living, life-breathing witness. But the current occupants of “Moses’ seat” did not conform their actions to the traditions they taught (verse 3). The scribes and Pharisees failed the test of consistency of word and deed. An unjust action, then and now, is requiring of others what you do not do yourself. Even children can readily recognize the hypocrisy in one who says “Do as I say, not as I do.” Our integrity and believability are at risk when those two statements are out of line. It is not enough to talk the talk; one must also strive each and every day to walk the walk of their witness both in private and in public.

Hypocrites do not walk the path. “They do not practice what they preach” (verse 3b, NIV). In particular, they do not follow Jesus’ way of discipleship. Instead, they live their lives to be seen by others. Their religion is always on display for the world to see. They want the best and brightest of everything. They are narcissistic lovers of God. Jesus’ way, however, is for those going down, not up; for the poor in spirit, not for the spiritual experts; for the unnoticed, rather than the applauded. It is not enough to say the right things about just and unjust actions toward other human beings—we must actually be found living them, and do these things not simply when our lives are on display before others.

B. Don’t Require of Others What You Don’t Do Yourself (Matthew 23:4)

For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.

Jesus charged that the Pharisees burdened others while failing to act themselves. As a group, the Pharisees encouraged people as a whole to live out their vocation as a priestly nation. In other words, they applied the priestly purity laws to the people as a whole. The alternative to the burden placed on the people’s shoulders by the Pharisees is Jesus’ own yoke (see Matthew 11:28-30), which is “easy” not because it is less stringent, but because it was oriented in another direction.

By saying but not doing, the Pharisees imposed rules on other people but gave them no help in coping with them. They made rules that were virtually impossible for ordinary people living ordinary lives to uphold. Unlike bearing the kind yoke and light burden of Jesus, those who followed the scribes and Pharisees found themselves toiling and heavily loaded, struggling under the weight of a hugely expanded
legal code which enslaves rather than liberates the one who follows it.

In our day, we, too, continue to tie up heavy loads and put them on the shoulders of others by insisting that people follow Jesus’ difficult way without offering any assistance or sacrificing any of our comforts to help them. For instance, we might take a strong stand for the sanctity of life, which we should, but then we ignore the single mother down the street struggling to raise her children alone. Or we stand for the biblical principle of man and wife in holy matrimony, but then overlook divorced families trying to piece their broken lives together again. This causes us not to act with justice because we are basically saying to these people, “You must struggle alone against all odds without any help from us. We’re simply going to tell you what the Bible says about your life, and not how we are supposed to help you.”

C. Our Practices Should Please God Rather than Human Beings
   (Matthew 23:5-7)

But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.

A second charge leveled against the Pharisees by Jesus was that their religious practices were designed to win the approval of other people rather than of God. These verses strongly recall Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18, where Jesus had already spoken of the preoccupation of “the hypocrites” with gaining human applause for piety rather than pleasing God. To the examples given there, He was now adding others which focus on clothing and on social status.

Phylacteries were the small leather boxes containing key texts from the Law which were (and are) worn on the forehead and arm in literal fulfillment of Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18. They were presumably intended to be a spiritual aid for the wearer, but they provided an opportunity for religious ostentation. The social opportunities for enjoying the adulation of the people were found in both secular life (dinners and marketplaces) and in worship. Those who wanted to put on a show also sought out preferential seating and the best couches at dinner. They also loved to be called “Rabbi.” By the second century, the title “rabbi” (“my great one”) was properly used of those who had been trained and formally recognized as scribes (like our “Reverend”), but this technical use probably came in after the time of Jesus. Even in Jesus’ day, it was likely an honorary title based on one’s reputation rather than official status.

D. No Unnecessary Titles in the Kingdom of God
   (Matthew 23:8)

But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.

Unlike the scribes who loved the human adulation and affirmation, Jesus calls on those who follow Him to avoid honorific titles. The concern for status, though taken for granted in secular society, ought not to characterize those who follow Jesus. The Pharisees wanted people to see their outward religious appearance, but Jesus argues that what really matters is what is in our hearts. If our hearts are not right, then all the religious trappings in the world would not make us just in the eyes of God. It not only matters what you wear, but also how you act and how you treat those...
around you. It matters not what titles you hold if you do not hold those you lead in love and respect. Our aim should not be focused on religious form or an outside show to an unfriendly world; rather, we should seek to please God through the purity of our actions and through the truthfulness of our love and concern for others.

The Pharisees wanted to be thought of as important and to be praised by the people for their religious achievements. But Jesus said that His disciples were to be self-effacing and humble, even to the point of declining titles such as “rabbi,” “father,” and “teacher,” and to be servants to other people instead. Jesus did not mean that there should never be teachers in the church, for the abilities to pastor and teach were some of the gifts given to the church by the risen Lord (see Ephesians 4:11). He only meant that His followers were not to seek such positions in order to be praised by other people. Wherever “leaders” are distinguished from “followers,” or “the powerful” from those “subordinate” to them, human power is likely to overshadow the power of God. There is but one teacher—Jesus Christ (verse 8).

The alternative to organization around status and hierarchy is a community of equality and solidarity where all are held in high esteem as brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. The church is thus a community of students, brothers and sisters, and servants of the Lord.

E. Majoring in Minor Things
(Matthew 23:23-26)

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.

In verse 23, Jesus criticized the scribes and Pharisees for focusing too much on meticulous concern for detail while leaving the essential principles of religion untouched. Tithing, like the swearing of an oath, is a matter covered by the Old Testament Law; it was the means by which the priesthood was maintained. Jesus had no objection to the practice as such. What He objects to is the unbalanced piety which puts great stock in these relatively insignificant rules, but misses the things that matter. Jesus says that the more important things of living by justice, mercy, and faithfulness should have been done without neglecting tithing and the giving of herbs.

The ancient hypocrites of Jesus’ day passionately emphasized minor points of the spiritual life while ignoring or minimizing the major points. In Jesus’ example, they tithed their mint, dill, and cumin, but then neglected “the more important matters of the law” (Matthew 23:23, NIV). As a result, says Jesus, they “strain out a gnat (the smallest unclean animal found in the Levitical dietary code) but swallow a camel (the largest unclean animal)” (Matthew 23:24, NIV). In other words, they practice diligence in minor matters (Notice that Jesus does not dispense with these minor matters.), while being slack about major matters like loving their neighbor, forgiving enemies, displaying mercy to sinful people, and calling on Jesus in their need. Jesus then accused the
religious leaders of cleaning the outside of the cup while its inside seethes with filth. For Jesus, two things sully and rot the inside of our hearts: greed (or economic injustice) and self-indulgence (or sexual immorality). Cleaning the inside of the cup, becoming Christ-like and holy, involves heeding the cry of the poor, feeding the hungry, fighting for fair housing, and championing the sanctity of an upright life before God and the world.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

The focus of this chapter is not so much on individual scribes and Pharisees as on the nature of the movement they represented. The “hypocrisy” alleged is not so much conscious insincerity as a distorted perspective which makes them think that they are doing the will of God when they are missing the main point. The attitude attacked in this chapter is a religion of externals, a matter of ever more detailed attention to rules and regulations while failing to discern God’s priorities. Many, perhaps most, scribes and Pharisees did indeed, as Josephus indicated, admirably fulfill their religious duties as they understood them. But Jesus’ charge is that that understanding was fundamentally flawed, and that the resultant religious zeal could do more harm than good. The failings here ascribed to scribal/Pharisaic religion have their parallels in most religious traditions when the form comes to matter more than the substance.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, please remove from us the hypocritical spirit of judgment and condemnation of others. Grant unto us hearts that are generous and forgiving of people when they fail. And please grant unto us a measure of grace for our own shortcomings. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(July 2-8, 2018)

Jesus Criticizes Unjust Leaders

MONDAY, July 2: “A Visual Reminder of the Commandments” (Numbers 15:37-41)
TUESDAY, July 3: “Jesus Fulfills the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 5:17-20)
WEDNESDAY, July 4: “Craving Attention while Cheating Widows” (Luke 20:45-47)
THURSDAY, July 5: “Doing Is More Important than Speaking” (Matthew 23:5-12)
FRIDAY, July 6: “Keeping People Away from the Kingdom” (Matthew 23:13-15)
SATURDAY, July 7: “Blind Guides Confuse Meaning of Oaths” (Matthew 23:16-22)
SUNDAY, July 8: “Jesus Critical of Scribes and Pharisees” (Matthew 23:1-4, 23-26)
THE WIDOW AND THE UNJUST JUDGE

**ADULT/YOUTH**
**ADULT TOPIC:** Persistence
**YOUTH TOPIC:** Don’t Lose Heart

**CHILDREN**
**GENERAL LESSON TITLE:** Keep Praying to God
**CHILDREN’S TOPIC:** Get What Is Fair

**DEVOTIONAL READING**
Psalm 145:13b-20

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Luke 18:1-8
**PRINT PASSAGE:** Luke 18:1-8
**KEY VERSE:** Luke 18:7a

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**Luke 18:1-8**—KJV

AND HE spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;
2 Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man:
3 And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary.
4 And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man;
5 Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.
6 And the Lord said, “Hear what the unjust judge saith. 7 And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? 8 I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?”

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**Luke 18:1-8**—NIV

THEN JESUS told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.
2 He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought.
3 “And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’
4 “For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think,
5 “yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’”
6 And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says.
7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?
8 “I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”
LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Examine the relationship between persistence and justice.
2. Value the need for faithful persistence today.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—Widows had to rely on family members to care for them after their husbands died. This widow had no family.
—The parable of the persistent widow appears only in the book of Luke.
—Judges in ancient Jewish life were charged with the responsibility of seeing that justice was done, particularly for widows, orphans, and foreigners.
—If fallible humans (like the judge) will respond to repeated requests, how much more certainly will God respond?
—There seems to be some level of irony if not contradiction in the parable, as it begins with the need to persevere in prayer and “not lose heart,” but concludes with assurance that God will grant justice “quickly.”
—That God will act “quickly” to bring justice (verse 8) is echoed in Romans 16:20: “The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet.” The word shortly in the book of Romans translates the same Greek word as “quickly” in the book of Luke.

—In connecting perseverance in prayer to the Son of Man’s finding faith on the earth when He comes, Jesus showed that God’s acting “quickly” to bring justice did not indicate that God’s people would not have to endure some measure of injustice.

Teachers of CHILDREN

—Jesus used parables to stimulate and deepen the listeners’ understanding.
—Jesus told this parable to His disciples as He traveled toward Jerusalem and His crucifixion.
—The Print Passage contains the first of two parables in Luke 18:1-14 that deal with prayer.
—The images of the judge and the widow symbolize ways that both the powerful and the vulnerable are victimized by their situations.
—The life of prayer often involves persistently asking, seeking, and knocking, followed by much waiting.
—Jesus said that God will not delay as the judge did in granting justice.
THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The parable of the judge and the widow serves as a transition between the discourse on the coming of the Son of Man, which precedes it, and the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, which follows it. The force of the parable heavily depends on the social status and religious duties involved in the roles of judges and widows. In ancient Israel, the duty of a judge was to maintain harmonious relations and adjudicate disputes between Israelites. Widows were deprived of the support of a husband, yet they could not inherit their husband’s estate. Judges were charged with the responsibility of hearing complaints fairly and impartially. The judge’s responsibility was to declare God’s just judgment and establish peace (shalom) among God’s people. Those who felt wronged by a judge often pleaded with God to intervene and vindicate them. Jesus’ practice of prayer and teachings on prayer form a recurring theme in the book of Luke. This parable, which is introduced as a parable on prayer, is found only in this gospel.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

Jesus’ parabolic teaching “about their need to pray always and not to lose heart” (verse 1, NRSV) stands as the climax to a longer section on faithfulness at the coming of the Son of Man (see Luke 17:20–18:8). Jesus’ teaching here is particularly oriented toward the necessity of tenacious, hopeful faith amid present ordeal. Jesus’ message has two foci, associated with the two primary characters of the parable of verses 2-5. On the one hand, based on an argument from lesser to greater, we hear in Jesus’ words an affirmation of the faithfulness of God: He will assuredly act with dispatch on behalf of the elect. On the other hand, we see in the widow’s action a model of perseverance amid wrongdoing. These two motifs—the certainty of God’s justice, and the call for resolute faithfulness in anticipation of that certainty—frame the teachings of Jesus in the beginning of this passage. Jesus addresses these concerns by first insisting that adversity is integral to the process by which God brings salvation, and, second, by assuring the disciples that, despite delay, divine vindication is imminent.

PROLIFIC CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

The widow: a woman whose husband had passed away, who in Old Testament times was considered to be under the special care of Jehovah. In New Testament times, Paul urged that they be cared for, especially if they were poor, without support, and old.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Adversary (verse 3)—Greek: antidikos (än-tē’-dē-kōs): an opponent.
Faint (verse 1, KJV)—Greek: ekkakeō (ek-kā-ke’-ō): to be wearied out, exhausted.
Pray (verse 1)—Greek: proseuchomai (pros-yū’-kho-mī): pray to God; supplicate.
Widow (verse 3)—Greek: chēra (khā’-rā): one lacking a husband (because of death).

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction
   A. The Promise of Persistence in the Face of Injustice
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. An Unjust Judge and a Just God (Luke 18:1-2)
I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Promise of Persistence in the Face of Injustice

We are familiar with strong women in our black communities who have demanded justice for themselves and for their families when confronted with tragedies and catastrophes in their lives. Mamie Till-Mobley, whose son Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi in 1955, refused to keep quiet about her son’s murder. When his body was sent home to Chicago with orders from a Mississippi sheriff not to open his coffin but to bury him in the sealed box, Mrs. Till-Mobley refused. She not only opened his coffin, but she also insisted on a very public funeral so that the entire world could see what the unjust acts of depraved men in Mississippi had done to her fifteen-year-old son. She continued to cry out for justice even when the men who were charged in her son’s murder were acquitted of all the charges in a show trial a short time later.

Many credit Mrs. Till-Mobley’s courage and outspokenness as the catalyst for the modern-day Civil Rights Movement. A few months after the murder of Mrs. Till-Mobley’s son, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Parks’s quiet dignity and courage eventually brought Martin Luther King Jr. and his insistence on justice into the national spotlight. Strong women insisting on justice had ignited the Civil Rights Movement and there was no turning back.

In recent years, we continue to hear the cries of strong women for justice. The mothers of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, and a long list of others continue to cry out for justice. These strong women refuse to remain silent until their pleas are heard and justice rolls down like water, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

B. Biblical Background

In today’s lesson, Jesus is teaching His disciples “to pray always and not to lose heart” (verse 1, NRSV). The widow presented here as an example is not only persistent, but also bold, even brash. She resembles the man who gets his neighbor out of bed because he needs three loaves of bread (see 11:5-8), but the fact that she is a woman makes her behavior more striking. The widow, having lost the protection and economic support of her husband, was likely to be poor and vulnerable to exploitation. Therefore, the Torah
insists that justice not be denied to a widow. This widow, however, was more than the stereotypical victim who needed help. She kept demanding justice even though the situation seemed grim.

