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# SUMMER QUARTER 2020

## NEW

### Unit 1  A New Thing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lesson Topic</th>
<th>Book/Verse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jun. 7</td>
<td>Keeping God’s Commandments</td>
<td>Deuteronomy 8:1-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun. 14</td>
<td>Fire on the Mountain</td>
<td>1 Kings 18:20-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun. 21</td>
<td>Lost and Found</td>
<td>2 Kings 22:8-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun. 28</td>
<td>Forever Love</td>
<td>Hosea 1:2-11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Unit 2  A New People

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lesson Topic</th>
<th>Book/Verse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jul. 5</td>
<td>Promised Restoration</td>
<td>Jeremiah 23:1-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul. 12</td>
<td>Wisdom to Navigate Life’s Challenges</td>
<td>Daniel 1:8-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul. 19</td>
<td>Our Always Faithful God</td>
<td>Daniel 3:19-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul. 26</td>
<td>Forgiving, Merciful, Compassionate</td>
<td>Nehemiah 9:9-17, 32-33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Unit 3  A New Way of Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lesson Topic</th>
<th>Book/Verse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 2</td>
<td>A Life-changing Encounter</td>
<td>Luke 19:1-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 9</td>
<td>Come and See</td>
<td>John 4:7-30, 39-42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 23</td>
<td>Great Faith</td>
<td>Matthew 15:21-28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 30</td>
<td>Great Mercy</td>
<td>Mark 5:1-20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lesson 1

Keeping God’s Commandments

Purpose

To remember how God created us as God’s people

Hearing the Word

The background text for this lesson is Deuteronomy 8:1-20.

Deuteronomy 8:1-10 (NIV)

1 Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors.

2 Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.

3 He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

4 Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years.

5 Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.

6 Observe the commands of the Lord your God, walking in obedience to him and revering him.

7 For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills;

8 a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey;

9 a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.

10 When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you.

Deuteronomy 8:1-10 (KJV)

1 All the commandments which I command thee this day shalt thou observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord sware unto your fathers.

2 And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.

3 And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord.

4 Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years.

5 Thou shalt also consider in thine heart, that, as a man chasteneth his son, so the Lord thy God chasteneth thee.

6 Therefore thou shalt keep the commandments of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to fear him.

7 For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills;

8 A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey;

9 A land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass.

10 When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the Lord thy God for the good land which he hath given thee.
Seeing the Need

Forty-one years in pastoral ministry have taught me that there will always be times of trial and depression. Everything will not always go our way. One of the more depressing times during my career was when I was moved from a full-time appointment to a part time appointment (technically, it was one fourth of the time). I didn’t feel that the district bishop and cabinet had it in for me; my superintendent simply said that there simply were no other appointments available in the conference for me. It was a drastic financial decrease on the home front and a blow to my ego.

My choice at that time was either to go on the attack, call the bishop, and explain that “I can’t accept this,” or to take what was offered, pray, and hope for the best. It was definitely a trying time. A friend sympathized with my plight, saying that if this had happened to him, he may have seriously considered leaving the church. In short, it really came down to me getting an appointment that I thought I didn’t deserve, or feeling that I deserved something better. The conclusion was, I stayed!

Thankfully, this crisis situation was not only a time of prayer, but also a time a reflection and remembering God’s past acts of provision to me during my ministry. Self-talk encourages the wounded spirit (1 Samuel 30:6, KJV). “Bob,” I said to myself, “this is not your first setback. God has always been with you and I don’t think God will abandon you now.” I believe the Lord honored this attitude, as this one fourth of the time appointment became one of the bright lights of my ministry. I would not have wanted to conclude my ministry without having experienced the extravagant and over-the-top love that this small congregation showed toward me.

The Bible passage for this lesson is for us a call from the Lord to remember who we are as God’s people so that we might receive the wonderful promises of God.

Keep Your Eyes Open

My youngest son recently graduated from high school. As with my other five children, my wife and I wanted him to go to college. Furthermore, he wanted to go. My college of choice for him was 30 miles...
down the road with a student population of 7,000; his college of choice was 130 miles down the road with a student population of 25,000. No argument, and quite frankly, my wife and I understood, as his last three siblings had gone to his college of choice.

My parting words to him after we had moved him into his dormitory were, “Keep your eyes open.” That message of fatherly advice was for him to simply be aware of his surroundings. His university is huge, and a lot is always going on. I wanted him to do the right thing and remember why he had gone to college. I like to think that these heartfelt words of mine might better prepare him for his new journey in life.

