

# Justice and the Prophets

**JOURNEYS • SPRING 2020**

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## About the Study

The study this quarter focuses on justice as presented in Scriptures from the prophets and in the reading for Easter Sunday, which is taken from First Corinthians. The prophets communicated God's will to the people. They called for repentance and justice. Unit I, "God Requires Justice," is a five-lesson study from four of the minor prophets. Unit II, "God Promises a Just Kingdom" continues the study of God's justice. The lessons for Palm Sunday and Easter examine the promised Messiah as the defender of justice. Unit III, "Called to God's Work of Justice," has five sessions that explore ways that people are called to participate in God's work of justice.

## About the Writers

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SESSION 1 • MARCH 1, 2020

# Called to Accountability

.....  
**SCRIPTURE:** Amos 5:18-24

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

## A Force of Frightening Intensity

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, a Baptist minister and civil rights leader, was arrested and incarcerated in the Birmingham city jail on Good Friday, April 12, 1963. In the early 1960s, Birmingham, Alabama, was one of the most racially segregated and divided cities in the United States. Black citizens faced legal, economic disparities and violent retribution when they attempted to draw attention to their problems. When King led a boycott to pressure business leaders to open employment to people of all races and to end segregation in public facilities, restaurants, schools, and stores, the authorities threw him in jail.

King was vehemently criticized for his involvement and leadership in protesting injustice by eight politically moderate clergymen. They felt he and the people he fought for should be more patient and accommodating and that the battle against racial segregation should be fought solely in the courts, not the streets. Using scraps of paper given to him by a janitor, notes written on the margins of a newspaper, and later a legal pad given to him by his attorneys, King wrote his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. In this letter, King expressed general frustration with moderates. He wrote, “Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”<sup>1</sup>

King also lamented the “myth concerning time,” by which white moderates assumed that progress toward equal rights was inevitable, and therefore assertive activism was unnecessary. King called it a “tragic misconception of time” to assume that its mere passage “will inevitably cure all ills.

Later, in his book *Why We Can't Wait* (which was an extended treatise on his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*), King wrote, “Just as lightning makes no sound until it strikes, the Negro Revolution generated quietly. But when it struck, the revealing flash of its power and the impact of its sincerity and fervor displayed a force of a frightening intensity. Three hundred years of humiliation, abuse, and deprivation cannot be expected to find voice in a whisper.”<sup>22</sup> In this same fervent spirit, eight centuries before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Amos articulated the voice of God, not with a whisper, but with frightening intensity.

Amos articulated the voice of God, not with a whisper, but with frightening intensity.

### † AMOS 5:18-20

- <sup>18</sup> Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!  
Why do you want the day of the LORD?  
It is darkness, not light;  
<sup>19</sup> as if someone fled from a lion,  
and was met by a bear;  
or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,  
and was bitten by a snake.  
<sup>20</sup> Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light,  
and gloom with no brightness in it?

### A Dark Day

For the prophet Amos, standing up to the religious establishment of his day by championing the poor and oppressed was not a popular position. Israel, believing itself in good stead with God, looked forward to “**the day of the LORD**,” expecting that God would one day act decisively, bringing disaster and judgment on God’s enemies but salvation and deliverance to the faithful. Nonetheless, the prophet warned that sadness and disappointment were crouching at the nation’s door; he tried to convince the people who had been acting contrary to God’s desire to turn around.

Yet the people of Israel mistakenly believed that their “chosenness” exempted them from accountability and judgment. Seemingly the Israelites’ hope for the day of the Lord was rooted in the ongoing belief that God would appear as a warrior God, fighting on Israel’s behalf. But the analogy of the lion, bear, and snake would prove otherwise.

Although the people expected that God would provide them refuge and safety as well as success and victory from threatening dangers, Amos tried to give them a reality check. According to the prophet on the Day of Judgment, the Lord would bring punishment to all transgressors, including Israelites.

Amos was arguing that for Israel there could be no presumed success or automatic victory. They might outrun the lion only to be met by a bear on the path. They might assume the safety of their home environment only to be unexpectedly bitten by a snake as they rested their hands against a wall. The day of the Lord would prove disastrous for Israel. God would demand accountability.

### QUESTIONS FOR RELECTION

- What are the dangers of assuming that our history, culture, or religion is superior to another’s history, culture, or religion?
- How do you define the word *accountable*? How does your being accountable make you feel?
- When have you found it impossible to keep silent about some injustice or situation of inequity?

### † AMOS 5:21-23

- <sup>21</sup> I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
- <sup>22</sup> Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 1: CALLED TO ACCOUNTABILITY

**February 24**  
(MONDAY)  
*The Coming  
Day of the Lord*  
ZEPHANIAH  
1:14-18

**February 25**  
(TUESDAY)  
*Judgment  
Coming to the  
Nation*  
AMOS 5:1-3,  
16-17

**February 26**  
(WEDNESDAY)  
*Seek the Lord,  
Establish Justice*  
AMOS 5:4-5,  
14-15

**February 27**  
(THURSDAY)  
*Injustice Leads  
to Ruin*  
AMOS 5:6-7,  
10-13

23 **Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.**

## **A God Who Seeks Us**

As a pastor, I have heard far too many times the grief and heartbreak that spouses or lovers feel when they have experienced a breakup with a person they have loved deeply and intimately. Often the grief is palpable for the person who feels utterly abandoned. In those times, I listen. I pray that God will heal wounds and give the person miraculous hope. Recovery will take a miracle. But God does miracles.

Reading this passage sounds very much like the anger expressed by a jilted lover, someone who has been abandoned by someone who was trusted: “I hate,” “I despise,” “I will not accept,” “I will not look,” and “I will not listen.” It does not take a trained counselor to hear in these words the angst of someone who loved deeply and is now feeling unabashedly betrayed. The hurtful thing for many of us is that the betrayed and abandoned lover in this passage is God.

At several points in **Amos 5**, we hear God make impassioned pleas for the people to make a personal connection with God: “**Seek me and live**” (v. 5); “**Seek the LORD and live**” (v. 6), and “**Seek good and not evil, that you may live**” (v. 14). It is almost like hearing God say, “Look at me. My desire is that you desire me, but I don’t see that in your eyes anymore.”

God, speaking through Amos, made it plain that the people of Israel had too often been looking for God in all the wrong places. Earlier in **chapter 5**, God said, “**Do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beer-sheba**” (v. 5). All of these places were pilgrimage points where shrines or worship centers might be found. Now God made it plain that God was not most fully known in festivals, solemn assemblies, offerings, or praise music (**vv. 21-23**). Conscientious worship and sacrificial service are good, but they neither secure God’s favor nor avert chaos and calamity.

Amos had an incredibly difficult message to get across to the people of Israel. He was speaking to people who as a nation were doing very well. Amos was preaching the unpopular and perhaps unacceptable message that prosperity and religious practices do not equate with a

nation being right with God. And it was precisely because the majority were doing so well and because people took religion so seriously that repentance seemed unnecessary to them. Certainly, the priests and religious leaders of the various temples and shrines would have had issues with Amos and his perception of God.

The words of Martin Luther King Jr. could very well apply to the days of Amos as well as our own: “It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, ‘Wait on time.’”<sup>3</sup>

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What difference does it make to you that God grieves and can feel heartbroken?
- Where or when is God most fully known to you?

### † AMOS 5:24

<sup>24</sup> But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

### Justice

Cornel West wrote, “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.”<sup>4</sup> For Amos, justice in the gate or in the common square is what love looks like. Amos called for justice to roll down like waters.

The kind of justice that Amos was concerned about was the justice of equity. Throughout our own country the wage gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen. While the rich are able to secure low interest rates on loans that banks are eager to provide for them, the poor are often victimized by payday loan centers where the cost of a loan can easily equate to an annual percentage rate of nearly 400 percent.<sup>5</sup>

Our nation continues to debate whether to raise the federal minimum wage, hardly ever raising the issue as to

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 1: CALLED TO ACCOUNTABILITY

February 28

(FRIDAY)

*Lord of  
Creation and  
Judgment*

GENESIS 1:4-9;  
AMOS 5:8-9

February 29

(SATURDAY)

*God Loves All  
Peoples*

HOSEA 2:14-23

March 1

(SUNDAY)

*Justice for  
the Poor and  
Distressed*

AMOS 5:18-24

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to download all the Daily Bible Readings  
for the Spring quarter.

whether there should be a minimum living wage for all of our citizens. Amos stood at the city gate and raised these kinds of issues.

*Justice (mishpat)* is a term that occurs more than four hundred times in the Hebrew Bible. It refers to the restoration of a situation or environment that prompted equity and harmony. Throughout the biblical witness, justice cannot be fully realized unless provision is made for the poorest and most vulnerable among us. The French mystic and philosopher Simone Weil called justice the “supernatural virtue,” which “consists of behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is stronger in an unequal relationship.”<sup>6</sup> For Amos, all had equal standing and equal rights in the household of God.

Amos said that God calls for righteousness (v. 24). It is clear that the people of Israel were religious, but were they righteous? Their offerings were off the charts. They participated in lively worship. But Amos announced that the Lord is not impressed with personal piety. God wants righteousness, which is the practical act of establishing justice in the home and in the world. To be righteous is to “do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” Amos wants justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Justice and righteousness are things we need to participate in constantly, like waves in the sea or like water bubbling upward and outward from a stream. Ultimately, justice and righteousness proceed from our connection and commitment to God.

## NOTES

1. Martin L. King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” [https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter\\_Birmingham\\_Jail.pdf](https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf).

2. Martin L. King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet, 1964), 68.

Martin L. King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: Essential Writings and Speeches*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986).

3. Cornel West quote, Goodreads, accessed October 7, 2019, [www.goodreads.com/quotes/279991-never-forget-that-justice-is-what-love-looks-like-in](http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/279991-never-forget-that-justice-is-what-love-looks-like-in).

4. “*What Is a Payday Loan?*” Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, [www.consumerfinance.gov/askcfpb/1567/what-payday-loan.html](http://www.consumerfinance.gov/askcfpb/1567/what-payday-loan.html).

5. Simone Weil, quoted in Obery M. Hendricks, “The ‘Macroethics’ of Martin Luther King, Jr.: When He Spoke Out against the Vietnam War Even His Supporters Deserted Him—Here’s How He Endured,” posted on *Salon*, January 18, 2016, [www.salon.com/2016/01/18/justice\\_righteousness\\_truth\\_the\\_worst\\_onslaught\\_of\\_martin\\_luther\\_king\\_jr\\_s\\_life\\_explained/](http://www.salon.com/2016/01/18/justice_righteousness_truth_the_worst_onslaught_of_martin_luther_king_jr_s_life_explained/).

SESSION 2 • MARCH 8, 2020

# A Prayer for Justice

SCRIPTURE: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 12-14

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

## Bending toward Justice?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. often proclaimed that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” That quote was so important to the forty-fourth president of the United States, Barack Obama, that he had it literally woven into a rug in the Oval Office.

I grew up in the civil rights era and was sustained through many dark days by meditating on this quote. As a pastor, I closed more than a sermon or two with this quote.

Nevertheless, there’s a fundamental problem with the quote: According to Michael Wear, who authored the book *Reclaiming Hope*, Dr. King’s line has been taken out of context and used by both liberals and conservatives “to bless a whole range of political solutions.”<sup>1</sup>

Wear says that the famous line was originally intended as a spiritual truth, not a political one. It’s very clear that, apart from Jesus Christ, the idea of a moral arc of the universe was inconceivable to King. Wear writes that it only made sense within the context of a declarative faith statement.

Dr. King, Wear argues, never intended to endorse some sort of historical determinism. There’s no guarantee that things will get better—at least, not here on this physical earth. The good guys don’t always win. As evidence, Wear notes the full context of Dr. King’s quote: “Evil may so

The arc of  
the moral  
universe is  
long, but  
it bends  
toward  
justice.

shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross,' Dr. King wrote, 'but that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. Yes, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."'"<sup>2</sup>

In this context, it is clear that bad people often prevail in this carnal world where Caesar still rules. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't engage in political activism, nor should we succumb to political quietism. We shouldn't assume that our activism alone is inexorably leading us to some utopian end of history, nor should we assume that history simply takes care of itself and in the end, it magically moves us toward justice. I take from this at least three lessons:

1. We may not, in our own personal lifetimes, see the justice that we fight and cry out for. Salvation may feel personal, but it is never private. God is working toward the redemption of all creation.
2. Our fight for justice is undergirded by a faith that assures us that even when God seems silent in the midst of our suffering, it never means no. It only means "not yet."
3. God is enlisting coparticipants in God's mission of wholeness and salvation.

In this session, we will discuss our feelings about when justice has been slow in coming, explore a biblical perspective on justice as God's ultimate concern, and rejoice in God's commitment to overcome our sin and infidelity with partnership and love.

#### **QUESTION FOR REFLECTION**

- Have you experienced a time in your life where you thought that fairness and justice were slow in coming and God was strangely silent?

#### **† HABAKKUK 1:1-4**

- 1 The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.
- 2 O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not listen?  
Or cry to you "Violence!"  
and you will not save?

Salvation  
may feel  
personal,  
but it is  
never  
private.

- 3 Why do you make me see wrongdoing  
and look at trouble?  
Destruction and violence are before me;  
strife and contention arise.
- 4 So the law becomes slack  
and justice never prevails.  
The wicked surround the righteous—  
therefore, judgment comes forth perverted.

### Habakkuk Cries Out

Habakkuk was weighed down by the circumstances and the burdens of his fellow Judeans. Their country was being besieged by the Chaldeans. The God whom Habakkuk had felt so close to now felt so eerily distant. Habakkuk's burden and the weight of his community's angst were palpable. He felt it and saw it everywhere he turned.

Habakkuk cried out to God, but God's silence was deafening. Had Habakkuk been rejected or ignored by God? Or was the situation even more problematic? Was it possible that God lacked the will and ability to save and deliver?

**Verses 3-4** highlight one of the central tasks of the prophet, to critically analyze and critique the sociopolitical environment of the society. Here Habakkuk saw “**wrongdoing**,” “**trouble**,” “**destruction and violence**” throughout the land (v. 3). Both Chaldeans and Judeans were caught up in a network of destruction and violence that undermined justice.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What people groups in your community can you identify who have been fighting for justice or fairness for a very long time?
- How do you measure the overall health of your community?
- How might it feel to think that you are all alone in your struggles without the support of God or others?

### Daily Bible Readings

#### WEEK 2: A PRAYER FOR JUSTICE

March 2  
(MONDAY)  
*Job's Cry  
for Justice*  
*Frustrated*  
JOB 19:1-7

March 3  
(TUESDAY)  
*The Rock's Work  
is Justice*  
DEUTERONOMY  
32:1-4

March 4  
(WEDNESDAY)  
*God's People  
Ravaged for Sin*  
JEREMIAH  
5:14-19

March 5  
(THURSDAY)  
*Chaldeans to  
Ravage the  
Nations*  
HABAKKUK  
1:5-11

## † HABAKKUK 1:12-14

- 12 Are you not from of old,  
O LORD my God, my Holy One?  
You shall not die.  
O LORD, you have marked them for judgment;  
and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment.
- 13 Your eyes are too pure to behold evil,  
and you cannot look on wrongdoing;  
why do you look on the treacherous,  
and are silent when the wicked swallow  
those more righteous than they?
- 14 You have made people like the fish of the sea,  
like crawling things that have no ruler.