The judge in the parable acted like so many who are in authority in our day. He did not care about the teachings of Scripture urging justice for the widow, for according to Jesus, “[he] neither feared God nor had respect for people” (verse 2, NRSV). Therefore, when the widow asked for justice, her case at first looked hopeless. But even an unjust judge could not hold out against this widow. The judge changed his mind when he realized what a bother this widow would be. He confessed that the woman would likely wear him out if he continued to ignore her pleas.

**II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE**

**A. An Unjust Judge and a Just God**

*(Luke 18:1-2)*

AND HE spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint; Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man.

The parable of the widow and the unjust judge is brilliantly placed immediately after the discourse in which Jesus made clear that the kingdom He proclaims had not yet reached its fulfillment (see Luke 17:22). Therefore, there would inevitably be times when the disciples would long to see the victorious days of the Son of Man but would not see them. Thus, we have this parable that is told with the point that it is necessary to pray constantly without giving up. The readers can all too easily see themselves as the widow, subject to oppression and delayed retribution, and by losing hope and courage become those who have faith for a time, but in a season of testing fall away. The parable makes its point so forcefully that little comment is required. A judge who had no respect for the people was confronted by a widow in need who absolutely refused to go away empty-handed. Contemporary readers can easily imagine an enraged bag lady hitting the negligent judge over the head literally and giving him a black eye to get his attention. It could well mean that we are meant to laugh when we hear this parable, but the serious point is that we are to remain prayerful, vigilant, and determined, even to the point of getting into someone’s face when confronted with injustice and insensitivity toward basic human needs. We are not to lose heart even when it seems that all hope is gone and no good will come from our present situation.

Luke indicated that Jesus’ purpose in this parable was to encourage His disciples. In His earlier predictions of the difficult experiences they would face in the future, He had given them cause for discouragement. It must be recalled also that from His first prediction of His death (see Luke 9:22-24), the Twelve had lived under a cloud of gloom and perplexity. They were nearing Jerusalem where death awaited Him. He gave them this parable so that they might see the importance of prayer and faith in opposition to losing heart in prolonged difficulty.

Just as the introduction to this parable is unusually explicit, the moral of the story is made even more explicit by Jesus Himself:
God’s patience is greater, and God’s response to prayer is faster for His elect. The major emphasis is on the unjust judge who did not want to respond to a needy petition in contrast to the just God who eagerly responds to petitions. The point of the parable is missed when the wickedness of this judge is reduced in any way, for the force of the parable lies in the contrast between the judge and the just and righteous God. Our pleas for justice are never lost on God, and the promise of Scripture is that He will hear and heed our prayers. Our challenge is not to grow weary in well-doing but to hold fast to our pursuit of justice with a dogged determination. The race is not given to the swift nor the battle to the strong, but to the one who holds out until the end.

B. A Widow Who Held Fast to Her Faith
(Luke 18:3)

And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary.

The widow in this parable was a citizen of the judge’s town and thus he was responsible for her welfare. She kept coming to him because she recognized him as the one who was the right one to deal with her case. Although her adversary is not identified and the nature of the grievance is not described, one safely assumes that it was some form of oppression in which someone was taking advantage of her defenseless widowhood.

As a widow, she had no standing in the community. Since the ancient court system belonged to the world of men, the fact that this woman found herself before the magistrate indicates that she had no kinsman to bring her case to court; the fact that she must do so continuously suggests that she lacked the economic resources to offer the appropriate bribe necessary for a swift settlement. In the Scriptures of Israel, widowhood symbolized the ultimate state of vulnerability, status deprivation, and need; as the object of God’s concern, they were also to be cared for within the community of God’s people. Despite this, the scene that Jesus painted develops the well-known view of the widow who struggled with a corrupt judicial system for her rights. Indeed, it is probably not too much to say that so much attention is paid to the divine concern for widows precisely because this concern was so little evident among God’s people.

More central to the parable is the astounding behavior of the widow. Perhaps it is expected that, having no man to plead her case, she would attend court on her own behalf. Having been slighted by the judge, however, her role should have been that of the helpless, hopeless victim. This woman assumed unusual responsibility for her own well-being. She adopted a self-presentation of shocking initiative and thus continually returned to the magistrate in her quest for justice. This woman expressed an unavoidable truth about the nature of prayer: that prayer is a continual and persistent hurling of our petitions against long periods of silence. The life of prayer is asking, seeking, knocking, waiting, but never giving up.

C. Wearing Out the Judge for Justice
(Luke 18:4-6)

And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith.

Presumably no more than a local magistrate,
this judge was nonetheless a male of notable status in his community. Within the world of Luke, neither fearing God nor having regard for persons signified one’s thorough wickedness.

After continuous refusal to decide in the case, the judge finally decided to settle the woman’s grievance. His thought process may be paraphrased as follows: “I will not do it because I have fear for God or concern for humankind—I have neither—but I will do it to get rid of her continuous nagging” (verses 4-5). Literally, he said, because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming. By contrasting God with the unjust judge, Jesus reinforced the point of the parable: if a widow woman can get an unjust judge to do what he does not want to do, then we should be all the more encouraged that in due time we will receive what we pray for from a God who delights to give that for which we ask. The central teaching here is not that humans can, by repeated prayer, break down the will of God. It is rather that humans can be encouraged in prayer by the realization that they pray to a just God who desires to give and to do that which His children need.

Interestingly, the judge’s self-assessment is identical to Jesus’ characterization of him: the action the judge proposed on behalf of this widow was not motivated by his commitment to God’s priorities or his concern for his standing in the community. This judge was motivated by the woman’s astonishing behavior. She was acting so out of character that, he mused, she may even be capable of assaulting him with more than words (verse 5). In this instance, Jesus’ followers may hear in the judge’s words astonishment at the behavior of the woman.

Directed by Jesus to see her behavior in this light, they may learn from her the import of engaging in the quest for justice—even when that quest requires that one act outside the script provided by an unjust world.


And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?

Jesus’ final commentary on this parable is closely tied to the understanding of a God who eventually grants justice. First, Jesus adopts an argument from lesser to greater: If an unjust judge will finally grant justice, how much more will God! Second, the text introduces a straightforward analogy between the widow of the parable and God’s “chosen ones who cry to him day and night” (verse 7, NRSV).

“Will not God vindicate His elect who cry out for relief?” Jesus asks. The emphatic construction of the question anticipates a strong affirmative answer: “Yes, He most certainly will.” He will see that justice is done and that their troubles will not be without His understanding presence and help. Elect literally means “chosen ones.” In the Gospels and the epistles of Paul and Peter, it is a synonym for “believers” or “Christians.” God will hear their cry in their distress and will help them.

Verse 8 gives Jesus’ answer to His own question: He will vindicate them speedily. God will do the just thing, the right thing, by His people in due time and without delay. Because He is a just God, He will do the right thing without being begged. In their oft-repeated mantra, our foreparents expressed
their confidence that God would eventually show up: “He may not come when you want Him, but He will be right on time!”

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

God and the unjust judge are analogous because they are both able to grant a request. Although the Gospels want to affirm that God does care, many cries for justice find no immediate answer. Thus, all too often, in the present experience of all too many blacks in America, God appears to be like the unjust judge. This passage allows us to lament long delays in justice, while denying that unheeded cries are the ultimate truth about God. Humans may temporarily thwart and usurp the purposes of God, but the promise of the Scriptures is that God will win! God will hear our cries. This parable supports faith by arguing that even an unjust judge will yield to the persistent and courageous seekers of justice. If this is true of an unjust judge, then how much more true is it of the God who promises and cannot lie? Moreover, this God is still on the throne! Though the injustices of this world often cause our hearts to bleed, one day God will wipe away all tears from our eyes. In the meantime, we continue to cry out for justice, to demand that all people be allowed to live in the truth that we all belong to God and are equal in His sight.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, help us not to lose heart in times of struggle and despair, but to look unto You for our help and strength in the firm belief that You will indeed ultimately hear our prayers for justice in this world. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(July 9-15, 2018)

The Widow and the Unjust Judge


TUESDAY, July 10: “I Always Remember You in Prayer” (Romans 1:7-15)

WEDNESDAY, July 11: “Unceasing Prayer, Essential in Church Ministries” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-18)

THURSDAY, July 12: “God’s Justice for the Widow” (Deuteronomy 10:17-21)

FRIDAY, July 13: “Take Care of Widows Now” (Acts 6:1-6)

SATURDAY, July 14: “The Lord Watches His People” (Psalm 33:18-22)

22 And he went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem.
23 Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said unto them,
24 Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.
25 When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are:
26 Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets.
27 But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity.
28 There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob,

22 Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.
23 Someone asked him, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” He said to them,
24 “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.
25 “Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’ But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’
26 “Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’
27 “But he will reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!’
28 “There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the
and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out.

29 And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God.

30 And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People desire to be rewarded for what they consider to be acceptable behavior. What kind of behavior is acceptable? Jesus taught that we must bear good fruit and come to Him through a narrow way.

LES S O N O B J E C T I V E S

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Identify the sense and reference of the narrow door.
2. Appreciate the difference between human and divine expectations regarding eternal reward.
3. Seek to enter through the narrow door.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—The narrow door is the door that leads into the kingdom of heaven.
—Believers who obey God’s commands and strive to live holy lives will enter the kingdom of heaven (Luke 13:24).
—Even though Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem, where He would suffer, He continued to teach.
—The kingdom of God is open to people from every part of the world (Luke 13:29).
—The narrow door might represent faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection, or it might represent Jesus Himself (see John 10:7-10; 14:6).
—The question about whether only a few would be saved (verse 23) can be traced back to Jesus’ own teaching about the narrow gate in Matthew 7:14: “The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”
—The message of verse 30 appears also in Matthew 19:30; 20:16; and Mark 10:31. In Matthew 19 and Mark 10, it appears at the end of Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man, an event Luke also recorded—but Luke did not add this expression to that account.
—This is the only time in Luke’s gospel where “weeping and gnashing of teeth” appears, but the book of Matthew has six occasions in which Jesus used this expression (8:11-12; 13:42; 13:50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). The first in Matthew’s gospel is much like the occasion here, with mention of people “from east and west” eating with “Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,” and “the heirs of the kingdom” (“you” in the book of Luke) being “thrown out.”
Teachers of CHILDREN
—On His way to Jerusalem, Jesus taught in various small towns and villages, so His audience included primarily rural people rather than urban people.
—On this journey and as He taught about God’s kingdom, Jesus was preparing the disciples for what would happen in Jerusalem.
—The point of Jesus’ teaching here is that it takes discipline to enter God’s kingdom because there are strict requirements.

—Jesus was also saying that the invitation is open but the way into the kingdom is narrow and demands some discipline.
—In addition, Jesus was saying that the door of opportunity will not always remain open (verses 25-27) and will not be reopened once it is closed.
—This passage causes the reader to ask himself or herself questions like, Where do I stand in relation to the reign of God? Can I measure up?

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
This is the first explicit notion of the journey to Jerusalem since it was announced in Luke 9:51-62. It is devoid of topographical detail, with the consequence that we are reminded that Luke’s interest in the journey is less about a travel itinerary and more about the motif of theological journeying and the identification of Jesus’ destination (or appropriate end). As Jesus journeyed a question was raised: “Are only a few people being saved?” Jesus’ answer is quite intelligible when read against the horizons of the banquet scene in Isaiah 25:6-9, whose images and vocabulary are mirrored in this Lukan scene. Isaiah had described the end time as a lavish banquet, a feast fit for royalty, yet prepared for all peoples. Over time those who would participate in this great feast would be narrowed to exclude not only Gentiles but blemished Jews also. Thus, the question “Are only a few people being saved?” may well be understood to refer to who among the faithful Jewish remnant would be saved.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON
The opening verse reminds the Lukan audience that Jesus was using His journey to Jerusalem as an opportunity to teach in as many towns and villages as possible (verse 1). Jesus’ response to a question becomes the occasion for another prophetic warning to the crowd, supporting what was said in Luke 11:29-32 and 12:54–13:9. Jesus’ initial answer of many not being able to enter the narrow door seems to affirm the truth that few are being saved. The emphasis lies, however, on the urgent message to make every effort to be among those who enter the door (verse 24).

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON
Workers of iniquity/Evildoers: those who will not enter into eternal life.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON
Evildoers (verse 27)—Greek: ergatēs (er-gä’-tās): false teachers; workers of unrighteousness; “workers of iniquity” (KJV).
Narrow (verse 24, NIV)—Greek: stenos (ste-no’s): the closely defined path God ordains to travel on to gain His approval (used three times in the New Testament).
Saved (verse 23)—Greek: sōzō (sō’-zō): delivered from the penalties of the Messianic judgment.
TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction
   A. A Way that Seems Right
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. A Life-altering Question (Luke 13:22-24)
   B. Closed Doors that No Person Can Open (Luke 13:25-27)
   D. A New Understanding of First and Last (Luke 13:30)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION

A. A Way that Seems Right

   Many American Christians live with a sense of entitlement and privilege. This is true even among people of color. When one considers the economic superiority of America, it is difficult not to go through life thinking that somehow or another we deserve the good things that befall us in life. Soon we come to believe that we are indeed exceptional in some broad understanding of the word.

   The prosperity gospel has certainly had a hand in fostering this idea of exceptionalism and the heightened focus on God’s material blessings. All too many Christians find their worth in the things of this world—a luxury car, fancy clothes, and a large home in the right neighborhoods. We make every effort to join the right social clubs and to be seen at their functions so that others will know that we, too, have arrived. We pass this competitive spirit on to our children when we insist that they participate in after-school activities and that they enroll in extracurricular activities that will cause them to be noticed by the right colleges and thus get a leg up on their college admission possibilities. There is nothing inherently wrong with the pursuit of such activities, except when people come to believe that these accomplishments are true signs of the things that truly matter to God. Even Christians can fall victim to majoring in the minor things of life.

   In the midst of these worldly pursuits, we find a steep decline in matters of faith and religion in America. A growing number of Americans identify themselves in the category of the “nones,” meaning they do not identify with any established religious group.

B. Biblical Background

   Our lesson this week seems to indicate that just when you think you have arrived through all the right doors in all the right places, there is a narrow door that we could find ourselves not being able to find. That door is the way that leads to a right relationship with God and it can only be entered when one accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. All of
our accomplishments can only be viewed in a dim light if we miss the narrow door that truly leads to life. Our worldly gains, material success, and creature comforts that we pile up in this life are no guarantee that we have entered into a right relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jesus urges us to enter that narrow door while we still have time (verse 24). Jesus had set His face toward Jerusalem in chapter 9, fixing His gaze on the work He was chosen to do for sinners. In chapter 13, He was still on His way, journeying toward Jerusalem, going up to Calvary and the Cross. The closer Jesus came to His own destiny, the more frequently He spoke about the destiny of all humanity. He told people to know the times, to get ready for His coming, and to repent before they perished. In the course of this teaching ministry, someone asked Him how many people would be saved: “Lord, are there few that be saved?” (verse 23).

