

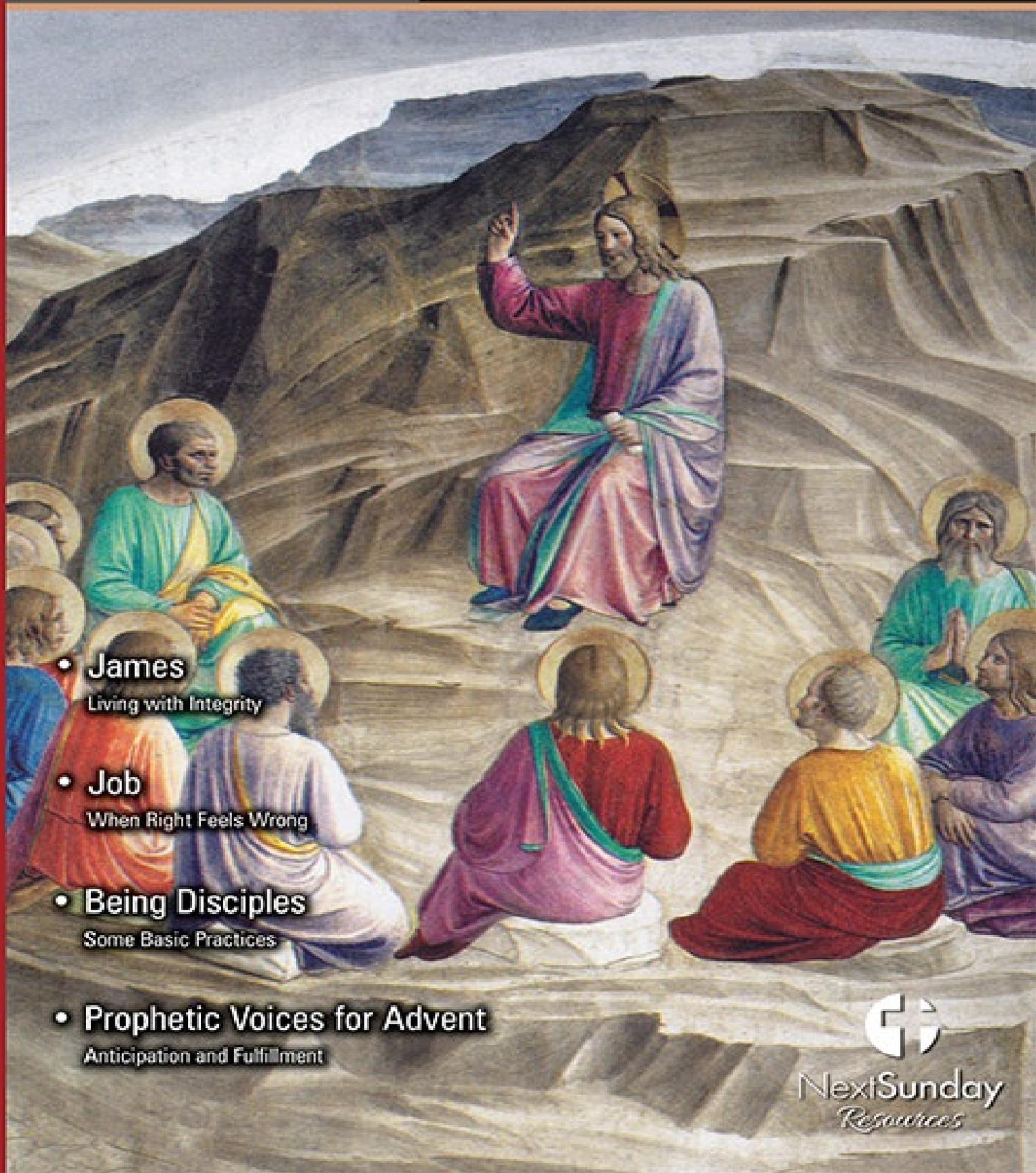
**connections**

LECTIONARY-BASED BIBLE STUDY

# STUDY GUIDE

September—December 2018

STUDY GUIDE



- **James**

Living with Integrity

- **Job**

When Right Feels Wrong

- **Being Disciples**

Some Basic Practices

- **Prophetic Voices for Advent**

Anticipation and Fulfillment



Next Sunday  
*Resources*



## *Study Guide*

September–December 2018

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# Using the *Connections Study Guide*

It is important for Christians to be familiar with and well informed about the Bible. The *Connections Study Guide* has been designed to help you grow in faith, discipleship, and knowledge of the Bible. Following the Revised Common Lectionary, the *Connections Study Guide* presents a helpful mix of classic Bible study and contemporary insight. The *Connections Study Guide* uses the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible as its Scripture text. The classic Bible study approach, the relevance of contemporary experience, and the precision of the NRSV all work together to make these lessons valuable companions for effective, weekly adult Bible study.

## **Each lesson in the *Connections Study Guide* offers the following features:**

- A key verse to remember
- Suggested daily Bible readings related to the week's lesson
- Bible study theme introduction
- Exploring the Bible—study sections and biblical background information
- Applying the Bible—contemporary application of Bible verses
- Reflecting on the Bible—guides for devotional and prayer times
- Prayer for Today—space to write a prayer inspired by your study of the Bible

The *Connections Study Guide* lessons are designed to help the reader encounter and interact with the Scriptures. Each week's text is divided into sections to focus Bible study and to provide spiritual reflection during the week. Each session offers space to guide a time of prayer and reflection using those verses and others. A list of suggested daily Bible readings is also provided for those who wish to read more each day related to the week's text.

## **Values Upheld in the *Connections Study Guide*:**

- A passion to spread the love and peace of God
- The meaning of being a devoted disciple of Jesus Christ
- A commitment to nurturing a responsible faith
- A desire to worship God

- Commitment to the local church
- Free and cooperative action in missions
- Respect for religious liberty
- A love of the Holy Scriptures

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# Unit One

## James: Living with Integrity

James begins his letter by telling us that God has integrity—that is, God is single-minded. James also says that God’s people should have integrity. We should be single-minded as God is single-minded. God does not show partiality (3:17), and neither should God’s people (2:1-13). God has regard for the poor (5:1-6), and so should God’s people (2:5-6a). Our faith practices should have integrity (1:22, 27; 2:1-26; 3:7-13). The guiding principle, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (2:8), should produce single-mindedness in our relationships with one another. Our prayers should have integrity (1:6; 3:2-3, 17-18; 5:13-18). So should our endurance under testing and suffering (1:2-4; 5:7-18).

But James knows that not all Christians live with integrity. The double-minded pray to God doubting that God hears their prayers and will give them everything they need (1:6-8). Those who cannot control their speech reveal their double-mindedness by their double-talk (1:26; 3:1-12; 4:11-17; 5:9, 12).

James identifies the underlying problem when he says, “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (4:4). The double-minded deceive themselves by believing they can follow both God’s wisdom and the world’s wisdom (1:16, 22, 26), which leads to “disorder and wickedness of every kind” (3:14-16; see 4:1-6).

As we study James over the next five weeks, we might feel the sting of his words: “Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin” (4:17). But don’t lose hope, because God responds with grace and forgiveness to those who repent with integrity (4:7-10). We can have faith that God has integrity—that is, God has the single-minded desire to be generous and gracious.

### About the Writer

**Phil Logan** is a native of Nashville, Tennessee. He and his wife Kendra currently live in Prince Frederick, Maryland. Phil is the father of a son, William, and a daughter, Austin. He is also the proud grandfather of Kylea. He graduated from Nashville public schools, Belmont University, and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has served as pastor of Baptist and Methodist churches. Phil is currently a seventh grade social studies teacher at Southern Middle School in Lusby, Maryland.

September 2, 2018

# Doers of the Word

Lesson Text: James 1:17-27    Background Text: James 1

## A Verse to Remember—James 1:22

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

### Suggested Daily Bible Readings (August 27–September 1, 2018)

Monday: Ephesians 5:21–6:9

Thursday: James 1:1-8

Tuesday: Ephesians 6:21-24

Friday: James 1:9-16

Wednesday: John 15:16-25

Saturday: John 18:28-32

## INTRODUCTION

We receive advice from many sources. Young people are often advised, “Don’t settle.” Don’t settle for a romantic relationship just because someone is convenient or familiar. Don’t settle for a career that will not make full use of your gifts. Don’t settle for less education than you are capable of getting. The letter of James, as well as other New Testament writings, offers similar guidance to all Christians: “Don’t settle for half-hearted discipleship.” James encourages us to realize what God has done for us in Christ and to be all we can be for Christ. In this week’s Scripture passage, he calls us to live out our faith.

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—WE ORIGINATE IN THE WORD OF TRUTH

James 1:17-18



**(17) Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (18) In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.**

God is “the Father of lights” (v. 17), which are the heavenly bodies. In many ancient cultures, people saw these heavenly bodies as divine beings that exercised control over humans, and they worshiped them as gods. James doesn’t want us to be deceived (1:16); he reaffirms the biblical teaching that God is the Creator of the “lights.”

Unlike the heavenly bodies, “there is no variation or shadow due to change” with God (v. 17). Heavenly bodies move. Sometimes they overshadow each other, as they do during an eclipse. Their appearances change. Not so with God. Nothing overshadows God. God’s character doesn’t vary. God is whole and undivided.

God is gracious and generous in nature and in action, giving wisdom generously to all who ask (1:5). God created us all in God’s image (3:9) and made us preeminent in creation (1:18). God hasn’t left us without direction and has implanted the word of truth within us (1:21). God provides teachers to guide the church (3:1). God “gives grace to the humble” (4:6) and will draw near to us (4:8). God hears our prayers and forgives our sins (5:13-16, 19-20).

Our gracious God has given us new “birth by the word of truth”—that is, the gospel of Jesus Christ (v. 18). But humans are double-minded, wanting to live by two standards. In this double-mindedness, humans follow their desires, which give birth to sin, which in turn gives birth to death (1:13-15; Johnson, 1273).

But God does not give up on us. The “word of truth” teaches us that God in Christ gives us new birth that makes us “a kind of first fruits” (v. 18). This means we are the evidence, the fruits, of what God is doing to bring salvation to the world (Church, 343). We must humbly welcome this word of truth, for none of us can earn God’s grace by our actions.

Our creation and redemption fulfill God’s purpose (v. 18) and express God’s grace. God’s actions express God’s very self. God is characterized by a single-minded focus on grace. There is “no variation or shadow due to change” in God (v. 17).

### **Applying the Bible**

God’s purpose is to save, which God does through the love and grace that Jesus Christ reveals. This is the good news of Jesus Christ! We should regularly remind ourselves of the content of this good news; one way to do this is by

participating in worship and Bible study. Regular reading of the Gospels is another way to grow in our knowledge of what God has done, is doing, and will do through Christ. Consider making a schedule for reading the Gospels. It could be as simple as reading a chapter each day. Commit yourself to following the schedule you establish.

### Reflecting on the Bible

We can become so wrapped up in our cares and activities that we forget the simple truths that make all the difference. I attended a retreat several years ago, and we had a special way of greeting one another during the worship times. The leader would say, “God is good....” The congregation would respond with, “All the time. And all the time....” Then the worship leader would respond with, “God is good.” This week, stop in your daily activities and contemplate God’s grace. Write down some of the good things God has given you. Practice giving thanks to God for God’s grace and love.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—MEEKLY WELCOME THE WORD OF TRUTH

James 1:19-21



**(19) You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; (20) for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. (21)**

**Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.**

We “must understand” what God has done and what God wants us to do. Our thoughts and actions should reflect God’s generosity and graciousness.

A generous and gracious person is “quick to listen, slow to speak” (v. 19). Such communication requires openness to other people so that we are willing to listen to their perspective. It also requires empathy for other people so that we try to understand their experience before evaluating it. We aren’t obligated to accept everything the person says, but God wants us to try to understand them through careful listening and cautious speaking.

We should also be “slow to anger” (v. 19). Other people’s perspectives can challenge our beliefs or actions and make us defensive or angry, which can impose barriers between them and us. When this happens, we lose the opportunity to minister to them.

We should treat others with patience born of grace and generosity because that is how God treats us. God listens to whatever we need to say. Expressions of frustration and even anger with God in some of the Psalms (13:1-6 and 42:9-11, for example) offer evidence of this. But, even though God wants to give us a better perspective, God listens. We should act toward one another as God acts toward us.

Anger “does not produce God’s righteousness” (v. 20). Defensive anger comes from self-interest; the expression of such anger isn’t generous or gracious because we are thinking of ourselves and not of other people. James also calls us to get rid of vulgar and malicious speech that we might use to express our anger (v. 21a).

We are instead to “welcome with meekness the implanted word” (v. 21b). The word of truth comes to us by God’s grace, and we welcome it with meekness by faith. We have no cause for boasting. We can’t demand salvation from God based on anything we have done. We can only humbly welcome the word “that has the power to save [our] souls” (see Eph 3:8-10).

### **Applying the Bible**

Think back to the last time you spoke or acted in anger. What were the circumstances? What caused you to flare up and lash out? Anger often arises because we feel threatened. Was this the case with your anger? If so, how were you threatened? What was the outcome of your angry words or actions? Write a paragraph about the sources of your anger. Then make a list of steps you could take to help you become “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” when confronted with similar situations. When you are in the heat of the moment, how can you remember who you are and what you should do?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Words like these can discourage us. We know that we are prone to self-centeredness and anger. We may feel that James’s call to move us beyond

defensive attitudes that lead to angry words and actions are so idealistic that they are out of reach. We may think that such wisdom is beyond our capability. But when we read James 1:1-8 (Thursday's Bible reading), we find that God will help us gain the wisdom that will enable us to live in ways that reflect God's grace and love. As you pray this week, ask God to help you grow toward the wisdom of patience and empathy.



## **EXPLORING THE BIBLE—BE DOERS OF THE WORD OF TRUTH**

**James 1:22-27**



**(22) But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. (23) For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; (24) for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. (25) But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. (26) If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. (27) Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.**

“The word” in the phrase “But be doers of the word and not merely hearers” (v. 22) is the same word James has mentioned twice before (1:18, 21). He now encourages us to demonstrate by our actions our reception of the good news. We are to exhibit the grace that is the hallmark of the gospel (see Jesus’ teaching in Mt 7:24-27).

James says that those who hear the word without doing it are like people who study their faces in a mirror but forget what they look like as soon as they walk away. Hearing without doing deceives them (vv. 16, 26) into believing that they understand what it means to have new life through the implanted word of truth (vv. 18, 21), when they really don’t.

But people who study the “perfect law, the law of liberty” and act in accordance with it “will be blessed in their doing” (v. 25). This law is probably Leviticus 19:18b, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (2:8; see Mt 22:37-39).

James presents two results of doing as well as hearing the law of love. The first result is the control of our tongues (1:26). Those who curse people made in God’s image with the same tongue they use to praise God (3:9-12) may hear the word, but they don’t do it. They deceive themselves (1:16, 22) because they believe they are living in a way that produces the righteousness of God (v. 20), but in reality “their religion is worthless” (v. 26).

The second result of doing as well as hearing the word is that we will “care for orphans and widows in their distress” (v. 27). Like God, those who hear and do the word both see and act on the needs of the vulnerable. These people are able to keep themselves “unstained by the world.”

### **Applying the Bible**

James uses the word “religion” (vv. 26-27) to mean the way we express our faith through our manner of life. This is a crucial matter for him. What is your religion? How do you express your faith in Christ? What does your way of life reveal about your trust in the Lord?

Reread verses 26-27. Rewrite in your own words James’s definition of sound religious practice. Then list some ways you can better practice your religion. Commit to performing one action in the next few weeks that will demonstrate sound religion.

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

James wants us to think about how our actions do or don’t demonstrate our faith. But he also wants us to think about the motives that lie behind our actions. The “law of liberty” (v. 25), which is most likely “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (2:8), should inspire us to practice sound religion.

Read Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 (the lectionary’s Gospel reading for this week). How do Jesus’ words lead us to think about our motives? Ask God to help you have integrity—to have the right motives for living the right ways.

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September 9, 2018

# Acts of Mercy

Lesson Text: James 2:1-10, 14-17    Background Text: James 2

## A Verse to Remember—James 2:8

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

## Suggested Daily Bible Readings (September 3-8, 2018)

Monday: 1 Timothy 4:6-16

Tuesday: 1 Peter 2:19-25

Wednesday: Mark 7:9-23

Thursday: Romans 2:1-11

Friday: Romans 2:12-16

Saturday: Matthew 15:21-31

## INTRODUCTION

What do people’s appearances tell us about them? We know that the answer is, “Not much.” Why, then, do we evaluate people by their appearance? A person in a business suit makes one kind of impression on us; someone wearing dirty or torn clothing makes another. But what do we really know about the person?

James is disgusted by the practice of showing favoritism in the Christian communities he addresses. When followers of Christ adopt the practice of showing favoritism based on appearance—or on any other factors—they fail to live as true Christian communities.

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—FAVORITISM ISN’T ONE OF GOD’S FAVORITE THINGS

James 2:1-4



- (1) My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?
- (2) For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes

**in, (3) and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” (4) have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?**

James is appalled that Christians would show favoritism, especially in their worship gatherings. He indicates that those who do so should engage in serious self-reflection: “do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” (v. 1). What does such behavior reveal about the validity of their faith? Scripture is clear that God shows no partiality (Isa 56:1-8), that Jesus didn’t show partiality (Lk 15), and that God’s people shouldn’t show partiality (Lev 19:15). Such favoritism, James says, is incompatible with faith in Jesus.

James gives an example of two men who attend a Christian gathering. One enters with gold rings and fine clothes. Both the rings and the clothes are signs of his status in his community. The other man is described as poor and wearing dirty clothes. The word used to name the poor man (*ptochos*) means absolutely destitute. He has no gold rings and no fine clothes. He has nothing.

The Christian community’s treatment of the two men contrasts as sharply as the men’s appearances. They politely offer the wealthy man a seat, saying, “Sit here, please,” while they show the poor man places to stand or sit on the floor. They treat the rich man with honor and dignity but subject the poor man to contempt and shame.

The two men have done nothing to deserve their treatment. James says nothing about their character or about their religious practice. All we know is that one is rich and the other is poor. James neither condemns the rich man for his wealth nor praises the poor man for his poverty. His focus is on the way the Christian community responds to them.

By showing favoritism, these church members have stopped living like a *Christian* community. Such favoritism may happen in many settings, but it is never appropriate when Christians gather in the Lord’s name. When we behave this way, we make ourselves “judges with evil thoughts” (v. 4).

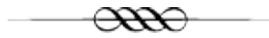
## **Applying the Bible**

Does today's church show favoritism to the rich over the poor? Do we think about rich or successful people one way and about poor people another way? If we do, is it obvious or subtle? Does the church show any other kinds of favoritism? Write down some ways we may do so. Then write down some ways we could be intentional about treating all people the same. How can you advocate for impartiality in the church's life?

### Reflecting on the Bible

Try to imagine how first-time guests feel upon entering your church. What kind of reception do they receive? Does it make a difference if no one in the congregation knew them? What happens if they are obviously very poor? Of a different nationality? How welcoming toward them are you and your fellow church members?

Read Romans 2:1-11. How do Paul's words help us think about showing partiality? Pray that your church family will treat people as God wants you to treat them.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF

James 2:5-10



**(5) Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? (6) But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? (7) Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? (8) You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (9) But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (10) For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.**

James reminds his readers of two reasons that they should not favor the rich over the poor. First, James says, “God [has] chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him” (2:5). The people James addresses are involved in a double transgression. First, they show favoritism; second, they dishonor the poor. But God shows no partiality and honors the poor who love God. These believers have forgotten the words of Psalm 82:2-4: “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” James’s words in verse 5 reflect Jesus’ teachings and actions; Jesus said his purpose was to announce good news to the poor (Lk 4:16-19; see 7:18-23), and he pronounced a blessing on the poor and the hungry (6:20-21).