### Habakkuk Affirms God

**Verse 12** is a remarkable affirmation. The Everlasting One is Lord, God, and the Holy One. God does not die. God outlasts wickedness, tyranny, and oppression. Moreover, this God is personal. For the prophet, the Lord is “my” God, and “my” Holy One. History is in the hands of this personal and purposeful God, and in the end, nothing can thwart God’s ultimate will for us. Although evil exists, our awareness of a personal and powerful God is a source of deep spiritual strength to support us in the midst of our struggle with evil.

God outlasts  
wickedness,  
tyranny, and  
oppression.

**Verse 13** raises the question as to why evil appears to flourish unchecked by a just and holy God. The prophet reminds us that while God acknowledges evil and wrongdoing, God is not ultimately tolerant of it. Could it be that God is a God who cannot tolerate sin but is tolerant with sinners? Is God the kind of God who hates evil but is compassionate and patient with those who act wickedly?

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- In what ways do you see God’s hand at work in history?
- What are your thoughts about the phrase “Hate the sin but love the sinner?”

- What steps might you take to enhance justice and increase fairness in the world around you?

## American Baptist Home Mission Societies

One of the great resources of our denomination that works to alleviate suffering in our world is the American Baptist Home Mission Societies ([abhms.org](http://abhms.org)). You may want to explore the **Healing Communities** component of their work. That work includes the following areas that invite your engagement in works of compassion and justice:



Disability Ministries; Disaster Response; Prisoner Reentry and Aftercare; Immigration and Refugee Resettlement; Rizpah's Children (ministering to the needs of children in poverty); Volunteer Mobilization; Community Outreach Ministries; the Penny Project; and Socially Responsible Investing.

While ABHMS has staff persons leading such initiatives, they need laity to actively participate in these efforts in order to maximize the impact on the communities they serve. ABHMS lives out its commitment to champion God's justice and be a blessing to all people as a witness to the Christ we serve.

### NOTES

1. Michael Wear, *Reclaiming Hope: Lessons Learned in the Obama White House about the Future of Faith in America* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 196.

2. *Ibid*, 197. King had the words in quotes because he was actually citing nineteenth-century clergyman Theodore Parker, who first coined the phrase.

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 2: A PRAYER FOR JUSTICE

#### March 6

(FRIDAY)

*The Destructive  
Character of the  
Enemy*

HABAKKUK  
1:15-17

#### March 7

(SATURDAY)

*Assyrians  
Punished for  
Arrogance*

ISAIAH 10:12-14

#### March 8

(SUNDAY)

*Why, Lord,  
Does Injustice  
Prevail?*

HABAKKUK  
1:1-4, 12-14

SESSION 3 • MARCH 15, 2020

# Consequences for Injustice

.....  
**SCRIPTURE:** Habakkuk 2:6-14

**KEY VERSE:** **But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.** —Habakkuk 2:14  
.....

## Occupied Territory

During the formative years of my early life, I remember quite vividly feeling as though I lived in “occupied territory.” I was a teenager in the 1960s and still suffer a bit of post-traumatic stress from those adolescent years. The time period that stands out most clearly for me is the summer of 1965. That was the year of the infamous Watts riots.

I was fourteen years old when the predominantly black Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles went up in smoke. It happened on my dad’s birthday—August 11, 1965. In Watts racial tension reached a breaking point after two white policemen scuffled with a black motorist suspected of drunken driving. A crowd of spectators gathered near the corner of Avalon Boulevard and 116th Street to watch the arrest and soon grew angry by what they believed to be yet another incident of racially motivated abuse by the police. A riot soon began, spurred on by residents of Watts who were embittered after years of economic and political isolation.

While I was fortunate enough to live only three blocks from the nearest supermarket, I cannot remember another grocery store within five miles of the neighborhood in which I grew up. I lived in a “food desert.” Most residents had to shop at “mom and pop” stores and pay exorbitant prices for groceries. Few fruits and vegetables were sold in these stores, and when they were, they were often spoiled. Ninety-nine percent of my classmates were African American, but 80

In Watts racial tension reached a breaking point.

percent of my teachers and school administrators were not. I can only recall two African American male professionals in my neighborhood—the high school football coach and my church pastor. All others were blue-collar workers. Besides my barber, I am unable to list one African American business owner in my predominantly black neighborhood.

I remember feeling incredibly frightened as I listened to gunshots and peeped out through darkened blinds at night at National Guard personnel outside my home during the citywide enforced curfew.

The rioters eventually ranged over a fifty-square-mile area of South-Central Los Angeles, looting stores, torching buildings, and beating white people as snipers fired at police and firefighters. On August 16, order was restored. The five days of violence left 34 people dead, 1,032 injured, nearly 4,000 arrested, and \$40 million worth of property destroyed. The Watts riot was the worst urban riot in twenty years and foreshadowed the many rebellions that occurred in ensuing years, including the 1967 Detroit riots, the Newark riots, and others.

In spite of the violence, carnage, and devastation to the already marginalized community that I witnessed that week, I can still hear my fourteen-year-old self saying, “Yes! This is the big payback.” Twenty years later, I became pastor of the largest and oldest Baptist Church in Watts.

### QUESTIONS FOR RELECTION

- What sights have you seen in your life that you found to be emotionally overwhelming?
- Is there a particular sight, sound, touch, smell, or taste that you associate with that emotion? What is it?

† HABAKKUK 2:6-14

<sup>6</sup> Shall not everyone taunt such people and, with mocking riddles, say about them,

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 3: CONSEQUENCES FOR INJUSTICE

#### March 9

(MONDAY)

*Wait for Divine Intervention*

PSALM 130

#### March 10

(TUESDAY)

*Pay Attention to the Sentinel*

EZEKIEL 33:1-9

#### March 11

(WEDNESDAY)

*The Risk of Ignoring the Needy*

MATTHEW 25:41-46

#### March 12

(THURSDAY)

*The Righteous Live by Faith*

HABAKKUK 2:1-5

“Alas for you who heap up what is not your own!”

How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge?

7 Will not your own creditors suddenly rise,  
and those who make you tremble wake up?  
Then you will be booty for them.

8 Because you have plundered many nations,  
all that survive of the peoples shall plunder you—  
because of human bloodshed, and violence to the earth,  
to cities and all who live in them.

9 “Alas for you who get evil gain for your house,  
setting your nest on high  
to be safe from the reach of harm!”

10 You have devised shame for your house  
by cutting off many peoples;  
you have forfeited your life.

11 The very stones will cry out from the wall,  
and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.

12 “Alas for you who build a town by bloodshed,  
and found a city on iniquity!”

13 Is it not from the LORD of hosts  
that peoples labor only to feed the flames,  
and nations weary themselves for nothing?

14 But the earth will be filled  
with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD,  
as the waters cover the sea.

## Faith Seeking Understanding

Habakkuk modeled for us the inquisitive mind. He was not afraid to ask God serious questions, and he was right to do so, for these circumstances are not easy to understand. The punishment for the persistence of injustice in Judah was an invasion by the Babylonians. Habakkuk thought the solution was worse than the crime and brought his view of things before God. Habakkuk mixed praise with complaint and questioning with trust in his prayers. His faith, like ours, may have been

tested by tough times, but Habakkuk believed that God saves those who “**live by their faith**” (2:4). How do we cope with injustice in our world? On a personal and congregational level, we trust in God to overcome injustice. Historically, we realize that injustice as expressed in corrupt kingdoms does not endure.

### The World’s Bully

Seemingly the whole world was looking on. The Babylonian Empire had run roughshod over Judah and over everyone else in their path. Chaldeans believed fervently in the maxim “To the victor belongs the spoils.” As the world’s foremost aggressor, they engaged in exploitation, extortion, violence, and cruelty against their victims.

Bullies, whether they be persons or nation-states, can sometimes be so enamored with their own power that they fail to see the countercultural narrative they launch in the hearts and minds of the people they terrorize. They are surprised when the Berlin Wall comes tumbling down, when segregation is dismantled with the stroke of a legislative pen, or when apartheid disappears in the spirit of a nonviolent movement.

The world seemed to have been watching as the Chaldeans victimized Judah, who began to taunt and mock the oppressors. This was much like days before I started college in 1968. I remember a chant I heard while watching the televised Democratic National Convention. Antiwar demonstrators were chanting, “The whole world is watching,” in front of the Conrad Hilton Hotel in Chicago.

It was August 28, 1968, and demonstrators took up the chant as police were beating and pulling many of them into paddy wagons, each with an unnecessary whack of a nightstick. The prescient and apparently spontaneous chant quickly became famous. In the short term, it ended Lyndon Johnson’s presidency. A few years later, its witness ended the Vietnam War.

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 3: CONSEQUENCES FOR INJUSTICE

March 13

(FRIDAY)

*Violence Leads  
to Destruction*

HABAKKUK  
2:15-17

March 14

(SATURDAY)

*Compare an  
Idol with the  
Lord*

HABAKKUK  
2:18-20

March 15

(SUNDAY)

*You Reap What  
You Sow*

HABAKKUK  
2:6-14

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How long range is your vision for social change?
- What are you trying to get changed in your lifetime?
- What are you working on that will make your grandchildren's lives better?

## God's Final Word, Habakkuk's Final Praise

Habakkuk had cried out to God about the conditions of injustice all around. He pleaded with God for a response. Today God always hears us even as God heard Habakkuk's cries. And God sent the word: the answer may seem slow in coming, but it will come. It may take time, but evil will not triumph forever. In the meantime, live faithfully (2:3-4). Habakkuk models this faithful living for his readers in his encounter with God. He feels free to express his confusion concerning God's judgment and the means of procuring that judgment, yet he remains in dialogue with God. And then in Habakkuk's own move to utterly live by faith, he pens a praise and testimony of his ultimate trust in God (see 3:17-19).



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How do you spiritually sustain yourself in the midst of battles about injustice?
- What challenges and fears do you face as you seek to remain faithful to God in Jesus Christ? What do you find helpful for enduring in the midst of these difficulties?
- How can you allow praise and thanksgiving to keep you rooted in the Spirit as you wait patiently for God's deliverance in dark times?

## Koinonia Farms

Koinonia Farm was founded in 1942 by Clarence and Florence Jordan and Martin and Mabel England as a "demonstration plot for the kingdom of God."<sup>1</sup> This meant a community of believers sharing their lives and resources, following the example of the first Christian communities as described in the Acts of the Apostles. Other families soon joined, and visitors to the farm were invited "to serve a period

of apprenticeship in developing community life on the teachings and principles of Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

Koinonians shared not only faith and resources, but also work. They farmed for their livelihood and sought ways to work in partnership with the land, “to conserve the soil, God’s holy earth” (Clarence Jordan). They shared, taught, and were members of local churches. From the beginning, Koinonians emphasized the brotherhood and sisterhood of all people. When they could afford to hire seasonal help, black and white workers were paid a fair, equal wage. When the community and its guests prayed or ate a meal, they all sat together at the table, regardless of color. Their commitment to racial equality, pacifism, and economic sharing brought bullets, bombs, and a boycott in the 1950s as the Ku Klux Klan and others attempted to force them out. They responded with prayer, nonviolent resistance, and a renewed commitment to live the gospel. They created a mail-order business, which continues to sustain the community today.

As the threats of violence dwindled, they focused on the poor quality of local housing and began a project to build decent, affordable homes for their neighbors. Clarence also focused on a passion he held, to pen a version of the New Testament from the original Greek to South Georgia vernacular. Jordan’s book *Sermon on the Mount* was published by Judson Press. From his writing shack nestled in the pecan orchards, Clarence wrote the *Cotton Patch Version* and prepared for nationwide speaking engagements. Then, in 1969, while working on a sermon, it is also where he suddenly died.

The Koinonia community carried on Jordan’s legacy. The partnership housing ministry evolved into Habitat for Humanity International under the leadership of Millard and Linda Fuller, former Koinonia members.

Koinonia is a powerful example of God’s promise to fill the earth with God’s glory.

## NOTES

1. For more information on Koinonia, go to [www.koinoniafarm.org](http://www.koinoniafarm.org).
2. Ibid.

SESSION 4 • MARCH 23, 2020

# Corrupt Leaders

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

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

## Believing in Things You Haven't Seen

Bryan Stevenson, an alumnus of American Baptist Churches–related Eastern University, is the executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a Montgomery, Alabama, criminal-defense organization he founded in 1989. A brilliant attorney, Stevenson chose not to pursue a law career representing the wealthy but chose instead to use his skills to represent poor people of color as a relentless fighter for justice. Like the prophet Micah, he perceived that profound wrong is often inflicted on the marginalized and vulnerable citizens of a country.

Stevenson's office has won reversals, relief, or release for more than 135 death-row prisoners. He has argued and won multiple cases in the U.S. Supreme Court, including a 2019 ruling protecting condemned prisoners who suffer from dementia and a landmark 2012 ruling that banned mandatory life-without-parole sentences for all children age seventeen or younger.

Stevenson lectures and writes to reshape the public's understanding of how racism affects society and criminal justice. He published a best-selling memoir in 2014 titled *Just Mercy*. In the summer of 2019 HBO released a documentary about his life and work called *True Justice*.

In that documentary, Stevenson tells the story of his meeting Mrs. Johnnie Carr, one of the architects of the Montgomery bus boycott, after



he moved to Montgomery to work on behalf of the poor, the incarcerated, and the disenfranchised. After telling Mrs. Carr about his dream to provide equal justice for all, Mrs. Carr told him, “Bryan, you are going to be tired, tired, tired. That is why you need to be brave, brave, brave.”<sup>1</sup>

In an interview with Zak Cheney-Rice of *Intelligencer*, Stevenson spoke about the hope for justice that is in him. He said, “I think my hope is not entirely rational, I guess it’s just rooted in this belief that truth crushed to earth ultimately rises again. I don’t think you can do this work if you’re unwilling to believe things you haven’t seen, and for many people that’s what—faith creates that relationship.”<sup>2</sup>

Bryan Stevenson has dedicated his life to serving the cause of justice, striving for an America that demonstrates justice for all, even in settings where it has not been seen. He battles corruption in many ways and is an example of a person who is committed to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with his God.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What sustains you in the midst of the struggle for justice?
- Mrs. Carr said, “Bryan, you are going to be tired, tired, tired. That is why you need to be brave, brave, brave.” How might the Key Verse in today’s session contribute to bravery and being an antidote to fatigue?

### † MICAH 3:1-3

- <sup>1</sup> And I said:  
Listen, you heads of Jacob  
and rulers of the house of Israel!  
Should you not know justice?—
- <sup>2</sup> you who hate the good and love the evil,  
who tear the skin off my people,  
and the flesh off their bones;
- <sup>3</sup> who eat the flesh of my people,  
flay their skin off them,

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 4: CORRUPT LEADERS

**March 16**  
(MONDAY)  
*The Lord Acts Justly*  
PSALM 146

**March 17**  
(TUESDAY)  
*The Results of Social Injustice*  
ISAIAH 5:18-24

**March 18**  
(WEDNESDAY)  
*Justice Actions by the Expected Messiah*  
ISAIAH 11:1-5

**March 19**  
(THURSDAY)  
*Prophets Fail on Their Watch*  
MICAH 3:5-8

**break their bones in pieces,  
and chop them up like meat in a kettle,  
like flesh in a caldron.**

The “**heads of Jacob**” and rulers of the house of Israel were entrusted with being God’s ambassadors, or envoys on behalf of God. God’s trusted envoy is especially chosen and anointed to bring forth justice. The fruit of justice is not limited to the elites or privileged classes or leadership classes. No leader can dare to think that justice is just about “Just us”—people who look like, sound like, act like me and “my kind.” Justice is broader than that.

The Hebrew  
word for  
justice here  
is *mishpat*.