God’s parental words to the wandering Israelites were, “You must carefully perform all the commandments . . . so you can live and multiply and enter and take possession of the land” (Deuteronomy 8:1). This was simply preparation for the journey into their Promised Land. It would be a new day in the life of God’s people. They had never traveled this way before. Expectations (and fears) would have been understandably present during such a time. The Lord’s command thus was directed and motivated by love for the people of God so that they might be prosperous and successful.

God’s greatest desire seems to have been a holy yearning to be used by God. The idea of teaching, preaching, or being a missionary is particularly appealing to them. They melodiously sing, “Here I am, Lord, Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.” My experience has been that while many people will go and commit to ministry tasks, others will wane and even quit when they discover the cost and responsibilities
that come with doing a particular ministry. Israel’s wilderness experience would show their true commitment and dependence upon God.

What specific acts or circumstances in your life show God’s love toward you?

Divine Health

God next wanted the people to know eternal and enduring love. This new land was land that the “LORD swore to your ancestors” (verse 1). God had set the wheels in motion long before the present generation that Israel would be blessed and remain the apple of God’s eye. However, the wilderness became a testing ground to measure the people’s faith. God allowed hunger and some level of deprivation to come upon these Israelites as a prompting tool to show and teach them their need for God. Even though the people had moments of complaining and frustration, the LORD never withdrew love from them.

Verse 4 gives us a closer and more vivid look at God’s abiding and longsuffering love toward Israel. Their 40 years in the wilderness had been marked by not only provision and protection but by divine health. “During these forty years, your clothes didn’t wear out and your feet didn’t swell.” Wow! Understandingly, some people today might have trouble with this verse. Forty years of walking in the desert, and no one’s clothes so much as got tattered, and no one ever experienced swollen feet? Exodus 12:37 tells us that originally about 600,000 men plus children left Egypt. That text does not mention women, though we know that surely women were part of the group too. Seamstress and physician may not have been the best career choices during this time!

Needless to say, scholars differ on how to understand this verse. Because the text does not explain the how of this phenomena, we will likely never rise above conjecture and speculation. Some scholars speculate that this verse was later added to the text to create effect; others suggest that the Israelites made good of the spoils they received from defeated armies along the way. Finally, some contend that this simply was a miracle performed by the God of miracles. Wherever our theological anchor may fall, the context of this verse makes it clear that God’s protection, power, provision, and presence never left this wandering people. It is an eternal truth that we can embrace today.

Regarding the phrase, “Your feet didn’t swell up,” again we are at a theological impasse. However, for me the simple mention of this occurrence suggests that God was not only concerned about the people’s material needs but also about their physical needs. The LORD was mindful of the rough and rugged conditions of the desert, yet God’s watchful eye and concern was on something as simple as aching feet. The fact that God knows and is concerned about things as simple as the number of hairs on our heads (Luke 12:7) causes me to love God even more.
Several months ago, my wife and I attended a relatively large church in a metropolitan area for their morning service. One of the main announcements that day was an upcoming health fair sponsored by the church. The theme of the event was, “Health Is Wealth.” The understanding as I perceived it was that we should not minimize or take lightly the gift and blessing of good physical health. Nothing is as draining on the mind, body, and spirit as an illness or constant sickness that simply will not go away. God is actively concerned about our health and welfare. We owe it to ourselves as good stewards of the temple that God has given us to be concerned about our physical bodies.

_How do you personally see God working on behalf of your prosperity and health?_

_A Wonderful Land_

Living in a new land would be the highlight and end result of faith and obedience to God. Keeping God’s commandments was not meaningless ritual. Neither was obeying God the demand of a harsh and dictatorial God. These Israelites had free choice as to whether they wanted to serve God. Whether they loved God or not, God’s abiding love remained the same. The decision of the one making the choice does not diminish the love of the person offering the choice. In other words, the Lord loves us at our best and at our worst. However, and in the final analysis, choices do have consequences!

In Deuteronomy 30:19 the Lord calls heaven and earth as a witness that the people have been offered life or death and a blessing or a curse. The Lord’s desire was that they choose life so that they and their descendants might live. Joshua followed up years later with a similar invitation to “choose today whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15). God’s love and desire for these Israelites to come into this “wonderful land” (Deuteronomy 8:7) shows the nature of this stern commandment to them. God wanted the best for Israel, and the best in terms of blessings would only come by obedience to the divine will. Later in this wilderness story, the Lord told the people to “watch yourself! Don’t forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commands” (Deuteronomy 8:11). God’s insistent command comes from God’s persistent and abiding love.