Second, James says his readers have forgotten that the rich often oppress them. The rich take them to court, and in doing so the rich bring dishonor to the name of Christ in which they were baptized. James does not mean this as a condemnation of all rich people. He is concerned because church members show partiality to the rich over the poor despite the way some rich people treat the poor.

Finally, James reminds his readers of the principle that governs their interpersonal relationships: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Jas 2:8; Lev 19:18; Mt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10:25-37). Jesus said that the commandments to love God and to love neighbor summarize all the law and prophets (Mt 22:40). Showing favoritism violates the command to love our neighbors (Jas 2:9). A violation of this command is a violation of all the commands (v. 10). Paul expresses a similar thought: “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal 5:14).

### **Applying the Bible**

To be privileged means to be treated well and to be given the benefit of the doubt because of your standing in society. Depending on the cultural context, people may experience privilege because of their race, their gender, their socioeconomic status, or other factors. Is privilege a problem for the church? Do we ever confer privileged status on certain kinds of people? If so, who are they? To what people

do we fail to extend privilege? What can and should we do about the problem of privilege? How would loving our neighbor as we love ourselves help us address it?

### Reflecting on the Bible

Jesus said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled” (Lk 6:20-21). Why does Jesus pronounce blessings on the poor and hungry? If you were among the poor and the hungry, how would you know if someone loved you as they love themselves? What would it mean to have the perspective of those whom Jesus says are blessed? Pray that God will give you a perspective that will make you open to God’s blessing. Also pray that you will be one of God’s blessings to the poor.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—LET YOUR FAITH LIVE

James 2:14-17



**(14) What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? (15) If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, (16) and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? (17) So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.**

James said earlier that we should “be doers of the word” (1:22). Now he says that “faith” that expresses itself in thoughts or words but not in loving and helpful action is not true and complete faith. James acknowledges that right belief is good (2:19), but he insists that loving actions must accompany it.

Some have seen a contradiction between Paul’s teaching that salvation is by God’s grace through faith and not by works (Eph 2:8-9) and James’s teaching that faith without works is dead (Jas 2:17). But James doesn’t advocate salvation by works. The contrast he presents is not between faith and works but between a living faith that acts and one that only knows and says the right things. James insists that our works are a response to the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. Paul agrees with this; after saying that we are saved by grace through faith, he

goes on to say, “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Eph 2:10).

Jesus taught that our faith expresses itself in good works. In Jesus’ parable of the two houses, he says that those who hear and do his words will be like those who build their house on a rock (Mt 7:24-27). A verbal confession of faith isn’t sufficient; doing the will of God must accompany it (7:21).

John poses a situation much like the one James presents when he asks how it is possible for God’s love to abide in those who refuse to use their resources to help a brother or sister in need (1 Jn 3:16-18). God’s love does not in fact abide in them. John later says that “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (1 Jn 4:21b).

### **Applying the Bible**

James teaches us that true faith in Christ leads us to carry out acts of mercy for people in need. When we really follow Jesus, our lives reflect his grace, love, and compassion. We show mercy with our actions, not just with our words. James offers the example of a naked and hungry person: true faith in Christ leads us to offer clothing and food. What other examples can you think of? What are some needs around us that we can address? How can we help?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Read Mark 7:24-37 (the lectionary’s Gospel reading for this Sunday). Think about how Jesus helped people with their needs. How do Jesus’ actions help us think about ways we can live out James’s teachings about doing acts of mercy? In the Gospel text, Jesus heals a deaf man. Pray that God will open the church’s ears to the cries of those around us. Ask God to help the church do all we can do to alleviate suffering and to heal hurting people.

### **References**

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September 16, 2018

# What Words Reveal

Lesson Text: James 3:1-12    Background Text: James 3:1-12

## A Verse to Remember—James 3:11

Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?

### *Suggested Daily Bible Readings (September 10-15, 2018)*

Monday: Joshua 6:1-21

Thursday: Proverbs 15:1-17

Tuesday: Joshua 8:1-23

Friday: Proverbs 19:24-29

Wednesday: Judges 15:9-20

Saturday: Proverbs 21:1-17

## INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel asked a disciple to go to the market and buy the best cut of meat. The disciple brought back a tongue. Gamaliel then asked him to go buy the worst cut of meat. He brought back another tongue (Laws, 155). When used properly, human speech is beneficial. But when sinful desires and ambitions corrupt it, it can be destructive. When we use speech to pray, teach, preach, praise, or encourage, it benefits others. But other uses of speech are harmful and hurtful. James sees both kinds of speech in the church; he even sees them come from the same person. He is very concerned about this and wants to see change in the faith community.

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—TEACHING IS IMPORTANT

James 3:1



(1) Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Teaching is an important ministry in the church. Good teachers pass on the church's traditions accurately and thoroughly so that believers can understand them and apply them in new settings (Laws, 143).

James addresses a situation in which unqualified people are seeking to be teachers. He agrees that teachers hold an honorable place in the Christian community, but he warns that they will be held accountable for their teaching. Those who aren't qualified shouldn't seek the role.

Some people in the congregations James addresses may be creating disorder through their selfish ambition to become teachers. Such ambition is improper (3:14-18). These people use the means of the world to achieve status in the church. They seek something for themselves without God's gift of qualifications. James doesn't list qualifications for a teacher, but he does discuss the need to control the tongue (vv. 2-12). He probably knows that many of his readers do not control their tongues. His dealing with this matter both earlier (1:19, 26; 2:12) and later (4:2, 11-17; 5:9, 12) in the letter underscores how serious it is.

### **Applying the Bible**

Being a teacher isn't easy. This is especially true of those who offer guidance to growing Christians by teaching the word of God. It is a tremendous responsibility. Study and preparation take a lot of time. Teaching others what the Bible says and what the Bible asks us to do is challenging, especially when teachers realize they need guidance as much as anyone else. Take a moment to do two things for the person who teaches your class: (1) pray for them, and (2) write a note of appreciation to them.

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

It would be easy to take James 3:1 as a reason not to teach. Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-4; 13:11; and Hebrews 5:11-14. How do these Scriptures balance James's warning? Read the lists of spiritual gifts in Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:27-31; Ephesians 4:11-12; and 1 Peter 4:10-11. If God has given you the gift of teaching, can you use James 3:1 as an excuse not to do so? If God wants you to teach, pray to be the best teacher you can be.



# EXPLORING THE BIBLE—HORSES, SHIPS, AND FIRES

James 3:2-6



**(2) For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. (3) If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. (4) Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. (5) So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! (6) And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.**

In verse 2, James transitions from speaking specifically to teachers—and those who want to be teachers—to addressing the entire community of believers. He begins with the confession that “all of us make many mistakes.” James knows that all people make errors in their speech. No one is perfect in any way, including the things they say.

James uses three images to illustrate how the small tongue can affect the entire body. First, the tongue is like a bit in a horse’s mouth. The bit is small in comparison to the horse, but it controls the movement of the large animal (v. 3).

Second, even though it takes a strong wind to move a large ship, a small rudder guides the vessel. James observes that the rudder takes the ship where the pilot wants it to go, which symbolizes human decision-making (v. 4). The tongue controls the body as directed by the will of the speaker. Therefore, the tongue itself is not evil, and speech is not inherently dangerous. Prayer, teaching, preaching, and encouragement are good uses of speech. Speakers’ choices determine whether speech is good or evil.

Third, “the tongue is a fire” (v. 6a). A small fire sets great forests ablaze (v. 5b). Likewise, poor decisions in using our words are destructive. James uses strong language to describe the destruction the tongue can cause. Wrong use of speech results in a “world of iniquity” and “stains the whole body.” It “sets on fire the

cycle of nature” so that nothing escapes its destruction. It “is itself set on fire by hell” (v. 6). Speech can do the devil’s work in our lives and in the church.

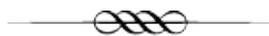
### Applying the Bible

Consider conducting a speech inventory. Keep track of how you use your words for seventy-two hours. Create two headers about your speech:

“Good/Productive” and “Bad/Destructive.” Then, whenever you say something that fits one of the categories, put a check mark beneath it. Make a note of any particularly positive or negative uses of speech. Tally your results at the end of the three days. Use this exercise to become more aware of the ways your words affect people.

### Reflecting on the Bible

Ponder Proverbs 15:1-17 (Thursday’s Bible reading) along with James’s words. Especially reflect on “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (v. 1); “The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly” (v. 2); and “A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit” (v. 4). As you pray this week, ask God to give you a spirit that wants to speak gentle, helpful, and wise words.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—NO DOUBLE-TALK ALLOWED

James 3:7-12



(7) For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, (8) but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (9) With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. (10) From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. (11) Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? (12) Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine, figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Human speech has immense power. Human beings have the ability to tame every beast of the earth (v. 7; Gen 1:26-30), as their naming by Adam demonstrates (Gen 2:19-20). But “no one can tame the tongue” (Jas 3:8a). The tongue is “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (v. 8b). It is anxious (“restless”) to do harm, and its “deadly poison” makes it capable of doing so (see 1 Pet 5:8). It is deadly because it can kill someone’s reputation, dreams, and self-esteem and because it can kill relationships.

James is confounded that people can bless God one minute and curse a sister or brother the next (vv. 9-10). He reminds his readers that when we curse people, we curse those “made in the likeness of God” (v. 9). In a sense, when we bless God and curse someone made in the image of God, we are both blessing and cursing God. We can sense James’s indignation in his statement, “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so” (v. 10). Such double-talk in the church is as inconceivable as a spring giving both fresh and brackish water, a fig tree producing olives, or a grapevine producing figs. Such things don’t happen in the world created by God. But humans, although made by God in God’s image, find ways to corrupt God’s creation by using their speech for evil purposes.

What can we do about this? Should we just try harder to control our speech? Human effort is certainly involved. James tells us to “be doers of the word” (1:22) and indicates that we can practice “pure and undefiled” religion (1:27). These teachings indicate that we can and should make the effort to overcome our selfish desires and the evil behind them. James says that those who overcome temptation “will receive the crown of life” (1:12). But James also reminds us that God helps us in our struggle. He says we have access to wisdom, and we can “ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given” to us (1:5). Later, James says that as we submit ourselves to God and draw near to God, God will draw near to us and enable us to resist the devil (4:7-8). God will help us grow and change so that our speech honors God and builds up other people.

### **Applying the Bible**

Our speech reflects the state of our minds. Read Mark 8:27-38 (the lectionary’s Gospel reading for this Sunday). Jesus rebukes Peter for “setting [his] mind not on divine things but on human things” (v. 33). What does Jesus mean by “divine

things” and “human things”? How can we develop the perspectives Jesus calls us to have? How will focusing on divine things help us use our speech in positive ways?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

How can we develop more constructive and less destructive speech? How will God help us? Read through James, noting passages that help you answer those questions. Ask God to help you use your speech to do good and not to do harm. Pray that God will help you develop greater integrity so that your good heart will produce good words and your praise of God will be matched by your encouragement of people.

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September 23, 2018

# Real Wisdom

Lesson Text: James 3:13–4:3, 7-8a    Background Text: James 3:13–5:6

## A Verse to Remember—James 3:17

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

## Suggested Daily Bible Readings (September 17-22, 2018)

Monday: Romans 3:9-20

Thursday: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Tuesday: Colossians 3:1-11

Friday: Romans 11:25-32

Wednesday: Proverbs 29:1-27

Saturday: Matthew 23:29-39

## INTRODUCTION

Most of us would like to be pure, peaceable, and gentle. But how often do our thoughts, words, and actions spring from mixed motives? How often do we experience the pain of thinking and acting differently than we know we should? How many times have we regretted speaking hurtful words? James helps us understand the root of our problem. He also helps us understand how we can sort out our struggle. James examines the origin and effect of both earthly and heavenly wisdom. He offers us the good news that heavenly wisdom comes from God, “who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly” (1:5). We need heavenly wisdom, and God wants to give it to us.

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—TWO TYPES OF WISDOM

James 3:13-18



**(13) Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. (14) But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.**

**(15) Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. (16) For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. (17) But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. (18) And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.**

James asks, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” He then answers his own question: they are people whose lives demonstrate that their “works are done with gentleness born of wisdom” (v. 13). He goes on to talk about two kinds of wisdom with different sources (one comes from above and the other from below) and different effects (one builds community and the other tears it down).

The gentleness that accompanies true wisdom contributes to peace rather than strife. For James, wisdom doesn’t consist of lofty principles available only to a select few; instead, it is God’s gift to the humble that guides us to live as Christians should. When we accept God’s gift of wisdom, our actions (“works”) reflect our faith more fully.

James contrasts heavenly wisdom that produces gentleness and peace with earthly wisdom that practices “envy and selfish ambition” (v. 14a). Envy desires to have what others have and leads to social upheaval (3:16), wars (4:1), and murders (4:2; Johnson, 1275). Envy and selfish ambition lead people to try to fulfill their goals by any means necessary.

Earthly wisdom causes us to measure other people’s worth by how much they can further our ambitions or satisfy our cravings (see Jas 4). Moreover, those who live by worldly wisdom will be arrogant and boastful (v. 14b; see 3:5). Worldly wisdom is “earthly, unspiritual, devilish” (3:15). In this three-fold description, James moves from the lesser to the greater evil. “Earthly” indicates that the wisdom is inferior because it is limited to human thinking. “Unspiritual” indicates that it only deals with physical experience (see 1 Cor 2:14-15). Finally, this wisdom is “devilish” (see 3:8), so it comes from spiritual forces opposed to God.

Earthly wisdom leads to negative behaviors. First, it leads to self-deception. James has previously warned his readers about being deceived (1:16, 22, 26). The qualities of envy and selfish ambition can certainly bring material and social rewards, but this kind of success deceives people into believing that they are living correctly and into judging others by the same faulty standard (2:1-13). Second, worldly wisdom leads to boasting and being “false to the truth” (v. 14b); this reflects James’s earlier words about the misuse of speech (Church, 375; see 3:1-12). Third, it leads to “disorder” or restlessness (v. 16; see 1:6-8; 3:8). Finally, worldly wisdom leads people to distort true religion (1:26-27) and to use prayer to try to manipulate God (4:3).

But God generously gives heavenly wisdom (1:5). Such wisdom is “pure” (v. 17) and undivided; it leads us away from a divided commitment to both God’s wisdom and the world’s wisdom.

Those who live by heavenly wisdom will, by their good life and gentle works, demonstrate that their wisdom comes from God. As our good works reflect our trust in Christ (1:22; 2:17), so our healthy and helpful actions demonstrate our reception of God’s wisdom.

God’s wisdom helps us grow toward purity and wholeness (v. 17). It leads us to be “peaceable” because it is free from selfish ambition. It is “willing to yield” and seek reconciliation; it does not seek its own way (see 1 Cor 13:4-7). It is merciful. It produces “good fruits” (see Jas 3:13; 1:26-27; 2:14-16). It is impartial; it doesn’t play favorites (see 2:1-12). Heavenly wisdom is without hypocrisy because it leads us away from the world’s wisdom. Adherence to heavenly wisdom results in “a harvest of righteousness” for peacemakers (v. 18; 1:20; see Mt 7:9)

In short, God’s wisdom leads us to live in ways that demonstrate God’s grace and love.

### **Applying the Bible**

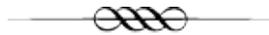
Think about your interactions with people over the past forty-eight hours. Make a list of ways that your attitudes, words, and actions reflected worldly wisdom. Make a second list of ways that they reflected heavenly wisdom. Which interactions influenced you and others negatively? Positively? What steps can

you take to prepare yourself for future interactions? How can you become more attuned to God's wisdom in your life?

### Reflecting on the Bible

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 (Thursday's Bible reading). Paul uses different words to address the same topic as James. How does Paul help us think more about the differences between earthly and heavenly wisdom?

As you pray, ask God to help you bear witness to your relationship with Christ in your attitudes, words, and actions. How can your life demonstrate God's ways as Jesus reveals them to us?



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—THE RESULTS OF LIVING BY WORLDLY WISDOM

James 4:1-3



**(1) Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? (2) You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. (3) You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.**

James sees evidence that his readers are trying to live by heavenly and earthly wisdom at the same time. They are engaged in “conflicts and disputes” with each other that originate in their internal struggles with “cravings” produced by envy and selfish ambition (v. 1). Their inner lives are a battlefield; they are constantly torn, unstable, and restless. They know they should follow God's wisdom, but they are double-minded.

The world's wisdom, which values having over being, causes a chain reaction: greed results in conflict, and conflict can lead to fighting and even murder (v. 2a). While most greedy people don't kill others, they may treat them in dehumanizing ways that detract from their lives (see Mt 5:21-23; Jas 5:6).

“You do not have,” James says, “because you do not ask” (v. 2b). People’s motives for asking matter: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures” (v. 3). They do not ask for the heavenly wisdom that God gladly gives (1:5); instead, their envy and ambition lead them to try to manipulate God into fulfilling their selfish desires. But God gives us what we need when we ask according to God’s character and purposes (1:17-18).

### **Applying the Bible**

James says that greed can lead us to act in ways that will do harm to other people. He also says that greed can negatively affect our prayer life, because it is inappropriate for us to pray out of selfishness. Can you remember some times when greed has caused you to act in ways that harmed another person or damaged your relationship with someone? How did your behavior in those situations affect you? How could things have been different if you had acted out of kindness and generosity instead? Commit to pursuing God’s better way in the future.

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Read Colossians 3:1-11 (Tuesday’s Bible reading). Paul says, “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (vv. 1-3). He goes on to encourage his readers to “put to death...whatever in you is earthly” (v. 5a); he lists several of those “earthly” things, one of which is greed (v. 5b). According to Paul, we can live in heavenly ways because Christ has given us new life. Ask God to keep you aware of the salvation that empowers you to live in God’s way for you.



## **EXPLORING THE BIBLE—THE NEED TO REPENT**

**James 4:7-8a**



**(7) Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (8a) Draw near to God, and he will**

## **draw near to you.**

The situation isn't hopeless. James's readers, including us, can repent because God "gives all the more grace" and "gives grace to the humble" (4:6).

Verses 7-8a contain the first three of ten commands James uses in calling his readers to repent (see vv. 8b-10 for the other seven).

First, James says that repentance requires submission to God (v. 7a). True wisdom comes by the grace of God, who gives it to us generously (1:5). God gives wisdom to people of any age group, socioeconomic status, gender, or nationality. Wisdom is God's gift, and if we humbly (see v. 6) submit to God, we will receive it.

Second, James says, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (v. 7b). James doesn't give specifics about what it means to resist the devil, but we can be certain that God will give us what we need to do so. Paul says we can withstand Satan by wearing the whole armor of God (Eph 6:10-17).

Third, James tells us, "Draw near to God" (v. 8a) and assures us that "[God] will draw near to [us]." God wants to be in a close relationship with us in which we will find the wisdom to live in God's way. God wants to be near to us; do we want to be near to God? God wants to give us heavenly wisdom; do we want such wisdom?

## **Applying the Bible**

Each of us needs to evaluate the state of our relationship with God, but we all need to draw closer to God. None of us is as close to God as we could or should be. In what areas of your life do you need to draw closer to God? In what areas do you need to submit more fully to God's will and way? In what areas do you need to resist the devil more forcefully? Make a personal commitment to enhance your relationship with the Lord.

## **Reflecting on the Bible**

Read Mark 9:30-37 (the lectionary's Gospel reading for this Sunday). Jesus reveals God's deepest wisdom to us. When he tries to tell his disciples that he will suffer, die, and rise again, they don't understand. But instead of asking him about it, they go off on their own selfish agendas. What can we learn from this

conversation between Jesus and his disciples? Are we seeking to learn from Jesus how we are supposed to live? Pray to have the courage to learn from and follow Jesus.