Most Jews thought that only a few people would be saved, because they believed that Gentiles were outside the kingdom of God. The question the man asked is important for us as well. It is important because it has to do with the plan of salvation, with God’s intention for lost humanity. Unlike some of the Jews of Jesus’ day, we believe that Jesus Christ came to save all and that salvation is open and free to all who believe on His name. But we must make a conscious effort to receive it; it will not be forced on an unwilling heart.

Jesus admonishes His followers to enter by the narrow door, and He warns them that in the end, there will be many surprising reversals as to who has standing with God and who does not. Many who think they will enter will not, and others (who are presumed to be excluded from God’s fellowship) will take their place. Strive, therefore, says Jesus, as one who dares not to presume on God’s grace. Strive as though admission into the kingdom depended entirely on your own doing, but know that ultimately it depends on God.

This of course does not mean that we can ever be saved by our own efforts. The Bible is clear that salvation is by grace, not works, so that God will receive all of the glory. But until we have entered salvation—until we have received the assurance of eternal life thorough faith in Jesus Christ—we need to keep striving to understand the Gospel. Have you found the narrow way and walked through the narrow door? If not, then keep reading the Bible; keep listening to the Gospel; keep praying for the help of God’s Spirit—and Jesus will show you the way.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. A Life-altering Question

And he went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem. Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said unto them, Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.

An unidentified interlocutor raises the question (“Lord, will only a few be saved?” [NIV]) to which verses 24-30 form an answer. In general use, the word Lord was a term of respect approximating “Sir.” That use would...
indicate only some person in the crowd. In subsequent use by Jesus’ followers it was a title of worship. Its use as a title of worship is characteristic of Luke. If it was used as a term of worship, then the questioner was most likely one of the Twelve. While the question of the relative number of the saved and the unsaved might occupy the mind of any person of religious inclination, it was more naturally a question asked by people interested in speculative argument on a religious theme—thus a scribe or a lawyer of the Pharisees. Jesus’ answer indicates that most likely the questioner was one of that group.

Will those who are saved be few (verse 23)? The Jews considered themselves as the people of God—the saved—and all the rest of the world’s people as the unsaved. However, even within Israel, there were those who made no effort to conform to the regulations and practices in the religion of God. If that was the case, then the questioner could have been saying to Jesus, isn’t it true that only a few truly devout Jews will be saved? On the other hand, the questioner might have been attempting to challenge Jesus’ insistent position that God’s mercy was for all people—even Gentiles and Samaritans—and not just the Jews. If his question was meant as a challenge to the teachings of Jesus, then his question could well have been intended to stimulate debate on an explosive issue among devout Jews.

Jesus’ answer may not seem satisfying. He did not take the bait! Asked concerning how few are being saved, He remarked instead on how many will not be saved. More centrally, He turned a potentially speculative dialogue on salvation into a pointed, present-day challenge about living in the here and now. Strive now, He said, for seeking to enter in the future is futile. This places the emphasis on “striving” in the present, using the athletic metaphor of “struggle,” employed in Greek-influenced Judaism with respect to the practice of virtue and obedience unto the law of God.

B. Closed Doors that No Person Can Open (Luke 13:25-27)

When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are: Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets. But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity.

Verse 25 indicates why many will not be able to enter. They will realize too late that they want to join the banquet, and they will find the door already shut. Then they will appeal to their past association with the host (who in verse 26 is clearly Jesus). He taught in their towns, and they had significant fellowship with Him. This was an attempt to establish themselves as friends who deserved to be invited to the banquet. As previous warnings have made clear, it is not enough to listen to Jesus’ teaching and invite Him to dinner. People must recognize the special demands of the time and respond with the fruits of repentance.

But the Master will reject their appeal, repeating His initial statement: “I do not know where you come from.” This statement does not mean that the Master knows nothing about these people. It is a repudiation of the claimed relationship and the obligations of friendship that go with it. In other words, “I do not know where you come from, but I know what you are
like; you are workers of iniquity.” If they had not been workers of iniquity, then they would have accepted the invitation while the door was open. The expression workers of iniquity (verse 27) has definite religious meaning. The noun workers characteristically refers to those “doing the works of the law,” following carefully the demands of the law as a way of being right with God. Iniquity means more precisely “unrighteousness.”


There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out. And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God.

The important gathering behind the door becomes the banquet in the kingdom of God. The prophets will be there along with the ancestors of Israel, for the banquet is for faithful Israel, and the kingdom fulfills promises made long ago. That great fellowship at the end of the age will include Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets. Sharing it, too, will be the non-Jews who have accepted the invitation; people will come from east and west, and from north and south (verse 29). This refers to humankind beyond the nation of Israel.

But many of those listening to Jesus may be thrown out. The people who come from all directions fulfill scriptural promises of the regathering of scattered Israel in the time of salvation. Perhaps the people in Luke 13:29 are both restored Israel and the Gentiles who will accompany Jews into the kingdom of God. The present concern, however, is that many who met Jesus personally will not be part of this group. They are the “first” who will end up last. The final verse of this section fits with earlier indications of radical reversal of status.

Those who will sit at the table in the kingdom of God is a symbolic reference to the glorious fellowship to which Jews looked in the messianic feast of the age of the Messiah. Those who had refused the open-door invitation would find the door closed to them. Their great distress at their loss is pictured in their weeping and grinding their teeth as they see others enjoy the fellowship. What is instructive for our faith is clear: there will come a day when it will be too late to enter into a life that is ultimately pleasing to God. The opportunity to find that life is in this present moment. We should act without delay.

D. A New Understanding of First and Last (Luke 13:30)

And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.

“Some are last who will be first” (verse 30, NRSV). This probably refers to Gentiles or Samaritans who, in the opinion of the Jews, would be at the bottom of any listing by rank. Those despised people, according to Jesus, would in some cases outrank Jews. “Some are first who will be last” (NRSV) probably refers to some Jews who in the final state would prove to be of lower rank than some of the despised Gentiles.

The two parts of the conclusion should not be understood as suggesting some order of rank in the consummation of God’s kingdom or in heaven. They are means of pointing out how humanity’s views are often erroneous in
the matter of what constitutes right standing with God. Jesus’ total answer to His questioner about how many would be saved included three ideas: (1) there will be some in heaven whom the Jews did not expect to be there—the Gentiles (verse 29); (2) there will not be some in heaven whom the Jews expected to be there—some of the Jews (verses 26-27); and (3) every person should strive to be one of those who will be there (verse 24).

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

The question put to Jesus is this: “Will only a few be saved?” (NRSV). Jesus answered by saying that the invitation is open, but the way into the kingdom is narrow and demands more than casual interest. And, in fact, the door of opportunity will not remain forever open. God’s purpose moves toward the eschaton (the end time), and when the door is closed, it is closed. The door will certainly not be reopened for persons whose only claim is that Jesus once visited their town or preached in their streets or that they once saw Jesus in a crowd or knew members of His family. Added to the pain of sitting before a closed door will be the sight of large numbers who are admitted, not only the expected ones among Israel’s ancient faithful but also the unexpected Gentiles who heard and believed.

This summary provides Luke’s readers and us an opportunity to assess where we stand in relation to the reign of God. The presence of the kingdom nullifies conventional concerns for honor and introduces alternative canons for measuring status. Performance—understood as repentance, as hearing and doing the Word—is the means by which one is counted among those who are being saved.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, increase our understanding of how to enter through the door that truly ushers us into Your presence and into the life that is to be lived as Your people. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS (July 16-22, 2018)

Entering God’s Kingdom

MONDAY, July 16: “Enter by the Narrow Gate” (Matthew 7:13-14)
TUESDAY, July 17: “Jesus, Gate of Salvation” (John 10:1-10)
WEDNESDAY, July 18: “Stay Connected to Jesus” (John 15:1-11)
THURSDAY, July 19: “By Their Fruits You Will Know” (Matthew 7:15-23)
FRIDAY, July 20: “Hear and Act on the Word” (Matthew 7:24-29)
SATURDAY, July 21: “Abundant Life Today and Eternally” (Mark 10:28-31)
SUNDAY, July 22: “Strive to Enter God’s Kingdom” (Luke 13:22-30)
PARABLE OF THE GREAT DINNER

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT TOPIC: Join the Party
YOUTH TOPIC: You’re Invited!

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: An Invite to God’s Kingdom
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Come One! Come All!

DEVOTIONAL READING
Luke 14:25-33

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Luke 14:15-24
PRINT PASSAGE: Luke 14:15-24
ADULT KEY VERSE: Luke 14:21
YOUTH KEY VERSE: Luke 14:23

CHILDREN
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Luke 14:15-24
PRINT PASSAGE: Luke 14:15-24
KEY VERSE: Luke 14:21b

Luke 14:15-24—KJV
15 And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.
16 Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many:
17 And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready.
18 And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused.
19 And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused.
20 And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.
21 So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind.

Luke 14:15-24—NIV
15 When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”
16 Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests.
17 “At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’
18 “But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’
19 “Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’
20 “Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’
21 “The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’
22 And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room.
23 And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.
24 For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper.

22 “‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’
23 “Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.
24 “I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Some people eagerly accept invitations to important events, while others feel that they have better things to do. What are the consequences of rejecting such invitations? Jesus declared that those who reject His invitation will not be allowed into His kingdom.

LESSON OBJECTIVES
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Evaluate the excuses people gave for not responding appropriately to the invitation to the banquet.
2. Fear being like one of the invitees who gave excuses.
3. Share with others Jesus’ invitation to the great banquet.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED
Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—This parable repeats and enlarges the concept of hospitality introduced in verses 12-14.
—The parable assumes the social custom of an invitation in advance and an invitation at the time of the meal to those who had accepted the first one.
—The economic pressures felt by the first two guests and the recent wedding of a third were excuses honored in most societies.
—Instead of inviting persons from the same social circle to replace the original guests, the host turned to the streets of the city, bringing in the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and then the transients on public roads.
—In the Old Testament, the prophets gave the first invitation, then Jesus called those invited, but they refused. The second invitation was then given to the unacceptable in Israel and to Gentiles.
—The reference to eating bread in the kingdom of God (verse 15) was a reference to the great messianic banquet at the end of the age (see Isaiah 25:6).
—Having been rejected by his social peers, the host reached out to a lower social group (poor people, the crippled, etc.), thereby telling his peers that their approval no longer mattered to him. The lower social class was being exalted, while the higher social class was being lowered.
—The Pharisees had placed many restrictions on who could enter God’s kingdom. Jesus used the parable to describe God’s kingdom, which is not exclusive. God’s grace extends to everyone.
—Jesus’ parable expressed that outcasts are given a special invitation to the banquet. This is in line
with a major theme in Luke’s gospel of concern for those who are often overlooked.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**
—This passage is part of a series of episodes in Luke 14 that take place at the dinner table.
—Table fellowship and the sharing of a meal were important times among Jesus’ followers and in the early church.
—The social custom of the day was to give two invitations to a dinner, one in advance and a second one at the time of the meal to those who had accepted the first invitation.

—Jesus’ listeners would not have been shocked by the host’s decision to invite others to fill the seats of those unable to attend the dinner.
—The surprise in the story comes when the host invited to his dinner those outside his social circle: the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind—and then later travellers from the public roads.
—The point of the parable is that all are invited into God’s kingdom; sometimes “insiders” will reject the invitation, and “outsiders” will always be welcomed.

**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**
At this point in the Lukan travel account, Jesus’ dinner-table talk moved on from topics of guest places at dinner (Luke 14:7-11) and the proper guests to invite (Luke 14:12-14) to that of the acceptance of invitations to a festive meal (Luke 14:15-24). The setting for this new topic is still the same: Jesus was reclining at a table on a Sabbath in the house of the prominent Pharisee of Luke 14:1. One of the guests who had been listening to His counsel about not maneuvering for the best positions and about inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind showed some comprehension of what Jesus had said about those who will enter the kingdom: “Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom” (verse 15). The fellow guest’s remark became the cue for Jesus to add this parable of the great dinner to His table talk. Thus, the climax of this group of topically arranged sayings of Jesus having to do with dining was now reached.

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**
A man gave a banquet and invited many. The parable assumes the social custom of an invitation in advance and a second invitation at the time of the meal to those who had accepted the first. However, between the first and the second invitation the circumstances of the guests had changed. The economic pressures felt by the first two—the purchase of land and five yols of oxen—and the recent wedding of a third were excuses honored in some societies of that era, but the wealthy man dismissed them out of hand. There is no reason any of the listeners would have been shocked by Jesus’ story up to the point of inviting persons to replace the original guests. But, like many parables, this one has a jolt in an unexpected turn: rather than inviting others from the same social circle as the original guests, the host turned to the streets of the city—bringing in the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind—and then to transients on public roads.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**
*The Giver of the Banquet:* an analogy to God the Father.
*The Poor (ptokos):* denotes the godly poor, the suffering righteous; persons who were bowed down, needy, and reduced in life.
KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON
Banquet (verse 16)—Greek: deipnon (dā’p-non): a dinner, an afternoon meal “supper” (KJV).
Compel (verse 23)—Greek: anagkazō (ä-nän-kā’-zō): force, strongly urge.
Excuse(s) (verse 18)—Greek: paraiteomai (pä-ri-te’-o-mi): reject, refuse, decline, shun, avoid.
Invited (verse 16, NIV)—Greek: kaleō (kä-le’-ō): called, summoned by God to an office or to salvation.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON
I. Introduction
   A. Our Choices Define That Which We Truly Value
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of Scripture
   A. Getting Our Priorities in Order (Luke 14:15-20)
   B. A Justifiable Anger at Misplaced Priorities (Luke 14:21)
   C. The Benefits of Saying Yes to God (Luke 14:22-23)
   D. Warnings against Half-heartedness in Following Christ (Luke 14:24)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION
A. Our Choices Define That Which We Truly Value

The United States of America is the richest country on earth. An ever-increasing number of her citizens are enjoying the American dream. Upwardly mobile people go out of their way in this land of opportunity to be a part of the status and good fortune awarded to those who work hard to make it in this land. Sometimes our pursuit of the American dream can be an all-encompassing adventure to the neglect of all else that is good, wholesome, and beautiful. Sometimes the drive to succeed can be so strong that it takes priority over everything else in life.

Even the pursuit of religion can be just another way of climbing the social ladder. Church can become just another place to meet all the right people who can help to advance one’s career and move one up into the upwardly mobile class. Even some black churches are becoming so status-conscious that one’s pedigree and earning potential can be a factor in whether or not a person will feel welcome in certain congregations. The cars we drive, the way we dress, and where we work all say where we stand socially in our communities. If we permit it, these things can also define us in our own eyes. A devout member of a local congregation stopped going to church when he lost his job because he had allowed himself to be defined by his employment and not by his faith.