What would this wonderful land look like? First, it would be a land unlike Egypt with its harsh realities; and second, it would be land that would belong to the people. Even though these Israelites would war for the land, nevertheless the Lord gave them clear title to “take possession” of it (verse 1). There would be “wheat and barley, vines, fig trees, and pomegranates; ... olive oil and honey” (verse 8). No wonder this was called the Promised Land, and the Lord called it “wonderful.”

And it gets even better! Verse 9 says that there the people would “eat food without any shortage.” This would be radically different from the rationed and con-
trolled food distribution system given to slaves in Egypt. We can understand how this new and radically different lifestyle might be a cultural shock to some of these Israelites, thus causing them to forget God. Not only would this new land be plenteous in food (“you won’t lack a thing there,” verse 8), but there would be opportunity to create prosperity and wealth through the mining of iron and copper (verse 9). God’s holy promise to these weary travelers was that they would be fully satisfied. Hence, the assumption is that these Israelites would out of gratitude and love “bless the LORD your God in the wonderful land that he’s given you” (verse 10). Unfortunately (and as history reveals), assuming is not always the best thing to do.

My hope and prayer is that we can see this wilderness story as more than just another episode in Israel’s history. This is our story! It is a picture wrapped in the artifacts of ancient Israel that symbolizes our modern-day journey through life. It is a picture of what the Lord has for the faithful. Our final destination is good and is available to all who will stay on the journey (tired feet and all). Where are you in the picture? How did you do on the test?

Finally, our promise is wonderful! Our hope is sure! I encourage you during this upcoming week to “put feet to the journey.” Set aside a specific time during the day in which you will reread this story (include background text) and listen to the sounds of God’s love over against the frailty and often rebelliousness of the human will. Don’t just learn the story, but seek to capture the spirit that comes through the story. It is love worth finding! May we as disciples of Christ fix our eyes on Jesus and “run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us” (Hebrews 11:1-2).

Are the promises of God wonderful to you? If so, how might you share these promises with others?

Lord, may we always remember that we are your people and the sheep of your pasture. Help us to humbly embrace the wonderful plan you have for us; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.
Fire on the Mountain

Purpose
To demonstrate the contrast between false gods and the true God

Hearing the Word
The background text this lesson is 1 Kings 18:1-46.

1 Kings 18:20-39 (NIV)
20 So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel.
21 Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing.
22 Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets.
23 Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it.
24 Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire—he is God.” Then all the people said, “What you say is good.”
25 Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.”
26 So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.
27 At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.”
28 So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.
29 Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.
30 Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which had been torn down.
31 Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.”
32 With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed.
33 He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.”
34 “Do it again,” he said, and they did it again. “Do it a third time,” he ordered, and they did it the third time.
35 The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.
36 At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command.
37 Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”
38 Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.
39 When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!”

1 Kings 18:20-39 (KJV)
20 So Ahab sent unto all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together unto mount Carmel.
21 And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.
22 Then said Elijah unto the people, I, even I
only, remain a prophet of the Lord; but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men.

23 Let them therefore give us two bullocks; and let them choose one bullock for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: and I will dress the other bullock, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under:

24 And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken.

25 And Elijah said unto the prophets of Baal, Choose you one bullock for yourselves, and dress it first; for ye are many; and call on the name of your gods, but put no fire under.

26 And they took the bullock which was given them, and they dressed it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, O Baal, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made.

27 And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked.

28 And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them.

29 And it came to pass, when midday was past, and they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded.

30 And Elijah said unto all the people, Come near unto me. And all the people came near unto him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that was broken down.

31 And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the Lord came, saying, Israel shall be thy name:

32 And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed.

33 And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood.

34 And he said, Do it the second time. And they did it the second time. And he said, Do it the third time. And they did it the third time.

35 And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water.

36 And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac,
emotional crisis.

Church business meetings were a great place for me to watch this scenario play out. I especially observed this during times when the congregation was making important decisions. A first step was to rally as many members as possible so as to get everyone’s opinion about the matter. Enthusiasm and excitement ran high over these new ventures. Everyone wanted to be a part of the process and make their contribution. However, when ideas clashed, the story often changed. Shall we tear down or shall we remodel? Shall we do it now or shall we wait? You mean you want to get rid of this furniture piece that her grandfather made for the church?