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September 30, 2018

# Prayers of Faith

Lesson Text: James 5:13-20    Background Text: James 5:7-20

## A Verse to Remember—James 5:15

The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

## Suggested Daily Bible Readings (September 24-29, 2018)

Monday: James 4:8-17

Thursday: Acts 4:13-31

Tuesday: James 5:1-6

Friday: Acts 12:20-25

Wednesday: John 8:21-38

Saturday: Matthew 5:13-20

## INTRODUCTION

James has written a lot about inappropriate uses of speech. He concludes his letter by focusing on appropriate uses of speech: prayer, praise, confession, and persuasion. Earlier James instructed his readers to accept suffering with joy, because their endurance under testing would lead to maturity. As part of their maturation process, they would receive wisdom from God if they asked for it (1:2-5). Now James instructs individuals to express both their sorrows and their joys to God. But James also deals with the communal dimension of speech. The sick should call for the church's leaders to pray for them. The cheerful should sing songs of praise. People should confess their sins to one another. And the church should be alert for those who wander from the fellowship so they can persuade them to return.

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—PRAYER FOR THE SICK

James 5:13-16a



(13) Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. (14) Are

**any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. (15) The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. (16a) Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.**

James says that those who are suffering should pray (v. 13a). Earlier in the letter, he says that trials are opportunities to grow in our faith because they produce endurance and maturity. But we are not on our own; God will give us the wisdom we need when we ask for it (1:2-5). Now James reminds us that prayer is an appropriate Christian response to suffering.

Experiences of joy also provide opportunities for prayer in the form of songs of praise (v. 13b). This is a helpful reminder that prayer is not reserved only for times of trouble. Prayer is also a way to talk to God about all the circumstances of life, whether they are positive, negative, or neutral. Praying as a regular form of communication expresses our trust in God and enriches our relationship with God.

Praying with our sisters and brothers also enriches our relationship with them. Paul encourages us, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). Such prayer is the opposite of the selfish prayers that James has condemned (4:1-3).

In the church, the sick don’t suffer alone. James says they should call for the elders to pray over them and anoint them with oil that symbolizes God’s healing power (v. 14). The elders offer this ministry as representatives of Christ and the church. James says that prayer and anointing should be done “in the name of the Lord.” This is not a magic phrase that obligates God to do what we want; it means that the prayer is offered in light of who Jesus is and how he would pray. His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is a good example. Jesus asks God for something specific, to “remove this cup from me,” but he adds a phrase that indicates his humble mindset: “yet, not what I want, but what you want” (Mk 14:36). Praying with selfishness and a sense of entitlement (see 4:3) is not praying in the Lord’s name.

When James says, “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up” (v. 15), he isn’t saying that prayer will automatically lead to physical healing. Even people who experience physical healing will die someday. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and healed his body, but Lazarus still died eventually (Jn 11:1-44). We believe that God will heal the sick whether or not they are physically cured. We should pray that God will heal them physically, but we should also expect God to do “far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph 3:20; Martin, 216). God is gracious and generous (1:5), and we can pray in faith that God will give those we pray for what they most need, even if their healing comes in a different way.

The word translated “save” (*sōdzō*) in verse 15 often refers to a sinner’s salvation. It has the sense of being made whole, which encompasses emotional and spiritual wholeness as well as physical well-being. James focuses on physical healing, but he also has spiritual healing in view: “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (v. 16a). James emphasizes the health of the Christian community as well as the healing of individuals. Because the church is a community, we confess to and pray for one another. As individual believers become more spiritually healthy, the community will be healthier too. Likewise, as the community becomes more spiritually healthy, individual believers within that community will also be healthier.

### **Applying the Bible**

Many churches have a prayer ministry, and people who feel a particular calling to prayer may find it a meaningful way to share their gift. It’s also good if everyone in the church family prays for each other. Likewise, it is healthy to cultivate trusted relationships in which we feel safe confessing our sins to each other. Such practices require spiritual maturity. What steps can you take to develop a spirit that is filled with kindness, mercy, and compassion?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

James says that we have a responsibility to pray for each other and to hear each other’s confessions so we can experience healing and forgiveness. To fulfill this responsibility in appropriate ways, we need to develop a sense of love and care for each other. Read Mark 9:38-50 (the lectionary’s Gospel text for this Sunday). How do Jesus’ words help us think about our responsibility to each other? As

you pray, ask God to fill you with love and compassion so that others can trust you with their deepest pain.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—THE PRAYER OF THE RIGHTEOUS

James 5:16b-18



**(16b) The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. (17) Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. (18) Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.**

James offers the prophet Elijah as an example of a “righteous” person whose prayers were “powerful and effective” (v. 16b; see 1 Kings 17:1–18:46). Elijah was a regular person—like us—who trusted God to answer his prayers (v. 17). He prayed fervently without doubting and being double-minded (see 1:6). He demonstrated his trust in God by his actions (see 1:22). The prayers of the righteous are effective not because these people know the right words to say but because their actions reveal their trust in the Lord.

We see Elijah’s active faith in the way he met a widow’s need for food and revived her son (1 Kings 17:8-24; see Jas 1:27; 2:14-26). We see it in his single-minded prayers (1:6) and his choice to be a friend of God and not of the world in his conflict with King Ahab and the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18:17-40; see Jas 1:6-7; 4:4). Elijah trusted God, and God answered his prayers (1 Kings 17:1-7; 18:41-46). God still answers the prayers of righteous and trusting people.

### Applying the Bible

You may have heard it said, “Sometimes we need to put feet to our prayers.” This means that there are times when we can take action on the things we’re praying for. Perhaps it could also mean that we need to live in ways that demonstrate the faith we bring to our prayers. How can you live a prayerful life?

### Reflecting on the Bible

Read the stories about Elijah found in 1 Kings 17:1–18:46. As you read these stories, think about how your life demonstrates your trust—or lack of trust—in God. Ask God to help you have real faith, to show it in the ways you live, and to pray in light of that faith.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—RESTORE THE WANDERING ONES

James 5:19-20



**(19) My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, (20) you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.**

James began our lesson text by talking about those who are physically sick. Now he writes about the sick in spirit—those who have “wander[ed] from the truth” (v. 19). Seeking the wanderer expresses our love of neighbor and concern for both the individual and the faith community.

Reaching out to wanderers runs counter to the world’s wisdom. We see examples of this in Jesus’ ministry. Some religious leaders criticized him for associating with prostitutes and tax collectors. They couldn’t believe Jesus actively sought such people and spent time with them. When some Pharisees and scribes complained about Jesus’ associating with outcasts, he told them the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (Lk 15:1-32). The shepherd searches for the lost sheep until he finds it (v. 4). The woman searches for the lost coin until she finds it (v. 8). The father waits for the prodigal until he comes home (v. 20). These parables show that God searches for the wandering ones until they are found; so should we.

James concludes his letter with an encouraging assurance (v. 20), but we need to be cautious here. Who determines when someone has wandered from the truth? What criteria guide this determination? We must consider many factors and circumstances before we identify people in this way. It is too easy for us to judge

by our standards rather than by God's. We need God's wisdom to make such determinations.

James teaches us that we should seek to restore those who wander away from the church's fellowship because it helps them and because it is the loving thing to do (2:8; see 1 Pet 4:8). Since James has been talking about prayer, we can probably assume that praying contributes to the wanderer's return (Isaacs, 249). But James reminds us that we need to do something to bring about the restoration we're praying for. We need to put feet to our prayers.

### **Applying the Bible**

When have you wandered from the truth? Are you wandering from it now? How does your life reflect the ways of God as revealed in Jesus? What changes do you need to make? How do you feel when realize that you have wandered? What does it mean to you that your sisters and brothers are concerned? How do you react when one of them tries to help guide you back? Thinking about such questions can help us empathize with those who have wandered away from the fellowship.

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Read Matthew 5:13-20 (Saturday's Bible reading). Jesus says his followers "are the salt of the earth" (v. 13) and "the light of the world" (v. 14). In other words, we are to be a positive influence on those around us. We do so by showing grace, love, and mercy to them. Reflect on Jesus' words as you think about what James says about restoring wanderers to our fellowship. How can we do this in ways that reflect who we are as Jesus' disciples?

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# Unit Two

## Job: When Right Feels Wrong

Why do bad things happen to good people? If God is good, why does God allow bad things to happen? If God is all-powerful, why doesn't God intervene when creation suffers? If God is everywhere, why are there times when we can't sense the divine presence? If there are no satisfying answers to these questions, why spend our time diving into the complexities of the book of Job? Will our doubt lead us down a slippery slope? Over the next four weeks, we will touch on each of these questions. We are unlikely to find definitive answers, but we may learn to ask better questions and to embrace partial answers.

In week one, we will meet two heavenly characters: God and the accuser. We also meet Job, a righteous man who suffers tremendous loss. God and the accuser agree to find out whether Job is devoted to God because of who God is or because of what God does for him. We should ask ourselves the same question.

In week two, we will find Job deep in despair. Having lost everything, he cries out to God for justice and mercy. Using Job's words as a guide, we will find language we can use when we are struggling to deal with suffering in our lives or in the world around us. We will learn that rebellion can be right and lament can be holy.

In week three, we will hear God's response to Job. God reminds Job that the plan for creation is good, even though it may not conform easily to human expectation and experience.

Finally, in week four, we will begin the process of moving forward. Our fears and doubts can frighten us, but they are not inherently bad. They are God-given elements of our being. But God doesn't want us to stay in our doubt forever. Job reminds us that we can trust God's love and concern for us. God invites us to join in the divine plan of restoration and generosity.

### About the Writer

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October 7, 2018

# Job's Situation

*Lesson Text: Job 1:1; 2:1-10    Background Text: Job 1-2*

## **A Verse to Remember—Job 2:10b**

“Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

## ***Suggested Daily Bible Readings (October 1-6, 2018)***

*Monday: 1 Peter 1:3-9*

*Thursday: Job 2:11-3:26*

*Tuesday: 1 John 2:18-25*

*Friday: Job 4:1-21*

*Wednesday: Matthew 18:6-9*

*Saturday: Job 7:1-21*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sometimes life seems like a series of traumatic events. We might start to wonder if God is still with us. We have doubts, but we manage to hang on to our faith. What keeps us connected to God? Habits developed through years of faithful practice and obedience can help.

This week, we will begin a journey with Job through loss and fear to redemption and relief. We will learn some ways we can respond to the suffering we face. We won't get all of the answers we would like to have, but we will find help for our journey.

## **EXPLORING THE BIBLE—THE HEAVENLY DRAMA**

**Job 1:1; 2:1-6**



**(1:1) There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.... (2:1) One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and**

**Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. (2) The LORD said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered the LORD, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” (3) The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.” (4) Then Satan answered the LORD, “Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. (5) But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” (6) The LORD said to Satan, “Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.”**

The first two chapters of Job consist of six scenes alternating between heaven and earth that set up the poetic epic that will follow in 3:1–42:6. In this opening narration, we learn that Job, “a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil” (1:8; 2:3), has become the center of a debate in the heavenly throne room. Job was as close to reaching perfection in his life and faith as a human being can get. We never learn Job’s background story or how he became a man of such integrity, but his words and actions indicate that his piety comes from a lifelong practice of faith.

It is important to understand the characters and the role they play in the story. The LORD is Yahweh, the name by which the covenant of Israel is known. The NRSV and other English translations render the Hebrew term *ha satan* as the proper name “Satan.” But because the definite article *ha* (“the”) precedes the Hebrew noun *satan*, it is better understood as a title: “the accuser.” We should take care not to read later ideas about the devil into the book of Job. This story pictures the *satan* as a member of the heavenly court who is assigned to search for and indict humans who are disloyal to God. In this role as divine accuser, the *satan* is not God’s adversary; he is a subordinate heavenly being whose job is to protect God’s honor.

The issue of divine blessing lies at the heart of the debate between God and the *satan*. People often think that if they do all the right things, God will bless them. This presumed relationship between good behavior and prosperity lies behind the *satan*’s question in 1:9: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” The *satan* proposes

that the divine-human relationship is contaminated by people's self-interest. He believes that Job reveres God because of what he gets from God. In response, God allows the *satan* to afflict Job's health but not to take his life (2:6). They will both see how Job reacts to this trial and then judge whether his faith is legitimate.

### Applying the Bible

The *satan* believes that if Job no longer enjoys God's blessing and protection, he will turn away from God. The story of Job offers a serious challenge to the idea of a "prosperity gospel," the insistence that if we obey God, then God will reward us. It wasn't true for Job, and it isn't true for us. Even if we know this, the idea may persist in the back of our minds.

Do we expect God's protection because we are good people? Do we assume that good fortune means God has blessed us for our goodness? Do we ever assume that people experience bad things because they are bad people?

### Reflecting on the Bible

In the narrative of the book of Job, God believes that Job's worship and devotion are sincere and not shallow; that is, God believes that Job loves God whether or not God blesses him. Read 1 Peter 1:3-9 (Monday's Bible reading). Note especially these words: "In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (vv. 6-7). Pray to be faithful in suffering so that your faith will become even more genuine.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES

Job 2:7-8



(7) So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. (8) Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

In chapter 1, the *satan* took away all of Job's outward securities—his material wealth and family. Now he strikes Job's flesh. This causes Job physical pain as well as mental, emotional, and social torment since it makes him an outcast in his community. His neighbors probably assume that Job's affliction is both physically contagious and religiously isolating. They do not want to interact with him because they fear that God's wrath will extend to the broader community. Only Job's wife and three of his friends are brave enough to come near him.

When something bad happens to us, how do we respond? Do we blame and accuse God of not holding up God's end of the bargain? We have devoted our lives to serving God. We have committed to gathering in worship with other believers. We have studied God's word regularly. We've given to charity. We volunteer at church and at the food bank. Why has God not protected us?

My husband and I had several especially trying years back to back. We suffered job loss, health crises, financial insecurity, and had a new baby to top it all off. The stress, fear, and grief were too much sometimes. Over and over I questioned God: "We have committed our lives to your ministry, God. Aren't you at least supposed to make sure we have the security we need to fulfill our commitment to you?" I would never consider myself a believer in prosperity theology; yet there I was, experiencing loss and uncertainty and blaming God for not upholding God's end of the deal.

The frightening realization we may come to while studying the book of Job is that faithfulness doesn't make us immune to tragedy. Job had done everything right, but he couldn't escape the suffering of this world. We can't either. Awareness of this reality can be terrifying.

### **Applying the Bible**

We can experience painful losses in any area of life. Any loss brings its own complexities, fears, pains, and stressors. We may not be able to keep from questioning why such things happen to us. We need something or someone to blame so that we can build a system of understanding; without that, the unknown is too scary. But sometimes there is no system that makes sense of our suffering. What do we do when tragedy strikes? Job sat down on ashes. He withdrew. Sometimes we need to do that, too. It can be cathartic to get away, to retreat into silence for a while and attempt to come to terms with our new reality.

## Reflecting on the Bible

When Job's health failed, the first thing he did was isolate himself. What is the value of being alone during a difficult time?

Read Job 2:11–3:26 (Thursday's Bible reading). In 2:11-13, Job's friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar visit him; they spend seven days and nights sitting in silence with him. What good can the presence of friends do for us? Is it significant that they just sat with him and didn't say anything? In 3:1-26, Job laments his situation. How important is it that we are honest with God about what we're experiencing and how we feel about it?



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—DO YOU PERSIST IN YOUR INTEGRITY?

Job 2:9-10



**(9) Then his wife said to him, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.” (10) But he said to her, “You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” In all of this Job did not sin with his lips.**

This is the only time we hear from Job's wife. She is the lone survivor of Job's immediate family. She has lost her children too. At this point, she is the only person by her suffering husband's side. She has received more than her fair share of scorn for her one recorded statement. We should consider the possibility that she is more than a one-dimensional character and is misunderstood. Let's consider some other possible interpretations of her question.

Perhaps her question is a call for Job to own his integrity rather than abandoning it. She questions what integrity means for Job and for all people. To have integrity is to be one in spirit, thought, word, and deed. Job's wife may be raising the question of whether having integrity means following religious rules or being honest and open about the state of our hearts.

It is also possible that Job's wife is speaking out of empathy and concern. She has lost her security and her children too. Now she speaks to her husband as a

grieving yet devoted spouse. Perhaps she speaks aloud what Job is not yet able to utter. She asks the question that Job will ask in different (and many more) words later.

Job responds to his wife harshly. Maybe his words are a fair critique of her statement, or maybe they are the painfully cruel words of a pain-stricken, frustrated, and heartbroken man. The rhythm of Job's question suggests that he is turning to the foundational traditions of his faith for understanding and comfort. In his commentary on the book of Job, J. G. Janzen tells the story of a young man who learns that his brother was killed in war. Upon learning the news, the young man falls to his knees and repeats the Apostle's Creed (Janzen, 43). The familiar words of his faith that have brought him comfort and security throughout his life now provide the steady ground he needs when his world is falling apart. By stating that both good and bad come from God, Job emphasizes a conventional understanding of his faith; he seems to be trying to orient both his wife and himself during this time of trial.

### **Applying the Bible**

Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's Chief Operating Officer and best-selling author, recounts the importance of her faith in her process of grief after her husband's sudden death. Sandberg was raised a devout Jew, but she no longer practices regularly. In her grief, however, Sandberg says she relied heavily on the traditions of her faith: a traditional Jewish funeral followed by the Shiva (a week-long period of mourning). When her children collapsed at their father's graveside, Sandberg fell down beside them and began singing *Oseh Shalom*, a traditional Jewish prayer for peace. What is most interesting is that Sandberg acknowledges that these things were within her, even though she was no longer devout. For Job, who was devout, the roots of his faith stabilized him in the most difficult period of his life.

What spiritual habits are you forming that can act as stabilizing forces in your most difficult periods of life? How have your spiritual habits already served this purpose?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

We often can't know why bad things happen to us or to our loved ones. But we do know that God is with the brokenhearted. We also know that God gives us

tools to find some peace in the most challenging circumstances. God's gifts of resilience and endurance, which can be strengthened by spiritual discipline, will not take the pain away, but they may give us just enough strength to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

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October 14, 2018

# Job's Contention

Lesson Text: Job 23:1-17    Background Text: Job 23–24

## A Verse to Remember—Job 23:16

“God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me.”

## Suggested Daily Bible Readings (October 8-13, 2018)

Monday: Job 8:1-22

Thursday: Job 17:1-16

Tuesday: Job 11:1-20

Friday: Job 18:1-21

Wednesday: Job 15:1-35

Saturday: Job 20:1-29

## INTRODUCTION

When Job's friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar first come to visit him, they spend seven days sitting with him in silence (2:11-13). The four men then enter into a conversation presented in the form of long poetic speeches (chapters 3–31). Job raises challenging issues concerning God's relationship with him and, by extension, with us. This week's lesson text confronts us with a very bold statement from Job. As you study it, think about the kind of faith that Job models for us.

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—REBELLION

Job 23:1-7



(1) Then Job answered: (2) “Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. (3) Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! (4) I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. (5) I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. (6) Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. (7) There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be

## **acquitted forever by my judge.”**

In previous chapters, Job’s friends have offered various explanations for his suffering. They have suggested sin, pride, and disloyalty to God as possibilities. Their desire to explain Job’s situation reflects the human need to protect ourselves from the reality that horrible things can happen to anyone. We might blame the victim or offer religious platitudes to “explain” suffering. Such platitudes may speak correctly of God’s desire for us to live faithful, good, honorable lives, but they may also negate the real struggle of human experiences and the honesty of grief, doubt, and pain. We do better when we allow others and ourselves to fully explore the depths of grief. Job, no longer satisfied by a shallow faith with no room for lament, feels compelled to practice “complaint and groaning as loyal rebellion” (Janzen, 170).

How can someone rebel and still be loyal? The word “bitter” in verse 2 (NRSV) might more accurately be translated as “rebellious” or “contentious,” while the word translated as “complaint” can also refer to meditation or piety. When we put these two alternate translations together, we can read the first part of the verse as saying, “Today my meditation/piety is rebellious.” Thus, Job may see his contention with God as a sacred act.

Job has probably grown up hearing the stories about God coming to the rescue of the needy, vulnerable, and oppressed. Even in his suffering, Job refuses to let go of his faith in this God. But he must come to terms with the facts of his life: the God who heard the cries of the Israelites in Egypt hasn’t come to deliver him from his pain.