The Hebrew word for justice here is *mishpat*. In most instances throughout the Hebrew Bible where this word is used, several classes of people are consistently mentioned in conjunction with it. *Mishpat* describes taking up the cause of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. Some Bible scholars call these “the quartet of the vulnerable.” A just leader takes up the care and the cause of the most vulnerable in our society.

Twice in **verse 2**, the phrase “**my people**” is used. Micah may have been putting these words into the mouth of God, or he may have been articulating them for himself. What is important here is the notion of kinship. We are all children of God, regardless of the many “isms” we socially, politically, culturally, and economically construct to divide us. That means, too, that we are all sisters and brothers.

Micah said that corrupt leaders hate the good and love the evil. Corrupt leaders “**tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones . . . eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron.**”

Micah was not calling the political and religious leaders cannibals. He was saying that corrupt leaders commodify and objectify people and use them for their own purposes, satisfying only their own personal hunger, thirsts, and lusts.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What does “With liberty and justice for all” mean to you?
- In the age of Micah, what might a “Department of Justice” look like?
- Are their people groups in your community, in America, in the world that you see as being “skinned alive”? What might you do to respond to that situation?

## † MICAH 3:9-12

- 9 Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob  
and chiefs of the house of Israel,  
who abhor justice  
and pervert all equity,  
10 who build Zion with blood  
and Jerusalem with wrong!  
11 Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,  
its priests teach for a price,  
its prophets give oracles for money;  
yet they lean upon the LORD and say,  
“Surely the LORD is with us!  
No harm shall come upon us.”  
12 Therefore because of you  
Zion shall be plowed as a field;  
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,  
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

Micah did not reserve his critique of leadership for corrupt governmental leaders alone. He also castigated religious leaders for their greed and lack of fidelity to their faith and those it was supposed to serve. All too often, political and religious leaders collude for nefarious purposes. Politicians use the religious establishment to maintain power. Religious leaders avoid acting and speaking prophetically in order to share in the privileges of social power and esteem. Just as important, these

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 4: CORRUPT LEADERS

#### March 20

(FRIDAY)  
*Remember  
God's Righteous  
Actions*  
MICAH 6:1-5

#### March 21

(SATURDAY)  
*Cheating and  
Violence Will  
Be Punished*  
MICAH 6:9-16

#### March 22

(SUNDAY)  
*God Requires  
Justice for All*  
MICAH 3:1-3,  
9-12; 6:6-8

political and religious leaders sometimes act with impunity, believing that nations and institutions do not reap what they sow.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What evidence do you see of collusion between political and religious leadership that harms the most marginalized in our society?
- What are some of your thoughts about the separation of church and state?

### † MICAH 6:6-8

- <sup>6</sup> With what shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?
- <sup>7</sup> Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"
- <sup>8</sup> He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

**“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?”** Here the prophet answered poignantly and powerfully about the essence of true religion. What the Lord requires, God has already showed: acting justly in dealings between persons; the humble walk of a person with God; and mercy (better: “steadfast love”) as the bond between the horizontal and vertical relationships of life.

**Micah 6:6-8** is perhaps the best-known text in the book and should be understood as the response of the repentant Israelites to the challenge of **verses 3-5**:

**“O my people, what have I done to you?  
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!  
For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,  
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;  
and I sent before you Moses,  
Aaron, and Miriam.**

**O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,  
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,  
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,  
that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.”**

Corrupt political and religious leaders too often express their desire to bring acceptable worship to God in terms of the sacrificial system familiar to them. They progressively magnify ritual offerings in their religious tradition to win the approval of God and make restitution for past failures.

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

Micah pointed out the ineffectiveness of the superficial ritual.

Micah concluded,

**<sup>8</sup> He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?**

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How might you practice justice more faithfully today?
- How might you exhibit and extend the grace of God to others today?
- How might you follow Christ more dearly today in your own context?

### NOTES

1. *True Justice: Bryan Stevenson’s Fight for Equality*, HBO, 2019, [www.hbo.com/documentaries/true-justice-bryan-stevensons-fight-for-equality](http://www.hbo.com/documentaries/true-justice-bryan-stevensons-fight-for-equality).
2. Zak Cheney-Rice, “Bryan Stevenson on His ‘Not Entirely Rational’ Quest for Justice,” June 25, 2019, <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/06/bryan-stevensons-not-entirely-rational-quest-for-justice.html>.

SESSION 5 • MARCH 30, 2020

# Leading Justly

.....  
**SCRIPTURE:** Malachi 2:1-9; 3:5-6

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

## Love God and Serve People

The motto of my local church is “Love God and serve people.” We see this message on our bulletin cover, decoratively printed on the walls of the church, and throughout our social media. For us, it has become more than just a slogan. While we enthusiastically worship God on Sunday morning, pray to God at 6:00 every morning on a church-wide prayer line, and study the Bible in small groups on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, we also attend to our horizontal relationships as well. We minister to the needs of incarcerated women and men, provide meals for hundreds of food-deprived people each month, raise tens of thousands of dollars to address the needs of cancer patients, sickle cell victims, and people who have suffered loss of homes and properties through floods and hurricanes. Our pastor often reminds us that we cannot be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. Our choir will sometimes sing “Everybody Talkin’ ’Bout Heaven Ain’t Goin’ There.”

“Love God  
and serve  
people.”

Our motto is really another way of articulating what Jesus had to say about the Great Commandments: “**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is**

**like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).**

Reverence for God is at the heart of our church’s life. And the overflow of that reverence is a life of connection and concern for our fellow human beings. Living and leading is about love and service.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What are some of the ways your church serves people?
- Who in your community seems to be least underserved when it comes to the basic necessities of life?

### A Bad Situation

The prophet Malachi was distressed about how the religious leaders had become lax in their faith and in carrying out their responsibilities in serving the community. The first chapter of the book outlines the ways in which God had been rejected as their father and how the priests had begun to loathe God’s name (v. 6). The priests were now offering polluted food on the altar and presenting blind animals in sacrifice (vv. 7-8). The cause of this laxity and shirking of responsibility was that the leaders had grown weary (v. 13) and were tired of waiting on and for God in a period of political, social, and economic anxiety. And then . . .

### † MALACHI 2:1-2

<sup>1</sup>And now, O priests, this command is for you. <sup>2</sup>If you will not listen, if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse on you and I will curse your blessings; indeed I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart.

### Warnings and Consequences

Whatever issues God had with Israel, those issues began first and foremost with the religious leaders. In their weariness,

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 5: LEADING JUSTLY

#### March 23

(MONDAY)

*Offer Sacrifice of Thanksgiving to God*

PSALM 50:1-15

#### March 24

(TUESDAY)

*Bring Acceptable Offerings to the Lord*

LEVITICUS 22:17-25

#### March 25

(WEDNESDAY)

*God’s Name Is Great among Nations*

MALACHI 1:11-14

#### March 26

(THURSDAY)

*Be Faithful to One Another*

MALACHI 2:10-16

they had ceased listening for God's voice and failed to esteem and exalt God in the community.

A primary role of the priest was to pronounce blessings on the community as a mediator of God's presence among them. But having drifted from the source of their efficacy, the priests' power would not only dissipate, it would have the inverse effect of becoming a poison poured forth on the community. The priests had an intellectual knowledge of God but God no longer lived and lingered in their hearts.

The priests had an intellectual knowledge of God but God no longer lived and lingered in their hearts.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What are you looking for most in your spiritual leaders?
- Does your church encourage your pastor to spend time alone with God? Does your church provide the time for him or her to do so?

### † MALACHI 2:3

<sup>3</sup> I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and I will put you out of my presence.

### Leadership Sets the Tone

Spiritual leadership carries with it the responsibility of spiritual modeling. Poor leadership results in people being poorly led and therefore susceptible to becoming alienated from God.

The priests had become so lax in their responsibilities that they had failed to remove the dung from animals offered for ritual sacrifice. Such sacrifices were unacceptable to God. Here God is saying that God will smear that same dung on the faces of the leaders and send them out of God's sight.

### † MALACHI 2:4-9

<sup>4</sup> Know, then, that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may hold, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>5</sup> My covenant with him was a covenant of life and well-being, which I gave him; this called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. <sup>6</sup> True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong

was found on his lips. He walked with me in integrity and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. <sup>7</sup> For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. <sup>8</sup> But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, <sup>9</sup> and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction.

### Poor Behavior Leads to a Poor Witness

All spiritual leaders must speak the Word of God and do the Word of God as well. They are to do this with integrity and justice just as the role model of Levi had done. Leadership grounded in a reverence for God issues forth in words and wisdom from the leader to the gathered community. Ultimately the posture and actions of leaders impacts the well-being of the entire community.

When spiritual leaders fall, they fall hard. **Verses 8-9** show that when spiritual leaders fall, many of their constituents fall right along with them. Further, when spiritual leaders fall, not only do they experience estrangement from God, but they are often despised by and debased before the people they serve.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How do you perceive the spiritual leaders in your church? Are they simply employees, or do you see them as messengers of the Lord of hosts?
- What about you as a spiritual leader? What opportunities do you take or make to stand in awe of God?
- Who are the spiritual leaders in your community whom you will commit to praying for?

### † MALACHI 3:5-6

<sup>5</sup> Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 5: LEADING JUSTLY

March 27  
(FRIDAY)  
*Messenger  
of Judgment  
Coming*  
MALACHI  
2:17-3:4

March 28  
(SATURDAY)  
*God's Blessings  
and Delights  
Await*  
MALACHI  
3:7-12

March 29  
(SUNDAY)  
*Leading in  
Troubled Times*  
MALACHI 2:1-9;  
3:5-6

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.

<sup>6</sup> For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.

## God's Holistic Concerns

God is concerned about the personal piety of religious leaders. They are not to exploit people for personal gain or sexual favors, nor are they to engage in deceit. But God is also concerned about social ethics. Spiritual leaders must be concerned about people who don't make a living wage, about people whose lives are politically, socially, and economically vulnerable. God has a special place in God's heart for the immigrant and the refugee. Spiritual leaders must have a place and a policy perspective for people like this as well.

In spite of this instance of poor spiritual leadership in today's Scriptures, we end on a note of hope. Because God has not changed, the children of Jacob have not perished. While spiritual leaders must take their roles as messengers and representatives of God seriously, in the end, they are not God. And that is a good thing.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How are you growing in your personal piety and in your social witness?
- Who are those underpaid workers, widows, orphans, and aliens among you?

## Jitsuo Morikawa

Just leaders act honorably and serve reverently even in the midst of challenging situations. The Reverend Dr. Jitsuo Morikawa is an example of such a leader. Morikawa was a Christian minister and a powerful prophet of the twentieth century. Born into a Buddhist family who immigrated to British Columbia from Japan, Morikawa became a Christian at age sixteen and felt the call to be an evangelist.

He was educated at the University of Southern California at Los Angeles and received his theological training at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Pastoring in Los Angeles when the US war with

Japan broke out in the 1940s, Morikawa and his wife, Hazel, were victims of anti-Japanese sentiment, which resulted in the evacuation and incarceration of 110,000 people of Japanese descent in concentration camps. Jitsuo and Hazel spent a year and a half in Arizona at the Poston Relocation Center with other detainees. There Jitsuo did not lose hope but instead used the opportunity to minister to those who were incarcerated with him.



Jitsuo Morikawa

Morikawa and his wife were released through help from American Baptists. Subsequently, the Morikawas moved to Chicago where Jitsuo became pastor of a predominantly white ABCUSA church in Chicago. This soon led to the encouragement of interracial churches on a national level.

Years later Morikawa would play a major role in the life of the denomination. The American Baptist Home Mission Societies invited him to join them as director of evangelism for the ABCUSA denomination. In this capacity, he was instrumental in organizing the American Baptist participation in the 1963 civil rights march. In retirement, Jitsuo served as interim pastor of Riverside Church in New York City and later as pastor of First Baptist Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Dr. Morikawa stood out among church leaders in the twentieth century and participated in and forged a leadership role in respect to the greatest issues of that time: racial oppression, interreligious dialogue, and bridging the gap in religious outlook between conservatives and liberals. He exemplified the humble courage that serves the Truth wherever it leads, never giving up or giving in to narcissism or anomie [the condition in which society provides little moral guidance to individuals].<sup>1</sup>

#### NOTE

1. "Jitsuo Morikawa," accessed October 15, 2019, <https://cache.kzoo.edu/bitstream/handle/10920/28554/Morikawa-DegreeCitation.pdf>.

**SESSION 6 • APRIL 5, 2020**

# God's Just Servant

**SCRIPTURE:** Isaiah 42:1-9

**KEY VERSE: Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.** —Isaiah 42:1

## The Messiah as Servant

April 5 marks the beginning of Holy Week, so we remember once again Jesus' ride into Jerusalem. While people dreamed of a dramatic release from Caesar's reign of violence and domination, Jesus came humbly, riding on a donkey. He offered a counternarrative to the religious establishment of the day that was focused on the minutiae of the law and had neglected the noble pursuit of justice. He gave beasts of burden a new dignity. He gave majesty a new face. He gave those who longed for redemption a new song to sing. Yes, the Messiah came as a servant. He signaled this reversal of popular messianic expectations at the beginning of his ministry when tempted in the wilderness. The mission of the Christ (Greek for "Messiah") was not about self, not about fame, and not about power. The Christ hymn in **Philippians 2:6-8** sings eloquently about Jesus' servanthood:

We  
remember  
once again  
Jesus'  
ride into  
Jerusalem.

- <sup>6</sup> **who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,**
- <sup>7</sup> **but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,**

8

**he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.**

### The Servant Song

In the book of Isaiah, we find four “servant songs” (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; and 52:13–53:12). There is no consensus among biblical scholars about the servant figure’s identity. However, many interpret the songs from a messianic perspective and apply them to Jesus and his ministry. Matthew’s depiction of Jesus’ baptism (Matthew 3:13-17) echoes Isaiah 42. He also used these verses to clearly identify Jesus as the servant (Matthew 12:18-21).

As you read the following poem introducing the Messiah, note its personal nature. The stress is on the servant’s character, method, and mission. You will quickly recognize that its theme is justice. In twelve lines the poet says three times that this servant will bring forth justice. In other words, the Messiah will ultimately set things right.

#### † ISAIAH 42:1-4

- 1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
- 2 He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;



Prophet Isaiah (Isaias) statue in Rome,  
Italy. Famous Spanish Square  
(Piazza di Spagna).

### Daily Bible Readings

#### WEEK 6: GOD’S JUST SERVANT

**March 30**  
(MONDAY)  
*Faith Heroes  
Acted Justly*  
HEBREWS  
11:29-35

**March 31**  
(TUESDAY)  
*Your King  
Comes Humbly*  
MATTHEW  
21:1-11

**April 1**  
(WEDNESDAY)  
*House of Prayer  
for All Nations*  
MARK 11:15-19

**April 2**  
(THURSDAY)  
*Neglect Justice  
at Your Peril*  
LUKE 11:42-44

- 3 a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
- 4 He will not grow faint or be crushed  
until he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

God speaks  
to us when  
we feel  
hopeless  
and  
helpless.

### **Bruised Reeds and Dimly Burning Wicks**

Isaiah spoke a word of hope for captives in Babylon. Judah was like a bruised reed or a dimly burning wick. The trampled reed will not be broken, and the struggling lamp will not be extinguished. Across the centuries and miles, God speaks to us when we feel hopeless and helpless. Bent over and flickering faith will not be broken or snuffed out. Captives to injustice have the promise that God will set things right. The bruised and hurt, the small and insignificant will know that the servant will faithfully bring forth justice.