What began as a calm and exciting time to put our heads together had all of a sudden become a potential battleground. People handled the situation in different ways. Some folks would outright confront with strong and argumentative protest. Others quietly sat back with little to say in what appeared to be a “go along to get along” attitude. Real feelings, however, were likely to be shared on telephone lines after the meeting had ended. Hidden resentments over decisions made were often harbored in the minds of some that occasionally popped up over the years. The only thing people totally agreed on was that we need to agree on something.

Elijah’s Mount Carmel experience helps us see the tensions that might arise when we seek to affirm our faith in a world of diverse ideas.

Two Opinions

Our background Scripture sets the tone and circumstances for this mountain-top duel between a prophet and a king. During this time, Israel was in dire social and economic need. First Kings 17:1 tells us that God sent the prophet Elijah to announce to the Northern Kingdom that a drought would come upon the land. The land would see “neither dew nor rain for three years.” This drought or famine would ultimately bring devastation and hardship upon the entire nation. It was during the third year of this drought that Elijah received a message from God (1 Kings 18:1). The prophet was to go and tell King Ahab that the Lord would now send rain once again. Certainly this would have been good news to the inhabitants of this thirsty land. Furthermore, Ahab would seemingly have been happy to see Elijah and hear this message. However, this meeting between king and prophet was anything but cordial.

Elijah’s message and mission was clear. He had not only come to bring good news (rain), but also to denounce evil that had plagued the land. This evil was idolatry and especially idolatrous worship as endorsed by King Ahab. “You deserted the Lord’s commands and followed the Baals” was the prophet’s message (verse 18). This public indictment would force the hand of King Ahab to gather all the people of Israel along with the 450 prophets of Baal to settle this matter once and for all.

Elijah’s first order of business was not to correct King Ahab or even the prophets. Instead, his first concern was directed toward the people of Israel. “How long will you hobble back and forth
between two opinions?” (verse 21). Probably no one had expected to be addressed in this way, as, “The people gave no answer” (verse 21). Yet this question seemingly cut to the hearts of many who were present. Elijah was challenging their faith as true believers in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The statement, “If the LORD is God, follow God. If Baal is God, follow Baal” (verse 21) suggests a level of frustration and maybe even anger toward these Israelites by the prophet. The undertone was that many of them were “straddling the fence” in terms of their loyalty toward Jehovah God. Like confused children, they were hobbling back and forth from one deity to the next. Elijah clearly saw this behavior as hypocritical and a mockery of the living God.

The question “how long will you hobble back and forth” was not only a question for these Israelites, but it is a question for Christians today. Often our timidity and hesitancy to share our faith (especially with nonbelievers) suggests that deep down we are perhaps unsure about our witness. We may think the safe thing to do in such situations is to say nothing rather than risk offending and being misunderstood by the other person. The irony of this attitude is that we are members of a denomination that challenges and encourages us to go and make disciples of Jesus Christ in the world.

So, how do we modern-day Christians share our faith in a living God among what Elijah might call Baals? First, this is not a new question nor is it a new challenge to our faith. Our witness is not a call to be dogmatic and condescending toward those who do not share our beliefs. However, our faith begins with a clear acknowledgement and understanding of who we are in Christ. The awareness of God’s redemptive love and presence working in my life gives me a biblical right to, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15, NIV). The Common English Bible and other translations of the Bible use the word “defend” or “defense” as an expression of our loyalty to the faith. Therefore, as a fellow citizen of the world, I can share my faith and spiritual journey with others without apprehension and simply allow the Holy Spirit to work through me to usher forth the kingdom of God into the world. Respect for others of different persuasions does not call us to denounce or reject our faith. I am grateful and blessed to be part of a denomination that does not put its “go ye” under a bushel basket.

How does Elijah’s bold and confrontational faith posture personally speak to you?

Tensions Mount

When Elijah started to detail the plans for the encounter with the prophets of Baal, it no doubt made an impression on everyone present. This prophet was serious! It did not matter to Elijah that he was outnumbered. In fact, he told the people that “I am the last of the LORD’s prophets” (verse 22). So what? At first glance this prophet was either crazy or he knew something that King Ahab and his cohorts did not know. He confidently ordered the attendants to “Give us two
bulls” (verse 23). The next instructions were that Baal’s prophets would choose one of the bulls, and he and the people of God would take the other one. In traditional and ceremonial fashion, each side would prepare their sacrifice. We can only imagine the tension and excitement that was slowly building up in the minds and hearts of those present.