Job’s spiritual struggle adds more pain to his physical suffering. If God is just, why is God treating him so unfairly? Job believes that if he could only have a hearing with God, they would understand each other. He believes that he would gain insight into why tragedy has befallen him and that God would acquit him of wrongdoing. Job wants to understand and to be understood, and if contention and rebellion are the only ways to get God’s attention, he will persist in them.

Job needs to know that God recognizes the moral dilemma of an innocent person’s suffering. He must speak out against this, even if it is rebellion. God isn’t acting as Job believes God should, so he sees rebellion as the only honest response.

## Applying the Bible

Most of us have probably been told at some point in our faith journey that those who question God are on a dangerous and slippery slope. We're told to hold tight to our faith and to trust God's plan for our lives, no matter what is happening. There is nothing inherently wrong with those statements—we should hold tight to our faith and trust God. But problems can arise when we adopt a blind and quiet submissiveness that denies our experience and our honest reaction to it.

How do you react when you see injustice? Do you ever feel angry that God doesn't seem to be intervening? What do you do with that anger? What do you do to promote justice?

## Reflecting on the Bible

Great heroes of our faith have cried out to God when they believed God wasn't acting as God should. They called on God to act justly in the face of injustice. Read Genesis 18:16-33 and Exodus 32:7-14. Consider how Abraham and Moses pleaded with God on behalf of the people. They believed that destroying the people would be unjust, and they knew that God's character is just. They advocated with God for the people. We should also be advocates for justice, even with God. Pray to have grace and strength to be a holy rebel when it is necessary.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—INSISTENCE

Job 23:8-12



**(8) “If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; (9) on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. (10) But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold. (11) My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside. (12) I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth.”**

Job yearns for an audience with God. He wants to plead his case. He wants to know why God doesn't intervene and end his suffering. But no matter how much Job desires to commune with God, God is nowhere to be found. It seems to Job

that in his time of greatest need God is not only silent—God has disappeared. Job’s worst torment comes not from the loss of his family, his possessions, and his health but rather from the loss of his sense of God’s presence.

Sometimes we’d like to hide from God because we know we aren’t living as God wants us to live. We may feel convicted of our sins, but we don’t want to change. We are comfortable in our greed, selfishness, hatred, self-righteousness, or whatever sinful attitude or action we have succumbed to. But when we want to hide from God, God is everywhere we turn. At other times, we, like Job, feel that God is nowhere. Every place seems devoid of God’s presence and comfort. This sense of abandonment is soul shattering. Job is looking everywhere for God, and God seems nowhere to be found. But Job continues asking and searching. Through the honest expression of his heart, Job remains connected to the God he can’t find. That connection keeps him going.

### **Applying the Bible**

We know that God is everywhere. Even when our pain causes us to feel that God has abandoned us, we know that God is still with us. But that doesn’t mean our feelings of abandonment aren’t real or important. Job’s feelings matter to God because God cares about our emotions. God created us to be emotional beings. To deny our emotions would be to deny a good gift from God. But sometimes our emotions can overwhelm and even paralyze us. How can we be true to our emotions without allowing this to happen? What do we do when our emotions become too much to bear?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Read Psalm 22:1-15 (the lectionary’s psalm reading for this week). How does the psalmist express feelings similar to Job’s? What can the psalm teach us about honestly expressing our emotions to God? Perhaps you are going through a time of trial or can recall such a time. Keeping your situation in mind, rewrite the psalm in your own words. Thank God for accepting your complaint and for hearing your lament. Ask God to help you trust in God’s presence even when God seems absent.



## **EXPLORING THE BIBLE—LAMENT**

## Job 23:13-17



**(13) “But he stands alone and who can dissuade him? What he desires, that he does. (14) For he will complete what he appoints for me; and many such things are in his mind. (15) Therefore I am terrified at his presence; when I consider, I am in dread of him. (16) God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; (17) If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!”**

To lament is to express mourning in words, which is what Job is doing. He doesn't keep his grief, anger, pain, and doubt inside; he lays them out in the open. And through the holy practice of lament, Job connects to God even in his deep sadness. When someone we love is in a desolate state, we might want to encourage them to resist despair by reminding them of God's constant goodness and presence. While remembering such truths is meaningful in a life of faith and discipleship, we should be careful not to apply them too quickly as a salve for someone's pain. They can seem like an adhesive strip on a bullet wound to someone experiencing the trauma of a great loss.

Job recognizes that God is almighty. God will do what God will do and no one can stand against it. Job knows that his rebellion and lament are unlikely to change God's will, but he still tries. Job is filled with fear to know that if he receives an audience with God, he will stand face to face with an all-powerful force whose standards of justice have become puzzling. This dread works its way into his soul every time he considers an actual confrontation with God (see 3:25-26; 9:34-35; 13:21). Still, he persists.

The NRSV translation of verse 17 implies that Job is ready to give up. But other translations allow for a different interpretation. The Jewish Study Bible reads, “Yet I am not cut off by the darkness; He has concealed the thick gloom from me,” and the Contemporary English Version reads, “God has covered me with darkness, but I refuse to be silent.” Job may be affirming that he will speak because he must.

Job thinks that God is not serving justice as God is “supposed” to do—that the innocent are suffering needlessly and that God is abandoning them. If that is true, what does it say about God? How is Job supposed to go on with his life without reconciling this tension? Job chooses not to give up on God. He will

continue his rebellious holy lament until he receives a resolution. In doing so, as we will see in later lessons, Job will find God.

### **Applying the Bible**

Job wants an audience with God, but the thought fills him with dread. He realizes that God is almighty and will do whatever God wants to do, yet Job still seems determined to express his concerns to God. How can we balance appropriate reverence for God with appropriate honesty with God? What will it cost us if we let reverence keep us from openly expressing our questions and concerns to God? What will happen we let our insistence on speaking take away from our reverence?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Read Hebrews 4:12-16 (the lectionary's second reading for this week). Note especially verses 15-16: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Reflect on how the death and resurrection of Jesus enables us to approach God "with boldness," knowing that we will find mercy and grace.

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October 21, 2018

# God's Response

Lesson Text: Job 38:1-7, 28-41    Background Text: Job 38-41

## A Verse to Remember—Job 38:4

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding.”

## Suggested Daily Bible Readings (October 15-20, 2018)

Monday: Job 26:1-14

Thursday: Job 36:1-16

Tuesday: Job 28:12-29:10

Friday: Job 37:1-24

Wednesday: Job 32:1-22

Saturday: Job 39:1-30

## INTRODUCTION

Job has been waiting a long time for God to speak with him. As readers of the book of Job, we have been waiting too. How will God answer our questions? Why did this happen to Job? Which of his friends is right? Is Job right? Why do bad things happen to us? Can we protect ourselves from tragedy? What is the purpose of it all? But God offers no explanations. Instead, God gives speeches that at first glance seem to have little to do with the debates between Job and his friends. God speaks out of the whirlwind. Let's listen, and then let's try to understand.

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—GOD COMES TO JOB

Job 38:1-7



**(1) Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: (2) “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? (3) Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. (4) Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. (5) Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? (6) On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its**

## **cornerstone (7) when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”**

In the suggested daily Bible readings during this unit, you will notice that God’s address continues the pattern of the debate between Job and his friends. The four of them challenged one another’s views with satire and sarcasm, stating the flaws of the previous argument. This form of speech is not meant to demean or humiliate but rather to change minds. God uses similar tactics.

“Counsel” (v. 2) refers to God’s design of creation. God’s charge that Job “darkens counsel” recalls Job 12:13-25, where Job said that God’s purpose was to bring “deep darkness to light” (v. 22b) and to cause chaos and confusion (Janzen, 231; Balentine, 643). Because of what Job was going through, he began to feel that God’s plan for creation was to bring about darkness instead of light. Now God addresses this twisting of divine intent, saying that Job does this “without knowledge” (v. 2). As God’s speech develops, it becomes clear that God wants Job to acknowledge that he has been claiming to know more than he actually knows. Job needs the humility to accept that he doesn’t know as much as he thinks he does. But perhaps the Lord also wants to move Job to a place of greater understanding (Balentine, 643).

God comes to Job. It seems that God values their relationship enough to begin the process of reconciliation. Job doesn’t have to beg and plead; God approaches Job right where he is and begins to counter Job’s ideas of who God is. Maybe God comes to Job at this point because he is at last mature enough to have this kind of talk with God.

We should probably read God’s questions as ironic rather than condescending. God isn’t looking for thoughtless submission but rather a thoughtful change of heart. The echoes of the Genesis creation stories in God’s words can remind Job of his deep, sustaining faith. God is indeed the same Lord whom Job has always known God to be.

### **Applying the Bible**

Sometimes we forget who a person really is. We have an argument with someone we love and inwardly we wonder, “Who *is* this person?” We can have a similar experience in our relationship with God. When life is especially difficult, we may wonder, “Who *are* you, God?” Some of the best marriage advice my fiancé

and I received was to write letters to one another throughout the course of our relationship. Now, as a married couple, my husband and I have each other's hearts on paper. When we wonder if we really know each other, we have these letters to remind us. What practices can you incorporate into your relationship with God to remind you who God is and what your relationship with God means?

### **Reflecting on the Bible.**

Job wanted to have a hearing with God, and God came to grant it. God comes to people throughout the Bible. God has come to us throughout history. God came to the world in Jesus Christ. Read Mark 10:35-45 (the lectionary's Gospel reading for this week). What does Jesus' coming to the world tell us about God's grace? How does it help us think about God's coming to Job? Perhaps God's coming to Job inspired him to greater humility. Jesus' coming to us certainly should inspire us that way. Ask God to help you demonstrate humility before God through your service to others.



## **EXPLORING THE BIBLE—POTENTIAL PROGRESS**

**Job 38:28-38**



**(28) “Has the rain a father, or who has begotten the drops of dew? (29) From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven? (30) The waters become hard like stone, and the face of the deep is frozen. (31) Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion? (32) Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season, or can you guide the Bear with its children? (33) Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth? (34) Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? (35) Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are’? (36) Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? (37) Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens, (38) when dust runs into a mass and the**

## **clods cling together?”**

God continues to ask Job about the workings of the universe. Job’s primary understanding of the world, much like ours, is one of order that revolves around human civilization. Job views this human order as the “correct” order for all of creation—and even for God. God challenges this understanding by reminding Job that the human experience is only one part of God’s far-flung and incredible creation.

Human beings crave order and fairness. Throughout the book, Job has tried to understand what has happened to him through the lens of these categories. By reminding Job of how the world came to be, God leads him toward a more nuanced understanding: chaos is part of creation, but so are purpose and order. God also wants Job to see that he doesn’t have sufficient wisdom to understand how creation operates. God uses the weather to make this point: Job can’t understand how all the forces of creation work together to bring about meteorological phenomena. God alone has the “wisdom to number the clouds” (v. 37). It takes wisdom far beyond Job’s to know how many clouds there are and how many of them will pour water onto the land.

Ultimately, God is leading Job back to the realization that God is the Lord of creation. God also challenges him to grow in wisdom.

### **Applying the Bible**

The world is unpredictable and often scary. Stability is a privilege afforded to only a few; safety is a luxury given to none. Chaos hasn’t been eliminated from creation, but God does work to bring order to it. As God’s people, we have a responsibility to participate in what God is doing. God brings order to chaos through love, grace, and mercy. How can we use those tools to help bring order to the chaos people face?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Read Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c (the lectionary’s psalm reading for this Sunday). This psalm also uses the language of creation. In the lesson text, God uses creation language to call Job to recognize his limitations and to grow in his understanding. The psalm uses similar language to motivate God’s people to

praise the Lord. As you pray, ask God to let the wonders of creation inspire you to recognize your limitations, to expand your understanding, and to praise God.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—LESSONS FROM THE ANIMAL WORLD

Job 38:39-41



**(39) “Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, (40) when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? (41) Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?”**

God now questions Job about wild animals. For people in Job’s time, wild beasts weren’t majestic creatures to be gazed upon during a safari or admired in a zoo. The realm of the wild was fraught with danger. Communities were formed in part to protect people from the perils of the wild. In these questions, God presents the animals as fragile creatures that need the order God provides. God reminds Job that even the lion needs a caretaker; even the predator is fragile and dependent.

These verses begin a long series of questions that God asks Job about the animal kingdom (38:39–39:30). In the Genesis 2 creation story, God brings the animals for the man to name (vv. 19-20); here, God brings Job to the animals to learn from them about dependence on God (Balentine, 658). God challenges Job to consider five pairs of animals; our lesson text includes God’s questions about the first pair. God asks Job if he can provide prey for lions to eat. Lions are powerful hunters, but God provides the prey they kill to eat. Ravens are small and weak when compared to lions. Unlike the lion that hunts and kills its prey, ravens scavenge for food to eat and to bring to their young. God presents lions and ravens as fragile creatures that need God’s order and provision. Job can’t provide for the animals, but he can learn that even in a threatening world, God provides for them. Surely, then, God provides for human beings.

**Applying the Bible**

We should learn to pay attention to what creation teaches us about God. God called Job's attention to the animal kingdom, which could instruct him in the marvelous ways God provides for all creatures. We can benefit from looking beyond ourselves to the world and the universe for a broader perspective on life.

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

We rely on the Bible for spiritual guidance. We should read, study, and pray over it regularly. The Bible also points us to other sources of spiritual instruction. In this part of our lesson text, God points us to the animal world. One way we can live better as people of faith is to learn more about the world we live in. Consider adding some texts about science and nature to your devotional reading. Read and study them prayerfully, asking God to use what you learn to help you better understand your place in the world.

### **References**

Samuel E. Balentine, *Job*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006).

J. Gerald Janzen, *Job*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985).

October 28, 2018

# Job's Confession

Lesson Text: Job 42:1-6, 10-17    Background Text: Job 42

## A Verse to Remember—Job 42:5-6

"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

## Suggested Daily Bible Readings (October 22-27, 2018)

Monday: Job 40:1-24

Thursday: 2 Kings 20:12-19

Tuesday: Job 41:1-11

Friday: Nehemiah 1:1-11

Wednesday: Job 41:12-34

Saturday: Job 42:7-9

## INTRODUCTION

We have reached the end of the biblical story of Job, but we could spend a lifetime mining its depths. The book of Job doesn't offer bumper-sticker explanations of the complex realities of life. As we continue to live our story, the literary and theological majesty of Job's story offers us affirmations and suggestions to serve as guideposts for our journey. Perhaps one of the major points of Job's story is that, like him, we have to confront life in all its wonder and terror as people who live in relationship with God, with creation, and with each other. Job calls us to a disciple's life of wrestling with hard questions and doing the work to become the people God made us to be.

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—ALTERED THINKING

Job 42:1-6



(1) Then Job answered the LORD: (2) "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (3) 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. (4) 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.' (5) I had heard of you by

**the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; (6) therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”**

Pain fills the book of Job. We tend to think especially of Job’s extreme and traumatic losses at the beginning of the book. But as his story progresses, more pain grows out of verbal disputes that lead to broken relationships. We see this in Job’s relationships with his wife, his friends, and his God. Here at the end, we finally see some healing, including the repairing of relationships.

We want clear answers to hard problems, but we don’t get them from God’s speeches and we don’t get them from Job’s response. God hasn’t explained Job’s suffering. But Job has experienced God, and in that experience he has found that God cares enough to be with him. Perhaps Job knows enough to have some peace. Couples who have argued into the wee hours can appreciate this dynamic. It is 2:00 a.m. and issues still remain, but the relationship is intact, and that is enough to lay the issue to rest. Job recognizes that his relationship with God is more important than any disagreement or lack of understanding. So he seeks reconciliation.

While Job still does not know why everything has happened to him, he seems to be more accepting of the unknowable. The ultra-pious man we met at the beginning of the book saw the world in categories of right and wrong. Job’s declaration that he now “sees” God implies that he has developed a different perspective: he knows now that creation can contain chaos and still be good. He also has a new perspective of what it means to be human. Some interpreters read verse 6 as statement of self-degradation, but it more likely reflects Job’s new understanding of the human place in creation, especially in relationship with God.

### **Applying the Bible**

Sometimes we say, “Live and learn!” We mean that experience teaches us things. Job’s experience has been very difficult. He has suffered terrible losses. He has also had to endure the attempts of his friends to explain his life to him according to their traditional theology. Perhaps most significantly, he has had to deal with his own questions about whether God is with him and for him. At this point in the story, Job is devastated: his children, his possessions, and his health are all still gone. But something about his perspective on life and his relationship with

God has changed. Job has lived and learned. Are you learning all you need to learn from your life?

### Reflecting on the Bible

Read Mark 10:46-52 (the lectionary's Gospel reading for this Sunday). Jesus heals a blind man named Bartimaeus. In Mark's narrative, the opening of Bartimaeus's eyes looks forward to the disciples' spiritual eyes being opened: they must grow in their understanding of Jesus as the crucified and resurrected Messiah. Notice also that Bartimaeus's faith was part of his healing. In a similar way, Job's eyes were opened to God's grace and love. Ask the Lord to open your eyes of faith. Pray also to better live in light of who Jesus reveals God to be.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—GOD RESTORES

Job 42:10



**(10) And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.**

At 42:7, we leave the poetic dialogues of 3:1–42:6 and return to the prose of chapters 1–2. This epilogue differs from the prologue in a couple of important ways. First, the *satan* is now absent, probably because Job has passed his test. Second, conversations in the prologue took place in heaven or on earth—never between individuals in different realms. But here in the epilogue, God speaks to Job and to Job's friend Eliphaz.

This verse follows God's only words to Job's friends (42:7-9). The Lord addresses only Eliphaz, but the words apply to Bildad and Zophar as well. God tells Eliphaz that these friends "have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (v. 7). What have they said about God that is wrong? Their main point has been that suffering always indicates God's judgment. But Job has spoken "what is right" about God. What has Job said that is right? Perhaps he is right in speaking openly and honestly about his experience with God. The Lord calls on the three friends to present a burnt offering for themselves and tells them that God will accept Job's prayer on their behalf.

God restored Job's fortunes "when he had prayed for his friends" (v. 10). This implies a connection between Job's prayer and God's actions. Job's prayer for those whose theological arguments contributed to his misery demonstrates a graciousness that leads to restored relationships. God delights in our restoration to full relationship with God and in our restored relationships with each other.

Why does God give Job double of what he lost? It can't be because Job has proven his righteousness; if that were the reason, it would counter the book's argument against the idea that a person's status in relation to God can be judged by his or her circumstances. God's double restoration of Job's possessions is most likely based on the same grace in which God comes to meet with, speak to, and relate to him (Janzen, 267-68).

### Applying the Bible

God doesn't have to acknowledge Job, much less restore him. But God does both. God then offers Job the opportunity to show his friends the same kind of grace. God has forgiven and restored us in Christ, and God calls us to extend forgiveness and restoration to others. How do God's grace and love compel you to treat others?

### Reflecting on the Bible

Read Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22 (the lectionary's psalm reading for this Sunday). It acknowledges human struggle and celebrates God's deliverance. As you pray over the psalm, list ways you struggle in life and in faith. Ask God to help you. Then make a list of ways in which you have experienced God's deliverance. Thank God for past and future deliverance. Ask God to help you live faithfully in all the circumstances of life.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—GOD IS GENEROUS

Job 42:11-17



**(11) Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring. (12) The LORD**

**blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. (13) He also had seven sons and three daughters. (14) He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Karen-happuch. (15) In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. (16) After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. (17) And Job died, old and full of days.**

The story of Job invites us into a new perspective in which the world doesn't fit into neat categories of right and wrong. We don't see Job's restoration in terms of what Job does or doesn't deserve; instead, it arises out of God's great grace.

Why does Job's family visit him only when his crisis has ended? Perhaps it is because his physical illness made him unclean. The actions of Job's friends, who have been with him the whole time, haven't helped him. But his family's actions do seem helpful. Their sharing of a meal with Job indicates genuine communion (Balentine, 717). Besides, Job's friends offered only words, while Job's family offers material gifts to help him rebuild his life. It is easier for us to offer words than to act in tangible ways that make a real difference.