### **God Chooses Us**

In an issue of *The Secret Place*, the American Baptist quarterly devotional magazine published by Judson Press, Christopher Yopp wrote,

I can remember that as a child I wanted to be picked first when a team was being chosen. While I wasn't always the first picked, I certainly didn't want to be last. I wanted to be someone's favorite—someone's choice. Sadly, from time to time, I still have this attitude as an adult. I want to be the center of attention, the favorite in the crowd.

How often do we seek the approval of others at the expense of doing what is right and true in the eyes of God? Jesus challenges us to be a people whose lives reflect the Good News that he came to proclaim. This doesn't mean we will always be the most liked or beloved or even favorite. But we will stand out as ones who have been consecrated by God. Let us endeavor to stand out in this way—the way God chooses—and allow our lives to reflect the team or, better yet, the kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus came to the earth as God's chosen servant to do kingdom work. Now *we* are the chosen ones whom God has empowered and called to join God's mission of establishing justice wherever we can.

Now we are  
the chosen  
ones whom  
God has  
empowered  
and called.

### A Hymn of Praise

Some biblical scholars describe the following verses as a hymn of praise to God, the creator of the cosmos. As such, it also elaborates on the preceding "servant song." Whereas the servant in verses 1-4 is spoken of in the third person, God addresses the servant directly in **verses 5-9**.

#### † ISAIAH 42:5-9

- 5 Thus says God, the LORD,  
who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it  
and spirit to those who walk in it:
- 6 I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations,
- 7 to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
- 8 I am the LORD, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other,  
nor my praise to idols.
- 9 See, the former things have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth,  
I tell you of them.

### Daily Bible Readings

#### WEEK 6: GOD'S JUST SERVANT

April 3  
(FRIDAY)  
*Jesus, God's  
Servant  
Messiah*  
MATTHEW  
12:15-21

April 4  
(SATURDAY)  
*God Will Not  
Forsake the  
People*  
ISAIAH 42:10-17

April 5  
(SUNDAY)  
*God's Servant to  
Establish Justice  
Everywhere*  
ISAIAH 42:1-9

## Servant Leadership

It's ironic that Robert Greenleaf is credited with having coined the term "servant leadership" in 1970, even though its principles were modeled and taught by Jesus. He believed that the best way to lead people was to serve them, so he

exemplified servant leadership in everything he did. And today God calls and empowers us to model ourselves after Jesus and to serve as his hands and feet here on earth. Greenleaf, a Quaker, was first inspired by a servant-leader named Leo in a novel by Herman Hesse, *Journey to the East*. Reflecting later in life, he wrote, however, that his father was the original model for a servant-leader. Greenleaf's epitaph on his Terre Haute, Indiana, tombstone reads, "Potentially a good plumber; ruined by a sophisticated education." Was this his witty way of concluding that he might have been a greater servant as a plumber than as a well-educated corporate executive and management guru?

"Servant leadership," like Henri Nouwen's "wounded healer," does seem like an oxymoron, or total contradiction in terms, doesn't it? Most of us think of a leader as one who is ostentatious and flashy—the one who easily rises above the rest. The servant, on the other hand, does the menial tasks and waits on the leader. We wonder, can the roles of servant and leader be effectively fused?

The answer is yes—if the leader isn't possessive of the position. Servant leadership turns the power pyramid upside down. Instead of people working to serve the leader, the leader serves the people. Servant leaders share power, give priority to the needs of others, and help the people with whom they relate to develop and grow.

Jesus said it another way:

**You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among**



God  
calls and  
empowers  
us to model  
ourselves  
after Jesus.

**you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:25-28)**

When Jesus' disciples struggled with this concept, he washed their feet in the upper room and said, **"For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you"** (John 13:15).

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- In what ways does Jesus match up with Isaiah's prophetic description of God's servant?
- The New Testament extends the servant image to apply to all believers. Read **Acts 13:47** and **2 Timothy 2:24-26**.
- As a Christian, also chosen and called by God to be a servant, which of the qualities Isaiah described have you experienced?
- What does **Isaiah 42:1-9** say to you about your life's purpose and mission?
  - Your family?
  - Your work?
  - Your priorities?
  - Your character?
  - Your passion for justice?

### **The Church of Hope**

One form of justice ministries mentioned in Isaiah 42 is prison ministry. The American Baptist Churches of the Dakotas' approach is unique: they started a church *inside* a prison. It's called Church of Hope, and it's located in the women's prison in Pierre, South Dakota.

When the facility first opened during the summer of 1997, a group began worshipping together with Rev. Michelle Bradley serving as their first pastor. In three months, the congregation outgrew the multipurpose room, so they moved into the dining hall. It is their prayer that every woman who walks through the doors of their church—wherever they may be meeting—will find sanctuary there.

The Church of Hope provides support for the women inside the facility who have committed to being God's servants in evangelism, healing, and discipleship ministries. Bible studies, recovery groups,

worship services, and pastoral counseling fill the weekly schedule. Church of Hope is also a sending church—sending out transformed women to their families, communities, and churches as witnesses of the love of God.

Church of Hope is spiritually and financially supported by American Baptist Churches of the Dakotas and by American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS). To find out more about Church of Hope, visit the website: [www.churchofhopepierre.org](http://www.churchofhopepierre.org).

Is God calling you to engage in some facet of prison ministry? Perhaps your congregation could open the doors of your building to a support group of returning citizens or offer a program for some of the two million children in the US who have a parent in prison. Maybe your Sunday church school class could offer business suits and other professional attire that returning citizens can wear to job interviews. Or perhaps you will decide to contribute to Judson Press's Send-a-Blessing program to send Bibles to inmates. You and your church can participate in a variety of ways.

Wherever God leads you and your church to serve in this area of justice ministry, ABHMS wants to help you to find the tools and resources that will guide you on the journey and help you become a church that offers hope to brothers and sisters who need care and support. For more information, visit [www.abhms.org/ministries/healing-communities/ex-offender-re-entry/](http://www.abhms.org/ministries/healing-communities/ex-offender-re-entry/).

Is God  
calling you  
to engage in  
some facet  
of prison  
ministry?

#### NOTE

1. Christopher Yopp, *The Secret Place* (Judson Press), devotional for July 13, 2017.

To order your own copy of *The Secret Place* or to order copies for your church, visit the Judson Press website, [www.judsonpress.com](http://www.judsonpress.com) and click on *The Secret Place* link.

SESSION 7 • APRIL 12, 2020

# Resurrection Hope

SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 15

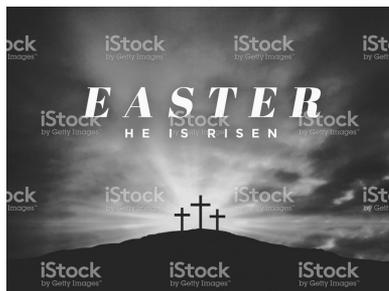
KEY VERSE: **If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.**

—1 Corinthians 15:19-20

## The Hope of the Resurrection

Today is Easter Sunday. Christ is risen! Our Christian faith is founded on the fact that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again on the third day. Yes, the resurrection matters! The apostle Paul surely thought so.

Part of one of Paul's letters to the Corinthians was entirely dedicated to that very subject. While **1 Corinthians 13** (the Love Chapter) is perhaps better known, **1 Corinthians 15** is of greater historical significance. In it we find an early written testimony to the resurrection of Jesus and its centrality to the gospel message.



† **1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-8, 12-14, 20-23, 42-45**

*(Note: Since only parts of 1 Corinthians 15 are printed here, take the time to read the entire chapter in your Bible.)*

<sup>1</sup> Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, <sup>2</sup> through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

<sup>3</sup> For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, <sup>4</sup> and that he was

buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,<sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.<sup>6</sup> Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.<sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.<sup>8</sup> Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. . . .

<sup>12</sup> Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? <sup>13</sup> If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; <sup>14</sup> and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. . . .

<sup>20</sup> But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. <sup>21</sup> For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; <sup>22</sup> for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. <sup>23</sup> But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. . . .

<sup>42</sup> So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. <sup>43</sup> It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. <sup>44</sup> It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. <sup>45</sup> Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

## Setting the Record Straight

Paul had learned that some people in Corinth denied the future resurrection of the body. This was not surprising, because many in the Greco-Roman world held the same view. They believed death was the absolute end.

Paul had faithfully taught the news of the risen Christ to the Corinthians. But these new Christians now seemingly affirmed the bodily resurrection of Jesus while denying the possibility of their own future resurrection. Paul addressed the lack of belief in the believers’ resurrection boldly, arguing that they could not have one without the other. If there is no future resurrection for believers, then Christ did not arise from the tomb. If Christ was not resurrected, then everything we believe concerning our faith is in vain. Apart from the resurrection, we have no hope.

Paul had faithfully taught the news of the risen Christ.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What did Paul continually offer as evidence for the hope of our resurrection?
- Have you connected Jesus' resurrection with your own victory over death? What difference has it made to you in terms of hope?
- What comfort do you derive from Paul's discussion of the resurrection body (vv. 35-58)?
- What is the hardest thing for you to understand in those verses?
- How does the hope of the resurrection influence your daily life?

## The Power of the Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus is a lot more than history that happened nearly two thousand years ago; it is salvation history that cascades through the centuries! His resurrection assures us that all who believe in him will be saved (**Romans 10:9**). The atoning promise of the cross is confirmed by Jesus' victory over death. And not only are we saved until the day of redemption, but we have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us in living a victorious life in the present (**John 14:26**). Christian faith is not only about a new life in the afterlife; it is about a new life in the present. Paul wrote to the Romans that baptism was like burial and resurrection "so we too might walk in newness of life" (**Romans 6:4**). What is vital is our response to the risen Lord, for our response to him radically affects our life today and determines our eternal destiny (**John 3:17-18**). Easter faith is not about what an American Baptist evangelist called "hats, rabbits, and Easter eggs," but about a life lived in imitation of the Savior about whom we sing "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today."

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Following are four ways the power of the resurrection may manifest itself in us.

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 7: RESURRECTION HOPE

#### April 6

(MONDAY)  
*Women Find Jesus' Tomb Empty*  
MARK 16:1-8

#### April 7

(TUESDAY)  
*Saul Meets Jesus on Damascus Road*  
ACTS 9:1-9

#### April 8

(WEDNESDAY)  
*Free Gift of Grace and Hope*  
ROMANS 5:12-17

#### April 9

(THURSDAY)  
*The Dead in Christ Will Rise*  
1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

1. Belief in the resurrection helps us deal with the difficulties we face. How does your understanding of the resurrection affect the way you work through day-to-day life issues?
2. Because there is a resurrection, we live in a new and different way. How does the fact of the resurrection affect your Christian conduct?
3. The resurrection gospel is good news not only for people who believe, but also for people who do not yet believe. With whom do you feel called to share the good news of the resurrection?
4. Our belief in the resurrection gives us a new perspective on death. How has the promise of a bodily resurrection helped you deal with the death of a loved one?

### The Exhortation to Believers

Notice how Paul challenged his readers at the end of **1 Corinthians 15**: **“Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (v. 58)**. Because Christ is risen, we who are in Christ can be sure that our attempts to share the good news of the risen Christ are not pointless. They will matter for all eternity. Let’s not forget this Easter that the resurrection of Christ changed everything. With it, we have the Good News, eternal salvation, a message of love and victory, and certainly a future of hope and promise.

American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS) has accepted Paul’s 1 Corinthians 15:58 challenge to be persistent in abounding in good works. One example of being steadfast and immovable is the “Home Mission: ’Til the Work Is Done” program. Although fifteen years have passed since hurricanes Katrina and Rita ravaged the Gulf Coast, plenty of work remains to be done.

Rallied by morning prayers, camaraderie, and Christian songs, 186 volunteers from twenty-one American Baptist churches, seventeen states, and fifteen regions across the United States and Puerto Rico braved a week’s worth of heat and humidity to minister as the hands and feet of Christ during American Baptist

Our belief  
in the  
resurrection  
gives us  
a new  
perspective  
on death.

Home Mission Societies' (ABHMS) "Home Mission: 'Til the Work Is Done" in New Orleans. They worked in homes, community gardens, a playground, a charter school, a horse-rescue ranch, an animal shelter, and a food pantry, to name a few.

At orientation on the first day, Victoria Goff, ABHMS national coordinator of Volunteer Mobilization Ministries, asked rhetorically, "Why concentrate on the Lower 9th Ward?" she asked. Then she provided the answer: "Because injustices were done."

A brief drive through particular areas revealed streets riddled with potholes and homes in need of great repair—some unlivable, with walls stripped down to studs. Several homeowners told stories of being bilked by so-called contractors who accepted large sums of money and never returned to finish the work.

Burnell Colton's variety store/barbershop/beauty shop/fast-food place/Laundromat is one of the businesses in which ABHMS volunteers have done repair work over the years. "The reason I felt it was important to do the work for Colton was because the Lower 9th Ward turned into a food desert after the hurricanes hit," said Goff.

Volunteers measured, sawed, hammered, and drilled as part of the nascent stage of Colton's next goal: to turn the abandoned building behind the market into an internet café for youth. In addition, volunteers painted picnic tables that sit between the market and what will be the café.

"I'm just an average guy, but I have above-average dreams," Colton said. "My dream is to get my neighborhood up to speed so that people can come back."<sup>1</sup>

You will find more "Home Mission: 'Til the Work Is Done" stories on the ABHMS website: [www.abhms.org](http://www.abhms.org). Search "'Til the work is done."

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 7: RESURRECTION HOPE

#### April 10

(FRIDAY)

*All Things under God's Control*

1 CORINTHIANS  
15:24-28

#### April 11

(SATURDAY)

*Victory through Our Lord Jesus Christ*

1 CORINTHIANS  
15:50-58

#### April 12

(SUNDAY)

*All Are Made Alive in Christ*

1 CORINTHIANS  
15:1-8, 12-14,  
20-23, 42-45

## An Easter Prayer

Leader: O Risen One, you are the resurrection and the life.

**All: You give us life and eternal hope, and we praise you.**

Leader: Be the resurrection and the life in us,

**All: for we confess that we know what is good, but we fail to do it.**

Leader: Be the resurrection and the life in us,

**All: for we have not been judged, but yet we judge.**

Leader: Be the resurrection and the life in us,

**All: for we know love, but we still live for ourselves.**

Leader: Be the resurrection and the life in us,

**All: for we know hope, but too often we succumb to despair.**

Leader: We work toward the day when all shall know you and the power of your resurrection, and especially pray

*Voice 1: for those dying of malnutrition and hunger,*

*Voice 2: for those imprisoned unjustly and those imprisoned justly,*

*Voice 3: for those who live under regimes that seek to crush all who proclaim resurrection and life,*

*Voice 4: for those in the throes of sickness that leads to death,*

*Voice 5: for the weak who are maltreated by the strong,*

*Voice 6: for victims of human trafficking,*

*Voice 7: for anyone anywhere who knows suffering and death in any form,*

*Voice 8: and for creation itself.*

**All: May your Holy Spirit empower us to share the good news of the resurrection with those who do not know you and your power to save. Amen.**

### NOTE

1. "ABHMS Continues 'Home Mission: 'Til the Work Is Done' 11 Years after Hurricanes Devastate New Orleans," accessed October 15, 2019, [www.abhms.org/about-us/mission-stories/abhms-continues-home-mission-til-the-work-is-done-11-years-after-hurricanes-devastate-new-orleans/](http://www.abhms.org/about-us/mission-stories/abhms-continues-home-mission-til-the-work-is-done-11-years-after-hurricanes-devastate-new-orleans/).