Problems will arise when social status replaces a true love for the things of God and the works of God in the world. This is not to suggest that only marginalized peoples are the
true worshippers of God, but it does say that to whom much is given, much is required. Our challenge is not to let the things of this world gain such a hold in our lives that we begin to worship them and merely pay lip service to God. Who among us will heed the call of God and who will find all kinds of excuses not to be involved in God’s work in the world?

B. Biblical Background

The parable of the great dinner tells of a man who had prepared a banquet and then faced a major social embarrassment because those expected to come all excused themselves at the last minute. The three specific excuses used in Luke 14:18-20 build suspense and dramatize the problem, leaving the man with a social crisis. The focal point of the parable is the man’s response to the crisis. Rather than abandoning his plans, he made a surprising decision, one sure to cause gossip: he decided to replace people of property and social standing with those at the bottom of the social pyramid. He even insisted that his slave go out to such people a second time so that the banquet hall would be full.

The parable is both bad news and good news—bad news for those who turned down the invitation, and good news for those brought in from the streets. These two groups have clear social profiles. Those who turned down the invitation were people with property and family ties. They placed these interests ahead of the invitation. They had a social position befitting a great dinner, but at the last minute they excused themselves to tend to their own business. Their last-minute excuses were a major social affront to the host, who decided to go ahead with the dinner anyway and angrily ordered his slave to get the beggars from the streets. The beggars were people at the bottom of the social pyramid. They were among the outcast group who were not permitted to live in the city but who nevertheless stayed close to it because they could sell their services to the city dwellers.

The question for the contemporary reader of this parable is this: How do you see yourself? Are you among the social-status seekers, paying lip service to the things of God while giving priority to mundane worldly pursuits; or are you among those who welcome the voice of God into their lives and respond positively to the opportunity to be in His presence?

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Getting Our Priorities in Order
   (Luke 14:15-20)

And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God. Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready. And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.

The parable assumes the customs and social stratification of the ancient city. The host was obviously a wealthy person. He could afford to give a banquet and he invited persons who
were buying land and oxen, and he had a servant. The practice of the double invitation allowed guests to verify that proper arrangements were being made for the banquet and that the right people would be in attendance. If the right people were not going to be there, then they could decline also. In this case, the man’s banquet was snubbed. All the guests politely offered excuses, as if by common assent, claiming they were unable to come.

The first two excuses were absurd, but they served the social function of declining the host’s invitation. No one would buy land without having inspected it first. Thus, the first invited guest is portrayed as an absentee landowner, a wealthy man of the city (verse 18). Nor would anyone buy oxen sight unseen. Also, five yoke of oxen would be required to work a farm of well more than a hundred acres. This indicates a substantial property holding in a time when most peasant families might farm three to six acres per adult. Luke’s audience would recognize these would-be guests as persons who were preoccupied with possessions, marking them as persons who had not embraced the values and practices that flow from a fundamental commitment to God the Father and the way of life to which He calls us. Both of the first two excuses point to material possessions as hindering them from coming to the banquet. The third excuse concerned allowing one’s family to hinder one’s response.

All of the excuses were pretenses. The newlywed man’s pretense may be that he was in the midst of his own celebration, thus he needed to spend time with his bride; or possibly it could be that as a result of his recent wedding he had taken on many social debts and could not afford another at this time. The reasons for their refusal to accept the invitation notwithstanding, the host had been snubbed and he looked upon all their excuses as mere pretenses. Whereas the first two asked to be excused, the third man flatly stated that he could not come.

There is no doubt that the man giving the banquet represents God. Probably the initial invitation embraced the preparatory announcement of God’s redemptive purpose as it was given through the prophets. The message that all was ready most likely brings the invitation up to date in the coming of Jesus to inaugurate the fulfillment of God’s purpose—now was the acceptable time.

**B. A Justifiable Anger at Misplaced Priorities**

*(Luke 14:21)*

So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind.

The master was very angry when he heard the excuses. All of them were empty, for no reason existed why a person should not save his soul by means of God’s Gospel of redemption. All three presented something that was perfectly legitimate in itself but used this in a fearfully illegitimate way to decline the means of salvation. All were dishonest, for they that made such excuses knew that they were pretending. The guests had no real reason for refusing, but every reason for accepting so gracious an invitation. They just did not want to accept. Clearly they represent the people who were rejecting God’s invitation to share His kingdom in association with Jesus.
When the people of status and means refused the invitation, the man then sent his servants to invite others—the poor and the maimed, blind and lame (verse 21). To make sure that the banquet hall was filled, the servant was told to go out a second time to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in. The expression “highways and hedges” refers to the rural roads and fields that were divided by hedgerows serving as fences.

C. The Benefits of Saying Yes to God
(Luke 14:22-23)

And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.

This second invitation matches the two invitations that had been extended to the original guest list. It may also foreshadow the preaching of the Gospel first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. The homeless and landless lived outside the city gates, which would have been closed in the evening to keep them away from the homes and holdings of the well-to-do. Their social ostracism was strictly enforced, so the servant might well have had to “compel” them to come where they were not normally allowed. Those who were invited after the well-to-do refused the invitation represent the Gentiles. The fact that the marginalized gladly accepted the owner’s invitation in this parable was another of the many indications that God’s mercy was for both Jews and Gentiles. It was not a matter of God’s preference for one over the other, but rather of historical precedence. God made Himself known to the Jews. They were naturally the first in opportunity to receive His grace. God reached out to the Jew first, but also to those outside of Jewish life and thought. Paul’s favorite expression for the idea was “to the Jew first, but also to the Greek.” The invitation to accept God’s will and God’s way—the invitation to the banquet—was and is extended to all, then and now. It is up to us to say yes to God!

D. Warnings against Half-heartedness in Following Christ
(Luke 14:24)

For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper.

The master intended to fill his house so that none of those who had been invited at first could come in. The statement “none of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet” (verse 24, NIV) does not mean that no Jews would experience God’s mercy. It means that none of those who rejected the invitation would experience it. Acceptance of God’s offer is the condition of sharing His mercy. It also means that God’s purpose would not fail because some people refuse His invitation. He proposes to bless with the favor of His kingdom those who accepted His invitation. And that blessing He bestowed—and bestows—whether those accepting were Jews or Gentiles.

The parable ends with the master’s pronouncement. His servant had spoken (verses 17, 22), the invited guests had spoken (verses 18-20), and the master had spoken (verses 21, 23-24). Only persons who are poor, crippled, blind, and lame, and those out in the roads and lanes, remain without a voice. But it is those who have no voice, no place, and no social standing who in the end will dine with the master. Here, the point of the whole story
comes to light: Many of those who presume that they will be included will find themselves excluded and their places will be taken by outcasts. The future in the coming rule and reign of God will not be a continuation of the present but a reversal of its exclusionary and discriminatory social codes. The lawyers and the Pharisees who had been invited to the meal had jockeyed for positions of honor, but in Jesus’ parable those who are concerned about their honor will exclude themselves from the master’s banquet and their place will be taken by those who exclude no one on the basis of their social standing. No person can enter into the kingdom without the invitation of God, and no one can remain outside it but by his or her own deliberate choice.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

The forces against which God’s offer to join Him at the banquet table must contend are often reasonable and well-argued, but God’s offer has priority not simply over our worst, but also over our best things that claim so much of our attention and time. Those who attend the banquet, and the work of God that it represents, do not do so because there was nothing else to do, but because the banquet was the best among all other attractive alternatives. Luke’s familiar use of reversal to announce the Gospel is the format used in this parable: insiders are out and outsiders are in. Those who say yes to God’s invitation and prize it over all that the world has to offer will be seated at God’s table in this life and in the promised eschaton (end of the age) to which we are moving.

This parable should be heard as a prophetic word of Jesus to a church rapidly becoming fixed in custom and tradition; a church uttering pious phrases (verse 15), comfortable in a false confidence of its own salvation, and no longer inviting to God’s table the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, give us the wisdom and good judgment to discern those things that are truly important in life. Help us not to major in minor things, but to be able to discern when and where Your redemptive purposes are at work in our lives. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(July 23-29, 2018)

Parable of the Great Dinner

MONDAY, July 23: “Exemptions from Military Service” (Deuteronomy 20:5-8)
WEDNESDAY, July 25: “Take Up the Cross and Follow” (Matthew 16:24-28)
THURSDAY, July 26: “My True Mother and Siblings” (Mark 3:31-35)
SATURDAY, July 28: “Count the Cost, Then Follow Me” (Luke 14:25-33)
GOD’S JUSTICE

ADULT/YOUTH

ADULT/YPUNG ADULT TOPIC: Equity for All
YOUTH TOPIC: Who Should Judge?

CHILDREN

GENERAL LESSON TITLE: God’s Justice
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Speaking Kindly of Others

DEVOTIONAL READING
Psalm 32

Romans 2:1-12—KJV

THEREFORE THOU art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things.
2 But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things.
3 And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?
4 Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?
5 But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God;
6 Who will render to every man according to his deeds:

Romans 2:1-12—NIV

YOU, THEREFORE, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.
2 Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.
3 So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment?
4 Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?
5 But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.
6 God “will repay each person according to what they have done.”
LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Explore Paul’s convictions regarding living generous and just lives before God in community.
2. Aspire to refrain from judgmental attitudes that only serve to condemn us.
3. Practice repentance that leads to new life in Christ.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachrs of ADULTS and YOUTH

—Paul was saying that we all have repeatedly sinned and only through Christ can we be saved from sin’s eternal consequences.
—Paul’s teaching aligns with Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7:1: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.”
—The purpose of God’s kindness is to give us the opportunity to repent (verse 4).
—God’s judgment is certain for all.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: It is very easy to judge others, condemning them for doing the same things we have done. How can we avoid being judgmental? Paul taught that God’s kindness, forbearance, and patience lead us to repentance and new life.

7 To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life:
8 But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath,
9 Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile;
10 But glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile:
11 For there is no respect of persons with God.
12 For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law.

7 To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.
8 But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.
9 There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile;
10 but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.
11 For God does not show favoritism.
12 All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.

We all will be judged according to what we know. We must obey the Word of God.
—Paul was using a style of writing for confronting an individual with a truth that demanded a response. It is a type of discourse used by first-century AD teachers and philosophers. Many modern translators feel that this form of address is redundant for the English reader, and thus omit it.
—In this text, the phrase “For everyone” literally means “upon every soul of man,” a linguistic expression for all humanity.
—The apostle Paul used law, nomos, in four distinct ways; figuratively, as a “principle,” generically, as a “statute,” as a reference to the entire Old Testament, and as a reference specifically to the Mosaic law, the Torah.
—In this text, the judgment of persons against one another is juxtaposed against God’s righteous judgment.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**
—God is the judge of all people.
—We err when we judge others.
—God’s mercy is for all who repent.
—Each person is judged according to his or her deeds.
—God wants everyone to do good deeds.
—God’s people must act in accord with the Law and not simply speak its words.

**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The book of Romans is generally considered the central piece of Paul’s writings to the churches. Unlike those letters in which Paul responded to specific problems in virtual shorthand, Romans is a lengthy letter that is both ample and magisterial. Paul had neither established nor ever met the Roman churches to whom he was now writing. He did not write in response to a crisis within the community nor to clear up some misunderstanding as their father in faith, as was true in some of his other letters. Paul’s purpose in writing the book of Romans was practical and had to do with the future of his mission. Around AD 57, Paul dictated this letter while at Cenchreae (the port near Corinth, mentioned at 16:1). He was at a pivotal juncture in his mission, when taking the fund to Jerusalem would conclude his work in the East and free him for a wholly new venture in the westernmost part of the empire, Spain. For this new undertaking, he hoped to have the support of the westernmost Christians, those in Rome, most of whom were Gentiles. This letter would prepare the way for the Roman churches to become his new base of operation in his mission to the Gentiles.

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

What was happening in Rome that prompted Paul to write this letter to the churches? When Paul came to know Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:3-4) in Corinth, they were among the Jewish refugees whom Emperor Claudius had expelled from Rome; subsequently they accompanied Paul to Ephesus. When Paul wrote the book of 1 Corinthians, they were still with him. However, at the writing of the book of Romans in AD 57, they were back in Rome—for with Nero’s accession to power, Claudius’s decree of expulsion of the Jews was no longer in effect. Stated simply, Christianity in Rome began among Jews, but the Jews’ constant conflicts over the messiahship of Jesus prompted Emperor Claudius to expel them. In their absence, Christianity became predominantly Gentile, perhaps primarily among those who had been God-fearers (Gentiles attracted to Judaism but not converts to it). When the Christian Jews returned under Nero, they found themselves marginalized and often at odds with Gentile believers. It was in the West, in this setting, that Paul had hopes of fully exercising his calling to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13).

Even though the book of Romans is Paul’s most sustained theological argument, he was not simply clarifying theological concepts, but he was clarifying the import of the Christ-event for the human plight as well. In effect, Paul was saying this: If you say you believe in Jesus Christ, it should make a difference in your life. The theology in the
book of Romans assumes that Paul realized that unless the Gospel announcing the Christ-event deals decisively with the human condition—our situations in life—there would be little reason to announce to Gentiles what the Jews had achieved in Christ. While Paul’s theology in the book of Romans is not comprehensive—the word cross does not appear in the letter, neither is the Lord’s Supper mentioned—his letter is nonetheless focused according to his purpose in writing to the Roman churches. Paul’s task in writing was to show why the Gospel should be believed at all and what difference it makes if one believes it, regardless of whether that person is a Gentile or a Jew.

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. INTRODUCTION
A. The God Who Treats Everyone the Same

God’s justice is equal and it applies to all. More often than we would like to admit, our sense of justice is imbalanced and prejudicial and tends to lean in our favor or in the favor of our group or tribe. Things that we tolerate in ourselves or in the people with whom we associate we find unforgiveable in others. For example, many African Americans are deeply offended when we hear someone use the “N” word. And rightly so! It is a word that has a long history of hurt, pain, and dehumanization behind it. And we are right to condemn it no matter the sense in which the offender intends it. But while we are quick to condemn...

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Judgment (verse 1, NIV)—Greek: krinō (krē'-nō): to judge, whether in court or privately.
Partiality (verse 11, NRSV)—Greek: prosō-polēmpsi (pro-sō-po-lām-psē'-ä): “favoritism” (NIV).
Repentance (verse 4)—Greek: metanoia (me-tā'-noi-ā): literally, a change of mind.