Everything was set, ready, and about to go. However, a key part of Elijah’s instructions before this holy event began was that no fire would be placed on the altar by either side. The seriousness of following this last step is highlighted by the fact that the prophet on three occasions told this congregation not to add fire to the sacrifice (verses 23, 25). How then would the test of divine superiority be determined? Elijah’s message was, “The god who answers with fire—that’s the real God!” (verse 24). We can only imagine what was behind the people’s reply of, “That’s an excellent idea” (verse 24). Were they as confident as Elijah that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would declare sovereignty as Supreme God? Or were they simply in the crowd to see what would happen? The absence of fire along with the need for fire to make the sacrifice complete would call for divine and supernatural intervention.

What are we to make of Elijah when he started “making fun” of the prophets of Baal (verse 27)? In childlike fashion, he started taunting and teasing these prophets as if to say, “Ha, ha! I told you so!” The fact that these prophets had wailed and screamed and even did a hopping dance from morning to midday would have only heightened Elijah’s taunting insults in their minds. These prophets were very likely a little embarrassed, frustrated, and even annoyed with the response of their god. Their cry, “Great Baal, answer us!” had seemingly fallen on deaf ears (verse 26). This open and public criticism no doubt played a key role in dampening the hopes of these prophets to prevail in this situation.

In the name of human respect, I do not condone offensive language even for people I think might deserve it. On the surface, Elijah likely appears to some people as a little arrogant and what others might call “cocky.” However, (and not condoning arrogance), the flip side of this coin is that Elijah’s confidence in God comes through loud and clear. He had no doubt that God was the real God.

We like to think that unconsciously his purpose was to educate these pagan prophets into the faith of the real God. Perhaps his overzealous attitude and comments were a bit much, but no one can overlook his faith and commitment to the God of Israel. He was sure of God and not afraid to declare his allegiance. However we understand the tone of this prophet, the Lord’s sovereignty as Supreme God was under attack and truth had to emerge.

How do you feel when people criticize your faith? What are some ways that you might restore fellowship with them?

Fire From Heaven

After the taunting and teasing match had ended, Elijah set the stage for God’s sovereignty and power to come forth. It would be a hands-on lesson for the people that they would never forget. He
called the people (“Come here!”; verse 30) and reminded them that a first order of business was to repair the Lord’s altar. God’s dignity and sovereignty as the God of Israel must be restored for all to see. The text does not mention how this altar was destroyed or why it was even on Mount Carmel. However, the fact that an altar was present representing Israel’s God demanded that it be restored as a place of honor and respect.

The prophet next called on the people to remember their history as the people of God. They were the covenant people. Elijah took twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel and rebuilt the damaged altar. These twelve stones represented the twelve sons of Jacob. They were not just stones set in place as ceremonial pieces, but they were a clear and vivid reminder of Israel’s spiritual journey. These stones would forever remind these Israelites of who they were as a people and whom they were to serve and give their allegiance. Therefore, it was imperative and absolutely necessary in the mind of Elijah that this holy place be restored. Furthermore, the Lord had given this prophet specific instructions to set these matters of God in order (verse 36).

After the altar had been restored, the next step was to prepare the sacrifice. The storyline shows that Elijah was careful and methodical in what can be seen as the handling of holy things. The details of verses 33-34 show the prophet’s unshakeable faith and trust in God to do the miraculous. He instructed the people to fill four jars with water and pour it on the sacrifice. Not once, not twice, but three times! This public act may have appeared a little boastful to some on the part of Elijah; however, doing this would have erased any idea of trickery on the part of this prophet when heaven’s fire came. It also showed Elijah’s utmost confidence in God to be God in a difficult and divisive situation.

Elijah’s short but powerful prayer captures the essence of the why of this Mount Carmel extravaganza. His confrontation with Ahab and the prophets of Baal was not to satisfy a personal agenda. Yes, Ahab and Elijah were not the best of friends and saw each other as menaces to the land. However, Elijah came as a servant of God to restore a sinful and rebellious nation. He came to show God’s sovereignty to all humankind and to make it public knowledge that God is the real God. His attempt to bring about spiritual restoration to a rebellious nation had to be candidly proclaimed and openly demonstrated. The joy and blessings of new life always override the appearance of how we bring about this change. When people come into the knowledge of God, hearts change and the foundation for true restoration begins.