Job gets the same number of children he had before. Children can't be replaced with other children. But maybe having ten more children is the best compensation Job can receive under the circumstances.

The text tells us the names of Job's three new daughters but not his seven new sons. Interestingly, Job gives his daughters an inheritance along with his sons. Legal custom said that daughters could inherit in the absence of male heirs (Num 27:1-11). In the context of the culture, the fact that Job makes his daughters heirs along with his sons is quite generous. As Mayer Gruber suggests, "Perhaps Job's suffering has made him more sensitive to the plight of the powerless, especially women" (746). Shouldn't our suffering make us more sensitive to the circumstances of the oppressed and powerless around us?

The phrase "old and full of days" (v. 17) is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe only Isaac (Gen 35:29) and David (1 Chr 23:1). Neither of these

heroes of the faith died fully satisfied and at peace. Is the same true of Job? It is probable that Job too spent the rest of his life with greater faith accompanied by a sense of unease.

### **Applying the Bible**

The book of Job gives us something of a “happy ending,” but it doesn’t resolve every issue for Job or for us. What do we do with this story? We remember that life involves struggle; there is always the potential for chaos to erupt. But we trust God. We live in God’s grace that we find in Jesus Christ. We work for restoration. And we give generously of our material prosperity, our grace, our mercy, and our love. We seek to become more aware of and concerned about oppressed people. This is the character of God. This is how we live into the image we are created to reflect.

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

We have received so much grace and love from God in Christ, but we haven’t received it to keep it to ourselves. God’s generosity should lead to our generosity. How can we live out of a gracious generosity rather than a legalistic one? Perhaps a good first step is to reflect regularly on all that God has done for us. A good second step might be to ask God to fill us with so much grace and love that it flows out of us and onto others. A third step would be to help others whenever and wherever we can.

### **References**

Samuel E. Balentine, *Job*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006).

Mayer Gruber, “Job,” *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004).

J. Gerald Janzen, *Job*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985).

# Unit Three

## Being Disciples: Some Basic Practices

To be a Christian is to follow Jesus in order to learn from him. This is what it means to be Jesus' disciples. Our lives are our classrooms; the four Gospels are our textbooks. In this unit, we will study passages from Mark's Gospel that will help us learn more about being Jesus' disciples.

Our first lesson points us to the need for obedience. A conversation between Jesus and a religious scholar helps us see that a disciple's obedience goes beyond following rules. It involves a fully devoted life that is grounded in love for God and for people.

The second lesson guides us to think about the role of generosity in a disciple's life. Jesus' observation of people giving their offerings leads him to contrast the acts of rich people who give out of their wealth and of a poor widow who gives out of her poverty. A disciple's generosity grows out of our utter devotion to God.

The third lesson points us to our need for insight. In talking to his disciples about Jerusalem's coming destruction and his second coming, Jesus makes it clear that dealing with such matters requires critical and nuanced thinking. We should live in hope and trust, not in anxiety.

The final lesson focuses on our need for worship. We worship Almighty God for who God is and for all God has done, is doing, and will do. We especially worship God for sending Jesus into our world and into our lives.

There are many other ways in which we need to practice being disciples, but these four are good ways to start. How else should we practice following Jesus?

### About the Writer

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November 4, 2018

# Obedience

Lesson Text: Mark 12:28-34    Background Text: Mark 12:1-34

## A Verse to Remember—Mark 12:33

“To love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding and with all the strength,” and to “love one’s neighbor as oneself,”—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

## Suggested Daily Bible Readings (October 29–November 3, 2018)

Monday: Isaiah 59:9-19

Thursday: Hebrews 9:1-12

Tuesday: Ezekiel 18:1-32

Friday: Romans 3:21-31

Wednesday: Ezekiel 14:12-23

Saturday: Luke 10:25-37

## INTRODUCTION

What does God require of us? We know that Christianity is about more than keeping rules, but doesn’t God expect us to follow certain practices?

The answers to these questions can be found in our Scripture passage. Jesus has a conversation with a scribe who wants to learn which commandment Jesus thinks is most important. Jesus tells the scribe that God has two inseparable expectations: that we love God with our entire lives and that we love our neighbor in the same way we love ourselves. Love is the highest form of obedience to God.

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—LOVE GOD AND NEIGHBOR

Mark 12:28-31



(28) One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” (29) Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the

**Lord is one; (30) you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ (31) The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”**

The exchange between Jesus and the scribe begins with a question. Unlike previous questions that religious authorities ask Jesus, this one isn't intended to entrap Jesus; the scribe (a legal scholar) really wants to know what Jesus thinks. He asks Jesus a question that rabbis frequently raised about the Torah, which they reckoned to contain 613 commandments: which one is most important? By the first century, rabbis had divided the commandments into categories of “heavy” and “light” (Thurston, 137).

Jesus answers the scribe using the Shema, which originated in Deuteronomy 6:4 (shema is the first word of the verse in Hebrew, translated into English as “Hear”) and was part of the routine prayer life of faithful Jews. Groups who worshiped different gods often surrounded God's people, so it was imperative that the Israelites stay true to the Lord. Faithful Jews repeated these words at least twice a day, usually in the morning and evening. The Shema was a liturgical reminder to give the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob absolute priority in life and worship. The Lord is not chief among many gods. The Lord is the one true God.

Jesus' response to the scribe summarizes the Ten Commandments. The first four focus on love of God and the last six on love of neighbor (Osborne, 219). Jesus makes it clear that it is not enough to love God a little bit or to love God and false gods too. God requires that we love our Creator with everything that we have and all that we are. Wholehearted love involves every aspect of our lives.

The second part of Jesus' response originates in Leviticus 19:18b. Since we are made in God's own image, our love should reflect God's love. God's love for us is unmerited (we can't earn it) and covenantal (it is grounded in God's faithfulness and calls for ours). Jesus wants the scribe to see that if he loves as God loves, he would love people as radically as God does.

Jesus' life, death, and teachings demonstrate that complete devotion to God and commitment to people is evident in sacrificial service. To love God and neighbor is the essence of the law and the guiding reality for Jesus' followers.

This focus on love is foundational for Christian discipleship. Jesus teaches us to obey the commandments by responding to God’s love for us with our love for God and for people. Love, not legalism, motivates our obedience. Jesus points the scribe to a new way of life rather than a list of rules. The spiritual practice of service helps us put love into practice.

Devotion to God and love for others are central to life in God’s kingdom. Such love isn’t easy. Being totally devoted to God means that we aren’t able to claim allegiance to anything or anyone else. Loving our neighbor may cost us friendships or prestige. Following Jesus is about entering his kingdom and living according to its one rule of love.

### **Applying the Bible**

What are the most important things in your life? When a crisis comes along, we often reevaluate and adjust our priorities. Jesus tries to help a scribe grasp what truly matters to God and should truly matter to us. The scribe knew the breadth and depth of the law, but he wasn’t sure how to figure out the most important commandment. Jesus tells the scribe that we can’t offer God pieces of our lives; we must worship God with our entire being. He also tells him that loving God properly leads to a deep love for others.

How can we give our lives to God more fully? How can we move toward loving our neighbors more willingly?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Read Luke 10:25-37 (Saturday’s Bible reading). In this passage, a scribe asks Jesus what he must do to have eternal life. When Jesus asks the scribe what the law says, the scribe responds with the same answer Jesus gives in our lesson text. Jesus commends his answer and tells him to live that way. But then the scribe asks Jesus who his neighbor is. Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan. As you read the parable, ask God to give you the heart of a loving neighbor and to help you put your love into practice.



## **EXPLORING THE BIBLE—THE SCRIBE WHO UNDERSTANDS**

## Mark 12:32-33



**(32) Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; (33) and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”**

The scribe restates (with minor changes) and affirms Jesus’ statement. He also expands on Jesus’ words with the comment that “this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (v. 33). This is surprising, since offering sacrifices was a major component of Jewish worship.

But the Hebrew Scriptures also include teaching that supports the scribe’s comment. For example, the Lord says through the prophet Hosea, “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (6:6). And Samuel says to Saul, “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 15:22).

The scribe probably means that love of God and neighbor is more important than the practice of sacrifice. But for Jesus and his followers, love of God and neighbor *replaces* participation in a sacrificial worship system. Instead, sacrificial love is their way of life. As Hebrews 9:13-14 (from the lectionary’s second reading) says, “For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!”

Jesus’ sacrifice frees us to worship, love, and serve God and people sacrificially (see Mk 8:34-35). We love God and others because God first loved us. We give ourselves up because Christ gave himself up.

## Applying the Bible

Worship rituals are important. They help us focus our worship on God, they contribute to a disciplined discipleship, and they ground us in our faith. But

rituals are empty if they are disconnected from love of God and love for people. Our love for God should inspire us to worship, and our worship should inspire us to love God and our neighbors. In addition, the ways we treat others reveal our readiness to worship with integrity.

As we worship, let's consider what our attitudes and actions reveal about the meaning of our worship practices.

### Reflecting on the Bible

Read Ruth 1:1-18 (the lectionary's first reading for this week). As you read, think about how Ruth displays both love for God and love for a person. How do the two loves work together for her?

We need God's help to love as we should. As you reflect on the scribe's words and on Ruth's actions, ask God to fill you with love that will show itself in the right ways. Pray to be alert to opportunities to practice love for God and for others.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM

Mark 12:34



**(34) When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.**

Jesus tells the scribe that he is "not far from the kingdom of God." God's kingdom exists where God's will is done (Mt 6:10). God's kingdom is in the future; it will be known fully only when Jesus returns. But it also exists in the present; we enter it by trusting in God and committing to God's way as seen in and taught by Jesus.

When Jesus tells the scribe he is "not far from the kingdom of God," he could mean several things. Perhaps he means that the scribe is near the kingdom because he has drawn close to Jesus, but he will enter it completely only when the kingdom comes in its fullness. Or he could mean that while the scribe knows

the right words and has good intentions, he will enter the kingdom only when he commits to living in right ways.

Or maybe Jesus means that the scribe needs to take the additional step of believing in the good news embodied in Jesus to be in the kingdom (see 1:15). If the scribe does this, then he will love God and his neighbors because that's what a subject in God's kingdom does.

Putting God's love into practice is different than intellectually understanding God's love. The kingdom of God is lived out in forgiveness, hospitality, peacemaking, and other practices that make God's love real.

Mark concludes this section by saying that after Jesus' conversation with the scribe, "no one dared to ask him any question" (v. 34). Evidently his opponents have gone from being amazed by his answers (12:17) to being intimidated by him.

### **Applying the Bible**

We all need to make progress in our discipleship. The main way we do so is by growing in our love for God and for others. How can we be more intentional about growing in our love for God and for people?

One important way we grow is by following Jesus more closely. We do this by studying our Bibles (especially the Gospels), by praying, by worshiping, and by serving. What specific steps can you take to enter more deeply into God's kingdom?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Jesus shows us that obedience to God is rooted in love. This kind of love is commitment and devotion to God that shows itself in our human relationships. During your prayer time, ask God to help you grow in love so your contributions to other people's lives will reveal your citizenship in God's kingdom. Pray to love God and others in the same ways Jesus did—through selfless, sacrificial service.

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November 11, 2018

# Generosity

Lesson Text: Mark 12:35-44    Background Text: Mark 12:1-34

## A Verse to Remember—Mark 12:44

For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.

## Suggested Daily Bible Readings (November 5-10, 2018)

Monday: Romans 12:17-21; 13:8-10

Tuesday: Acts 7:17-29

Wednesday: John 13:31-35

Thursday: Romans 5:6-11

Friday: Hebrews 9:15-24

Saturday: Mark 11:12-14, 20-24

## INTRODUCTION

In last week's lesson, we studied Jesus' teaching about loving God and neighbor. This week, Jesus identifies a concrete example of wholehearted love when he praises a poor widow who gives everything she has to the Lord.

We need to take care in reading today's Scripture passage. The story of the poor widow doesn't intend to manipulate poor people into giving beyond their ability. It also doesn't condone exploitation of the poor. Instead, it intends to challenge those who think too much of themselves because of their supposed piety. Jesus lifts up the widow's generosity as an example of what loving God looks like. Let's consider this question: what would it look like for people with adequate or abundant financial resources to follow the widow's example?

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—EXPECTATIONS OF THE MESSIAH

Mark 12:35-37



(35) While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, "How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David?"

**(36) David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.”’ (37) David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?’ And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.**

The authorities have stopped questioning Jesus (see 12:34b), but now Jesus questions their contention “that the Messiah is the son of David” (v. 35). They had good biblical reasons to say this (2 Sam 7:16; Isa 9:2-7; Jer 23:5; Ezek 34:23-24). People in Jesus’ day expected the Messiah to be a descendant of David, and some saw Jesus as the fulfillment of this hope (Mk 10:46-48; 11:10; Mt 1:1; Luke 1:27; Rom 1:3).

Jesus cites Psalm 110:1 to help make his point. The New Testament quotes Psalm 110 over a dozen times to support its proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah. The psalm’s original function was to celebrate the king’s enthronement. A worship leader would have sung or spoken it. In the phrase “The LORD says to my lord,” “the LORD” refers to God and “my lord” refers to the king. God calls the king to “Sit at my right hand,” which is a summons to assume the throne (Mays, 351). By the time the collection of the Psalms came together after the Babylonian exile, people were probably already reading Psalm 110 as looking toward the Messiah (Mays, 353).

So Jesus refers to a psalm that people already understand to be messianic, but he offers a surprising interpretation. Assuming the tradition that David wrote the psalm, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit inspired David to say, “The Lord [God] said to my Lord [the Messiah], ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.’” Then Jesus asks, “David himself calls him [the Messiah] Lord; so how can he be his son?” Even David would give up his place of honor in deference to the Messiah.

Jesus isn’t denying that he is David’s descendant; he is saying that he is a different kind of Messiah than the scribes expect. His identity as the Son of Man who “must undergo great suffering” (8:31) matters more than his identity as the son of David who is expected to defeat Israel’s enemies. Those who would follow him must “deny themselves and take up their cross” (8:34) rather than expect positions of honor and power (see 10:32-45). His followers should do what the scribe and Jesus agreed is most important: love God with their entire beings and love their neighbors as themselves (12:28-34; Culpepper, 437).

## Applying the Bible

People in Jesus' day had ideas about who the Messiah would be and what he would do. Their thoughts were rooted in their hopes for national renewal. They expected the Messiah to usher in a new era of military and political dominance. Jesus challenges this understanding by downplaying the emphasis on the Messiah as the son of David. It's not that he isn't descended from David; it's just that his identity as a suffering-servant Messiah matters more. How we understand Jesus helps determine how we follow him. Do we follow him by trying to have power over others or by serving them?

## Reflecting on the Bible

Read Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17 (the lectionary's first reading for this Sunday). Note two things about these verses. First, God worked in amazing ways to continue the line out of which King David would come. Second, David's great-grandmother Ruth was a Moabite, not an Israelite. Many interpreters believe that a major point of the story of Ruth is that the Israelites should be open to outsiders; after all, the great King David was part Moabite. God also worked in amazing ways to have Jesus come from David's line. And Jesus the Messiah came not only for Israel's sake but also for everyone's sake. As you pray this week, ask God to show you what these great truths mean for you.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—BEWARE OF THE SCRIBES

Mark 12:38-40



**(38) As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, (39) and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! (40) They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”**

Is there a connection between the scribes' expectation of a conquering Messiah and their craving for power and glory? Jesus tells his listeners, “Beware of the

scribes...” (v. 38a), because they focus on outward appearance rather than on inward devotion. Their behavior demonstrates that they don’t love God with everything they are. They like to be recognized and treated as important people (v. 39). This desire to be honored indicates that the scribes crave the kind of devotion that only God should receive (Stein, 574).

The scribes’ behavior also indicates a lack of love for their neighbors. Jesus says, “They devour widows’ houses,” which means they take economic advantage of widows (v. 40a), who were vulnerable to manipulation in the ancient world. The Hebrew Scriptures instructed people to care for widows (see Ex 22:22; Deut 10:18; Jer 7:6; Mal 3:5). The book of James says that caring for widows is part of “religion that is pure and undefiled before God” (Jas 1:27). Some scribes may have done economic harm to widows by inappropriately charging them for legal advice, by becoming guardians of their estates and cheating them out of their property, or by accepting their houses as collateral for debts the women couldn’t pay (Stein, 575).

Jesus also criticizes the scribes for praying long prayers “for the sake of appearance” (v. 40a). The lone scribe correctly noted that loving God and people “is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (v. 33). But other scribes value religious performance over loving widows (or others). Jesus says that they will be judged more harshly than others, probably because they know better what they should do, yet they don’t do it.

### **Applying the Bible**

Jesus says that the scribes honor themselves above others. Pride focuses on self and blinds people to the needs of others. It causes us to treat them as means to our self-absorbed ends. As Jesus points out, pride leads to hypocrisy. We focus on the outward appearance of piety but inwardly lack a gracious and generous heart. What do our attitudes and actions reveal about the state of our hearts? Do we think more about ourselves or about others?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Jesus criticized scribes who expected to be treated as if they were better than other people. He also criticized them for seeking praise based on outward appearance when the state of their hearts led them to mistreat vulnerable people.

He said as well that they faced more severe condemnation, probably because their greater knowledge gave them greater responsibility.

Ask God to help you put what you know into practice. Also pray to develop a heart that craves service rather than honor.



## **EXPLORING THE BIBLE—GREAT GENEROSITY**

**Mark 12:41-44**



**(41) He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. (42) A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. (43) Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. (44) For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”**

The final teaching in our passage occurs in the Court of the Women, where the temple treasury was located. Jesus directs this lesson to the disciples. The appearance of a widow in this story connects the lesson with the previous teaching about the scribes’ hypocrisy.

As Jesus watches people give their offerings, he sees many rich people giving large amounts. Then he sees a poor widow give her offering. Given what Jesus has said about scribes cheating widows out of their homes, we might wonder if a scribe’s dishonesty has left this woman destitute.

The widow gives “two small copper coins.” Each one was worth one sixty-fourth of a denarius, which was the daily wage of a laborer. She would be justified in keeping one of her two coins for her own needs, but she doesn’t (Lane, 443).

Jesus tells his disciples that the poor widow has given more than anyone else, including the rich who gave large amounts. Jesus judges the gifts not on what people give but on how much they have left over after they give (Culpepper, 439).

The story emphasizes the widow's utter commitment. Jesus says that "she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on" (v. 44b). The Greek of the last phrase can be translated "all her life." Perhaps Mark wants us to read it both ways: the widow gives everything she has to live on, but she also gives her entire life. She does what the scribe agreed with Jesus should be done: she loves God with all she is (12:32-33).

The point of this passage is that the widow, who is virtually invisible in society, exemplifies true humility and faithfulness. Someone who seems to have nothing to offer is recognized for offering "everything."

### **Applying the Bible**

The measure of true generosity is not the amount we give but the spirit with which we give. True generosity has more to do with the giver's motive. The widow wrapped her small gift in her whole heart, mind, soul, and strength.

If we have much and give little, we aren't generous. We may not even be generous when we have much and give much. But we are generous when we give our entire lives to God. When we do that, appropriate gift giving will follow.

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

What kind of giving do we most value in the church? How consistent is our viewpoint with that of Jesus? How should the life and death of Jesus inspire our generosity?

Spend some time this week reflecting on your level of generosity. How does your spirit of giving demonstrate your relationship with Jesus? How does your love for God and for other people affect the way you use your resources? Ask God to help you respond to God's generosity with your own.

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November 18, 2018

# Insight

Lesson Text: Mark 13:1-13    Background Text: Mark 13

## A Verse to Remember—Mark 13:5

Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray.”