SESSION 8 • APRIL 19, 2020

# Justice Prevails

.....  
**SCRIPTURE:** Esther 7:1-10

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

## The Book of Esther

The story of Esther is set among the Jewish diaspora community in the Persian Empire sometime between 483 and 471 BC. The events occur between the return of the first group of Jews to Judah from Babylon in 538 BC and the return of a second group led back by Ezra in 458 BC.

At its height, the Persian Empire extended from India to Ethiopia. As such, it was the largest empire known until that time in the ancient Near East. The empire had four capitals: Susa, Babylon, Ecbatana, and Persepolis.

Xerxes I was the king (486–465 BC). In the New Revised Standard Version text, we discover he was also called Ahasuerus, the Hebrew rendering of a Persian word meaning “mighty man.” **Esther 1:2** locates him on his throne in the citadel of Susa where he hosted a huge party.

It is likely that the feast described in **Esther 1** was actually a festive strategy session cited by Greek historians during which Xerxes I planned his conquest of Greece.

Nowhere in the book of Esther is God mentioned. Yet it is often subtitled a book about God’s providence.

The word *providence* comes from the Latin *providere*, which literally means to foresee. But more than merely knowing about the future, the word carries the connotation of making preparation for the future. Thus, the idea of the providence



of God pictures a sovereign deity working quietly behind the scenes to shape circumstances and events according to God's own purpose and glory. When we look back on an event, happenings that first appear to be coincidences can be understood in the long run to be *God-incidences*. Depending on the theological lens through which you read the story of Esther, you may see the hidden hand of God in the story.

Read it in a single sitting if you can. Savor the drama!

## Reading Guide

As you read the book of Esther, look for the following elements and make note of them.

- events that happen in pairs
- ironic reversals
- mysteries and unexplained situations
- humorous occurrences
- God-incidences or situations indicating the hidden hand of God

### † ESTHER 7:1-10

<sup>1</sup> So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. <sup>2</sup> On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." <sup>3</sup> Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request." <sup>4</sup> For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king." <sup>5</sup> Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" <sup>6</sup> Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. <sup>7</sup> The king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king had determined to destroy him. <sup>8</sup> When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining; and the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. <sup>9</sup> Then Harbona, one of

the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high.” And the king said, “Hang him on that.”<sup>10</sup> So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

### It’s Not Over Yet

Are you a bit squeamish about the severity of Haman’s demise? Or maybe you’re breathing a sigh of relief that justice was finally done. Are you tempted to just stay here awhile and rest in this small victory?

How many times have you settled for the small win instead of pushing through to the final victory? Too many to count? Rather than pushing through and trusting God to do something extraordinary, we settle for a little win and convince ourselves that it’s enough. In any areas of your life has this been the case? How about diet, exercise, prayer, relationships? What would you add to this list?

But this story of redemption as portrayed in **chapter 7** was far from over. Later that day Esther had a glimpse of the possibility that her people could be saved. She wasn’t resting yet because she still had work to do. And God still had work to do.

For in the story of Esther, God is the real hero. God and the acts of the Almighty’s sovereign hand, though not even mentioned in these verses, are woven throughout the very fabric of Esther’s story. Be assured that God is at work in your story too, turning tragedy into triumph and meting out justice where evil seems to prevail. Thanks be to God!

### Recognizing God’s Providence

We need only look to the city of Providence, Rhode Island, to see the sovereign and providential hand of God at work and an example of justice prevailing. If Baptists

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 8: INJUSTICE WILL BE PUNISHED

#### April 13

(MONDAY)

*Solomon Makes  
a Just Decision*  
1 KINGS 3:16-28

#### April 14

(TUESDAY)

*Jesus Issues His  
Platform for  
Justice*  
LUKE 4:14-21

#### April 15

(WEDNESDAY)

*The Year  
of Jubilee  
Established*  
LEVITICUS  
25:8-17

#### April 16

(THURSDAY)

*A Light to the  
Nations*  
ISAIAH 49:1-7

had patron saints, one would be the Puritan minister Roger Williams. The General Court of Massachusetts in 1635 convicted him of sedition and heresy for spreading “diverse, new and dangerous opinions.” He was ordered banished to England and escaped by slipping away during a January blizzard and finding shelter until spring with the Wampanoag Indians.<sup>1</sup>

In 1636 Williams purchased land from the Narraganset chief Canonicus and established a settlement he named Providence, because he felt that God’s providence had brought him there. Providence was to be a “shelter for persons distressed of conscience.” Under his leadership, the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, one of the original Thirteen Colonies, would be a place of religious freedom, separation of church and state, and fair dealings with American Indians.<sup>2</sup>

The civil government enforced the “second table,” commandments 6-10, and the church was concerned with the “first table,” commandments 1-5. Williams wrote that “forced worship stinks in the nostrils of God.” Williams used the metaphor of a “wall of separation” between church and state, which was later used by Thomas Jefferson in his *Letter to Danbury* Baptists in 1801. Williams concluded that believers’ baptism was the only valid concept of baptism and had himself rebaptized.<sup>3</sup>

After about two years of meeting in his home, Williams’s little congregation in Providence became the first Baptist church in the New World, founded in 1638. Now, 382 years later, First Baptist Church in America embraces the legacy of Roger Williams and celebrates its role in founding Brown University, supporting abolition, and serving as a witness for Christ in a dramatically different twenty-first-century Providence.<sup>4</sup>

Today the church ministers to the marginalized; supports immigrants and refugees; partners with the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty; sends volunteers to rebuild, renew, and restore Puerto Rico (ABHMS initiative following Hurricanes Irma and Maria); and dispatches medical and construction teams to the Dominican Republic.

What was born of exile from Massachusetts Bay Colony birthed a state founded on soul liberty, and planted a church that still gathers “for the publick worship of Almighty God” and “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (**Acts 1:8**).<sup>5</sup>

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- After having read the book of Esther in its entirety, where do you see the hidden hand of God at work?
- Where has God's providence been evident in your life?
- Which term do you prefer: *coincidence* or *God-incidence*? Why?
- Does the providence of God rule out coincidence? Why or why not?
- Where have you been tempted to settle for a small victory instead of trusting God for full redemption?
- How does knowing that the last chapter in your life has not yet been written bring hope to your current situation?

## Prayer of Commitment

(Inspired by the book of Esther)

O God,

our guide and help in alien and contentious places:  
as Esther prayed faithfully and worked courageously  
for the deliverance of your people,  
strengthen us to confront the oppressor  
and free the oppressed,  
so that all people may know  
the justice and unity of your realm. Amen.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTE

1. "Roger Williams," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger\\_Williams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Williams).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. <https://www.firstbaptistchurchinamerica.org/history/for-the-publick-worship-of-almighty-god/>

6. "Prayer of Commitment," *Revised Common Lectionary Prayers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), [www.re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/09/prayer-of-commitment-esther.html](http://www.re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/09/prayer-of-commitment-esther.html).

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 8: INJUSTICE WILL BE PUNISHED

April 17

(FRIDAY)

*A New Vision  
for the People*  
ISAIAH 61:1-7

April 18

(SATURDAY)

*Zion Welcomes  
the Redeemed  
Home*  
ISAIAH 62:5-12

April 19

(SUNDAY)

*The Lord Brings  
the People  
Justice*  
ISAIAH 61:8-11;  
62:2-4a

SESSION 9 • APRIL 26, 2020

# God Loves Justice

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

**KEY VERSE: For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. —Isaiah 61:8**  
.....

## The Book of Isaiah

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

While on the surface Isaiah appears to be a unified book, most biblical scholars call it an amalgamation or blend of the oracles of three separate writers. Thus, we have the designations First, Second, and Third Isaiah. This week's study is found among the oracles attributed to Third Isaiah (**56:1-66:24**).

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

The section of Scripture we study this week was written after 537 BC when Israel's return from exile under the edict of King Cyrus of Persia began. The returnees were undoubtedly expecting a glorious restoration. Instead, they

"Isaiah"  
means  
"salvation is  
of the Lord."

found themselves facing innumerable adversities. They were vulnerable and desperate to hear some good news.

## Poetry 101

A quick glance at the printed pages of Isaiah's prophecies makes it clear that these are not narratives (like the Gospels) or arguments (like the Epistle to the Romans). Instead, the broken lines indicate poetry. Poetry is not merely decorative language or a matter of simple formatting as we say in contemporary computer-speak. Neither is it a fancy way of saying something that could be said another way. Rather, it is a primary mode of expression. The form is essential to its meaning. These facts call for a different way of reading.

Yes, reading poetry is both a discipline and an art. We improve when we practice. Instead of relying solely on commentaries, curricula, or Sunday school teachers to explain the poetic texts in the Scripture, open your heart and mind to let them speak for themselves. Part of the power of poetry is the discovery process in which we engage as we begin to feel the effects of a text or make connections to personal experiences or other biblical images.

Even if we feel uncomfortable with poetry, once we begin, reading it becomes more natural and perhaps even delightful! So take a deep breath and dig in. Let the words of Isaiah speak to your life situation. (To get the most out of this week's poetry assignment, read **Isaiah 61:1–62:4** in your Bible.)

### † ISAIAH 61:8-11

- 8 For I the LORD love justice,  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
- 9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations,  
and their offspring among the peoples;

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 9: THE LORD LOVES JUSTICE

**April 20**  
(MONDAY)  
*Solomon Makes  
a Just Decision*  
1 KINGS 3:16-28

**April 21**  
(TUESDAY)  
*Jesus Issues His  
Platform for  
Justice*  
LUKE 4:14-21

**April 22**  
(WEDNESDAY)  
*The Year  
of Jubilee  
Established*  
LEVITICUS  
25:8-17

**April 23**  
(THURSDAY)  
*A Light to the  
Nations*  
ISAIAH 49:1-7

all who see them shall acknowledge  
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

- 10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
- 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations.

† ISAIAH 62:2-4a

- 2 The nations shall see your vindication,  
and all the kings your glory;  
and you shall be called by a new name  
that the mouth of the LORD will give.
- 3 You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,  
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
- 4 You shall no more be termed Forsaken,  
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate.

## Good News for All People

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

But we can also apply it to our lives today. Jesus came among us to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (**Luke 4:18**). He did that and continues to do

Jesus, in his first advent, announced that he was fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy.

these things for humanity. Our response, then, should be to live just as righteously, joyously, and hopefully as those who heard God's good news in the first place.

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

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

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

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- From your reading in Isaiah 61–62, what words and phrases communicate God's good news to you personally?
- What promises do you wish to claim?
- What questions rise out of the prophet's poetic writing?
- If you had been a postexilic Jew returning to Jerusalem, how might you have internalized Isaiah's words?
- Are you more motivated to work for justice because of what you have just read? Why or why not?

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 9: THE LORD LOVES JUSTICE

April 24

(FRIDAY)

*A New Vision  
for the People*  
ISAIAH 61:1-7

April 25

(SATURDAY)

*Zion Welcomes  
the Redeemed  
Home*  
ISAIAH 62:5-12

April 26

(SUNDAY)

*The Lord Brings  
the People  
Justice*  
ISAIAH 61:8-11;  
62:2-4a

## Poetry in Motion

We can assume that the postexilic community of Jews drew comfort from Isaiah's words. Jesus read a portion of this poem (**Isaiah 58:6** and **61:2**) in the synagogue in Nazareth (**Luke 4:18-19**). The poem also evokes an eschatological application as God's people await the eventual fulfillment of prophecy when Jesus returns to reign. But what about us in our twenty-first century setting? What does this poem have to say to us today?

Of course it's true that we can be comforted by these words when we are victims of injustice. We may rejoice in the assertion that God loves justice. We may even cite some of the poetry as a gratifying source of victory when we see others punished for their wrong actions.

But beyond these applications, we are tasked with putting this biblical poetry into motion. What might that look like for an American Baptist? Maybe it means joining the American Baptist Home Mission Societies' Passionary Movement. This movement among American Baptists is an initiative that calls all of us, clergy and laity, to intentional Christian living by marrying our passion with our Christian commitment.

## Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things for Christ

Passionaries exhibit and extend the grace of God with everyone everywhere by embracing the whole gospel, answering the call to grow in discipleship, and working for justice. Passionaries are ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

These faithful Christians promise to focus each day on following Jesus, incarnating God's grace, and loving others as God loves them. As part of their spiritual journeys, passionaries rely on the Holy Spirit to resist the pull of popular culture, asking these three questions daily:

- How shall I follow Jesus today?
- How can I demonstrate Jesus' love and justice today?
- How can I play my part in practicing the perseverance of Christ right here and right now?

Passionaries pursue justice fervently and cultivate the Beloved Community by practicing radical acts of hospitality, welcoming the stranger, and cultivating compassion.

Becoming a passionary is a journey with many forks in the road, but the common path is living a life filled with passion for answering God’s call to incarnate Christ’s presence in the world with depth, love, and service.

*(You are invited to join this group of ordinary American Baptists. Visit [www.walkwet.com](http://www.walkwet.com) to make the passionary promise and receive the daily e-mail “Word and Witness” along with access to the weekly blog “Everyday Mission.”)*<sup>1</sup>

## The Bible Is Our Story Too

In 2018 Karen Carlo was a volunteer theological educator at the Pwo Karen Theological Seminary in Yangon, Myanmar. She also served as a guest lecturer at the Myanmar Institute of Theology.

While Carlo was teaching a class called Theology for Peace and Justice, a student remarked, “I never knew the Bible was our story too.” The class was studying the ways in which the ancient Israelites had to overcome not only physical bondage in Egypt but also their “internal pharaoh” as they learned to live as free people. These students, who came from many different ethnic groups, had suffered greatly both because of their ethnicities and their Christian faith. They understood both external and internal bondage, but by studying the Bible and theology, they also learned to find hope that they, too, could learn to live as free people as they help their country transition to democracy.

The Pwo Karen Theological Seminary’s statement of identity states that they “meet and work hard not only to transform each other’s lives but also to transform their society.”<sup>2</sup> Carlo reported, “I felt very honored that God allowed me to be part of this transformative work empowering future faith leaders to be witnesses to the love of God



revealed in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit that brings new hope to a hurting world.”

This was Carlo’s second assignment as a volunteer. “It will, God willing, not be my last,” she says, “because this country and its people have claimed my heart.” If you also feel God’s nudge toward possible volunteer service in Myanmar, email the Short-Term Mission team at [volunteers@internationalministries.org](mailto:volunteers@internationalministries.org).<sup>3</sup>

## Litany for Justice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**All: that we might take seriously the meaning of your call to do justice. Amen.**<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1. “Passionary movement,” American Baptist Home Mission Societies, [www.abhms.org/ministries/developing-leaders/passionary-movement/](http://www.abhms.org/ministries/developing-leaders/passionary-movement/).

2. Pwo Karen Theological Seminary, accessed October 21, 2019, [www.pkts.org/index.html](http://www.pkts.org/index.html).

3. Journals: “The Bible Is Our Story Too,” International Ministries, July 17, 2018, [www.internationalministries.org/the-bible-is-our-story-too/](http://www.internationalministries.org/the-bible-is-our-story-too/).

4. Adapted from Anonymous, “Litany for Justice,” *Worship & Song* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), no. 90.

**SESSION 10** • MAY 3, 2020

# The Return of Joy

**SCRIPTURE:** Zephaniah 3

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

## Standing Up to the Challenge

The Old Testament prophet Zephaniah knew quite a lot about trials and challenges. In fact, he had what you might call a completely overwhelming task to perform: relay the message of God's justice and love to an uncaring, selfish, and rebellious group of people.