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture

A. God’s Judgment Is Inescapable (Romans 2:1-4)
B. God’s Judgment Is Righteous (Romans 2:5-6)
C. God’s Judgment Involves Choices (Romans 2:7-10)
D. God Shows No Partiality (Romans 2:11-12)

III. Concluding Reflection

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Paul: a leading persecutor of Christians who became the Christian apostle to the Gentiles.
Jews (Ioudaioi): originally denoted inhabitants of Judah, but later the meaning was extended to mean all descendants of Abraham. “Jews” is the familiar term for Israelites in the Gospels.
Gentiles (etnos): a non-Israelitish people or nation; not from the stock of Abraham. In the New Testament, they came to be regarded as unclean and a people with whom it was unlawful to have any friendly intercourse.
the “N” word on the lips of a person of another race, from time to time African Americans have also used epithets or slang words to refer to people of different races. Some dismiss it by saying, “Well, we are just doing to them what they have done to us.” The truth of the matter is that all epithets that dehumanize and hurt others should be banned from our discourse—with one’s race, nationality, or ethnicity being of no consequence.

Being in community with other people requires that we treat everyone with respect. Communities are strengthened when we learn to respect and honor difference and otherness. How we treat others is a reflection of our love for God and humankind. Justice requires that we bring balance and fair treatment to all people and not just to our loved ones and friends.

The building of human community is difficult at best, but it is made all the more challenging when we approach one another through eyes of suspicion and deep resentments, holding them in judgment for things we also have done. God’s call is for us not to judge one another, especially when we remember that we have often fallen short of the mark. Our challenge is to fight evil with good, to take the high road even when others refuse, and to believe that glory, honor, and peace will be had by those who make a special effort to do good in the world. Our ultimate trust is in our firm conviction that God will reward evil and good in God’s own way.

B. Biblical Background

Even the most casual reading of the book of Romans will show that the church in Rome was a mixed community consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, with Gentiles being in the majority. There was considerable conflict between these groups. It is further recognized that this conflict was primarily not ethnic (different races and cultures), but theological (different understandings about God’s covenant, law, and salvation). The Jewish Christians in Rome regarded Christianity as simply a part of Judaism and required their followers to observe the Jewish law, while the Gentile Christians supported a law-free Gospel and despised the Judaizing Christians as weak and in unnecessary bondage to the Law.

In his ministry of reconciliation to the Romans, Paul developed two paramount themes and interwove them beautifully throughout the letter. The first is the justification of guilty sinners by God’s grace in Christ, through faith alone, irrespective of status or works.

Paul’s second theme is the redefinition of the people of God, no longer according to descent, circumcision, or culture, but according to faith in Jesus Christ, so that all believers are the true children of Abraham regardless of their ethnic origin or religious practice.

In the first chapter of the book of Romans, Paul declared the depraved Gentile world to be guilty and inexcusable in the eyes of God, but in chapter 2 he quickly declared that no one can pass judgment on another human being. In fact, his main purpose in the writing of this section was to demonstrate that Jews and Gentiles are equal in sin and in salvation. Paul pulled no punches in Romans 2:1 when he said that no one has an excuse to judge others, for in so doing we judge ourselves since we, too, are guilty of doing the very same things. God and God alone judges, and He judges according to our deeds. Our hypocrisy in judging others while we are doing the same thing will eventually find us out.
II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. God’s Judgment Is Inescapable
   (Romans 2:1-4)

   THEREFORE THOU art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou
   art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou
   condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same
   things. But we are sure that the judgment of God is ac-
   cording to truth against them which commit such things.
   And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which
   do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape
   the judgment of God? Or despisest thou the riches of his
   goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not know-
   ing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?

   Paul uncovered in these verses a strange
   human foible—namely our tendency to be
critical of everybody except ourselves. We
are often as harsh in our judgment of others
as we are lenient toward ourselves. We work
ourselves up into a state of self-righteous indignation over the disgraceful behavior of other people, while the very same behavior seems not nearly so serious when it is ours. We even gain a vicarious satisfaction from condemning in others the very faults we so readily excuse in ourselves. This warped criticism enables us simultaneously to retain our sins and our self-respect. It is a convenient arrangement but it is also slick and sick to require of others what we know we are not doing ourselves.

   In addition, Paul argued that when we engage in this kind of hypocrisy, we expose ourselves to the judgment of God, and we leave ourselves without either excuse or escape—for if our critical faculties are so well-developed that we become experts in our moral evaluation of others, we can hardly plead ignorance of moral issues in ourselves. On the contrary, said Paul, in judging other people we thereby condemn ourselves because we who pass judgment do the same things. This is not a call either to suspend our critical faculties or to renounce all criticism and rebuke of others as illegitimate; it is rather a prohibition of standing in judgment on other people and condemning them (which as human beings we have no right to do), especially when we fail to condemn ourselves. This is the hypocrisy of the double standard—a high standard for other people and a comfortable low one for ourselves.

   Sometimes in a futile attempt to escape God’s judgment, said Paul, we take refuge in a theological argument. We appeal to God’s character, especially to the riches of His kindness, tolerance, and patience (verse 4a). We maintain that God is much too kind and long-suffering to punish anybody, and that we can therefore sin with impunity. But this kind of manipulative theologizing shows contempt for God, not honor. It is not faith; it is presumption. While God is kind, His kindness is meant to lead us toward repentance. That is its goal (verse 4b). His kindness is intended to give us space in which to repent, but it is not meant to give us an excuse to keep on sinning and to be hypocritical about it.

B. God’s Judgment Is Righteous
   (Romans 2:5-6)

   But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasur
   est up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and
   revelation of the righteous judgment of God; Who will
   render to every man according to his deeds.

   In Paul’s understanding of the Gospel, to assume that God’s kindness is intended as encouragement to keep on sinning as opposed
to repenting is a sure sign of stubbornness and an unrepentant heart (verse 5a). Such obstinacy can have only one end. It means that we are storing up for ourselves not some precious treasure, but the awful experience of God’s divine wrath when His righteous judgment will be revealed. Far from escaping God’s judgment, we will bring it all the more surely upon ourselves.

Paul then enlarged on his expression of “God’s righteous judgment” (verse 5). He began by stating the inflexible principle on which it is based: God will give to each person according to what he has done (verse 6). To some, it would appear that Paul was contradicting himself at this point. He began the book of Romans by declaring that salvation is by faith alone (Romans 1:16f), but in Romans 2:6 he said that God will repay according to our works. There is no contradiction here; what Paul was affirming is that although justification is, indeed, by faith, judgment will be according to works. We have been made right through Jesus Christ, but we will be judged on what we did in our lives after being delivered from sin.

### C. God’s Judgment Involves Choices
(Romans 2:7-10)

To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life: But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile; But glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile.

Verses 7-10 are a further explanation of verse 6, in which Paul declared that God’s righteous judgment will be passed on the basis of what we have done. We have a choice in how we will be judged, and that choice will determine our final destiny. The two final destinies of humankind are called eternal life (verse 7), defined by Jesus as knowing Him—and wrath and anger (verse 8), defined as the awful outpouring of God’s judgment. The basis on which God will judge us will be a combination of what we seek (our ultimate goal in life) and what we do (our actions in the service either of ourselves or of others). Some, according to Paul, will seek glory (the manifestation of God Himself), honor (God’s approval), and immortality (the unfading joy of His presence). To those who seek such, God will give eternal life (verse 7). On the other hand, there are those who will be characterized by a single derogatory word—self-seeking (verse 8). Self-seekers are described as those who are engrossed in self-centered goals and seek to get ahead by unfair means.

Paul had two categories for every human being. There are those who do evil and there are those who do good. One destiny involves trouble and distress for everyone who does evil (verse 9), while the other involves glory, honor, and peace for those who do good works. Peace indicates a reconciled relationship with God (verse 10).

### D. God Shows No Partiality
(Romans 2:11-12)

For there is no respect of persons with God. For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law.

While Jews and Gentiles appear to differ fundamentally from one another with respect to Jewish Law, Paul insisted that there
is no difference between them in the moral knowledge they have, or in the sin they have committed, or in the guilt they have incurred, or in the judgment they will receive. Verse 12 puts Jews and Gentiles into the same category of sin and death. Paul flatly stated that all who have sinned will also perish or will be judged (verse 12), irrespective of whether they are Jews or Gentiles. Jews will be judged by the Mosaic Law, and Gentiles will be judged apart from the Law. Both will perish because of their sin, not because of their ignorance of the Law. God will be even-handed in judgment. The ground of judgment will be their works! What mattered was not their adherence to the Law or lack thereof, but, rather, their obedience to God’s will.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

God is fair and balanced in His judgments. He judges things as they are. The Jews wanted to condemn the Gentiles and exempt themselves for doing the very same things. God applies the same standard to the same things for all people. God’s kindness is intended to lead us toward repentance, but the failure to repent transforms God’s kindness into wrath. Any presumption that sin will be treated lightly serves only to store up the wrath of God. In the same manner that God is just and fair we, too, are called upon to live in community with one another in ways that edify and build up the body of Christ. Humility, not hypocrisy, is the order of the day when we remember that all we, like sheep, have gone astray.

PRAYER

O Lord, help us to learn how to love one another, being mindful that we are all prone to miss the mark of perfection. Help us to be patient and kind to one another in our faults and failure, and give us the confident assurance that we can approach the throne of grace when we have sinned against You and against our brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(July 30–August 5, 2018)

God’s Justice

MONDAY, July 30: “The Power of the Gospel” (Romans 1:16-17)
TUESDAY, July 31: “Bear Fruits of Repentance” (Luke 3:7-14)
WEDNESDAY, August 1: “Genuine Christian Behavior” (Romans 12:14-21)
THURSDAY, August 2: “Gentiles Experience Repentance” (Acts 11:15-18)
FRIDAY, August 3: “Paul’s Joy at Corinthians’ Repentance” (2 Corinthians 7:9-11)
SATURDAY, August 4: “Doers of the Law Are Justified” (Romans 2:12-16)
SUNDAY, August 5: “God’s Righteous, Impartial Judgment” (Romans 2:1-12)
GLOBAL ECONOMIC JUSTICE

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: Charitable Equity for All
YOUTH TOPIC: Giving Your All

CHILDREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Sharing Gifts with the Needy
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Helping Others

DEVOTIONAL READING
Proverbs 3:9-10, 13-20, 27-28

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 8–9
PRINT PASSAGE: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15
ADULT KEY VERSE: 2 Corinthians 8:9
YOUTH KEY VERSE: 2 Corinthians 9:8

CHILDREN
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 8–9
PRINT PASSAGE: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15
KEY VERSE: 2 Corinthians 8:12

2 Corinthians 8:7-15—KJV
7 Therefore, as ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also.
8 I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love.
9 For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.
10 And herein I give my advice: for this is expedient for you, who have begun before, not only to do, but also to be forward a year ago.
11 Now therefore perform the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to will, so there may be a performance also out of that which ye have.
12 For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not.
13 For I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened:

2 Corinthians 8:7-15—NIV
7 But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.
8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.
9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.
10 And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so.
11 Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.
12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.
14 But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality:
15 As it is written, He that had gathered much had nothing over; and he that had gathered little had no lack.
13 Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.
14 At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality,
15 as it is written: “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.”

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: We want to be generous to those in need. What motivates true generosity when the needs seem so overwhelming? Paul encouraged the Corinthians’ generosity in response to God’s generous gifts to them.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Identify ways of living generous lives in Christ that demonstrate fidelity to the Gospel.
2. Commit to changing our relationships with the poor and oppressed of the world by giving to help them.
3. Develop a thoroughgoing personal stewardship that embraces equity and justice for all people.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—Paul addressed the question of the collection of money for the distressed Christians in Jerusalem, which the Corinthians had started but not completed.
—In contrast with the Law, which imposed giving as a divine requirement, Christian giving is voluntary and a test of sincerity and love.
—The privilege of giving is universal, according to one’s ability (rich or poor).
—The churches in Macedonia gave a sacrificial gift for the impoverished believers in Jerusalem.
—There are rewards when Christians give—such as joy, the ability to give in proportion to that which has been already given, thankfulness to God, and the fact that God is glorified.
—Second Corinthians 8:15 reflects on the divine economic and ecological equity in the sharing of manna in Exodus 16:18. All shared equal access and equal distribution of needed resources.

Teachers of CHILDREN
—By giving His life for us, Jesus displayed great generosity.
—Our eagerness to give according to what we have makes our gifts acceptable to God.
—Those who are able to give are commanded to share with the poor.
—We are challenged to excel in giving generously to others.
—Those who truly desire to give will do so with great eagerness.
—Paul cited Exodus 16:18 in urging a fair balance between abundance and need.
THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

Some scholars regard 2 Corinthians 8–9 as belonging originally to a letter other than that containing chapter 7. The acceptance or rejection of such a claim does not affect our understanding of the broader issues with which they deal. The collection of which Paul spoke was for the poor in Jerusalem. Paul had willingly agreed to raise it when he and Barnabas had gone to that city to discuss their preaching to the Gentiles (see Galatians 2:10). Paul mentioned it in some of his letters (see Romans 15:25-27, 31; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4), and Luke told of its delivery (see Acts 24:17). There are several puzzling features about this collection. In Galatians 2:10, it is said to be for the poor, but in 2 Corinthians 8:4 it is for “the saints.” Romans 15:26 suggests that it was for the poor among the saints. Since today’s lesson is not Paul’s first reference to the offering, he did not precisely identify its recipients. Probably most of the Christians in Jerusalem were poor and, therefore, either description of them would suffice.

It is difficult to say whether or not the Christians in Jerusalem were poorer than other Christians. Jesus and his disciples had lived in voluntary poverty. As active missionaries, they made do with the barest minimum (Matthew 10:7-9). The first Christian community followed their practice. Those who had property sold it and contributed the resulting sum to the common purse (Acts 2:44-45). They would have been more ready to do so since they believed that the Lord would soon return and possessions would then become unnecessary. However, the sale of their assets and the immediate use of the money meant that their capital slowly disappeared, and unless there was a continual influx of wealthy converts they would not have been able to remain solvent. Also, the church in Jerusalem may have looked upon the collection as a kind of acknowledgment on the part of the Gentiles of its own pre-eminent position. Paul probably initially accepted the obligation to raise the money because he saw the need in Jerusalem and was inspired by the love of Jesus to respond. The collection became an excellent way of displaying the unity of the Jewish and Gentile sections of the church, which were in danger of drifting apart over the keeping of the Jewish law.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

Having heard from Titus about the Corinthian generosity, Paul began his appeal to them by telling them what the Macedonians had done. There were at least three Christian communities at that time in Macedonia: Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. These communities, despite being desperately poor and suffering persecution, had given most generously. The persecution and poverty of the Macedonian Christians had not closed off their generosity. Once he had introduced the examples of the Macedonians in the earlier part of chapter 8, Paul turned in this lesson to the Corinthians themselves. Comparisons to other churches can be dangerous if made too bluntly, so Paul avoided this danger by using theological terms. In this way, Paul emphasized what God had done for the Macedonians rather than what they themselves had achieved. When he turned to the Corinthians, it is again the divine dimension that he stressed. To give to the saints was as much a work of grace as any of the spiritual gifts that Paul mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14.