### Suggested Daily Bible Readings (November 12-17, 2018)

Monday: 1 Timothy 5:1-8

Thursday: 1 Timothy 6:11-21

Tuesday: 1 Timothy 5:9-16

Friday: Colossians 2:6-15

Wednesday: Luke 4:16-30

Saturday: Mark 12:1-12

## INTRODUCTION

In this week’s Scripture passage, Jesus’ disciples ask him about the meaning of events in their time. We also want to understand what God is doing in our time. We want to know the meaning of the good and bad events that happen in our lives and in the world. We long to understand how God is involved in what is taking place around us. As Jesus prepares to leave the disciples, he warns them to be careful about the ways they interpret events. God is at work in the world, but to understand what God is doing we need insight that comes through the Holy Spirit. Jesus lets us know that we who follow him will experience difficult times, but we can endure because we know God is at work.

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—SIGNS OF THE TIMES?

Mark 13:1-4



(1) As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” (2) Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” (3) When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives

**opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, (4) “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”**

Jesus deals with two separate but related matters in Mark 13—the coming destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the future coming of the Son of Man. Jesus encourages the disciples to develop insight into what God is doing that will help them stay faithful for the long haul.

In Mark’s narrative, the events of chapter 13 occur on Tuesday of Holy Week. As Jesus and his disciples leave the temple, one of them comments on how impressive the temple buildings are. The temple was in the midst of an expansion and redevelopment begun by Herod the Great in 19 BC (Jn 2:20) that would not be completed for another three decades. The disciples mention the “large stones” (v. 1); those still visible today are about fifteen feet long and three to four feet high, with one being about forty feet long (Reddish, 101). The temple was a magnificent structure.

Jesus responds by saying that the temple will be destroyed (v. 2), which had to be hard for the disciples to hear. The predicted destruction occurred when the Romans leveled it in AD 70, which is about the time Mark’s Gospel was written.

Jesus and the disciples leave Jerusalem and walk across the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives, from which they have a magnificent view of the temple. As they sit looking at the temple with Jesus, some of his disciples ask him, “When will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” (v. 4). “When will this be?” probably refers to the temple’s destruction. “What will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” seems to refer to the coming of the Son of Man and the full arrival of God’s kingdom. Jesus’ response will indicate that the temple’s destruction isn’t the same thing as the establishment of God’s kingdom. His disciples will need a nuanced understanding.

### **Applying the Bible**

We often assume that the institutions, organizations, or systems that comprise our cities, nations, and world are indestructible. We rely on them for our way of life. We view them as permanent. This is how first-century Israelites felt about

the temple. If we depend too much on temporary things, we will lose perspective on eternal realities. All human institutions have a beginning and an end. Nations and empires rise and fall. But God still reigns. Where do you place your trust?

### Reflecting on the Bible

What impresses us? How enamored are we with seemingly strong and influential institutions? It is possible for institutions to maintain their ideals and to stay true to their core purpose, but often they don't. This can be true even of churches or other Christian institutions. Read Mark 12:1-12 (Saturday's Bible reading). Jesus' parable of the vineyard teaches that the religious authorities of his day had lost their way. Our lesson text says that the institution they ran would collapse. Pray that our leaders and institutions will be true to the ways of Jesus. Pray also that we will evaluate them according to their faithfulness to those ways.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—ALERT BUT NOT ALARMED

Mark 13:5-8



**(5) Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. (6) Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. (7) When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. (8) For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”**

Jesus' first response to the disciples' inquiry is “Beware” (v. 5). They want to know when the destruction of the temple will take place, but Jesus doesn't provide a calendar for their planning purposes; instead he issues a warning. He wants them to be careful not to let false leaders and teachers lead them astray about the meaning of events (v. 6). Jesus warns his followers against false prophets and possibly against fake messiahs.

Mark's Gospel was most likely produced during the period of the Jewish war against Rome in AD 66–70, which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem,

including the temple. Christians in Rome, perhaps the Gospel of Mark's intended audience, were persecuted during this period. People who falsely claimed to represent Jesus or even to be the returned Jesus tried to cause chaos by saying that the end was at hand. Jesus warns his followers not to listen to such people. A too-heightened expectation of the end can produce gullibility.

Jesus also encourages believers not to be alarmed when political and natural crises occur, as they often do (vv. 7-8). Jesus' followers can see such events as pointing to the eventual fulfillment of God's kingdom, but we should not regard them as signs that the end is at hand. During challenging events, we should be more assured of God's purpose and less anxious than others about what is happening to us.

Such occurrences are "but the beginning of the birth pangs" (v. 8b). Labor can be prolonged and intense, and awaiting the fulfillment of God's kingdom can be as well. But Jesus cautions us against too closely associating the struggle with the end, which will not come before its time.

At the same time, we should watch for Jesus to return and for God to fulfill God's kingdom. Jesus calls on his followers to "keep alert" (v. 33) and to "keep awake" (vv. 35-36). We keep alert and awake by faithfully fulfilling our mission even in the face of opposition and other challenges.

### **Applying the Bible**

There has probably been no generation since the time of Jesus in which someone didn't claim that turbulent times signaled the end of the world or Jesus' return. Jesus makes it clear that such events will occur as long as history continues. He wants us to have appropriate insight so that we will not be misled or deceived. Disciples should rely on faith rather than fear so we can keep our composure in challenging times. God will give us the insight, faith, and courage we need to remain faithful no matter what happens.

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Jesus doesn't want us to be led astray by those who use crises to build a following by manipulating people's fears. The anxiety that makes people susceptible to such false teachers is inappropriate to those who trust in God. We believe what Jesus teaches us: God is working out His purposes, and the

timing of the kingdom's fulfillment is in God's hands. On the other hand, we are always to be alert for the coming of Jesus (13:32-37). Read 1 Timothy 6:11-21 (Thursday's Bible reading). How does this advice to Timothy help us think about how we should live as we wait for Jesus to come again? Ask God to help you live faithfully.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—FAITHFUL WHEN PERSECUTED

Mark 13:9-13



**(9) “As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. (10) And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. (11) When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. (12) Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; (13) and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”**

Jesus tells his disciples that they will face persecution. They will be brought before both religious and civil authorities. Their response to these experiences will be “a testimony” to those who persecute them (v. 9). They can't avoid opposition, but they can be faithful as they face it.

The mission of sharing the good news must continue both despite and through persecution (v. 10). One of the reasons disciples shouldn't believe those who say the end is near is that proclaiming the good news “to all nations” will take a long time. Two thousand years of sharing the gospel have passed since Jesus spoke these words. But we still don't know whether Jesus' return is near or far, so we are to continue the mission. We should be faithful until Jesus comes, no matter what we go through and no matter how long it takes.

Disciples shouldn't be anxious about defending themselves when put on trial, because the Holy Spirit will speak through them. Jesus promises that the Spirit will empower his followers to bear faithful witness under persecution. The book of Acts, Christian history, and contemporary personal testimonies bear witness to this empowerment.

Jesus says that even his followers' family members will turn them in (v. 12) and that hatred of them will seem universal (v. 13a). This hatred is "because of my name" (v. 13a); it comes when disciples' witness accurately reflects Jesus.

Jesus assures his followers that "the one who endures to the end will be saved" (v. 13b). He could mean those who endure to the end of their persecution even if they lose their lives, those who endure to the end of the age, or both (Boring, 366). To be "saved" probably means to find eternal life (see 10:29-30; Culpepper, 459).

### **Applying the Bible**

Jesus expects his disciples to continue his work in the world. He wants them to know what to expect as they do so. Their mission will be difficult; Jesus experienced great opposition, and so will those who faithfully represent him. We need to be careful of how we think and talk about being persecuted. Some Christians in some parts of the world are genuinely and horribly persecuted, and we should pray for them and do all we can to help them. What kind of opposition do we face? What kind of faithfulness to Jesus might lead to opposition in our setting?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Read Hebrews 10:11-25 (the lectionary's second reading for this Sunday). Especially notice these words: "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God,' and since then has been waiting 'until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.' For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (vv. 12-14).

What has Christ accomplished? What will he accomplish? What is going on in the world in the meantime? Who does Christ call us to be and what does he call

us to do as we wait? Reflect on how Christ needs you to be part of the process of defeating his enemies with his grace and love.

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November 25, 2018

# Worship

*Lesson Text: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Revelation 1:4b-8*

*Background Text: Daniel 7; Revelation 1*

## **A Verse to Remember—Daniel 7:14**

To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

## **Suggested Daily Bible Readings (November 19-24, 2018)**

*Monday: Hebrews 10:26-31*

*Thursday: Acts 7:54–8:1a*

*Tuesday: Hebrews 10:32-39*

*Friday: 1 Corinthians 15:20-28*

*Wednesday: Mark 13:9-23*

*Saturday: John 3:31-36*

## **INTRODUCTION**

If we want to know who or what we worship, we might ask ourselves the following questions: (1) What do we focus our lives on? (2) What do we depend on? (3) What determines our values and priorities? Christians should focus and depend on God. God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ should determine our values and priorities. We need to practice our worship of God at all times so we will be prepared to worship God in difficult times. Both of our lesson texts come from apocalyptic works. The word “apocalyptic” means to uncover or reveal. Such literature was written in times of crisis when God’s people needed to be reminded that God was still at work. Its purpose is still to encourage God’s people to persevere in hope and faith.

## **EXPLORING THE BIBLE—THE HEAVENLY COURTROOM**

**Daniel 7:9-10**



**(9) As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and**

**the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. (10) A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.**

The first six chapters in the book of Daniel present stories of Daniel and his friends as they prove faithful during the exile in Babylon. Beginning with chapter 7, Daniel receives and shares visions of God's working on an international and even cosmic level to shape the future of God's people.

Our lesson text presents part of a dream that Daniel has and writes down (see 7:1); in his dream Daniel receives visions that assure God's people that God is still working.

Daniel sees God taking the throne (v. 9). Daniel has seen other kingdoms arise as beasts from the sea (vv. 2-8). Most scholars believe that these beasts are the empires that dominated Palestine from the sixth through the fourth centuries BC: the Babylonian, the Median, the Persian, and the Seleucid kingdoms. The Seleucids (the name indicates their origin in Seleucus, one of Alexander the Great's generals) were most likely in power when the book of Daniel was written. The Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV, who called himself "Epiphanes" ("God manifest"), took extreme measures to impose Greek culture and to stamp out Jewish culture in Israel during the second century BC. The "little horn" that "speak[s] arrogantly" (v. 8) is Antiochus.

The multiple thrones probably imply a heavenly courtroom (see Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; Zech 3:1-10). An "Ancient One" (also "Ancient of Days") sits on one of the thrones; this is God. The Ancient One's white clothing and hair symbolize God's holiness and purity (v. 9a).

God assumes the throne to judge the powers that have imposed their will against God's people, particularly Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The fire symbolism (vv. 9b-10a) represents God's presence and judgment (Ex 14:24; Deut 4:24; Pace, 241-42). As the trial begins, "the books [are] opened" (v. 10b); these probably list the sins of the various empires.

## **Applying the Bible**

These verses affirm that God reigns and judges. The first people who heard the words of Daniel were oppressed and persecuted. Their persecutors seemed to have much more power and authority than they did. But the book of Daniel assures them that God is at work, and part of that work involves the ultimate judgment of the world's powers. We need this encouragement too. How do current worldly powers oppress, misuse, and abuse people? How would Daniel's words encourage people experiencing oppression?

### Reflecting on the Bible

The Bible affirms that God is ultimately in control and will finally fulfill God's purposes. But this doesn't mean that things will be the way God intends for them to be any time soon. How do we live in the meantime?

Read Hebrews 10:32-39 (Tuesday's Bible reading). This passage calls us to endure in the face of challenges. What basis does it provide for our endurance? As you pray this week, ask God to give you the grace and courage to endure through any difficulty. Also pray for those who are experiencing persecution. Ask God to show you how you can address injustice and oppression.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—ONE LIKE A SON OF MAN

Daniel 7:13-14



**(13) As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. (14) To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.**

After God judges the previous kingdoms, Daniel sees “one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven” (v. 13). “One like a human being” is literally “one like a son of man.” This phrase can refer to a human being, which is how God uses it to address the prophet Ezekiel (see 2:1 for example; NRSV translates the phrase “mortal”). In Psalm 8:4 (“what are human beings that you are mindful

of them, mortals that you care for them?”), “mortals” in the NRSV translation is literally “son of man.”

For the “one like a son of man” to come “with the clouds of heaven” indicates that he is no ordinary human being. He may be an idealized figure representing God’s faithful people, or he may be the Messiah.

The previous kingdoms have come and gone. But God gives the “one like a son of man” an everlasting kingdom.

“Son of Man” is an important designation for Jesus in the New Testament. When Caiaphas asks Jesus if he is “the Messiah, the Son of God” (Mt 26:63), Jesus’ answer reflects Daniel 7:13: “You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (v. 64).

### **Applying the Bible**

Daniel’s vision of the “one like a son of man” was meant first for the Jewish people experiencing persecution under Antiochus IV. It assured them that God was going to deliver them through a ruler who would establish a never-ending kingdom. The New Testament proclaims Jesus as the Son of Man whom God sent to establish the kingdom of God. How can this message assure us in challenging times? How should we live as citizens of God’s kingdom?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday on the Christian calendar. Read Psalm 93 (the lectionary’s psalm reading for this Sunday). The psalm celebrates God as the eternal king. Christians can read it as pointing to the eternal reign of Jesus Christ. As you pray, ask God to keep you mindful of whom you serve and to show you how you can be an effective and faithful citizen of the kingdom.



## **EXPLORING THE BIBLE—CHRIST THE KING**

**Revelation 1:4b-8**



**(4b) Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are**

**before his throne, (5) and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, (6) and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (7) Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. (8) “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.**

The book of Revelation comes from a time when Roman authorities were persecuting Christians in the late first century AD. It is addressed to “the seven churches that are in Asia” (1:4a), those churches scattered throughout the Roman province of Asia, which was in western Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). In apocalyptic symbolism, seven represents completeness, so John’s message is for all churches, including ours.

John offers “Grace” and “peace” (v. 4b) to his readers; they need to experience those realities in light of their persecution. Grace and peace come from the One “who is and who was and who is to come,” which recalls God’s self-introduction in Exodus 3:14. The phrase “seven spirits who are before his throne” (v. 4b) refers to the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is described in three ways (v. 5a). First, he is “the faithful witness.” A witness is someone who bears witness to God regardless of the cost. Jesus’ witness that led to his crucifixion inspires us to be faithful in our own witness. Second, Jesus is “the firstborn of the dead,” which refers to his resurrection (Col 1:18). John reminds his readers that God’s life-giving power is greater than the death to which their faithful witness might lead. Third, Jesus is “the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Jesus’ authority far exceeds that of all earthly rulers, including Caesar.

After describing Jesus in three ways, John names three things Jesus does for his followers. First, he “loves us.” Second, he “freed us from our sins by his blood” (v. 5b). Third, he “made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father” (v. 6a). Because Jesus loves us, he sets us free from our sins through his death

and calls us to be a servant community. Christians experience opposition and persecution when we bear faithful witness to the crucified Jesus.

Verse 7 cites Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10 to express anticipation of Jesus' glorious return. When he does return, "all the tribes of the earth will wail," perhaps out of mourning and repentance. Jesus' coming will be obvious and will cause a reaction.

God's statement "I am the Alpha and the Omega" (v. 8) uses the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet to say that God began and will complete creation. God opens and closes the books of history. God will do this through Christ, who later applies the same words to himself (22:13).

### **Applying the Bible**

Gathering with God's people to worship the Lord is essential to the life of faith. How committed are you to worshipping God? This is a good opportunity to evaluate your commitment to worship. It is also a good chance to think about why and how you worship. Does your worship focus on praising God for who God is and for what God has done, is doing, and will do through Jesus Christ? Does your worship extend into your life in the world?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Jesus is our ruler and we are citizens of his kingdom. Read John 18:33-37 (the lectionary's Gospel reading for this Sunday). Jesus tells Pilate that his "kingdom is not from this world" (v. 36a). But he also says that he came to this world "to testify to the truth" and that "everyone who belongs to the truth listens to [his] voice" (v. 37). We who follow and listen to him are still in the world, and this is where we serve him. Ask God to help you live in light of the truth about God that we find in our Lord Jesus Christ.

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# Unit Four

## Prophetic Voices for Advent: Anticipation and Fulfillment

Advent is a season of waiting, which occurs in many forms. Sometimes waiting comes with fits and tantrums, as with a toddler waiting for the end of a car ride to Grandma's house. Sometimes waiting occurs with dread, as with students awaiting the results of an important exam. Sometimes waiting occurs with anxiety, as with a military family awaiting news. But at other times, waiting occurs with an expectancy that causes us to begin to live into what we await, as with an engaged couple whose love grows deeper as they await their wedding day. Advent calls for this last kind of waiting. Advent calls us to lean forward in expectation until we find ourselves moving toward the Savior who also moves toward us.

The four prophetic passages in this unit remind us of the certainty of God's promises so we won't lose heart when the waiting grows long. They offer their promises in the midst of difficult times to remind us that despair doesn't have the final word and that hope can be found in all circumstances. They remind us that faithful waiting requires faithful living. As we study these passages, we will discover the richness of the prophetic word that speaks to its own day and time, that finds its ultimate fulfillment in the person and ministry of Jesus, and that still has significance for our day and our lives. We will also discover the power of hope to galvanize generation upon generation and to encourage the downtrodden and oppressed.

Once Christmas arrives, we will leave the world and word of the prophets and encounter the only biblical story about Jesus' childhood. There we will learn about spiritual growth in wisdom and grace. We will also see how the things in which we immerse our lives shape us.

### **About the Writer**

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December 2, 2018

# A Righteous Branch

Lesson Text: Jeremiah 33:14-22    Background Text: Jeremiah 33

## A Verse to Remember—Jeremiah 33:15

In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

## Suggested Daily Bible Readings (November 26–December 1, 2018)

Monday: Revelation 11:1-14

Thursday: Nehemiah 9:6-15

Tuesday: Revelation 11:15-19

Friday: Nehemiah 9:16-25

Wednesday: John 16:25-33

Saturday: Nehemiah 9:26-31

## INTRODUCTION

Have you ever said that a situation was hopeless? We might say this when we see no way out of difficult circumstances. And it may be that a situation presents no short-term solution. That was the predicament for the people of Judah when the prophet Jeremiah shared the words in our lesson text. The nation was in serious danger of being overrun by the armies of Babylon, and that is what eventually happened. But Jeremiah calls the people to look beyond their current circumstances and trust in God's long-term promises. We need to heed this call as well. Our hope is based on the assurance that God does as God promises. How can we increase our hope?

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—THE DAYS ARE SURELY COMING

Jeremiah 33:14-16



(14) The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. (15) In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall

**execute justice and righteousness in the land. (16) In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”**

These words from Jeremiah come during a dark time in the history of the people of Judah and Jerusalem. The Babylonian army, one of the strongest ever to exist, is besieging their city. Jeremiah is in prison, put there by his own king for preaching that God would give the people into the hands of the Babylonians as punishment for their wrongful ways.

In the midst of those dark days, God sends a hopeful message through the prophet: a righteous Branch will spring up for David, justice and righteousness will be done in the land, and Judah and Jerusalem will be safe. The message looks to the future, so it doesn't cancel Jeremiah's proclamations about impending defeat or change the current siege situation. But it does offer hope for the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises.

The image of a righteous Branch symbolizes God's act of bringing hope out of situations that seem hopeless. Many of us have been surprised by new growth from a broken and seemingly dead tree. Jeremiah says that while the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile of its people, and the displacement of its king will leave Judah looking like a dead stump, unseen roots will give new life to God's promises.

Justice and righteousness are important parts of this promised renewal. The Hebrew prophets often proclaim that the leaders and the people have failed to live justly and righteously. Here Jeremiah proclaims that justice will be done and righteousness will prevail when a righteous king sits on the throne.

In Scripture, righteousness and justice are deeply intertwined concepts. They are both personal and public, and they ultimately involve right relationships. Justice and righteousness are active in the world when all things in the created order are free to abide in right relationship one with another by living according to the standard and guidance of their creator.

Jeremiah doesn't say when this envisioned time of renewal will come, but he seems to think it will occur in the near future. He tells the people that the days

are going to be hard, but they should endure in hope because they can count on God's promise to restore and renew them.