After Elijah had finished his prayer, the text says that fire came down from heaven (verse 38). This is the crowning act of this event and the ultimate proof that God is Sovereign King of the universe. When the people witnessed this great display of power, they fell on their faces and declared that, “The LORD is the real God!” (verse 39). They no longer had a superficial and shallow idealism about God, but a life-changing experience that
removed all doubt about the God of their ancestors. The high note of this “answer by fire” verse for me is not in trying to theologically unravel the how of this miracle, but simply to acknowledge and embrace the reality of a true and living God who lives in the now of life. Let this story challenge you this week to embrace the truth and power of divine love extended toward humankind. Believe that God is real and graciously rewards those who diligently seek and try to find God (see Hebrews 11:6). “All hail the power of Jesus’ name! Let angels prostrate fall.”

What religious or other symbols remind you of your allegiance to God? Why?

O Lord our God, we bow in humble adoration and there proclaim, “My God, how great Thou art!” In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.
2 Kings 22:8-20 (NIV)

8 Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, “I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord.” He gave it to Shaphan, who read it.

9 Then Shaphan the secretary went to the king and reported to him: “Your officials have paid out the money that was in the temple of the Lord and have entrusted it to the workers and supervisors at the temple.”

10 Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, “Hilkiah the priest has given me a book.” And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king.

11 When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes.

12 He gave these orders to Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Akbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king’s attendant:

13 “Go and inquire of the Lord for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the Lord’s anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us.”

14 Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Akbor, Shaphan and Asaiah went to speak to the prophet Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the New Quarter.

15 She said to them, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Tell the man who sent you to me,

16 ‘This is what the Lord says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in the book the king of Judah has read.

17 Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and aroused my anger by all the idols their hands have made, my anger will burn against this place and will not be quenched.’

18 Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard:

19 Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people—that they would become a curse and be laid waste—and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I also have heard you, declares the Lord.

20 Therefore I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.’” So they took her answer back to the king.

2 Kings 22:8-20 (KJV)

8 And Hilkiah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord. And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it.

9 And Shaphan the scribe came to the king, and brought the book word again, and said, Thy servants have gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of them that do the work, that have the oversight of the

Lost and Found

Purpose

To renew our commitment to the demands of faith

Hearing the Word

The background text this lesson is printed below.
10 And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king.
11 And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes.
12 And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying,
13 Go ye, enquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.
14 So Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asahiah, went unto Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; (now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the college;) and they communed with her.
15 And she said unto them, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Tell the man that sent you to me,
16 Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the king of Judah hath read:
17 Because they have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore my wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched.
18 But to the king of Judah which sent you to enquire of the Lord, thus shall ye say to him, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, As touching the words which thou hast heard;
19 Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the Lord, when thou hearest what I spake against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes, and wept before me; I also have heard thee, saith the Lord.
20 Behold therefore, I will gather thee unto thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered into thy grave in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place. And they brought the king word again.

### Seeing the Need

Losing or misplacing my eyeglasses bothers me to no end. The idea that I just laid them down somewhere and am now walking all over the house looking for them makes things even more frustrating for me. I find myself asking my wife or children to be on the lookout for them. Finally, desperation kicks in to the point that I pray and ask God to help me find them because, “Lord, you know I can’t see anything without them.”

After frantically looking for several minutes, the answer emerges, along with an embarrassing and humbling moment: my eyeglasses are pushed up over my eyes.
and on top of my head. Now I know why the wife and kids were laughing. My eyeglasses were, so to speak, right under my nose. The same thing happens when I am looking for a pencil, only to find one lodged behind one of my ears. Something valuable to me was right in my midst all the time. The great joy and relief for me in finding my eyeglasses comes in knowing that I can now resume my normal day’s activities in peace.

The discovery of the lost scroll we read about in 2 Kings 22 was more than just an historical find. It was an opportunity for the people of God to renew their commitments to the commands of their faith. It was cause for correction and jubilation.

A Glorious Find

Josiah’s social and spiritual reforms of the nation left no stone unturned and affected everyone, crossing all social and economic lines. To understand the why of this national renewal, we need to briefly look at the events that led up to this point. Josiah came to the throne at the young age of eight and ruled Jerusalem for 31 years (2 Kings 22:1). He was a good king! In fact, Josiah was perhaps the greatest king of Judah, as 2 Kings 23:25 says that there had “never been a king like Josiah, whether before or after him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, all his being, and all his strength.” Josiah’s predecessors, however, were just the opposite. Manasseh, who had reigned as Jerusalem’s king for 45 years before Josiah (2 Kings 21:1), is hailed as one of Judah’s most wicked kings, leading the nation into idolatrous and pagan practices. God used Josiah to clean up the social and spiritual mess of this former king.