The population living in Judah in 640-609 BC had hardened their hearts toward God, choosing instead to worship pagan idols. But God spoke through Zephaniah of a time that would come when God would restore God's people through the outpouring of God's salvation. It was a word of hope in a time when people were going their own way and not seeking the face of God.

### † ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20

- <sup>14</sup> Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;  
shout, O Israel!  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
O daughter Jerusalem!
- <sup>15</sup> 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.
- <sup>16</sup> On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:  
Do not fear, O Zion;  
do not let your hands grow weak.
- <sup>17</sup> 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  
18 as on a day of festival.  
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.

## A Deeper Look

Some might say that the book of Zephaniah reads a bit like a fairy tale as it moves through God’s judgment of the nations to the future moment when God seemingly has washed the slate clean. **Verse 15** says, “**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.**”

Backing up to **verse 14**, we see a reference to Zion. What does Zion represent? The *ESV Study Bible* gives this definition: “Zion is an alternative name for Jerusalem, the city of David and home of the temple.”<sup>1</sup>

The last part of Zephaniah 3 offers a beautiful look at God’s love and care for God’s people. We are reminded (**vv. 14-16**) that the punishment they have endured is over, that their enemies are no longer a source of concern, and that God is present in their midst.

But wait—just who are these enemies? And what was this “punishment”? Step back to **Zephaniah 2:9b** and we’ll find the answer to the first question. “**Moab shall become like Sodom and the Ammonites**

like Gomorrah, land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever.”

These were cities that had pitted themselves against God.

The punishment refers back to **3:6**: “I have cut off nations; their battlements are in ruins; I have laid waste their streets so that no one walks in them; their cities have been made desolate, without people, without inhabitants.” God did not want to mete out punishment. Rather, God wanted to be in communion with God’s children. Their disobedience, rebellion, and outright combativeness toward God, however, made this impossible. Still, there remained a remnant, a small band of those obedient to the one true God.

God’s plan is reiterated in **verses 16-18**: the Lord will protect and restore God’s people and deal with their oppressors. “On that day,” is the same as saying “The Day of the Lord,” which points to the future.<sup>2</sup> God’s people are told not to fear (**v. 16**). Why? Because God is with them: “**The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory**” (**v. 17**). Unlike a human warrior, the Almighty does not grow weak or tired in the defense of God’s people. God will not retreat, nor will God be defeated.

In addition, God promised to remove all burdens from the people and to take these on to God’s self (**v. 18**). You might also note that within **verses 14-17**, the speaker’s voice changes. The third person “He” in previous verses becomes the first person “I” in **verses 18-20**. The voice of God’s prophet, Zephaniah transforms into the voice of the Lord.

Next, in **verse 19** God proclaims God’s promises over God’s people: “**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.**”

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 10: A VISION OF RESTORATION

April 27

(MONDAY)

*God Promises  
Restoration of  
Israel's Fortunes*  
DEUTERONOMY  
30:1-6

April 28

(TUESDAY)

*God Will  
Shepherd the  
People*  
EZEKIEL  
34:11-16

April 29

(WEDNESDAY)

*God Will  
Strengthen the  
People*  
ZECHARIAH  
10:6-12

April 30

(THURSDAY)

*Christ's  
Forgiveness of  
Israel's Sins*  
ACTS 5:27-32

Restoration for God's faithful, who will be fully restored, is the final theme of chapter 3. **"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" (v. 20b).**

The end of this chapter reads like a beautiful fairy tale. We who are true to God will be restored. We are also promised God's blessings, love, and mercy. This word of hope in the midst of corrupt times lets us know that whatever the circumstances we are living in, there is salvation to come for those who love God.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What might it have been like to live in a culture such as Jerusalem during this time in history?
- Do you believe there is a similar spiritual climate in our culture today? Why or why not?

### Overcoming Trials

Screaming 150 mph winds. Trees toppled. Streets flooded. Roofs peeled from buildings like aluminum foil. These are just a few of the scenes from Hurricane Maria, which engulfed Puerto Rico in late September 2017. News footage showed devastation on much of the island after the Category 5 hurricane devastated the area.

When the storm had passed, inhabitants of the island were left to deal with the debris and try to rebuild their lives. Imagine the sense of desolation and despair. With no electricity, no running water, homes and businesses demolished or completely unusable, the entire population faced severe challenges.

One of those people was Abigail Medina Betancourt, a staff member of American Baptist Home Mission Societies and a divinity student. Not only did Abigail graduate with her master of divinity degree nine months after Hurricane Maria hit, but she did so with honors, graduating *magna cum laude*.<sup>3</sup>

Abigail could have thrown up her hands and given up on her dream after the hurricane hit. She could have used the powerful storm as an excuse to pause her studies. Instead, Abigail studied by the light of candles most evenings and lost out on spending time with her family in order to complete her schoolwork. She had to handwrite her papers as there was no electricity to power a computer.

As Abigail crossed the stage to accept her diploma that spring, do you think she felt rewarded by her efforts? Do you think she felt victorious? The old adage “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” is true. And while embracing hardships and enduring peril aren’t eagerly anticipated, God can use them to change us for the better, to strengthen our faith and make big differences in our lives.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Looking back at one of the greatest challenges in your own life, can you see how God helped you to grow and persevere during that time?
- Think of a situation that caused you a great deal of stress in the last couple of weeks or months. Was it a challenge to turn that situation over to God and leave it in his capable hands? What helped you to finally do so?

### Water for Weary Travelers

Have you ever been so thirsty you couldn’t think about anything but water? In our modern-day world it’s not a common problem. Water is just about everywhere we go: clean water can easily be found via water fountains, bottled water in stores and gas stations, and the water bottles many of us keep by our sides.

Imagine God’s faithful as thirsty travelers. They have been through the desert of heartache and pain. They have suffered oppression. They have lived among the doubters and scoffers, among their neighbors who gave up on God and worshiped glittering idols instead.

They have been waiting and waiting for the cool, revitalizing drink that only God can give.

And then the beautiful passage of **Zephaniah 3:15** comes along. It provides a wonderfully refreshing reminder of God’s promises to God’s faithful. Finally, after all the time spent waiting, God’s people are vindicated.

### Daily Bible Readings

#### WEEK 10: A VISION OF RESTORATION

##### May 1

(FRIDAY)

*Leaders, Priests,  
and Prophets*

*Don’t Listen*

ZEPHANIAH  
3:1-7

##### May 2

(SATURDAY)

*God Will*

*Preserve a  
Remnant*

ZEPHANIAH  
3:8-13

##### May 3

(SUNDAY)

*Rejoice in God’s*

*Glory and  
Salvation*

ZEPHANIAH  
3:14-20

God's promise to turn away our enemies is one that is still reassuring today. This passage promises us that even in the midst of that battle, the Lord is with us and we do not need to fear.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- God promises to turn away our enemies. Where in your life right now do you desire the Lord's vindication?
- What tools or help do you need to "stay the course" in your faith during trying times?

### Bringing Justice to the World

If God has saved us, restored us, and made us "renowned," and "praised," as **Zephaniah 3:20** says, are we then to sit back and enjoy a nice, long rest?

We can help to fight the injustices of the world.

Quite simply, no. As God's chosen, we are responsible not only to accept the gift of God's grace but also to offer it to those around us. Read **Zephaniah 3:19** again: "**I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast.**"

Where do we find the "lame and the outcast," today? We don't live in the same type of tight, close-knit communities that those living in Bible times did. But our world is hurting and the people in it are hungry: for love, for hope, for connection. Still, in a hectic, overly loud world, how are we to know whom to help?

One need only turn on the nightly news to be barraged with stories of injustice, pain, lack, and disaster around the world. Christians are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus. We must think of ways we can live that out on a daily and weekly basis. We can help to fight the injustices of the world, shining God's love and light into the darkness.

### NOTES

1. *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 1739.

2. Elmer A. Martens, ed., *The Complete Biblical Library*, Daniel-Malachi (Springfield, MO: World Library Press, 1999), 15:511-18.

3. "ABHMStaffMemberExemplifiesResiliencyofPuertoRico'sPeople," American Baptist Home Mission Society, accessed October 21, 2019, [www.abhms.org/about-us/mission-stories/abhms-staff-member-exemplifies-resiliency-of-puerto-ricos-people/](http://www.abhms.org/about-us/mission-stories/abhms-staff-member-exemplifies-resiliency-of-puerto-ricos-people/).

SESSION 11 • MAY 10, 2020

# Peace and Justice Reign

SCRIPTURE: Zechariah 8:1-8, 11-17

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

—Zechariah 8:15

## Peace in Difficult Times

Do you know what holiday will be celebrated on September 21? This day is recognized internationally and will be filled with vigils, prayer events, discussions, themed art, and perhaps even marches or parades. It's International Peace Day. Created by the United Nations' General Assembly in 1981, the third Saturday of each September is set aside to promote the message of peace.

Peace is a message that our world needs to hear. In Zechariah's day, God's people needed a word of hope and encouragement. They needed to know that despite the negative aspects of their current social condition, God would bring about restoration and the abundant life they longed to regain—a life of peace and prosperity.

Peace is a message that our world needs to hear.

## † ZECHARIAH 8:1-8

<sup>1</sup>The word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying: <sup>2</sup>Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath. <sup>3</sup>Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts shall be called the holy mountain. <sup>4</sup>Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. <sup>5</sup>And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. <sup>6</sup>Thus says the LORD of hosts: Even though

it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the LORD of hosts? <sup>7</sup>Thus says the Lord of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; <sup>8</sup>and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.

## Peace—as in Shalom

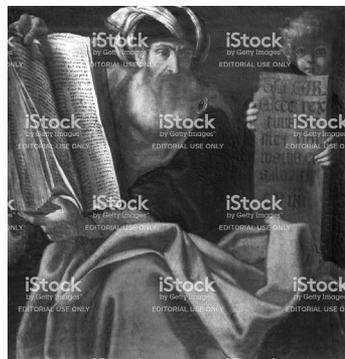
When some hear the word *peace*, they think of the 1970s. Back then people draped peace signs around their necks and on their rearview mirrors and painted peace signs on their T-shirts and jeans. The '70s in the United States was a period of time filled with political strife. Watching the news today makes one wonder, however, if the current social climate is much different. The country is plagued with divisiveness, discord, and mistrust.



The people of Zechariah’s day were also plagued with hardships as they sought to reestablish themselves in their homeland. From the rebuilding of the temple to the reestablishment of religious and cultural norms, the task of getting back to where they were before the exile proved to be a slow and painful process.

And what they sought was not just a sense of security by having a wall around their city. They sought to regain the lifestyle they once had been promised as covenant people. They sought not just political and social peace, but *shalom*—a sense of wholeness and well-being that pervaded all aspects of their lives. Jesus blessed his disciples with his distinctive peace in **John 14:27** and expanded this blessing when he spoke of “abundant life” in **John 10:10**.

In Zechariah, God is portrayed as a passionate, jealous God because of God’s love and commitment to God’s people.



Bologna - The painting of prophet Zechariah in church Chiesa di San Benedetto by Giacomo Gavedoni (1577 - 1660)

God wanted to fulfill the needs and desires of the people and promised to do so in time. This prophecy echoes God's promise from years earlier as spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: **"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope"** (Jeremiah 29:11).

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How does our society mirror aspects of the culture and community that Zechariah was addressing? What are aspects of community God desires us to foster?
- Do you ever feel that the modern world is too far removed from God to ever be saved? Why or why not?
- What are situations today in our society in which we need justice and peace?

### Bible Exploration

Remember, **Zechariah 1:4** said, **"Do not be like your ancestors, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.' But they did not hear or heed me, says the LORD."**

In fact, many of the chosen had given themselves over to idol worship and let peer influence dictate their decisions. They went their own way, lived life the way they wanted, with little regard for God or the commandments.

Awful, we might think. But are we so different? It's incredibly easy, especially in today's culture, to be lured away from God's voice and God's vision for us. All is not lost, however. God passionately wanted the people to return. God wants the same for us. We are never too far outside the circle of God's grace. Even when God's heart is breaking, God extends God's love and mercy to us.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever experienced a time in your life when you felt far from God's grace and wondered if God would really welcome you back with open arms?

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 11: PEACE AND JUSTICE REIGN

May 4

(MONDAY)

*God's  
Worldwide  
Covenant with  
Abraham*

GENESIS 12:1-8

May 5

(TUESDAY)

*A New  
Covenant of the  
Heart*

JEREMIAH  
31:31-34

May 6

(WEDNESDAY)

*Divided Peoples  
to Become One*

EZEKIEL  
37:15-23

May 7

(THURSDAY)

*Just Living in  
Church and  
World*

ROMANS  
12:9-21

- What distractions or struggles are prevalent in your life right now? What would it be like to ask God into these distractions or struggles with you?

### † ZECHARIAH 8:11-17

<sup>11</sup> But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>12</sup> For there shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit, the ground shall give its produce, and the skies shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things. <sup>13</sup> Just as you have been a cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you and you shall be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.

<sup>14</sup> For thus says the LORD of hosts: Just as I purposed to bring disaster upon you, when your ancestors provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the LORD of hosts, <sup>15</sup> so again I have purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; do not be afraid. <sup>16</sup> These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, <sup>17</sup> do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the LORD.

### Mercy or Justice?

Our key verse is this: **“I have purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; do not be afraid” (Zechariah 8:15)**. Justice has such a lovely ring to it—when we look at other people: “Certainly she should be reprimanded for her actions.” “Of course, he should be made to toe the line for his indiscretions.” But when we look at ourselves, how likely are we to be filled with longings for justice? Did God’s people deserve justice? Yes. They had, after all, turned away from the Lord, from God’s commandments and God’s plans for them. Like stubborn toddlers, they wanted to do things their way, in their timing, with their resources. “Mine, mine, mine!” shows up between the lines of **Zechariah 1**.

Justice has such a lovely ring to it—when we look at other people.

Like a most loving and patient parent though, God doesn’t deal with God’s children in anger.

God doesn't throw up God's hands and say, "Forget it." Instead, God promises that God will "**do good to Jerusalem and the house of Judah.**" Imagine that! Where we expect justice and punishment for our wrongs, God offers love and forgiveness. Where we were anticipating pain and punishment, our loving Parent offers grace.

"**Do not be afraid,**" God promises (v. 15b). Did you know that **fear is talked about in the Bible 365 times?**<sup>1</sup> Jesus himself mentions it over and over again: "fear not," he commands his disciples and other times asks them why they were afraid. If the disciples, being in the very presence of Jesus felt fear, it should come as no surprise that we do as well.

Obviously, God recognizes that fear is part of our sin nature. How many times, though, do we allow fear—which can look very much like guilt, shame, and self-condemnation—to keep us from turning to God? This beautiful passage in Zechariah reminds us that we *never* fall too far away for God to catch us or for God to return us to God's presence and work miracles in our lives.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Is there an area of your life which you feel God wouldn't understand? This week will you accept the challenge to talk to God about it, even if just for a couple of minutes?
- When you see all the injustices in the world around us, where do you feel most called to help? This doesn't have to be a big, earth-shattering move for you. Where in your small circle could you be an agent of God's justice?

Fear is  
talked about  
in the Bible  
365 times.

We never  
fall too  
far away  
for God to  
catch us.

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 11: PEACE AND JUSTICE REIGN

May 8

(FRIDAY)

*Cultivate  
Peaceful and  
Just Relations*

1 THESSALONI-  
ANS 5:12-22

May 9

(SATURDAY)

*Joyful Feasts  
Draw*

*Newcomers*  
ZECHARIAH  
8:18-23

May 10

(SUNDAY)

*Enjoy Fruits  
of Peace and  
Justice*

ZECHARIAH  
8:1-8, 11-17

## Grace for Grace

This Scripture also offers us encouragement to help others. Just as God forgave the people and extended grace and mercy to them, God challenges us to “go and do likewise” to our sisters and brothers inside and outside of the church. What does that look like? First, it makes sense to look at the spiritual gifts you have. And then to take action after praying for God’s guidance. Where is there a need? And where do you feel God leading you?