### Applying the Bible

We all encounter hard times. Sometimes difficult days come because of choices we make, other times because of other people's actions, and still other times because of unexplainable reasons. No matter how our struggles arise, we need a word of hope to remind us of God's enduring promises. We need a reminder that God is at work beneath the surface and behind the scenes. The roots of God's promises run deep, preparing to bring forth new life in due season.

### Reflecting on the Bible

Recall a time of struggle in your life. What kept you going during this time? Was it the kindness of someone else, inspiring words from a friend, the words of Scripture, prayer, or something else? Give thanks for what helped you endure.

Also think about people who need hope. Say a prayer for them and ask God to give you words and show you actions that will offer encouragement.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—KINGS AND PRIESTS

Jeremiah 33:17-18



**(17) For thus says the LORD: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, (18) and the levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to make grain offerings, and to make sacrifices for all time.**

Jeremiah continues to develop his theme of the righteous Branch (v. 15) by repeating the Lord's promise that a descendant of David will always occupy Israel's throne. Jeremiah also repeats God's promise that "the levitical priests" will always offer sacrifices and offerings.

Again, he is probably anticipating that God will fulfill these promises in the near future. While the priesthood did continue after the exile in Babylon, the monarchy was never reestablished.

People living in Jesus' time continued to expect the Messiah to come someday; he would be David's descendant and would establish God's reign. Those who believed Jesus was the Messiah passed that good news on to us. The New Testament also teaches that Jesus is our great high priest (Heb 4:14-16), so he fulfills the hope not only for an ideal king but also for an ideal priest.

We think of Jesus when we read Jeremiah's words because the New Testament reveals Jesus to be both king and priest. Following his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus reigns as king and priest forever, thus fulfilling the eternal covenants of God in a greater way than anyone else could have.

The continuing unfolding of Jeremiah's prophetic word underscores the dynamic nature of God's word. A prophetic word speaks the truth about a particular moment in time, but it may prove even truer in later times and events. This is the case with Jeremiah's word of hope for his contemporaries who faced difficult days: it finds even greater meaning centuries later in the coming of Jesus. Such a word can continue to speak to us during our trying days.

In Jesus' time, another world empire dominated Israel. The Roman armies didn't besiege Jerusalem during Jesus' lifetime, but they occupied the nation. Many of Jerusalem's own leaders colluded with the empire so that justice and righteousness were hard to find. In Jesus, some found a king who was humble of spirit and a priest who was acquainted with their struggles; they found the One who would indeed execute justice and righteousness and establish God's kingdom forever.

### **Applying the Bible**

The earliest Christians searched the words of God that came through the Hebrew prophets to find truth for their time and experience, and we can do this too. We can read the words of Scripture knowing that they had meaning for their original audience and for generations throughout history. We can also read them knowing that they will reveal great truth to us in our time. Jeremiah's words have already had more than one fulfillment. How are they being fulfilled in our time?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

When was the last time you read a Scripture passage and realized it had significance for your life at that time? Was it recently? Has it been a while? Be

thankful for what you can learn about how Scripture spoke in the past, but listen for what it says in the present.

As you spend time in prayer, ask God to help you to be open to what God wants you to hear in Scripture and to give you courage to act in light of what you hear.



## **EXPLORING THE BIBLE—AN UNBREAKABLE COVENANT**

**Jeremiah 33:19-22**



**(19) The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: (20) Thus says the LORD: If any of you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night would not come at their appointed time, (21) only then could my covenant with my servant David be broken, so that he would not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with my ministers the Levites. (22) Just as the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured, so I will increase the offspring of my servant David, and the Levites who minister to me.**

God's covenant with the generations who followed David and with the levitical priests is as certain as God's "covenant with the day and...with the night" (v. 20); to think it can be broken is "absurd" (Thompson, 603). The cycle of day and night is part of God's creation and is thus dependable (Gen 1:3-5). Only if humanity could alter the course of the sun and moon and the timing of day and night could God's covenant with David and the priests be broken. One is as impossible as the other.

The endurance, sureness, and dependability of God's promises bring us back to the theme with which we began: God's promises can be trusted no matter what we are going through. As we can count on a stump to produce new life and depend on the continuation of day and night, we can also trust the promises of God.

We may not suffer oppression by a foreign empire or endure the despair of exile, but we know the struggle of facing situations when God's promises seem far away. When that happens, we should look back and remember that God's promises have already lasted through many difficult times. We can rest assured that they still endure. We know that God's promises culminate in Jesus Christ, the one through whom we can enter into a relationship with God. We find our ultimate hope in Christ.

### **Applying the Bible**

Hope gives us strength for the present by pointing us toward the future. Christian hope is active rather than passive. As we wait for God to fulfill God's promises, we look for ways to contribute to what God is doing here and now.

Read Luke 21:25-36 (the lectionary's Gospel reading for this Sunday). Jesus says, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap" (vv. 34-35a). As we wait for his return, he doesn't want the difficulties of life to distract us from our calling to remain faithful. How can our hope in Christ lead us to serve?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. As we begin this season of expectant waiting, it is good to remember and celebrate God's faithfulness: God keeps God's promises! It is also a good time to check our level of hope: Do we trust that God will complete what God has started? Are we looking for Jesus to come again? How does our watching affect our lives?

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 (the lectionary's second reading for this Sunday). How does Paul pray for the Thessalonian Christians? Pray that the same things will take place in us as we watch expectantly for Jesus.

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December 9, 2018

# The Messenger of the Covenant

Lesson Text: Malachi 2:17–3:5    Background Text: Malachi 2:17–4:6

## A Verse to Remember—Malachi 3:1

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

## Suggested Daily Bible Readings (December 3-8, 2018)

Monday: Numbers 17:1-11

Thursday: Malachi 3:6-12

Tuesday: 2 Samuel 7:18-29

Friday: Malachi 3:13-18

Wednesday: Isaiah 1:24-31

Saturday: Malachi 4:1-6

## INTRODUCTION

There is a fine line between trusting in God’s grace and presuming upon it. The people to whom Malachi’s message was originally addressed had crossed that line. They lived in the years following the people’s return to Judah from Babylonian exile, sometime between the completion of the second temple in 515 BC and the reform efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah in the mid-400s BC. The challenges of rebuilding the nation were difficult. The people’s failure to be faithful to the Lord complicated the situation. But when the prophet we call Malachi—the word means “my messenger” and may be a title—told them what God had to say about their sins, they didn’t understand what was wrong. They thought everything was all right. How presumptuous are we? Are we ready to hear what God’s messengers have to say about our sins?

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—DOES GOD CARE?

Malachi 2:17



(17) You have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, “All who do evil are good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in

**them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?”**

The book of Malachi is arranged as a dialogue between God and the people. At the beginning of the book, the prophet shares a word from the Lord to the people: “I have loved you.” Then he reports that the people reply, “How have you loved us?” (1:2). Finally, the prophet offers God’s answer to the question. This pattern continues throughout the book.

This part of the dialogue opens with the prophet telling the people, “You have wearied the LORD with your words” (v. 17). When they want to know how they have done this, the prophet tells them they have done so by saying that God doesn’t care enough about evil to take action against it. Indeed, it seems to them that evil people prosper. Their statement reveals a lack of self-awareness. After all, Malachi’s preaching has made it clear that they aren’t doing right themselves. The prophet proceeds to tell the people where the God of justice will soon be. He also informs them that they will be surprised at what God is going to do.

### **Applying the Bible**

According to Malachi, the Lord is weary of hearing the people say that God doesn’t care how they live. Their claim that evildoers get away with everything is ironic because they don’t do right themselves. They presume upon God’s grace by assuming that they are in good standing with God. When we think about the evil and injustice in the world, do we give enough thought to our role in it? Or do we just think about what other people are doing? Malachi calls us to examine ourselves.

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Malachi 2:17 could lead us to conclude that God grows tired of hearing our questions and complaints. We should remember a couple of things. First, the book of Malachi is arranged as a dialogue. This means that disagreement and discussion are built into the book’s presentation. Second, the Bible contains many examples of God patiently listening to the concerns of faithful people. The issue is not what the people say; it is the assumptions and presumption behind their words. As you pray, ask God to reveal any improper attitudes and presuppositions. Thank God for hearing your heartfelt, genuine concerns. Pray that you will heed God’s call to repentance and spiritual growth.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

Malachi 3:1-4



**(1) See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. (2) But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; (3) he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. (4) Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.**

God does care and will act by sending “my messenger” (v. 1a). Since “Malachi” means “my messenger,” the messenger God is sending “to prepare the way before me” could be the prophet. But it seems more likely that the messenger is someone who is yet to come.

Malachi says that “the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (v. 1a). The word “Lord” here translates the Hebrew *adon*, not the divine name YHWH (which is why it appears in regular text rather than capital letters), but it probably still refers to God. The “messenger of the covenant” (v. 1b) will prepare for the Lord’s arrival. “Covenant” refers to the relationship between God and the people that is rooted in the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. God will judge the people for violations against their relationships with God and with others (see v. 5).

Malachi is being ironic in the phrases “whom you seek” and “in whom you delight” (v. 1; Achtemeier, 184). His message makes it clear that the people don’t seek God and will not delight in the messenger.

The people may think the forerunner’s coming will be good news for them, but Malachi says this isn’t the case. He asks, “who can endure the day of his coming,

and who can stand when he appears?” (v. 2a). The eighth-century BC prophet Amos issued a similar warning to his listeners: “Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light...” (5:18; Tuell, 249). The messenger will play a role in God’s judgment of the people.

The prophet uses the imagery of refining metal, a process that uses fire to remove impurities from the valuable ore (vv. 2b-3). “Fuller’s soap” may refer to material used in removing stains from clothing or to an aspect of the metal refinement process (Nogalski, 1051).

The messenger’s mission will be to purify the Levites so they can present acceptable offerings on the people’s behalf (vv. 3b-4). Malachi has previously criticized the priests for offering unsuitable sacrifices (1:6–2:9). The Lord warned the priests in an effort to preserve the “covenant with Levi” (2:4) that the priests had “corrupted” (v. 8). The messenger will purify the religious leaders so they can help the people reestablish their relationship with God. This purifying and cleansing work that the messenger is called to accomplish is about restoration rather than punishment. When the Levites’ impurities are removed, their work will be enhanced rather than destroyed.

The lesson text doesn’t identify the messenger, but later in the book we find another option—the ninth-century BC prophet Elijah: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes” (4:5). Malachi says that Elijah “will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I [God] will not come and strike the land with a curse” (4:6).

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all refer to the book of Malachi when describing John the Baptist (Mt 11:10; Mk 1:2; Lk 1:76; 7:27), whom they regard as the messenger and forerunner who prepares the way for Jesus by calling the people to repent of their sins. After Elijah and Moses appear with Jesus in his Transfiguration (Mt 17:1-8), Jesus’ disciples ask him, “Why...do the scribes say that Elijah must come first [before the Messiah]?” (v. 10). Jesus answers, “Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they

pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands” (vv. 11-12; see Mk 9:11-13).

According to the Gospels, John the Baptist fulfills the role of the messenger whom Malachi anticipated. These writings add a qualification for the messenger: he will suffer and die in anticipation of what the Messiah will experience.

### Applying the Bible

We need to listen to what Malachi says to us. We need to listen to what John the Baptist says to us. Indeed, we need to listen to any messenger that God sends to us. The Gospel writers give us a good way to judge a messenger’s validity: does he or she proclaim through words and lifestyle the self-sacrificing love of Jesus Christ?

We should also remember that we are God’s messengers. We do or don’t proclaim God’s grace and love through the ways we think, speak, and act. How can we better serve as God’s messengers who announce the coming of Jesus?

### Reflecting on the Bible

The priests and the people needed to hear and respond to Malachi’s preaching of impending judgment. God sent Malachi to call them to repentance, and by God’s grace, repentance was possible. Read Malachi 3:6-12 (Thursday’s Bible reading). This passage, which immediately follows our lesson text, offers good news to the people: “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished” (v. 6). God’s grace and mercy always have been and always will be available. Because of this great truth, the people can reestablish their relationship with God: “Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts” (v. 7b). Praise God for God’s great grace and mercy. Ask God to help you return to God in whatever ways you need to do so.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—THE LORD COMES

Malachi 3:5



**(5) Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those**

**who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.**

God will come to judge the people. The Hebrew word translated “judgment” in verse 5 is the same one translated “justice” in 2:17. The people who wonder where “the God of justice” is will find that God has come to judge them. They complain about the others’ wrongdoing when they are guilty themselves. They are evidently better at seeing the speck in their neighbors’ eyes than they are at seeing the log in theirs (Mt 7:4-5). They are guilty of self-righteousness.

God will testify against those who violate the covenant requirements of loyalty to God and faithfulness to each other. Both the law and the prophets speak against the violations listed here. The failure to revere God (“those who...do not fear me”) leads to unfaithfulness in one’s relationship with God and with people.

Malachi proclaims that God is calling his listeners back to the basics of being God’s people. It is as if God is saying, “Remember the foundations of our covenant relationship.” What basics do we need to return to as we worship God and follow Jesus?

### **Applying the Bible**

Do we judge others more harshly than we judge ourselves? Do we want God to hold others accountable but allow us to justify our behavior? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Mt 7:1-2). Should we spend our time and energy evaluating the sins of others or focusing on our lives to make sure we live in the just and righteous ways that Jesus reveals to us?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Read Luke 3:1-6 (the lectionary’s Gospel reading for this week). Luke reminds us that John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus to come by calling people to repent. God still calls us to repent. Read Philippians 1:3-11 (the lectionary’s second reading for this week). Paul says, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (v. 6). What else does Paul say will happen in the Philippian

Christians' lives so they will be ready for Jesus to come again? Ask God to help you grow in ways that will make you ready and help you bear witness to Jesus until he comes.

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December 16, 2018

# The Lord in the Midst

Lesson Text: Zephaniah 3:11-20    Background Text: Zephaniah 3

## A Verse to Remember—Zephaniah 3:15

The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies.  
The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

## Suggested Daily Bible Readings (December 10-15, 2018)

Monday: Romans 8:22-25    Thursday: Amos 6:1-8  
Tuesday: 2 Peter 1:2-15    Friday: Amos 8:4-12  
Wednesday: Luke 7:18-30    Saturday: Amos 9:8-15

## INTRODUCTION

Sometimes people say, “I have good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?” Zephaniah probably didn’t give the people a choice, but he shared the bad news first; most of his book is made up of messages about God’s judgment. Here at the end he turns to the good news of God’s deliverance. If we stop and think about it, though, we may realize that, at its heart, even preaching about judgment is good news—messages of judgment present us with opportunities to repent. Twice in our lesson text Zephaniah tells the people that God “is in your midst” (vv. 15b, 17a). As we approach the third Sunday of Advent, we are also getting close to Christmas, when we celebrate God’s coming into our midst through Jesus Christ.

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—A HUMBLE REMNANT

Zephaniah 3:11-13 (11)



**On that day you shall not be put to shame because of all the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. (12) For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall**

**seek refuge in the name of the LORD — (13) the remnant of Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid.**

Zephaniah prophesied in Jerusalem during the reign of King Josiah, who ruled Judah from 640 to 609 BC (1:1). Babylon was the rising power in the area but had not yet come into its own. Zephaniah gives much attention to internal threats such as the corruption of the priests and the greedy oppression of the city's leaders.

“On that day” refers to the day of the Lord when God will judge the nations, including Judah. It is also when God will deliver the righteous. The “proudly exultant ones” and those who are “haughty” (v. 11) may be Jerusalem's political, judicial, and religious leaders whom Zephaniah has criticized (3:3-4). At the beginning of chapter 3, Zephaniah proclaimed God's judgment on Jerusalem, calling it an “oppressing city” that will not receive “correction” (vv. 1-2). The prophet blames the leaders for this state of affairs. Officials, judges, prophets, and priests are all called out by name as those who prey upon others, are faithless, and do violence against God's law. The prophet even proclaims that God had hoped that the destruction brought on other nations would have served as a corrective warning to Jerusalem's leaders, but they continued in their corruption (v. 7). God will address the situation by bringing down the arrogant leaders.

But a humble and righteous remnant of the people will remain. They will be humble because “they shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD” (v. 12b), which means to look for it in God's character as the One who is faithful to God's people. Finding refuge in God will lead the humble remnant to reflect God's character (v. 13a; Achtemeier, 184). They will also find peace and security (v. 13b). “Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid” (v. 13b) is ironic. The prophets often refer to leaders as shepherds, sometimes commending them for shepherding well, and sometimes criticizing them for neglecting their duty. Now Zephaniah declares that the people need protection from their leaders. On the day of the Lord, God will be their shepherd and they will be safe.

## Applying the Bible

We often emphasize individual transformation, which is appropriate. But the Bible also stresses the need for the transformation of societal structures and practices. Christians should be at the forefront of praying for and working toward a just world in which all people can live without fear. Zephaniah calls our attention to the need for religious, political, and judicial leaders who put the needs of people before any desire for personal enrichment. How can we contribute to a more just society?

## Reflecting the Bible

You may have experienced an abusive use of power on either a societal or personal level. If you have, name the experience before God, knowing that God hears the cries of the oppressed and promises that the humble will rest secure. If you haven't had such an experience, try to place yourself in the experiences of those who have. Ask God to help you understand their situation. Pray that they will be strong in the midst of trial and experience freedom and safety, and ask God to show you what you can do to support them.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—THE LORD'S PRESENCE MEANS JOY

Zephaniah 3:14-18a



**(14) Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! (15) The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. (16) On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. (17) The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing (18a) as on a day of festival.**

Zephaniah summons Jerusalem (“daughter Zion”) to celebrate God’s great saving act on its behalf (v. 14). They should celebrate because God is in their

midst as king and victorious warrior (vv. 15b, 17a). During King Josiah's reign, workers renovating the temple found a law scroll that prompted sweeping reforms in Judah (2 Kings 22:1–23:30). Zephaniah may have seen this rediscovery of the word of God as the return of God's presence into the midst of the people. But it is more likely that he has in mind God's return to Jerusalem after the exiles come home from Babylon (v. 20; see Ezek 11:22-23; 43:1-5).

The New Testament develops the theme of God's abiding presence and the resulting joy of God's people through the stories of the birth of Jesus, who is Emmanuel, "God with us" (Mt 1:23). Mary, Elizabeth, the shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and so many others sing, rejoice, and exult before God at the news that God has come into our midst through Jesus (Lk 1:39–2:38). We should rejoice that God came to us in Jesus and continues to be with us through the Holy Spirit.

The people should also celebrate because they no longer have to fear (vv. 15b-16). This is a powerful promise for those who are accustomed to living in fear. Fear prevents us from living a full life. We hesitate when opportunity comes our way because we know it could be taken away, we assume the worst intentions from others because we have experienced them so often, and we close ourselves off from the world to protect ourselves. Zephaniah encourages the people, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak" (3:16). Freedom from fear sets us free to do what we should do.

Zephaniah tells the people that there will be no need for fear because there will be no one to oppress them and make them afraid, because their enemies will be no more, and because God will be with them as a righteous king and victorious warrior. In the New Testament stories of Advent and Christmas, angels sometimes tell people not to be afraid (Mt 1:20; Lk 1:13, 30). Jesus came to conquer the oppressive forces that cause us to be afraid, and Jesus will come again to remove them completely.

Even God enters into celebration with the people (vv. 17b-18a). God will rejoice and sing as if at a festival because God is so joyous that the people are safe from violence and wrongdoing. In this "celebration of love" (Achtmeier, 86), God and the people celebrate together all that God has done and the opportunity for renewed covenant relationship.

## **Applying the Bible**

When we are going through a challenging time—a serious illness, a family crisis, or depression, for example—we usually want only certain people around. These are the people we trust enough to see us in such a condition, but they are also the ones who bring calm, peace, and even joy into times of struggle. We know that their presence can help us rise up out of fear and anxiety. They can help us sense more of life’s possibilities. If we think about the powerful presence of such people in our lives and multiply it by thousands, we will barely imagine the power of God’s presence. And yet God is with us. We have much to celebrate!