At the time of Josiah’s reign, the Temple in Jerusalem was undergoing renovations, and the ruling king was responsible for overseeing that work. On a particular day in the 18th year of Josiah’s reign, Josiah sent his palace secretary, Shaphan, to the Temple to insure that the workers were timely paid. When Shaphan arrived, he was met by Hilkiah, the high priest of the Temple, with what appeared to be exciting news: “I have found the Instruction scroll in the LORD’s temple” (2 Kings 22:8). This was no small matter to Hilkiah. Shaphan took the scroll back to Josiah as part of his report on the Temple progress and “read it loud before the king” (verse 10). The foundation for national reformation was set in place.

Some Bible scholars think that this scroll may have been the Pentateuch (what we know as the first five books of the Old Testament). However, the general consensus is that it was what we call the Book of Deuteronomy. This would have given the people a review of the laws of Moses and the travels of the people in the wilderness. It would have also shown God’s consistent love toward Israel in spite of the Israelites’ rebellious nature. The information contained in this scroll would radically change the moral and social climate of the nation.

After Josiah had heard the reading of the scroll, “he ripped his clothes” (verse
11) as a sign of total dismay and grief. He knew that Judah’s problem was generational. The accepted lifestyle of idolatry and rebellion against God had gone on since the days of Israel’s great ancestors. In frustration, Josiah proclaimed, “The LORD must be furious with us because our ancestors failed to obey the words of this scroll and do everything written in it about us.” This statement was not Josiah’s attempt to pass the buck to the former generation. It was an insight into the root cause of Israel’s problems.

How had these covenant people, the apple of God’s eye, lost and seemingly forgotten God’s instructions to them? This “spiritual amnesia” on their part simply shows the effect and power of longstanding disobedience on people. The more the people were exposed to the idolatrous practices of the day, the more they forgot and rejected God. Herein is an important lesson for us today. The more we choose to follow and enjoy the things of the world, the less we want to follow Christ. The less we follow Christ, the more we forget Christ. It is a slow but deadly process. As the Apostle James wrote, “Once those cravings (sinful desires) conceive, they give birth to sin; and when sin grows up, it gives birth to death” (James 1:15).

What discoveries have you made in life that have changed your relationship with God? In what ways did you change?

Holy Reform

After Josiah recognized the seriousness and the holiness of this scroll, he immediately sent Hilkiah the priest and a group of other officials from the Temple to go to the prophetess Huldah to confirm the truth of this discovery. She would inquire or seek the Lord on behalf of the people as to their next steps. When Josiah and the others who read the scroll saw the past rebelliousness and sins of the people, they understandably were concerned about divine retribution. Sin has consequences! Hence, Huldah’s prophetic words would be welcome news in regards to the plight of the nation.

Huldah’s words were swift and straight to the point: “This is what the LORD says: I am about to bring disaster on this place and its citizens” (2 Kings 22:16). There would be consequences! God’s words as recorded in the scroll would come to pass. This judgment upon the nation would not be vindictive or vengeful on God’s part, but would come about as a direct result of Israel’s generations of disobedience. This bad news, however, would be mixed with good news. Josiah would not see Judah’s destruction during his lifetime. His heartfelt sorrow and plan to return the nation to righteousness had moved the heart of God (verses 19-20).

At this junction, we need to pause and give proper recognition to Huldah. The text identifies her as the wife of Shallum and notes that she lived in Jerusalem. On the surface, she does not appear to be a major player in the biblical narrative; however, her prophecy and what Josiah did after that prophecy speak volumes.
Lesson 3

What would Josiah have done (or not done) if her prophetic utterance had not occurred? It is also significant that Josiah and these palace officials went to and received the word of this prophetess in a world dominated by male prophets. Huldah’s ministry cannot be overlooked. In retrospect we owe this quiet, unassuming, and unsung heroine a debt of gratitude for her bold witness that brought her nation back into covenant relationship with God.