- Are there people the church deems to have fallen too far to help?
- Are there those right here in this community who have fallen between the cracks, who believe no one cares about them, let alone loves them?

Jesus said, “**I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me**” (Matthew 25:36). Perhaps this is the time to start or join that prison ministry or nursing home outreach. Maybe God is calling to you to help young people by volunteering as a mentor, or to assist the elderly by teaching classes and leading activities at the local community center. Is the local soup kitchen or food pantry in need of volunteers? Could you encourage others through cards or notes of encouragement from your armchair or wheelchair? In whatever way God wants to use us, we are encouraged to extend the shalom God has showered upon us to our neighbors. All of them. And in doing so, we can build communities that reflect the unconditional love that God showers upon us.

We can build communities that reflect the unconditional love that God showers upon us.

### NOTE

1. Katherine Weber, “Rick Warren: Why God Encourages Christians to ‘Fear Not’ 365 Times in the Bible,” *Christian Post*, April 30, 2016, [www.christianpost.com/news/rick-warren-why-god-encourages-christians-to-fear-not-365-times-in-the-bible-163029/](http://www.christianpost.com/news/rick-warren-why-god-encourages-christians-to-fear-not-365-times-in-the-bible-163029/).

SESSION 12 • MAY 17, 2020

# Just Rewards

.....  
**SCRIPTURE:** Jeremiah 21

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

## Jeremiad

An English word derived from the weeping prophet Jeremiah's books of Jeremiah and Lamentations is *jeremiad*. It is often applied to moralistic texts or speech that denounces a society for its wickedness and prophesies its downfall. Jeremiah spent his days reproofing the Hebrews for their false worship and social injustice, as well as denouncing King Zedekiah for his selfishness, materialism, and inequities. The prophet Jeremiah was not popular, nor was his message. The people of Judah preferred the messages of false prophets who forecast peace rather than the message of Jeremiah who warned of judgment. Speaking truth to power, to the religious leaders and royal household, was an unwelcome ministry. Jeremiah was made a laughingstock (**Jeremiah 20:7**), his life was threatened (**11:21**), a temple official struck him and placed him in stocks for a day (**20:2**), and he was imprisoned and thrown into a cistern (**37:15; 38:6**). Today Christians have God's words in the Old and New Testaments and are called to speak out against false worship and social injustice just as Jeremiah did.

Jeremiah spent his days reproofing the Hebrews for their false worship and social injustice.

## Standing in Peaceful Protest

Imagine that you attend a countywide meeting one evening in your community. You've heard

bits and pieces of news flying around town but nothing concrete.

At the meeting you learn that a large corporation is coming to the area. It is intent on claiming land—in the name of efficiency of course—to take on a multimillion- (or perhaps, multibillion-) dollar project.

Huge machinery will dig. The landscape outside your door will be forever changed. Oh, and the project will also run right through your church's property and the local clean water supply.

How excited would you be about this news? A similar occurrence happened in 2016 in Cannon Ball, North Dakota. There peaceful protests lasted for several months as people from all over the country showed support of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe who live in the area.

The American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS) and many other supporters stood with this tribe, opposing the plan for a massive pipeline through the area.<sup>1</sup> The 1,170-mile Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) would have crossed through sacred sites and potentially affected the water supply of millions of individuals.

In the end the tribe was successful in defending its land from DAPL. Sometimes doing the right thing is also the hardest thing one can do. Different situations call for different measures. In the case of King Zedekiah in today's Scripture, standing his ground against the Chaldeans was not the right thing to do. As a matter of fact, his lack of practicing the right thing contributed to the peril of his people.

Sometimes  
doing the  
right thing  
is also the  
hardest  
thing one  
can do.

### † JEREMIAH 21:8-14

<sup>8</sup> And to this people you shall say: Thus says the LORD: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. <sup>9</sup> Those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; but those who go out and surrender to the Chaldeans who are besieging you shall live and shall have their lives as a prize of war. <sup>10</sup> For I have set my face against this city for evil and not for good, says the LORD: it shall be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.

<sup>11</sup> To the house of the king of Judah say: Hear the word of the LORD, <sup>12</sup> O house of David! Thus says the LORD:

Execute justice in the morning,  
and deliver from the hand of the oppressor  
anyone who has been robbed,  
or else my wrath will go forth like fire,  
and burn, with no one to quench it,  
because of your evil doings.

<sup>13</sup> See, I am against you, O inhabitant of the valley,  
O rock of the plain

says the LORD;

you who say, “Who can come down against us,  
or who can enter our places of refuge?”

<sup>14</sup> I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings,

says the LORD;

I will kindle a fire in its forest,  
and it shall devour all that is around it.

### Jeremiah’s Message

In **Jeremiah 21:8-14** God was unhappy with King Zedekiah as well as with the rebellious people in Jerusalem. Their revelry and disgraceful behavior had finally caught up with them. King Zedekiah, though, was not willing to listen. When the prophet Jeremiah relayed God’s message—to flee to their enemies and be considered war prizes—the king did not want to listen. “**See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death,**” Jeremiah said on God’s behalf in (v. 8). In other words, surrender to the Chaldeans or stay in the city and suffer the consequences. “**Those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence,**” says **verse 9**.

But wait—weren’t these God’s chosen people? Why would God hand them over to the enemy? Why not swoop in and save them, provide them with another miracle? At some point there must be severe punishment

### Daily Bible Readings

#### WEEK 12: PRACTICE JUSTICE

May 11

(MONDAY)

*Seeking Divine Help in Troubled Times*

PSALM 86:1-13

May 12

(TUESDAY)

*Land Now Belongs to Babylon*

JEREMIAH 27:1-11

May 13

(WEDNESDAY)

*Choose to Love and Obey the Lord*

DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20

May 14

(THURSDAY)

*Surrender and the People Will Live*

JEREMIAH 38:14-18

for severe disobedience. Imagine coming home from work and having your child shooting arrows—real ones—all around the house at his or her siblings. Certainly you wouldn't wait to take action!



In Jeremiah's day, God would also take action against the people. **“For I have set my face against this city for evil and not for good, says the LORD: it shall be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire”** (v. 10). The injustices and unrighteousness of the nation had left them in the position to be punished due to their lack of willingness to walk in the ways of the Lord.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- When God sees injustice happening on earth, what do you think God wants our response to be?
- Have you ever had to take an unpopular stance as a Christian? If so, what was that experience like?

### Administering Justice

The chapter concludes with an oracle, or word of God, to Zedekiah. **“Execute justice in the morning and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed”** (v. 12a). The phrase **“in the morning”** refers to a daily or regular practice. In this instance, it meant the king's attention—or lack thereof—to justice. What should King Zedekiah have been focusing on with regularity? Justice.

A king in biblical times had an extremely important role, one perhaps more important than just about anything else he did: administering justice to the people who lived in his domain. Because God had to remind the king of this duty, it is apparent that it was something King Zedekiah was not regularly doing.

While King Zedekiah was not the direct descendent of King David, he did still fall under David's dynasty (vv. 11-12a). As king and a descendant of David's house, Zedekiah had been trained in the law and in the ways of the Lord. Seemingly, though, he had fallen away from this instruction.

## Rebellion and Consequences

Now, it can be assumed that Jerusalem at this time wasn't a great place to live if one was faithful to God. In fact, judgment would come because of the people's evil-doing (v. 12b). Rebellion was at the root of this problem, but all of the blame can't be pinned on King Zedekiah. The house of David had long fallen away from living as God intended them to live.

They could have humbled themselves. They could have repented. They could have sought forgiveness. Instead, the people added insult to injury. In **verse 13** the Lord says, **"You who say, 'Who can come down against us, or who can enter our places of refuge?'"** Then, later, **"I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, says the LORD"** (v. 14a). This verse reminded the people, and reminds us today, that sinful actions often have painful consequences.

This passage concludes with the threat of fire in **verse 14b**: **"I will kindle a fire in its forest, and it shall devour all that is around it."** There was no forest in the city of Jerusalem. This text may refer to a forest that was within the king's domain. Or it could have referred to the wood (cedars of Lebanon) used to build much of the city. Solomon's temple, the palace, and many other buildings were constructed from this cedar.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever been part of a group, perhaps at work, volunteering, or in the community, where you were the only Christian present? Did that change the way you related to those you were with? If so, how?
- Give an example of one time in your life in which you definitely "deserved" justice and hard consequences. Did that knowledge change the way you felt about the punishment given?

Sinful actions often have painful consequences.

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 12: PRACTICE JUSTICE

May 15

(FRIDAY)

*Jerusalem Will Fall*

JEREMIAH

21:1-7

May 16

(SATURDAY)

*Jerusalem Defeated and Zedekiah Exiled*

2 KINGS

24:20b-25:7

May 17

(SUNDAY)

*Choose the Life of Justice*

JEREMIAH

21:8-14

## Injustice: All around Us

Did you know that 15 million children living in the United States right now live below the poverty threshold?<sup>2</sup> According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), most of these are in working-class families, but parents struggle to make ends meet. Inability to learn; social, emotional, and behavior struggles; and more are the negative results of poverty on children.

Polaris Project estimates that there are 4.5 million victims of sexual exploitation around the globe.<sup>3</sup> And if you think that America isn't part of this trade, you'd be wrong. Runaways, teens in love with the wrong people, and other victims of sex trafficking are sold at truck stops, Super Bowls, and elsewhere on a regular basis. So, what do we as Christians do about the injustice we see?

## Take Action. Take a Stand. Make a Commitment.

Feel too overwhelmed to begin on your own? Explore opportunities to advocate as a group, perhaps this group that you're studying with on Sunday morning. Is there an issue that particularly stands out to you and your church family? Become involved. Don't just talk about loving God—show others through your actions.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What is one area of injustice that really makes you angry with righteous discontent? How do you think God could use you—right where you are at the present time—to help?
- Reread **verse 13** from the passage. What mind-set does this perpetuate? What responses might counteract this wrong mind-set?

### NOTES

1. "ABHMS Joins Christian Leaders Supporting Nonviolent Protest at Standing Rock," American Baptist Home Mission Society, accessed October 22, 2019, [www.abhms.org/about-us/news/abhms-joins-christian-leaders-supporting-non-violent-protest-at-standing-rock/](http://www.abhms.org/about-us/news/abhms-joins-christian-leaders-supporting-non-violent-protest-at-standing-rock/).

2. "Child Poverty," National Center for Children in Poverty, 2018, [www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html](http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html).

3. "Sex Trafficking: Key Statistics," Polaris Project, [www.polarisproject.org/human-trafficking/sex-trafficking](http://www.polarisproject.org/human-trafficking/sex-trafficking).

SESSION 13 • MAY 24, 2020

# Do the Right Thing

SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 22:1-10

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

## A Calling in Difficult Times

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

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

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

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

Zedekiah  
did not have  
the people’s  
best  
interests  
at heart.

## † JEREMIAH 22:1-5

<sup>1</sup>Thus says the LORD: Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word, <sup>2</sup>and say: Hear the word of the LORD, O King of Judah sitting on the

throne of David—you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates. <sup>3</sup>Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place. <sup>4</sup>For if you will indeed obey this word, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their servants, and their people. <sup>5</sup>But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation.

## What Flavor Is Your Idol?

Jeremiah had a very unpopular message to deliver both to the king of Judah and the people who lived there.

The importance of seeking justice for those who are oppressed is as important today as it was in biblical times. In **verse 4-5**, God offered the people two options: Option 1 included future kings and the people of the land riding in chariots and on horses. David's descendants, in other words, would continue to rule in the land of Judah.

Option 2, however, was not appealing. If the people continued to rebel against God, God promised punishment: **“I swear by myself, says the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation”** (v. 5b). It's easy to believe that the people to whom Jeremiah was speaking were foolish. *Obviously*, we think, *the choice is perfectly clear*.

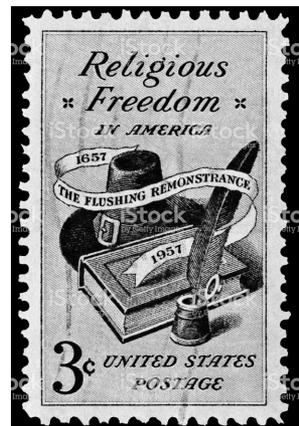
Yet are we reluctant to give up our own idols? Does the new romance, the promotion, the trip of a lifetime, the desire to be successful or to raise “perfect” kids overshadow the desire to serve God first and foremost?

### QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- What are one or two warning signs that something in your life is becoming or has the potential to become an idol?

## The Baptist Hero You've Never Heard Of

When you hear the term *religious liberty*, or *religious freedom*, what comes to mind first?



Religious Freedom Postal Issue.  
Issued in 1957 celebrating 300 years  
of American religious freedom.

Is it the *Mayflower*? Perhaps you think of Puritans and their steadfastness in the face of physical calamity? Or does your mind automatically go to countries where even today gathering together as a church is forbidden?

Isaac Backus was a phenomenal hero of the Baptists in North America during the time before and following the Revolutionary War, yet he may be someone you've never heard of until now. Born in 1724, Backus was forced to leave the Congregationalist Church in 1756. Why? Because he did not support the idea of infant baptism. That same year he began a Baptist church, and he served there as minister until his death in 1806.<sup>1</sup> He was passionate about spreading the news of Jesus and bringing others to the Baptist denomination. In fact, it's recorded that in a single five-month period, Backus rode 1,251 miles for his ministry and preached 117 sermons.<sup>2</sup> That's dedication!

Along with his unpopular views on infant baptism, Isaac Backus believed firmly in the separation of church and state. This, too, went against popular belief.

Though he had never been enrolled in college or seminary, Backus was well educated and passionate about religious freedom. He wrote many books during his lifetime and served on several committees focused on eliminating the discrimination of Baptists and those of other religions.<sup>3</sup>

Like the prophet Jeremiah, was it hard for Backus to “do the right thing” in the face of unpopular belief? Do you think he ever wondered if the cause he supported would have lasting effect? Did he spend hours or days feeling discouraged, bullied, and worn down from the stress and strain?

Doing the right thing sounds great and makes a lot of sense—until we're faced with uncomfortable choices or unpopular decisions. But does God call us to do the right thing only when it's easy?

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 13: REPENT OF INJUSTICE

May 18

(MONDAY)

*Justice for  
Aliens,  
Orphans, and  
Widows*

DEUTERONOMY  
24:17-22

May 19

(TUESDAY)

*God Requires  
Godly Rule by  
Kings*

DEUTERONOMY  
17:18-20

May 20

(WEDNESDAY)

*Who May  
Enter God's  
Holy Presence?*

PSALM 15

May 21

(THURSDAY)

*God's Justice for  
the Unjust King*

JEREMIAH  
22:11-19

## † JEREMIAH 22:6-10

- <sup>6</sup> For thus says the LORD concerning the house of the king of Judah:  
You are like Gilead to me,  
like the summit of Lebanon;  
but I swear that I will make you a desert,  
an uninhabited city.
- <sup>7</sup> I will prepare destroyers against you,  
all with their weapons;  
they shall cut down your choicest cedars  
and cast them into the fire.
- <sup>8</sup> And many nations will pass by this city, and all of them will say one to another, “Why has the LORD dealt in this way with that great city?” <sup>9</sup> And they will answer, “Because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD their God, and worshiped other gods and served them.”
- <sup>10</sup> Do not weep for him who is dead,  
nor bemoan him;  
weep rather for him who goes away,  
for he shall return no more  
to see his native land.