### Reflecting on the Bible

Zephaniah encourages his original audience by having them look toward a time when they will rejoice because the Lord will be in their midst. We are blessed to live on the other side of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We know that the Lord has come and entered our midst through Jesus and through the Holy Spirit. Read Philippians 4:4-7 (the lectionary’s second reading for this Sunday). Paul tells us to rejoice because Jesus is coming again (“the Lord is near”) and because he is with now (we are “in the Lord”). Reflect on what it means to be “in the Lord” and to know that “the Lord is near.” How do these realities change your life? How should they?



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

Zephaniah 3:18b-20



**(18b) I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. (19) I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. (20) At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.**

To this point Zephaniah has been speaking for the Lord; now the Lord speaks directly to the people. God promises to “remove disaster” (v. 18b), to “deal with all [their] oppressors,” and to reverse the fortunes of those who have been oppressed (v. 19). “The lame” could be people injured during the Babylonian invasion, and “the outcast[s]” could be people exiled to Babylon (Nogalski, 749); the terms more likely refer generally to the vulnerable and oppressed. God’s reversal of their fortunes will cause them to praise God and will also cause other people to recognize them because of what God has done for them (v. 19b). This theme of the reversal of fortunes is found throughout Scripture. We see it when God liberates the Hebrew slaves from Egypt in the exodus. We see it in Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God in which the last shall be first and the first shall be last (Mt 20:16). We find it in Mary’s song after Gabriel tells her she is to bear the Christ child: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Lk 1:52-53).

After the people’s experience of destruction and exile, God will bring them home (v. 20). In a sense, we are already home in God’s kingdom. In another sense, we will finally arrive at home only when we get to heaven. In the meantime, we trust in God’s promise of what is to come even as we do all we can to help others find their way home.

### **Applying the Bible**

A prophetic word can include future promise and present motivation. In fact, the two elements usually work together. In our lesson text, Zephaniah encourages the people to look forward to what God is going to do. But in saying this, he gives them hope for the present and a reason to serve God well here and now. As Christians, we believe that the coming of Jesus two millennia ago fulfilled many of God’s promises. We also believe that Jesus will come again to bring God’s kingdom to its ultimate fulfillment. Read Luke 7:18-30 (Wednesday’s Bible reading). Jesus came to reverse people’s fortunes. How can we participate in Jesus’ kingdom ministry?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Reflect on the promised reversal of fortunes found in this passage and throughout Scripture. Ask God, “How do my fortunes need to be reversed? How do I need to be humbled? How do I need to be lifted up?” Ask God to give you

insight and wisdom as you consider the question. Also, imagine a world where no one must fear, the powerful are not greedy or unjust, and everyone enjoys equality and fairness. Read Luke 3:7-18 (the lectionary's Gospel reading for this Sunday). Ask God to direct you to live so that you can help your family, your community, your church, and our world move a little closer to peace and justice.

## References

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Jennifer Ryan Ayres, "Third Sunday of Advent: Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, vol. 1: Advent through Transfiguration, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

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December 23, 2018

# The One of Peace

Lesson Text: Micah 4:9–5:5a    Background Text: Micah 4–5

## A Verse to Remember—Micah 5:5a

He shall be the one of peace.

### *Suggested Daily Bible Readings (December 17-22, 2018)*

Monday: Hebrews 13:7-17

Thursday: Jeremiah 31:31-34

Tuesday: Acts 28:23-31

Friday: Isaiah 42:10-18

Wednesday: Micah 4:8-13

Saturday: Isaiah 66:7-11

## INTRODUCTION

Our lesson text falls into three sections, each beginning with “Now” (4:9, 11; 5:1). Each section moves from present hardship to future deliverance. In each case, hardship is unavoidable but deliverance is certain. On the fourth Sunday of Advent, the last Sunday before Christmas Day, this movement reminds us that the hardships we experience as we wait for God’s promises to be fulfilled don’t have the final word. God’s promised deliverance does and will come. The God who delivered the people of Judah from Babylonian exile and who sent God’s Son to our world will fulfill all of God’s promises.

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—FROM GROANING TO DELIVERANCE

Micah 4:9-10



**(9) Now why do you cry aloud? Is there no king in you? Has your counselor perished, that pangs have seized you like a woman in labor? (10) Writhe and groan, O daughter Zion, like a woman in labor; for now you shall go forth from the city and camp in the open country; you shall go to Babylon. There you shall be rescued, there the LORD will redeem you from the hands of your**

## **enemies.**

In this first section, the people of Jerusalem face Babylon's military might, which may have already deposed their king (v. 9) and will shortly decimate the city and take many of its inhabitants into exile (v. 10a).

Micah prophesied in Jerusalem around the time that the Assyrian army destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. The Assyrians also threatened Judah, but Jerusalem avoided overthrow. Much of Micah's preaching reflects this background. But some oracles in the book of Micah, including our lesson text, address the threat of Babylon and the exile that followed Jerusalem's fall in 587 BC. Most interpreters conclude that this part of the book reveals the ongoing application of Micah's preaching by later prophets and editors working in his tradition.

A new superpower does the same things the previous one did to disrupt and threaten the lives of Jerusalem's inhabitants. This reality leads us to consider the cyclical nature of violence and war. It never seems to end; from ancient times to present times, nations fight each other for power, resources, and vengeance. Traumatic experiences can happen repeatedly in both a nation's life and in an individual's life. People of faith, however, live in the knowledge that God ultimately delivers them.

The imagery of labor pains (v. 10) is appropriate to the prophet's message, as the intense pain of childbirth may finally lead to life and joy. Hope lies beyond the pain. For the people addressed by these verses, deliverance awaits on the other side of exile. For us, it awaits on the other side of our current travails.

### **Applying the Bible**

Relationships between nations are often characterized by conflict and violence. Conflict can affect personal relationships too. We sometimes see this in family dynamics. Factions line up on different sides of an issue, whether it arose recently or generations ago. The dynamics that fuel cycles of global and personal conflict are similar: the desire to get revenge for a political or familial slight, the fear of not having enough raw materials or enough love, or the draw of power and a false sense of control. In public and private scenes, such dynamics cause an ongoing cycle.

## Reflecting on the Bible

Our lesson text uses the image of a woman in labor to symbolize the struggle the people of Jerusalem are going through. Their pain is real, but it will lead to the delivery of new life. Read Isaiah 66:7-11 (Saturday's Bible reading). In this text, a prophet speaking after the Babylonian exile also pictures Jerusalem as a woman giving birth. This time, though, "Before she was in labor she gave birth; before her pain came upon her she delivered a son" (v. 7). This prophet goes on to say, "Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the LORD; shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God" (v. 9). Reflect on this contrast between painful and easy labor. Do we experience both hard labor and easy delivery in our lives? What can we learn from this?



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—FROM DANGER TO VICTORY

Micah 4:11-13



**(11) Now many nations are assembled against you, saying, "Let her be profaned, and let our eyes gaze upon Zion." (12) But they do not know the thoughts of the LORD; they do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor. (13) Arise and thresh, O daughter Zion, for I will make your horn iron and your hoofs bronze; you shall beat in pieces many peoples, and shall devote their gain to the LORD, their wealth to the Lord of the whole earth.**

The crisis in this section is the gathering of "many nations" against Jerusalem (v. 11). Micah doesn't name the nations, but the immediate context suggests Babylon and its allies (vv. 9-10). The broader context could suggest Assyria and its allies (5:5b-6). In any case, Jerusalem faces great danger.

God, however, is working toward a hopeful future. Whoever these nations are, they have their reasons for gathering against Jerusalem. But they don't understand God's purposes. God has gathered them to fight against Jerusalem in order to give God's people the victory (v. 12).

Let's consider a few things as we try to understand these verses.

For one thing, this is not the only time the Bible talks about God using other nations for God's purposes. For example, the prophet in Isaiah 40–55 says that God calls the Persian leader Cyrus to defeat Babylon and set the people free from exile (45:1-8).

For another thing, the image of threshing could indicate the nations' purification rather than their destruction. God's purpose in judging the nations could be to separate the good part of the grain from the bad, which is what happens in the threshing process (Fretheim, 210).

Also, the people's victory lies on the far side of their suffering. The entire lesson text makes it clear that the people will experience deliverance only after defeat.

Finally, in other verses Micah anticipates the nations coming together to worship God. "Many nations" say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths" (4:2). God will "judge between" and "arbitrate between" the nations, but in the end "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (v. 3). Micah's overall message indicates that peace is God's ultimate goal for the nations.

We should also keep in mind the broader context of the Bible, which includes the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught us that God's way is the way of peace through self-giving love rather than through selfish aggression.

### **Applying the Bible**

It is hard to feel wronged by another person and not respond in kind. When someone slights our work, we want to slight theirs. When someone insults us, we want to insult them back. A wounded spirit wants resolution, and the world teaches us to seek resolution through retaliation.

Some Christians will point to the Bible to justify "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (Ex 21:24). But we follow Jesus, who points us toward resolution characterized by moving beyond an eye for an eye and toward loving our enemies (Mt 5:38-48).

## Reflecting on the Bible

Think about a time when someone hurt you. Did you respond in kind? If so, did it help to end or further fuel the conflict? Perhaps you are currently dealing with a situation at home, at work, or in your community in which you're tempted to keep the hostility wheel spinning. You know it will eventually come around and hit you again, but at least it will hit the other person, too!

Ask God for the wisdom to see how conflict and violence perpetuate themselves and consume us as well as those we are in conflict with. Ask God for grace to step outside of the cycle and to practice love.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE —FROM SIEGE TO PEACE

Micah 5:1-5a



**(1) Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek. (2) But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. (3) Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. (4) And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; (5a) and he shall be the one of peace.**

The crisis in this section is a military siege of Jerusalem. The reference could be to a late eighth-century siege by the Assyrians (5:5b-6), an early sixth-century one by the Babylonians (4:10), or any such siege. The blow the enemy delivers to the ruler could be literal or figurative; either way, it shames the king and takes away his legitimacy (v. 1).

Micah says that the siege will give way to peace and that a great king will arise from “Bethlehem of Ephrathah” (v. 2). Ephrathah was apparently the name of a clan that lived in the Bethlehem area; David’s father Jesse was “an Ephrathite of

Bethlehem in Judah” (1 Sam 17:12). The new king will come from David’s hometown and will fulfill God’s promises to David (2 Sam 7:15).

Before this happens, the Lord “shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth” (v. 3). “Them” refers to the people who will experience defeat and dispersal. The language of labor and birth could refer to the one giving birth to the king, but it more likely refers to the pain of defeat and exile experienced by the people of Jerusalem (see 4:10). The new king will come after the return from exile. He will rule as a good shepherd (v. 4). This new ruler will foster peace rather than violence (v. 5).

Our lesson text is important in the New Testament’s understanding of Jesus as the Messiah. Luke tells us that Jesus was born in “the city of David called Bethlehem” (2:4). In addition to reporting that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Matthew says that the religious experts, who were summoned by Herod to answer the wise men’s question about the Messiah’s birthplace, based their answer on Micah 5:2 (2:6).

### **Applying the Bible**

God’s way for us is the way of peace. Peace is more than the absence of conflict; it is the condition of living in a relationship with God that enhances our relationships with each other. How can we grow in our relationship with God so we will also grow in peace? How can we build stronger relationships with other people? List some ways you can more closely follow the Savior who came to bring peace. He told us, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Mt 5:9). How can we be peacemakers?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Micah says that the origin of the great ruler who will be born in Bethlehem “is from of old, from ancient days” (v. 2b), which is a way of saying that he will fulfill the promises made to King David. After Mary finds that she is going to give birth to Jesus, she declares of God, “He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (Lk 1:54-55, from the lectionary’s Gospel reading for this week). Reflect on the ways Jesus fulfilled Micah’s expectations. How can they continue to be fulfilled through those who follow Jesus today? Pray for grace to bear God’s peace.

## Reference

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December 30, 2018

# The Maturing Messiah

Lesson Text: Luke 2:41-52    Background Text: Luke 2:39-52

## A Verse to Remember—Luke 2:52

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

## Suggested Daily Bible Readings (December 24-29, 2018)

Monday: Colossians 1:15-20

Thursday: 2 Chronicles 24:17-24

Tuesday: Romans 8:18-30

Friday: John 21:19b-24

Wednesday: Isaiah 42:14-21

Saturday: Revelation 21:1-7

## INTRODUCTION

Do you remember what it was like to be twelve years old? You were going through many changes as you navigated the transition from childhood to adolescence. It's an intense time in a person's life. But all of life is about changes, and all of life should be about growth and maturity. This includes our spiritual lives.

This Sunday's Scripture passage is the only story in our Bibles about Jesus' childhood, and we are grateful to Luke for preserving it for us. It reminds us that Jesus was once a young boy and that he was part of a family. Perhaps most important, it offers Jesus as a model for us as we keep growing in faith and love.

## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—A FAITHFUL COMMUNITY

Luke 2:41-44



(41) Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. (42) And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. (43) When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed

**behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. (44) Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends.**

The verse immediately preceding this passage says, "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (2:40). The final verse of our lesson text (2:52) echoes that verse, and together they provide a framework for the story of the boy Jesus in the temple. We should look for factors that contributed to young Jesus' growth in wisdom and favor and that will help people of any age grow toward spiritual maturity.

Faithful parents contributed to Jesus' growth. Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem every year to observe the Passover festival (v. 41). The law required only adult men to make the pilgrimage, but Joseph and Mary both went every year. It is not clear if Jesus had accompanied them on previous pilgrimages, but he does so at age twelve (v. 42). His parents' faithfulness goes beyond obedience to the letter of the law.

Luke has already reported on Joseph and Mary's faithfulness. They had Jesus circumcised when he was eight days old (2:21). They also took him to the temple to dedicate him to the Lord (vv. 22-38), after which Luke notes that "they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord" (v. 39). Mary and Joseph modeled faithfulness to God.

A strong community also contributed to Jesus' growth. Families of that time relied on their close-knit community. Life was more communal; people lived in close proximity to their extended family, sometimes even in the same household, and relied on neighbors in caring for children. The community surrounding Jesus could be trusted to care for him as if he were their own.

This deep sense of community with relatives and friends is why it took a whole day for Jesus' parents to realize he was missing. It is also part of the reason he grew in wisdom and stature: he spent time with other adults who shared wisdom with him.

Jesus was raised not only by faithful parents but also by a faithful community. He had other adults in his life who invested in him and to whom he could go for advice and guidance.

## Applying the Bible

Jesus' belonging to a faithful family and community contributed to his growth and helped form his life. The things in which we immerse ourselves help shape us, and the things in which we immerse our children help mold them. Our children and grandchildren need to see us model faithfulness to God. They also need other adults to contribute to their spiritual upbringing. The church should be that community for our families. How committed are we to the faith development of our family members? How can our church develop a greater commitment to the spiritual formation of people of all ages?

## Reflecting on the Bible

Who has modeled faithfulness for you? Who has demonstrated a deep and consistent commitment to worshiping God, following Jesus, and serving others? Give thanks to God for your spiritual role models. Consider writing a note of gratitude to them; they may not know how they influenced you. Think about who might be looking to you for guidance—it might be a child, a teenager, a new Christian, or one of your peers. How are you modeling faithfulness for them? Ask God for wisdom and strength to be a good model for those who look to you as an example.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Luke 2:45-47



**(45) When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. (46) After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. (47) And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.**

After three days of searching, Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the temple, where he is engaged in dialogue with the religious teachers. He is learning and growing through listening and asking questions.

Jesus has learned from his parents' faithfulness; now he practices his own. This is a vital step in the life of faith; no one can grow spiritually on the strength of someone else's commitment. The journey of faith must become our own if it is to be legitimate. We all must step out boldly to find our way under God.

Jesus' later ministry will involve him in conflict with religious teachers. But for now, some of them are willing to discuss spiritual matters with him. Good teachers who listen as well as talk are vital to faith development. Since the teachers were amazed at Jesus' answers (v. 47), they obviously asked him questions. This is good teaching methodology. Perhaps these teachers challenged their students, including Jesus, to put the pieces together for themselves. In order to be sound practitioners of our faith, we must learn to think for ourselves and to be creative in applying spiritual truth to unexpected situations.

The questions that Jesus asks during his ministry indicate that he learned to ask thoughtful questions rather than questions designed to elicit easy, memorized answers. Students of any age will grow best when encouraged to listen, to ask thoughtful questions, and to answer questions that lead them to work through what they know and discover what they don't know.

Through the years, people have used this story to argue for Jesus' divinity. Some have suggested that the scholars were amazed at Jesus' knowledge because he was expressing his divine nature. Others have pointed to this story as evidence of Jesus' humanity. The fact that he listens and asks questions indicates that he is growing in wisdom. Perhaps we should read the story as a demonstration of the interweaving of divine and human in Jesus so that both are present without either being obscured. If Jesus needed to grow in wisdom, surely we do too.

### **Applying the Bible**

Why are we sometimes hesitant to voice questions in Bible study or other small groups? Perhaps our question is about a potentially controversial or polarizing subject and we don't want to disrupt the peace. Maybe we are afraid of raising doubts for people who want certain answers. Or perhaps we think we should already know the answer. We should not be afraid of questions in the body of Christ. Engaging questions asked in community contribute much to our growth in faith.

## Reflecting on the Bible

In what areas do we need to grow as a Christian community? Read Colossians 3:12-17 (the lectionary's second reading for this Sunday). Make a list of areas in which the passage encourages us to make progress. How many of them can one do alone? How many require a community? As you pray, ask God to help the church be a true Christian community where all participants humbly and lovingly learn together.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE—IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE

Luke 2:48-52



**(48) When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” (49) He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (50) But they did not understand what he said to them. (51) Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. (52) And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.**

When Jesus' parents finally find him, they are at first “astonished.” But their astonishment quickly gives way to a parental reprimand, as Mary voices their frustration and fear (v. 48). She essentially asks, “How could you do this to your father and me?”

Jesus' behavior perplexes Mary and Joseph, and their reaction perplexes Jesus. He wonders why they don't understand that it is his desire to be in his Father's house (v. 49). They aren't sure what he means (v. 50); they still have some learning and growing to do too.

Luke's main interest is in Jesus' identity and his growing awareness of his relationship with and responsibility under God as his Father. A few more observations are in order.

For one thing, Jesus' parents don't further reprimand him. They need Jesus to come home with them, but in achieving that end they do not want to smother the fire that is beginning to burn within him. Such discernment on the part of parents and other mentors helps children and others grow in faith.

Also, Jesus returns home and is obedient to his parents. He continues his spiritual development within his faithful family's circle. Tried and true boundaries, especially for children but notably for all of us, are helpful in guiding our growth in gracious ways.

Finally, Jesus' parents continue to grow in faith and understanding. "His mother treasured all these things in her heart" (v. 51b). Mary still has a long way to go down the road she started on when the angel Gabriel told her she would bear the Christ child. Jesus is unique, but all children are able to teach adults important things about faith.

### **Applying the Bible**

Jesus was an obedient and respectful child. But he had a mission that was going to take him far beyond the confines of his parents' home. No doubt his growth process was at times difficult for them, but they knew he needed to do what God wanted him to do. We praise God that Jesus faithfully fulfilled his mission. As his followers, we want to fulfill our mission too. And we want our children and grandchildren, our church's young people, and all of Christ's followers to do so as well. How can we encourage one another to be who God wants us to be and to do what Jesus leads us to do?

### **Reflecting on the Bible**

Jesus is unique. Only he is divine and human. Even as we read this story that demonstrates how Jesus grew in wisdom, we might find ourselves thinking that it can't teach us anything about ourselves because he was so different than we are. But when we read 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 (the lectionary's first reading for this Sunday), we find the boy Samuel described in similar terms. Yes, Jesus is unique. But we are all God's children, and Jesus calls each of us to follow him by serving in the same selfless and sacrificial ways he did. Like Samuel, we have to grow so we can serve. Ask God to help you keep growing spiritually so you can keep growing in service.

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