Organized giving of money was a well-recognized Jewish practice. Collections were made for the upkeep of the temple and its services through an annual tax levied on Jews of the Diaspora. Local collections were also raised for the poor. The first of these may have inspired the way Paul organized his collection, though it was certainly voluntary and
not a tax. Voluntary giving to the poor was widely stressed as a virtue in Judaism.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**Paul:** the apostle to the Gentiles.  
**The Macedonian Christians:** They were to be the beneficiaries of the Corinthian church’s acts of kindness.

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

*Equality (verse 14)—Greek: ἰσοτές (ē-so-tās):* fairness.  
*Grace (verse 7)—Greek: χάρις (khā’rēs):* favor, kindness.  
*Willingness (verse 11)—Greek: προθυμία (pro-thü-mē’-ā):* eager, ready; “readiness” (KJV).

**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

I. **Introduction**
   A. Christians Committed to Sharing Their Resources with the World
   B. Biblical Background

II. **Exposition and Application of the Scripture**
   A. Examples of Generous Giving  
      (2 Corinthians 8:7)
   B. Giving with a Christ-like Spirit  
      (2 Corinthians 8:8-9)
   C. Rules for Giving  
      (2 Corinthians 8:10-12)
   D. A Fair Balance between Sharing and Need  
      (2 Corinthians 8:13-15)

III. **Concluding Reflection**

I. **INTRODUCTION**

A. Christians Committed to Sharing Their Resources with the World

   Christians have a responsibility to extend their arms of benevolence far and wide. There is a real sense in which the world is indeed “our parish,” to quote John Wesley. We have a responsibility to share our resources in such a way that those in need can claim the relief they so desperately desire for many of the basic necessities of life. America is the richest country in the industrialized world, and even though there is much want and necessity among marginalized peoples in the U.S.A., it pales in comparison to the daily sufferings of the world.

   Those of us who live in the United States live in an unbelievable world of privilege when you think about how most of the rest of the world lives. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in the *Dignity of Difference*, observes that the average North American consumes five times more than a Mexican, ten times more than a Chinese person, and thirty times more than an Indian. Most of the world’s population lives on less than two dollars per day. It is also the case that 1.3 billion people live below the poverty line, 841 million are malnourished, and 800 million are without access to medical care. One billion people throughout the globe lack adequate shelter; 2.6 billion go without sanitation. Among the children of the world, 113 million—two-thirds of them girls—go without schooling, 150 million children are malnourished, and 30,000 children die somewhere in the world each day from preventable
diseases. American Christians who live in a land of plenty can no longer turn a blind eye to the destitute and outcast in countries near and far. We truly live in a global village where no person is an island unto themselves.

Many years ago Martin Luther King Jr. rightly noted that “we must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools.” King went on to say that “we are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. According to King, we can never be what we ought to be until the other person is what he or she ought to be. This is the way God’s universe is made; this is the way it is structured.

Also, when it comes to attracting millennials and Gen-Xers to the faith, statistics show that young people are being drawn to churches that take the world’s suffering seriously. Disease pandemics that kill millions; massive inequality that imprisons half the world’s population in miserable poverty, human sexual and economic trafficking; dangerous climatic changes in the earth’s temperature; genocide in places like Darfur; so many threats to the sanctity of human life; and endless violations of human dignity are the objects of their heartfelt concerns. Today’s young people are attracted to congregations that spend their resources helping to make this world a better place. The Scriptures are our guide in determining how best to help those in the greatest need. Thus, Paul’s call for a genuine care and concern for the less fortunate among us resonates with many of our young adults.

**B. Biblical Background**

Paul reminded us in this chapter that we who are recipients of God’s grace must pass it on to others. With respect to the circle of giving, we must finish the circle by redirecting it through us to someone else. Every encounter Christians have with another person should be seen as an opportunity to be a channel of God’s grace. In fact, when we do not view ourselves as a channel or a conduit of grace, we come in time to believe that grace is something we are supposed to possess. The goal of gracious giving and receiving is to pass it on to someone else. Grace is not static; rather, it is dynamic.

Speaking of the manner in which others give in relation to generosity could have served to discourage the Corinthians rather than encourage them to open up their purses. For this reason, Paul made it clear that he was not setting up the Macedonians as the standard of giving. He was simply asking the Corinthians to consider giving in a manner similar to how the Macedonians had done as a way of proving their love for the poor in Jerusalem. He was confident that the Corinthians would not fail because he remembered and tactfully reminded them of the enthusiasm with which they had begun a year ago (verse 10). That enthusiasm had unfortunately now evaporated, probably during and perhaps because of the period of strained relations between Paul and the Corinthian church. So Paul renewed his effort to stir their hearts toward generosity for others.

The idea of a collection of Gentile Christians for Jewish Christians in Palestine was seized on by Paul. It helped to remind the Gentile Christians of their debt to Jewish Christians and quicken their concern for them. It demonstrated to Jewish believers the love of Gentile Christians for them. It showed the Palestinian church Paul’s loyalty to them and affection for them.
Why was such an offering needed for the Christians in Jerusalem? It is important to remember that Jerusalem was a center of religious pilgrimage. Like other similar cities it attracted many poor (as Mecca and many Indian cities of today). For this reason, the Jews of the Dispersion regularly sent donations to Jerusalem for poor relief. Many of these indigent people would have been converted through the Gospel, and consequently the Christians would have been conscious of their duty to them. For this reason Paul was asked to remember the poor.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Examples of Generous Giving
   (2 Corinthians 8:7)

   Therefore, as ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also.

   In the first part of 2 Corinthians 8, verses 1-7, Paul told the Corinthian church that the liberality of the Macedonian Christians was a product of grace. From the beginning, the Macedonian believers had experienced persecution; the persecutions involved destruction of their property and the plundering of their goods. But grace triumphed over such circumstances. In spite of their harsh circumstances, the Macedonians gave according to their means and even beyond their means. Paul held up the Macedonian Christians as an example for the Christians in Corinth. In sincerity, he reminded them that they excelled in everything, and thus they should excel in the generous work of giving to the poor in Jerusalem (verse 7).

B. Giving with a Christ-like Spirit
   (2 Corinthians 8:8-9)

   I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love. For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.

   Paul had to walk gingerly with the Corinthians as he tried not only to mend his relationship with them, but also to reinvigorate and inspire full participation in the collection—so he quickly clarified that what he wrote was not a command (verse 8). Paul then reminded the Corinthians that there was an even greater motive for giving than either the example of the Macedonians or his exhortations to excellence. That greater motive is the love demonstrated by Jesus Christ: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ” (verse 9, NRSV). Grace is the love that stoops to save the undeserving, and in the poverty of Jesus it is shown to perfection. As the Corinthians faced the test of their love and generosity toward others, Paul reminded them of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and of the very grace in which they stood. If they understood that the Lord’s abundant grace made them what they were and gave them all that they had, then how would they possibly be able to stifle grace’s overflow?

   There are many today who do not mind giving out of their abundance. But giving out of our abundance does not mean that we are supposed to give people what we do not want; it means that we share with them as it relates to what they truly need. Paul urged the Corinthians to give from the best of their resources. He reminded them that they were
known for excelling in many things—faith, knowledge, earnestness, and love; he then admonished them to give in an excellent way out of their abundant resources. Not only is “giving” a gracious act, but it is also a sacrificial act whereby we give people what they truly need as opposed to giving them what we no longer want. More importantly, we give when we remember how much we have been given in Jesus Christ. The manner in which Christ freely gave to us and for us is our example of how we are to give in our everyday living.

C. Rules for Giving
(2 Corinthians 8:10-12)

And herein I give my advice: for this is expedient for you, who have begun before, not only to do, but also to be forward a year ago. Now therefore perform the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to will, so there may be a performance also out of that which ye have. For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not.

The Corinthians would not be surprised that Paul had practical suggestions for them. That was in his character; they had experienced this with him throughout their relationship. Accordingly, he first urged them to regain their original enthusiasm for the project (verse 7). He then called on them to finish what they started a year ago. Finally, he urged them to finish the collection out of what they had, not out of what they did not have. This indicates that Paul did not expect them to come up with more funds than one could reasonably expect.

Often we hear people speak of what they would do if only they had more. The Lord does not expect us to give beyond what we are able, but we can give in a liberal way out of what we have. The story is told of a rancher who told his pastor that he would tithe if he had one hundred cows. The pastor then asked, “And what if you had fifty cows?” The rancher responded, “I’d tithe if I had fifty cows.” Finally, the pastor asked, “Would you tithe if you only had three cows?”—to which the rancher replied, “Come on now, Pastor, you know I only have three cows.” The pastor’s point was made: we should give out of what we have, not out of what we do not have!

D. A Fair Balance between Sharing and Need
(2 Corinthians 8:13-15)

For I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened: But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality: As it is written, He that had gathered much had nothing over; and he that had gathered little had no lack.

Paul gave modern readers a glimpse into his sense of fairness and equality in the sharing of goods and proper care among believers. Fairness, by which he meant equality, seems to be the guideline for an individual’s contributions. The principle that those who have abundance share with those in need is significantly developed in a reciprocating fashion: the Corinthians’ current abundance should meet others’ needs and, in due course, the abundance of others would meet the Corinthians’ needs (verses 13-14).

Paul found confirmation, or perhaps the ground for his counsel, in Exodus 16:18, which functions here as a maxim: the one with much did not have too much, and the one with little did not have too little (verse 15). Whereas the story of the manna in the book of Exodus appears to mean that there was a miraculous equalization of the amounts collected, Paul meant that there is, or ought to be, equality of supply because the more fortunate give away their surplus, and the less fortunate receive
it. He used the Old Testament here not to authorize his advice, but rather to illustrate it.

God recognizes a degree of reciprocity in giving. Just as we are instructed to give out of our abundance, should the day come when we ourselves should fall on hard times, we can expect that God will also hear our cries and bless us through other Christians who have adopted the spirit of giving in all its Christ-like dimensions. Those who are blessed to be able to give should do so freely and without reservation. Those who have fallen on hard times should gladly receive the gifts that come to them through the generous hearts and hands of obedient servants of God. God works through human agency and He blesses our lives through the giving and receiving that come through those who love Him.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Reciprocity and care among believers were givens for Paul. Whether it has to do with possessions, as here, or with thoughtfulness about others, as in other places (see 1 Corinthians 8), believers are to look after one another. We might readily embrace these sentiments and think that when we have something extra we will share it with the less fortunate. But if we share only when we find ourselves with a surplus we may never share, because we have been subtly taught to think that we never have enough. Also, it is often the case that we are blind to how much we really do have to share with others. Furthermore, our sharing does not have to be solely or even primarily relegated to our goods or possessions. Paul developed a powerful critique of the social and cultural values of his times and ours when it comes to our responsibility of helping those who are less fortunate. What Paul was really asking of all of us is to think about what is most important, what really counts, and what really matters.

PRAYER

Lord, give us a spirit of generosity that is befitting to those who love and believe on Your name. Keep us ever mindful that You work on earth through human agency. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(August 6-12, 2018)

Global Economic Justice
MONDAY, August 6: “God Provides Food to the People” (Exodus 16:13-17)
TUESDAY, August 7: “The Widow’s Generosity” (Mark 12:38-44)
WEDNESDAY, August 8: “Generous Self-giving of Jesus” (Philippians 2:5-11)
THURSDAY, August 9: “Excel in Generosity” (2 Corinthians 8:1-6)
FRIDAY, August 10: “Generosity Results in Mutual Thanksgiving” (2 Corinthians 9:11-15)
SATURDAY, August 11: “Support the Ministry of Church Leaders” (2 Corinthians 8:16-24)
SUNDAY, August 12: “Balance Need and Abundance Fairly” (2 Corinthians 8:7-15)
LOVING AND JUST BEHAVIOR

ADULT/YOUTH
ADULT TOPIC: Equity in Conduct
YOUTH TOPIC: Unconditional Love

CHILDEREN
GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Practicing Real Love
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Showing Love to Others

DEVOOTIONAL READING
Matthew 5:38-48

ADULT/YOUTH
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Romans 12:9-21
PRINT PASSAGE: Romans 12:9-21
ADULT KEY VERSE: Romans 12:9
YOUTH KEY VERSE: Romans 12:10

CHILDREN
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Romans 12:9-21
PRINT PASSAGE: Romans 12:9-21
KEY VERSE: Romans 12:10a

Romans 12:9-21—KJV
9 Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.
10 Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another;
11 Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord;
12 Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer;
13 Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality.
14 Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not.
15 Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.
16 Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits.
17 Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men.

Romans 12:9-21—NIV
9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.
10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.
11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.
12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.
13 Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.
14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.
15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.
16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.
17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.
18 If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.
19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.
20 Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.
21 Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.
19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.
20 On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”
21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

**UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE:** We want to be loving persons. What makes for genuine love in the world? Paul offered the marks of true love that are to be lived by the faithful.

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**LESSON OBJECTIVES**

*Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:*

1. Consider Paul’s words about personal behaviors as being indicative of a Christian way of life.
2. Affirm human expressions of love for one another.
3. Become more loving according to Paul’s teaching.

**AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED**

**Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH**

—Paul wanted Christians to put their faith into action by being obedient to God’s commands.
—God wants us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices.
—Paul urged believers to love and honor one another.
—We have to pray at all times, good and bad.
—Believers are called to be peacemakers.
—Our loving actions toward our enemies may lead them to repentance.
—Building on the theological foundation of Romans 1–8, Romans 12:9-21 describes practical marks of faithfulness to Christ.

—Romans 12:9-21 delineates a description of merciful and just Christian living.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**

—Paul advised the Roman Christians concerning the characteristics of faithful Christians.
—For true Christian believers, loving others is second only to the primary mark of loving God.
—Love among believers should be mutually manifested.
—Paul’s advice was based on the teachings of Jesus.
—Overcoming evil is possible for those who are filled with love.
—Even enemies can be overcome by our loving acts.
THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

Paul did not establish the church in Rome through his missionary activity. How then, we may ask, did a Christian community in Rome originate? If we appreciate the strategic position of Rome in the Roman Empire and the factors which were operating in the Christian church after the Day of Pentecost, the answer to the question lies at hand. One fact that must not be discounted is that there were sojourners from Rome among those who heard Peter on the Day of Pentecost and witnessed its miraculous phenomena. It is hard to believe that none of these people returned to Rome. Also, there was a considerable Jewish colony in first-century Rome. The Jewish colony was organized into synagogues. But there were not only Jewish synagogues in first-century Rome, there were also a Gentile mission and Gentile churches independent of Paul. At the time of the writing of the book of Romans, Paul presupposed the existence of a community that contained a strong Gentile element. Thus, this apostle to the Gentiles had long desired to head west to Rome.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

All New Testament documents were written from within a particular situation. Paul was probably writing from Corinth during the three months he spent in Greece just before sailing east. He mentioned three places that he was intending to visit. The first is Jerusalem, taking with him the money the Greek churches had raised for the poverty-stricken Christians in Judea (see 15:25). The second is Rome itself. Having been frustrated in his previous attempts to visit the Christians in Rome, he was confident that this time he would be successful. The third is Spain, in order to continue his pioneer missionary work where Christ was not known. His most obvious purpose in writing the book of Romans was related to these three destinations. Paul thought of Rome, being situated between Jerusalem and Spain, as a place of refreshment after he had been to Jerusalem—and a place of preparation en route to Spain. His visits to Jerusalem and Rome were of special significance to him because they expressed his two continuing commitments to the welfare of Israel (Jerusalem) and to the Gentile mission (Rome and Spain).

PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON

Paul: probably wrote from Corinth during the three months he spent in Greece.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Hospitality (verse 13)—Greek: philoxenia (fono-kse-ne’-ä): warmth or friendliness shown to strangers; the readiness to share hospitality by entertaining in one’s home.

Love (verse 9)—Greek: agape (ä-gä’-pä): benevolence, good will.

Peaceably (verse 18)—Greek: eirēneuontes (ä-rē-nyü’-ō): being “at peace” (NIV) with all people.


TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction
   A. The Way Christians Are to Behave
   B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture
   A. Called to Love Those within the Christian Community (Romans 12:9-12)
I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Way Christians Are to Behave

Many years ago, the pop diva Diana Ross popularized a song whose lyrics eventually made their way into some of the churches. The song said in part, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love; that’s the only thing that there’s just too little of.” Even though the song is not calling for the exact kind of love that is mentioned in the biblical witness, the word itself is a starting point for what Paul was calling for the Roman Christians to do. For some, love is merely a sentimental emotion more often attached to the kind of immature love that teenagers feel for one another. That type of love may be defined as “a feeling that you feel when you feel that feeling that you never felt before.”

Agape (agapa)—the Christian love about which Paul spoke has a deeper, more profound understanding. First, it is a love of identity; it is a love that empathizes with the other person—a love that allows you to put yourself into the shoes of others and do your best to feel what they feel, and understand what they are going through and how they are experiencing life. Second, it is a love of sacrifice. It goes out of its way to help and not hinder a brother or sister in Christ Jesus. No hour is too late and no night is too dark to render aid and assistance when called upon. Third, agape is a love of rational good will. It is a love that treats a person in a manner that is best for the person. Our foreparents in the faith tried to catch the essence of this third trait by saying they would minister to difficult people “with a long-handled spoon.” They, unlike many of us, had no desire to ignore them or treat them as though they did not exist in Christian community—but they were also not going to embrace them too closely whereby they could do harm until they had become more mature in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Thus, they declared that they would feed difficult people in the community in a loving manner, but with a long-handled spoon.

It is this love that we are called on to demonstrate in our daily walk of faith. This love is a love that fire cannot burn, water cannot drown, and the wind cannot blow away. It is a love that lasts longer than life and is deeper than the grave. It is the kind of love that constitutes the most stubborn and tenacious emotion in the human condition. It is a selfless love that will go to any lengths to attain the well-being of other people. We are implored by the apostle Paul to engage in this love daily.
B. Biblical Background

Paul’s practical directives in Romans 12 are thoroughly commonplace and traditional in their treatment of attitudes of reciprocity. This collection of exhortations showed the Roman church that if it supported Paul’s mission, it would not be sponsoring a renegade or idiosyncratic version of the Christian life. Moreover, this section implicitly elaborates on the nature of Paul’s gospel, which he detailed in Romans 1–11. In this section, Paul denoted what faith of/in Christ entails for those who accept the claim of God upon their lives, and, in particular, he developed more fully the basic premises of Romans 6–8: the nature of the transformed life in the Spirit.

Although there is much in these exhortations that could be found in both pagan and Jewish moralists, there are also some distinctive emphases. The injunction to be “lowly” (verse 16, NRSV), for example, could only be considered a virtue in light of a Messiah who was “lowly” and a slave; for pagan moralists, this attitude was a vice, not a virtue. Likewise, in Romans 12:10, the Romans are told to have brotherly love (philadelphia) rather than simply love for humanity. One should take note as well on the emphasis on hospitality and contributing to the needs of the saints (verse 13). Paul did not entirely leave the admonitions found in Romans 12:9-21 without his distinctive touch. That Pauline touch is made all the more real with his insistence on Christian love and how Christians are to behave themselves as the redeemed people of God.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Called to Love Those within the Christian Community

(Romans 12:9-12)

Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer.

Without a doubt, agape love was dominating the scene in Romans 12. So far in the book of Romans all references to agape had been to the love of God—demonstrated on the Cross (5:8), poured out in our hearts (5:5), and doggedly refusing to let us go (8:35). But now Paul focused on agape as the essence of Christian discipleship. How do we demonstrate love within the bounds of Christian community? Some commentators see verses 9-16 as a jumble of miscellaneous instructions, with little or no connection with each other. But in fact, each exhortation adds a fresh ingredient to the apostle’s recipe for love.

First, love must be sincere, which is to say that love must be without hypocrisy. Hypocrites were play actors. But the church must not turn itself into a stage, for love is not theater; it belongs to the real world. Indeed, love and hypocrisy exclude one another. Yet, there is such a thing as pretense love, which was displayed in its vilest form in the betraying kiss of Judas. Love is so scarce that it is always in danger of substitutes, and no substitute is more sickening than a love-substitute. Christian love must be real.
Second, Paul admonished the Roman church to hate what is evil. It may seem strange that the exhortation to love is followed immediately by a command to hate. But we should not be surprised—for love is not the blind sentiment it is traditionally said to be. On the contrary—love is discerning. It is so passionately devoted to the beloved object that it hates every evil which is incompatible with his or her highest welfare.

Third, we are to love one another in mutual affection. We are to be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Paul brought together in this verse two family words. “Be devoted” describes our natural affection for relatives, typically love of parent or child. The other word is philadelphia, “brotherly love,” which denotes the love of brothers and sisters for one another. Both words were originally applied to blood relationships in the human family.

Fourth, we are admonished to honor one another above ourselves. Love in the Christian family is to express itself in mutual honor as well as in mutual affection. We are never to be lacking in zeal. In telling the Romans to be aglow with the Spirit, Paul was almost certainly referring to the Holy Spirit, and the picture is not so much of a glowing lamp but of a boiling pot.

We are to “rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer” (verse 12, NRSV). We are to live before one another in the confident Christian hope of the Lord’s return and the glory that is to follow. This expectation is to us the source of our abiding joy. But it also calls for patience as we endure tribulations and persevere in prayer.

B. Sharing with Those in Need
(Romans 12:13)
Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality.

Paul exhorted the Romans to share with those who are in need. The verb “share” (koinoneo) can mean either to share in people’s needs and sufferings, or to share out of our resources with them. They were also to practice hospitality. If generosity is shown to the needy, hospitality is shown to visitors. Love of brothers and sisters has to be balanced with love of strangers. Hospitality was especially important in biblical times, since inns were few and far between, and those that existed were often unsafe or unsavory places. It was essential, therefore, for Christian people to open their homes to travellers, and in particular for local church leaders to do so. In fact, Paul did not urge the Romans to practice hospitality, but rather to pursue it, meaning they were not merely to receive strangers when they came to the city, but they were to pursue them and search them out everywhere, lest perchance they might sit in the streets or lie without a roof over their heads.

C. How Christians Are to Relate to Difficult People
(Romans 12:14-16)
Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits.

Jesus has already mentioned in the Gospels that our challenge is not to love people who already love us but, rather, to love people who dislike and sometimes hate us. This is where the rubber meets the road. Is our faith deep enough to encounter stiff resistance, criticism, backbiting, and tattling and still be able to love? This is the question for people both inside the fold and out in the world. The call to bless those
who persecute you is a necessary challenge to Christian love. Blessings and curses are opposites, wishing people respectively good or ill, health or harm (verse 14). We bless people who persecute us, but we are not to curse them under any circumstances. Paul must have known that he was echoing the teachings of Jesus, who told us not only to “bless those who curse us but also to pray for them and to do them good” (see Luke 6:28). There is no better way to express our positive wishes for people who do not like us than to turn our thoughts about them into prayer and action on their behalf.

Moreover, we are instructed to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to mourn with those who mourn (verse 15). Love never stands aloof from other people’s joys or pains. Love identifies with them, sings with them, and suffers with them. Love enters deeply into their experiences and their emotions, their laughter and their tears. Even where hurt and betrayal have occurred, love chances it once again. Love does not give up easily. Once again, we are admonished in Scripture not to grow weary in well doing, for in due season we will reap if we faint not.

Christians make every effort to live in harmony with one another (verse 16). The Greek literally reads, “Think the same things toward one another” — that is, be of the same mind, and so live in agreement with one another. Since Christians have a renewed mind it should also be a common mind, sharing the same basic convictions and concerns. Without this common mind, we cannot live or work together in harmony. It is also the case that Christians are not to be too proud, but we are to associate with the lowly. Few kinds of pride are worse than snobbery. Snobs are obsessed with questions of status, class, division, tribe, and caste. Sometimes those who have belonged to a church through the years can turn what used to be a loving congregation with open doors into a glorified social club. This happens when we become more concerned with our status and standing in the church than with opening our doors to any and all who would like to draw near to God. Such people claim to be standing on the promises of God but many times they are sitting on the premises protecting their church turf.

D. No Repaying Evil for Evil among the People of God
(Romans 12:17-21)

Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

When we have truly come into an understanding of who God is and what He has done for us and for our salvation in Jesus Christ, we not only learn how to love one another in Christian community, but we also learn how to love those on the outside who are opposed to or simply unmindful of God and His redemptive purposes on earth. If we include verse 14, this remaining passage contains four resounding negative commands: 1) do not curse (verse 14); 2) do not repay evil for evil (verse 17); 3) do not take revenge (verse 19); and 4) do not be overcome by evil (verse 21).

Retaliation and revenge are absolutely forbidden to the followers of Jesus. Christians are
too inclined toward tit for tat, or to get even with an opponent. The urge to settle the score gets the best of us from time to time. Evil must not be met with more evil. Overcoming evil leaves the future to God, who alone is able to minister wrath with justice. It takes a steady diet of prayer to overcome the desire to pay people back who hurt our good name or embarrass us publicly. Instead of retribution, Jesus calls on us to imitate Him. To be sure, there is a place for the punishment of evildoers in the law courts, and Paul addressed this in Romans 13. But in their personal conduct, Christians should never seek to get back at others by injuring them, even when they have injured us physically or emotionally. A refusal to retaliate is a very early feature of the Christian ethical tradition.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Throughout this letter to the Romans, Paul had been conscious of the tensions between Jews and Gentiles in the churches of Rome. In his conclusion of chapter 12, he admonished all believers, irrespective of their ethnic origin, to act as brothers and sisters in the one international family of God. He reminded them that they had precisely the same vocation to be the holy, committed, humble, loving, and conscientious people of God. They had the responsibility to love one another and to be genuine and true in their dealings with one another. Even though they had come from different backgrounds, he called for unity and peace in the body of Christ in Rome. In a time of so much division and strife in our contemporary setting, Paul’s message of love, unity, and peaceful living among those within and outside the church should resonate with all people of faith in the opening years of the twenty-first century.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, we pray for that love that runs from heart to heart and breast to breast. Help us to so live among one another that all will be able to experience that peace in Christ and in community that passes all understanding. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(August 13-19, 2018)

Loving and Just Behavior

MONDAY, August 13: “Many Members in One Body” (1 Corinthians 12:12-26)
TUESDAY, August 14: “Aim to Live by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16-26)
WEDNESDAY, August 15: “Respond to Abuse with a Blessing” (1 Peter 3:8-12)
FRIDAY, August 17: “Don’t Act by Human Standards” (2 Corinthians 10:1-5)
SATURDAY, August 18: “New Life in Christian Community” (Romans 12:1-8)
SUNDAY, August 19: “Behavioral Action Goals of Christians” (Romans 12:9-21)
PRACTICING JUSTICE

ADULT/YOUTH

ADULT TOPIC: Equity in Character
YOUTH TOPIC: Live on Purpose

CHILDREN

GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Living like Christ
CHILDREN’S TOPIC: Living in Peace

DEVOOTIONAL READING
Romans 8:1-11

ADULT/YOUTH

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 4:25–5:2; Colossians 3:1-17
PRINT PASSAGE: Colossians 3:5-17
ADULT KEY VERSE: Colossians 3:12
YOUTH KEY VERSE: Colossians 3:14

Colossians 3:5-17—KJV
5 Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry:
6 For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience:
7 In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them.
8 But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth.
9 Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds;
10 And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him:
11 Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and is in all.
12 Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering;

Colossians 3:5-17—NIV
5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.
6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.
7 You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.
8 But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.
9 Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices
10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.
11 Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.
12 Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.
Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:
1. Explore the symbolic significance of being clothed in Christ for living justly in the world.
2. Appreciate ways that others have demonstrated being clothed in Christ.
3. Commit to living justly.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED
Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH
—In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul talked about being new in Christ. Here, the author was assuming that one had taken off his or her old self and its practices, and has his or her own new self.
—All are equal in God’s eyes . . . everyone (Colossians 3:11).
—This expectation is not for everyone, but only for those who have accepted God’s invitation to be God’s own chosen people through Jesus Christ (Colossians 3:9-10).
—God is concerned about our being faithful members of the body of Christ that display God’s love and forgiveness (Colossians 3:13).
—God is concerned about both our words and our deeds being done in the name of the Lord Jesus. God is praised and thanked when Jesus is lifted up in our lives (Colossians 3:17).
—The Greek terms απεδυω and ενδυω refer to putting off and putting on clothing. This

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: People want to live lives that make a difference. What makes for living justly in the world? Paul encouraged the faithful to clothe themselves with the love of Christ and let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts.
figurative language, probably drawn from the baptismal rite, is used extensively in this passage.
—In verse 11, the term Greek refers to all Gentiles as contrasted with Jews. The demographic descriptors indicate the entire world in its sections. This is contrasted with Christ as the only reconciler for all.
—The Scythian in verse 11 refers to an uncultured person, mainly from around the Black Sea.
—Paul’s analogy of putting off the “old self” and putting on the “new self” in verses 9-10 is parallel to his discussion in Romans 6.

**Teachers of CHILDREN**
—Living the Christian life means seeking to emulate Christ in all things.
—Christ makes it possible for us to put away our old lives and live new lives in Him.
—The new life in Christ begins now and will be made complete in the glory yet to be revealed.
—Paul contrasted the evils of this life with the virtues of the new life.
—Paul was confident that believers can begin living the new life now.
—We are challenged to strengthen one another in the new life by living in peace with each other.

**THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

Humankind’s awareness of the universe around us lends new force to the central message of the book of Colossians—for, here, Christ is set forth in a cosmic context, as He through whom the universe came to be, upon whom its coherence depends, for whom it was created, and in whom alone it will be restored to its primeval harmony. In this epistle, Paul answered the earliest of many attempts to relegate Christ to some subordinate role. He reaffirmed the divine fullness of Christ as the key to all the fullness of life in Christ. It is in Christ and through Christ that we become new people. This is the letter’s permanent value, making the book of Colossians both a theological feast and a spiritual tonic.

Paul’s three-year mission to Ephesus ensured that all the residents of Asia heard the Word of the Lord. Among those was a man named Epaphras, almost certainly a citizen of Colossae (see Colossians 4:12). It was from Epaphras that the Colossians had learned of the grace of God (see Colossians 1:7).

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON**

The letter to the Colossian Christians opens by identifying those who are “in Colossae” and “in Christ” (Colossians 1:2). This opening is suggestive both for the issues to be dealt with in the book of Colossians and for broader questions about Christian identity in their socio-cultural context. The readers are located both in their particular geographical environment—shaped by its religious, social, and political realities—and in the sphere of the lordship of Christ. One of the key questions dealt with throughout the letter is how the lordship of Christ will impact the culture and society in which they lived. The phrase “in Christ,” which appears throughout the letter, refers to the relationship of the believers’ incorporation into and union with Christ. Again and again, in various forms, Paul would appeal to the implications of this relationship in his attempts to persuade the Colossians to remain true to the Gospel as they lived out their calling in the social structures of their day. How
they lived, how they behaved, and the manner in which they conducted themselves on a daily basis was an ardent witness to the rule and reign of Christ in their lives.

**PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE LESSON**

**Barbarian:** a person who is different from the dominant class or group. The Greeks used it to describe anyone who did not speak the Greek language.

**Scythians [SITH-ee-unhs]:** a barbaric race who lived in Scythia, an ancient region of southeastern Europe and southwestern Asia. In biblical times, the Scythians were a tribe of nomadic raiders notorious for their cruelty and barbarism.

**KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON**

**Death (verse 5, NIV)—Greek: nekroō (ne-kro'-ō):** deaden, be dead.

**Holy (verse 12)—Greek: hagios (hā'-gē-os):** sacred, physically pure, morally blameless, ceremonially consecrated.

**Peace (verse 15)—Greek: eirēnē (ā-rā'-nā):** peace of mind.

**Renewed (verse 10)—Greek: ankainoo (ā-nā-kī-no’-ō):** to renovate, to make new.

**TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON**

I. **Introduction**
   A. Modeling the Christian Life
   B. Biblical Background

II. **Exposition and Application of the Scripture**
   A. Eliminating the Negatives of Life (Colossians 3:5)
   B. The “Then and Now” Quality of Life in Christ (Colossians 3:6-8)
   C. The Sins We Commit through Our Speech (Colossians 3:9-11)
   D. Proof of New Life in Christ (Colossians 3:12-17)

III. **Concluding Reflection**

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I. **INTRODUCTION**

A. Modeling the Christian Life

   What does it mean to live in Christ in a day and time when we are constantly bombarded with so much that is ungodly and harmful to our walks of faith?

   Today more than ever, we need Christians in our communities to model what it looks like to live in Christ Jesus. Christians can have a positive impact on their surroundings simply by living out the transformative claims of life in Christ Jesus. This is not to suggest that we have to live perfect lives, but it is to say that our communities desperately need us to live in such a way that others can see what a change Christ can make in one’s life. What does it mean to strip off the old self and live in the newness of Christ? If nothing else, it means a change in the things we value and the things we hold dear. A life in Christ calls for a rearranging of our priorities. It calls on us to focus on what really matters in life. We become more conscious of our behavior and the impact it has on others. Love and humility come to be the defining principles in our new lives in Christ.
B. Biblical Background

Paul was dealing with a heresy in Colossae that involved both Jewish and pagan elements. In general terms, the error can be described as a version of the Christian faith that was distorted and obscured by concepts of a Gnostic type. Gnostics were those who believed that they were saved through possessing a special knowledge. The effect of the heresy with which Paul was dealing sought to loosen humankind’s hold on the Christ of whom they had first been taught. It also sought to obscure, even to deny, the uniqueness of the ascended Lord.

Paul, however, insisted on the fullness of deity indwelling Christ; on His preeminence in creation over thrones, dominions, and principalities (see Colossians 1:16); on His headship over them in status (see Colossians 2:10); and on His victory over them at Calvary (see Colossians 2:15). Paul’s argument was that to doubt the fullness of Christ is to miss the fullness, richness, and sufficiency of the Christian life.

Paul turned in chapter 3 from expounding the fullness of Christ as a sufficient answer to the doctrine of the heretics to describing the fullness of the Christian life, as a sufficient antidote to the false promises of those who have embraced the heresy—thus, his turn to the dos and don’ts of Christian behavior. Paul rightly argued that the Christ-filled life cannot at the same time be filled with Christ-less things. Paul well knew that although conversion involved a total change of moral direction, it was no prescription for instant holiness. The Christ-filled life is a way of being in the world that we must pursue every day. It is not only that the Christian lives in two worlds at once, but it is also the case that death to the old and life to the new have to be realized gradually, albeit deliberately and intentionally. The radical change experienced in the inward nature has to be experienced in character and lived out in conduct.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Eliminating the Negatives of Life

(Colossians 3:5)

Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Paul began by admonishing the Colossian Christians to put to death whatever in them was earthly (verse 5). In Paul’s theology, each person has a twofold moral personality. There is in all of us the “old person” and the “new.” The old person and all its members must be pitilessly slain. Why such strong language? Such language is required to demonstrate in a very pointed fashion that true conversion makes for a radical reorientation in the Christian’s life. In Paul’s worldview, it is wrong to suggest that what happens to a Christian in conversion is but a mere change in status. If it is indeed conversion, it is so radical that it can appear as a death, a “putting off” of the former self. It marks a turning around, a new birth, so much so that at a definite point in the conversion experience permanent consequences come into view. The new self calls forth new things, enshrines a new nature, accepts new resources, and lives in a totally new world (in Christ). Thus, Christians must now build a new character appropriate to this change in the working out of their salvation.

What exactly are we being called on to put
to death in our new lives in Christ? In verse 5, the writer listed vices that are detrimental to Christian growth and maturity. The first five vices start off as explicitly sexual ones and gradually become more general. Heading the vices is fornication (porneia), a broad term denoting general sexual immorality that is also defined in some instances as adultery and intercourse with prostitutes. Impurity (akatharsia) is also associated with sexual sins and is found in combination with porneia; one is specific, while the latter is more broad.

Passion and evil desire likewise form a pair, as both are inward. Passion or lust (pathos) is understood here as uncontrolled sexual appetite. It is not used by Paul in the sense of the Greek schools of ethical philosophy. Here, it is understood as an inward fire that is kindled in the heart. Evil desire (epithymia) takes the list of vices in a more general direction, referring to all forms of sinful desire. It is a base desire defined as reaching out for an object in order to satisfy the self. These four sexual sins are thus joined to covetousness (pleonexia), defined as insatiable greed whereby people assume that things or other people exist simply for their own gratification. Covetousness is also equated with idolatry. The thought is that all idolatry involves some form of covetousness. The damnableness of covetousness lies in the fact that its quality or nature is idolatry—worshipping gold instead of God.

Why is it so important to put these things out of our lives? Because they hinder us in our desire for a more intimate knowledge of God and the ways of God and how God works out His redemptive purposes in our lives. Our foreparents used to recite a hymn that said in part, “I cannot live in sin and feel the Savior’s love; Oh wash me and I shall be clean and own me as your child.” It is that desire to feel the Savior’s love that should move us to put away the sins that cause us to feel estranged and alienated from the love of Christ.

B. The “Then and Now” Quality of Life in Christ (Colossians 3:6-8)

For which things’ sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience: In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth.

The previously mentioned vices are so serious that on account of them the wrath of God is coming, and the implication is that those who are included in them will experience that holy anger of God and the judgment that results from it. The “once . . . but now” contrasting language in verses 7-8 recalls the decisive change that has taken place for those who now live in Christ. Whereas the lives of the Colossian Christians were once characterized by such vices and deserved the coming wrath of God, this is no longer the case. Instead, their new life is to be characterized by a total transformation in which they are held accountable for putting aside or discarding the old vices. “These are the ways you also once followed,” declared Paul (verse 7, NRSV). As former Gentiles, the Colossians, too, had walked among their pagan neighbors and were altogether like them.

The word rendered “put off” (apostethethe), or “get rid of,” refers to the changing of one’s garments or putting off old clothes. It gives the picture of discarding sins like an old, worn-out garment that is no longer fitting or appropriate. Lay them aside, Paul admonished. The reference may also be to the practice of putting off
one’s old clothes at baptism in exchange for a new and pure white robe (verse 8).

A further list of five additional evils was provided to ensure that the Colossians understood the extent of their responsibility to abandon the old way of life. The previously mentioned vices harm the sinner, but those he now mentioned hurt other people. Anger, which heads this new list of sins, is given an overwhelmingly negative evaluation in the Scriptures because of the estrangement that nearly always accompanies its expression. It also brings forth a spirit of personal resentfulness and provocation. It is a slow-burning anger that one nurtures and keeps burning. Rage or wrath is synonymous with anger. It is indicative of sudden outbursts or explosions of passion and temper. Such behavior is never constructive; thus, the Christian is to be liberated from this in Christ.

Malice includes any attitude or action that intends to harm another. Malice can also express itself through slander (blasphemia), the abuse and vilifying of others through the use of shameful, foul, or obscene language. Blasphemy can also be defined as the use of speech either against God or one’s fellow human being with the intent to injure Christians who are called to a wholesome way of life in our words, deeds, and daily conduct. As we grow in grace, we put off the evils that hinder our walk in Christ and keep us from being all that God would have us to be. We are called to be the example of a more just and verdant way of living. And this we are to practice daily.

C. The Sins We Commit through Our Speech (Colossians 3:9-11)

Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.

The emphasis on the previously mentioned sins of speech is continued in the prohibition of lying. There can be no room for lies in the Christian community because they poison communication and breed suspicion instead of mutual trust. Paul beseeched the Colossians to remove filthy language and lying from their lips (verse 9). Such talk is worthless, but even worse, it can be very harmful in contrast to the speech that edifies (builds up) the body of Christ. The devil is the father of lies (see John 8:44). The Christian is to give no place to the devil or any other entity that is opposed to God and besmirches the good name and just deeds of those in Christ.

Paul then sought to encourage the Colossians by juxtaposing the new self to the old self. The old person is the person as identified with the old humanity, living under the present evil age and its powers. The new person is the believer as identified with the new humanity, the new order of existence inaugurated by Christ’s death and resurrection (verse 9). Verse 10 makes clear that this new person is not yet totally new, but is in the process of renewal. The underlying thought is the familiar “already” and “not yet” of the new age.

Paul concluded by saying that in the new self, there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all (verse 11). He then ran through a list of the most vital differences found in his day. “Greek and Jew” were opposed to each other—the Greek emphasizing his Greek culture and high social
standing, and the Jew boasting of his divine religion. Both prerogatives disappear before the spiritual glory of the new self. The only prerogative that could erase these false distinctions and differences was the new self. Christ is placed last in verse 11 because He is indeed absolutely everything needed in the new person.

D. **Proof of New Life in Christ**  
(Colossians 3:12-17)

Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.

Paul then issued further exhortations about the qualities necessary for living in the new community. Just as believers have already stripped off the old person but still need to discard specific vices, so now—although they have already put on the new person—they still need to clothe themselves with specific virtues. The readers are described as God’s elect, holy and beloved (verse 12). This trio of characteristics was used to describe Israel in times past. Now Gentile readers are reminded that through God’s initiative in Christ they, too, have now been chosen and set apart for God, who has bestowed upon them His divine love. As the new people of God, they are to put on the qualities of the new humanity.

The five virtues listed in verse 12 are required for harmonious living as a community. The new people of God need a deep and heartfelt sympathy for the situations of others and active consideration (compassion and kindness) for others’ interests and needs. The term for humility—*tapeinophrosyne*—listed here among the virtues is viewed positively as the ability to count others better than oneself. It is based on a proper sense of self-worth and not simply weakness of character. Closely associated with this quality is gentleness, entailing courtesy, considerateness, and a willingness to waive one’s rights rather than to be concerned for personal gain on one’s relations with others. Also intimately related to these virtues is patience, the ability not to become frustrated and enraged, but to make allowances for others and their shortcomings, and to tolerate their exasperating behavior.

In verse 13, we are told to bear with one another and to forgive one another. These two clauses reflect a realistic view about problems of relationships in any community and the inevitability of complaints, clashes, and grievances. Bearing with others involves fully accepting them for who they are (with their weaknesses and faults), and allowing them worth and space. The motivation to forgive is made real for us when we remember that we, too, have already been forgiven by Jesus Christ.

The admonition for Christians to clothe themselves with love (verse 14) is reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 13, which states that love is the greatest of all the virtues. Love functions
here in a way that leads to perfection or maturity. Love acts as a bond not only for the other virtues, but also for the community in which they are being displayed. Perfection, then, is not some individually gained state, but a corporate one achieved in a relationship of love.

Finally, we are called upon to do everything “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (verse 17). We can only do this when we recognize that His lordship claims every part of a believer’s life. To strive to do everything in His name is not to be saddled with some burdensome duty; rather, we do it as a natural expression of the thanksgiving we offer to God through Jesus Christ. By stressing that there can be no discontinuity between a Christian’s worship and their everyday lives, Paul continued to stress that it is not enough to talk that talk—we must walk that walk of faith as well.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Even when we fail to meet the standard of perfection put before us by Jesus Christ, our heads and our hearts should at least be pointed in the right direction. Our lives should reflect the lives of the “being saved” community of faith. Our actions matter. How we interact with people has consequences for our faith. What we say and what we do in our daily lives reflect on the newness of life that we claim in Jesus Christ. Though we are finite, fallible creatures of the moment, we are nonetheless expected to reflect the love of Jesus Christ that has been shed abroad in our hearts. It remains a true saying to this day: “Reputation is what people say about you, but character is who you really are.” For those who are truly in Christ, every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, give us the stamina and determination to live before the world in such a way that they will know that Christ Jesus has indeed made a change in our lives. Let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly each day of our lives. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS
(August 20-26, 2018)

Practicing Justice
MONDAY, August 20: “Buried in Baptism; Raised with Christ” (Colossians 2:6-12)
TUESDAY, August 21: “God’s Example in All Relationships” (Matthew 5:43-48)
WEDNESDAY, August 22: “Life with Christ in the World” (John 17:14-19)
THURSDAY, August 23: “Life in the Spirit” (Romans 8:1-11)
FRIDAY, August 24: “Speak Truthfully Always” (Ephesians 4:25-30)
SATURDAY, August 25: “Replace Anger with Forgiveness” (Ephesians 4:31–5:2)
SUNDAY, August 26: “Live the New Life in Christ” (Colossians 3:1-17)