### Justice: Up Close and Personal

In **verse 6** God told the people that they were “**like Gilead to me.**” Gilead was the most fertile and rich part of the country at that time. However, the Lord also cautioned that God would make them like a “**desert**” and an “**uninhabited city**” if they chose option 2. The people in the land of Judah had known times of plenty, but those were not of their own doing. They needed to recognize—as we do today—that blessings come from God and God alone.

The punishment if the people didn’t heed God’s words would be steep. God promised to “**prepare destroyers against [them],**” in **verse 7**, and said that these would come with weapons.

Desolation would be all that remained. **Verse 8** says that those passing by would wonder what had happened in that place. “**And they will answer, ‘Because they abandoned**

Gilead was  
the most  
fertile and  
rich part of  
the country.

the covenant of the LORD their God, and worshiped other gods and served them” (v. 9).

In **verse 10** we are told that the people were not to weep for those who died, but rather for the exiles who would never again return home.

**Jeremiah 22:1-10** is a difficult passage to read. We like the idea of a God of justice but not of always being a witness to God’s justice. And while it’s easy to see the faults of these early believers—worshiping idols, rebelling, hardening their hearts—it’s not always so simple to see the same traits in our own lives.

#### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Is there a situation in your life right now where you desire justice? If so, what is your role, and what is God’s role?
- Reread the key verse, **Jeremiah 22:3b**. What does acting with justice and righteousness look like?

#### “Would You Like a Side of Eggs with Your Justice?”

One of the reasons that superhero movies and books are so popular is because of their focus on justice. Sure, the bad guy might do all kinds of evil things. The hero meanwhile is oppressed, sometimes captured and tortured. How, we wonder, will he or she ever get out of this predicament? How will justice be served?

Eventually the hero or heroine finds their inner strength and resourcefulness and their way out of the predicament they’re in. Then they retaliate, swooping in to save the innocents and proving that good really does defeat bad. These can be great stories. But they paint an unrealistic look at what justice is and whose responsibility it is. God makes clear in **Jeremiah 22:3b** that we each play an important role in the

How will justice be served?

#### Daily Bible Readings

#### WEEK 13: REPENT OF INJUSTICE

May 22

(FRIDAY)

*The City Suffers for Its Disobedience*

JEREMIAH

22:20-23

May 23

(SATURDAY)

*Injustice Ends the Line of David*

JEREMIAH

22:24-30

MAY 24

(SUNDAY)

*Repent of Misdeeds and Unjust Actions*

JEREMIAH

22:1-10

process. We are told to “**act with justice and righteousness.**” Prayer is wonderful and essential. It does not, however, prevent us from being the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

In **James 2:15-16** we’re reminded, “**If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?**”

While the entertainment industry convinces us that justice is always big and showy, it is in fact often small and quiet. It can even look insignificant to those outside the situation. It can seem as everyday normal as your breakfast.

Imagine that you’re walking your child into school for the day. You see a little girl being pushed down by an older kid. The little girl falls to the ground, spills her books, and starts to cry. You could say a prayer for her as you pass by. Or you could stop, help her up, retrieve her books, and walk with her to the principal’s office to let him or her know what happened. An insignificant act? Not for that one little girl. For her, you’d have made a huge difference. Justice doesn’t always come in blowing a trumpet. Sometimes it’s just a whisper, but it’s still just as essential.

Justice  
doesn’t  
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trumpet.  
Sometimes  
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whisper.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Where do you feel God calling you to bring justice to the world?
- What one small act can you commit to this week that will show someone else you care about God’s justice?

### NOTES

1. “Isaac Backus,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed October 24, 2019, [www.britannica.com/biography/Isaac-Backus](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Isaac-Backus).

2. Brandon J. O’Brien, “Isaac Backus: An 18th-Century Evangelical with 21st-Century Wisdom,” *Christianity Today*, June 21, 2018, [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/july-august/isaac-backus-18th-century-evangelical-21st-century-wisdom.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/july-august/isaac-backus-18th-century-evangelical-21st-century-wisdom.html).

3. “Isaac Backus,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

**SESSION 14** • MAY 31, 2020

# Return to Love and Justice

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

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

## Dreaming God's Way

Ever have a dream that others scorned? Perhaps you felt God leading you to downsize your life, start a soup kitchen, become a lawyer, leave your career as a doctor to become an artist, or some other dream deemed “silly” by others.

For Amy Carmichael the dream was clear: become a missionary. But how? Plagued with neuralgia, a disease that makes one's entire body ache due to nerve pain, was her strike one. Strike two? Being a woman in the early nineteenth century. Strike three was lack of resources. Amy didn't come from a wealthy family, and after the death of her father, the family's financial situation became more dire.

None of these things stopped the admirable spirit of Amy, however. She served in Japan as a missionary, leading others to Christ in between bouts of neuralgia so bad that she was bedridden for weeks. Later she served in India as a missionary. She was responsible for saving the lives of girls who were trapped in the despicable practice of temple prostitution. Amy was eventually tried on kidnapping charges for her role in freeing the girls. The charge was later dropped.<sup>1</sup> In all, Amy spent fifty-five years as an ambassador for Christ in India. When she became too ill to continue work in that capacity, she wrote many books on life in missions and God's love and grace.

Imagine how differently Amy's life story may have played out if she'd said, “I can't,” rather than, “God can”? Amy is an example of someone

Ever have  
a dream  
that others  
scorned?

who lived out today's key verse despite the difficulties she had in life. Oh that we all would wed ourselves to the notion of clinging to God's justice by sharing God's love through our actions toward others! Is there an area of your life where you've felt God leading but you just can't see how God's plan is possible?

Is there an area of your life where you've felt God leading?

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How do you think Amy Carmichael kept God's dream alive in her heart during times of adversity, illness, and discouragement?
- What does the Bible say about following God's will for your life? (Read **Proverbs 3:5-6**; **1 Timothy 2:4**; **Hebrews 13:20-21**; **James 1:5**; and/or **Micah 6:8**.)

### † HOSEA 11:1-2

- <sup>1</sup> When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.
- <sup>2</sup> The more I called them,  
the more they went from me;  
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,  
and offering incense to idols.

### How Do You See God?

So many Christians have a wrong view of God. Instead of a loving Father, they picture an angry tyrant. Rather than a forgiving parent, they imagine a fault-finding perfectionist, intent on punishing us for our sins and never being pleased with us no matter how hard we try.

Yet in the *New American Standard Bible*, the heading for **Hosea 11** reads, "God Yearns over His People." God loves like a father calling to his son (v. 1). But God's people had turned to idols (v. 2).

"Ridiculous Israelites," we might be tempted to say in response. Yet are we so different? We still have "idols" today. They might not glitter or shine in the sunlight, but they captivate our attention nonetheless.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What is God's parenting style described in **Romans 8:14-17**?

- Why do you think so many believers and nonbelievers have a wrong view of God?
- Let's delve deeper into **Hosea 11**.

### † HOSEA 11:7-10

- 7 My people are bent on turning away from me.  
To the Most High they call,  
but he does not raise them up at all.
- 8 How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?  
My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.
- 9 I will not execute my fierce anger;  
I will not again destroy Ephraim;  
for I am God and no mortal,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath.
- 10 hey shall go after the LORD,  
who roars like a lion;  
when he roars,  
his children shall come trembling from the west.

### Does God Punish for Pleasure?

The theme of rebellion and turning away from God continues. “**My people are bent on turning away from me,**” God said (v. 7), but still God couldn’t give up on God’s chosen: “**How can I give you up, Ephraim?**” (v. 8). Like the parent of a prodigal child, God longs to be reunited with God’s imperfect children (that’s all of us!). Listen to God’s heartrending words: “**My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender**” (v. 8).

If you’ve ever spent time around toddlers, you know they are headstrong. When they say, “No!” they mean it. What about us? Do we deny God in favor of our own

### Daily Bible Readings

#### WEEK 14: RETURN TO LOVE AND JUSTICE

May 25

(MONDAY)

*Receiving a  
New Vision of  
God*

GENESIS

28:10-17

May 26

(TUESDAY)

*Justice for  
Gentile  
Believers*

ACTS 15:10-17

May 27

(WEDNESDAY)

*The Up or  
Down Choice*

DEUTERONOMY

28:1-6, 15-19

May 28

(THURSDAY)

*Jesus a Migrant  
from Egypt*

MATTHEW

2:13-15

will? Do we get so caught up in the show/book/person/job/mission that we forget about God and God's desire for us?

Like naughty toddlers, we, too, deserve punishment. Good parenting requires consequences for wrong actions; otherwise, how would a child ever learn right from wrong? Nevertheless, no good parent looks forward to carrying out the punishment or seeing their child face the consequences of wrong actions.

God takes no pleasure in punishment either. **“I will not execute my fierce anger”**; God promised (v. 9), yet God will come. When God does, it will be with a roar like a lion, and **“His children will come trembling from the west”** (v. 10).

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever had to discipline a child?
- Name three ways in which facing the consequences of his or her actions helped the child in the long term.
- Let's look now at the second set of Bible texts and continue our study of the topic.

### † HOSEA 12:1-2

- 1** Ephraim herds the wind,  
and pursues the east wind all day long;  
they multiply falsehood and violence;  
they make a treaty with Assyria,  
and oil is carried to Egypt.
- 2** The LORD has an indictment against Judah,  
and will punish Jacob according to his ways,  
and repay him according to his deeds.

### Herding the Wind

The opening line of this passage sounds like poetry, doesn't it? While the New Revised Standard Version (printed above) says **“Ephraim herds the wind . . .”**, the *New American Standard Bible* puts it this way: **“Ephraim feeds on wind, and pursues the east wind continually”** (v. 1,



emphasis added). Ephraim, the northern tribe descended from Joseph, is symbolic of Israel. But what does this mean: “**feeds on the wind, and pursues the east wind continually**”? This expression depicts filling oneself with what is elusive, unprofitable, or unsatisfying.

God’s people sought after that which had no real, lasting value. Are we doing the same today? In what ways do we chase after things without real and lasting value?

Israel’s relations with surrounding countries were obviously not where they needed to be in God’s eyes, as evidenced by the rest of this verse.

Yet in **verse 2** we’re reminded of the long history of God’s love and the people’s rebellion. In other words, this isn’t a new thing. God continued to love, and the people continued to turn away and rebel.

Like the Israelites, we, too, have the grace of God available to us at all times. We are never “too far gone,” in God’s eyes to seek forgiveness and return to God.

### QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever struggled to forgive someone who hurt you deeply? If so, did that happen in a moment, or did you have to work at it for a long period of time?

### † HOSEA 12:6-14

- 6 But as for you, return to your God,  
hold fast to love and justice,  
and wait continually for your God.
- 7 A trader, in whose hands are false balances,  
he loves to oppress.
- 8 Ephraim has said, “Ah, I am rich,  
I have gained wealth for myself;  
in all of my gain  
no offense has been found in me  
that would be sin.”
- 9 I am the LORD your God  
from the land of Egypt;

## Daily Bible Readings

### WEEK 14: RETURN TO LOVE AND JUSTICE

May 29

(FRIDAY)

*Ephraim  
Spurns God’s  
Love and  
Suffers*

HOSEA 11:3-6

May 30

(SATURDAY)

*Once a Slave;  
Now a Brother*

PHILEMON 8-21

May 31

(SUNDAY)

*Respond with  
Love and Justice  
Daily*

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

I will make you live in tents again,  
as in the days of the appointed festival.

10 I spoke to the prophets;  
it was I who multiplied visions,  
and through the prophets I will bring destruction.

11 In Gilead there is iniquity,  
they shall surely come to nothing.

In Gilgal they sacrifice bulls,  
so their altars shall be like stone heaps  
on the furrows of the field.

12 Jacob fled to the land of Aram,  
there Israel served for a wife,  
and for a wife he guarded sheep.

13 By a prophet the LORD brought Israel up from Egypt,  
and by a prophet he was guarded.

14 Ephraim has given bitter offense,  
so his Lord will bring his crimes down on him  
and pay him back for his insults.

### **With Greater Power Comes Greater Responsibility**

In **verse 6** we're reminded that if Israel chose to hope in the Lord, their hope would not be in vain. This is a message similar to that of another well-loved Bible text:

**Trust in the LORD with all your heart,  
and do not rely on your own insight.  
In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.**

—Proverbs 3:5-6

The Israelites, like believers today, were called to be set apart, to live in the world but not be of the world. How do we do that in a way that draws nonbelievers to Christ?

In **verse 7** of this passage in Hosea the dishonesty referred to includes not only the use of physical scales and measures, but also the people's relationship to God. Being referred to as "**merchants**," was likely a comparison of the Israelites to Canaan's merchants. Israelites

were God's chosen people and shouldn't have so closely resembled these others.

The moral code of these merchants is noted in **verse 8**. The people were reminded that God had been the Lord their God since they had lived as slaves in Egypt (v. 9). Whether or not we choose to acknowledge God, the sovereignty of God is not diminished. Does modern-day culture make it easier or harder to acknowledge God as Lord? This can be as simple as adding a fish icon to one's car or as challenging as saying no to an unscrupulous business practice.

In **verses 10-11** the iniquity of God's people is reiterated. There they "**sacrifice bulls,**" and their altars "**are like the stone heaps.**" In **verse 12** we see a parallel to the story of Jacob. Whereas he trusted God completely, the Israelites do not. Whereas Jacob was open to God's leading, the people are rebellious. In **verse 13** the prophet referred to is Moses when the people were reminded that the Lord brought Israel out from Egypt. Did the people remember this? It would appear not. Because of this, God would be forced to bring back his reproach on Israel (v. 14).

"Those Israelites," we may say, shaking our heads in disdain, "they were so weak." It's easy for us to condemn from here. However, it's also very likely that each one of us knows the temptation—even if we didn't give in to it—to deny Christ in some way or let something or someone else claim our attention and focus above God.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Is it hard to believe that God never runs out of love and forgiveness? Why or why not?
- What is one sin you see in others that is prevalent in our culture today? Is that sin "worse" than a sin you struggle with?
- Why is trusting God so challenging for so many of us?

### NOTE

1. Dan Graves, "Kindly Kidnapper," *Christianity Today*, April 28, 2010, [www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1901-2000/amy-carmichael-kindly-kidnapper-11630664.html](http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1901-2000/amy-carmichael-kindly-kidnapper-11630664.html).

Each one of us knows the temptation to deny Christ in some way.

# Evaluation Form

**JOURNEYS • SPRING 2020**

## We want to hear from you!

Please take a few minutes to tell us what you think of this quarter's *Journeys*. Put this form (or a copy) in an envelope, and mail to:

Journeys Editor, Judson Press, ABHMS, 1075 First Avenue, King of Prussia, PA 19406.

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

**1.** How do you use *Journeys*? (Check all that apply.)

- I take it home and read it to prepare for the coming week's lesson.
- I use it in class.
- I leave it at home, and don't use it in class.

**2.** *Journeys* helped me to understand and relate to the text in the following ways:

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**3.** *Journeys* could be improved by:

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**4.** Would you have used online materials related to the lessons in *Journeys* if they were available?

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**5.** Other comments/suggestions:

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Please tell us about your Sunday school class:

Age range \_\_\_\_\_ Average attendance \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Church: \_\_\_\_\_

Thanks for sharing your ideas! Your comments may be used to promote *Judson Bible Journeys for Adults*.