One of the great distinctions of the United Methodist church is that it has recognized and endorsed the ministry of women across the years. This openness has in my mind allowed God’s grace to freely move throughout the church in a greater way through the gifts and graces of these women pastors, teachers, and other servants of the church. For this I am grateful. While the living out of Galatians 3:28 (“There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . slave nor free . . . male and female”) is filled with challenges and tensions today, it is nevertheless God’s word to us and is vital to the creation of a just and free society for all.

Josiah’s social and spiritual reform touched every part of the nation. What exactly did he do? Or better still, what didn’t he do? The list of reforms is exhausting (see 2 Kings 23). His actions were swift and unapologetic. He began by destroying all the false and pagan images in the nation, including those that had somehow been placed in the Temple. These false images, freely displayed on poles and in other visible spots throughout the city, were highly offensive to Josiah. Further, he ordered that any and all religious items used to burn incense in worship to these gods be pulled down and destroyed, taken outside the city and either burned or crushed into dust. Josiah also denounced the worship of sun, moon, and star constellations that had become objects of worship.

Next, Josiah took aim at the shrines and houses of worship of these idols. Again, he left no stone unturned. The text uses words such as “removed,” “burned,” “did away with,” “tore down,” and “set fire” to describe his actions. With the destruction of these shrines came the destruction of community symbols that denied the presence of Jehovah God. These rebellious Israelites would also burn incense to these false deities while others would go as far as offering up their children as sacrifices to them. As ruthless and uncaring as he might have appeared, Josiah was the only person who dared to stand in the gap in an attempt to restore the nation to God.

What social and spiritual reforms are the most pressing to you? How might you bring about constructive change?

A Call for Celebration

Judah’s spiritual renewal should be remembered as one of the great events of history. His intentional and uninhibited actions laid the foundation for spiritual revival throughout the land. We cannot overstate the effect of this revival on Judah. Josiah’s actions changed the religious landscape of a nation. He single-
handedly went against generations of pagan practice and religious idolatry that had been woven into the fabric of Judah’s society. Josiah’s foes were not so much the nonbelievers of his day as they were believers who claimed to serve God but who also incorporated pagan thought and practice into their lives. This unholy mix of honoring God on one hand while serving these idols on the other was what angered the Lord. Josiah carried forth God’s plan of spiritual renewal.

Second Kings 23:20 reports that after his physical reforms, Josiah “returned to Jerusalem,” suggesting that he had completed his assigned task. The destruction of these idols and their shrines, however, was only the first step. It was not enough just to destroy the physical images of Judah’s paganism. True renewal involved turning the people’s hearts and minds back to God. Josiah would need to educate the people and remind them of who they were as followers of God. What better way to do this than to call for a celebration that would unite the people and recall their spiritual heritage.

The Passover celebration stood at the heart of Jewish faith. Israel’s history as a nation and more specifically as a people of God had its roots lodged in the Exodus story. This pivotal event as described in the scroll was to be celebrated as a perpetual memory of God’s everlasting love. Josiah’s heartfelt concern was that these Israelites had forgotten God as evidenced by the fact that this holy festival had not been celebrated since the days of the judges; “neither had it been celebrated during all the days of the Israelite and Judean kings” (2 Kings 23:22). Years of not remembering God through this religious observance had brought on years of forgetting and abandoning God. Passover thus for Josiah was not just a celebration of victory; it was also a celebration of remembrance in which Israel would once again see themselves as people of God.

As United Methodists, we along with the saints of old call to memory God’s redemptive love toward us through the various seasons and special days of the year. Do not overlook the power of observing these special times. The Advent season calls us to anticipate and remember that the Christ child has come; Pentecost marks a season of growth; Lent, followed by Easter, points us to the new life that comes through Christ. When we study and practice these and other designated days, we grow in our faith and unite in a global fellowship that seeks to usher the kingdom of God into the world. Stay on track with God’s love through the Christian calendar.

Finally, hats off to Josiah. Renewal is important and is our call and duty as servants of God. Try to understand Josiah’s passion and concern. He was not ruthless or mean; he was faithful to his cause. Like Elijah, Josiah knew that effective and lasting spiritual restoration often requires radical and intentional change. We all have a part in creating a better world. Renewal begins with our commit-
Commitment therefore is a necessary and vital ingredient in the life of every one of us. Look for opportunities to be God’s change agent this coming week. Be patiently faithful as lasting change is often a process and not an event. Equip yourself with regular Bible study and times of prayer so that we might become instruments of God’s love in a broken world.

How important are the church seasons in your worship? Which season is most meaningful for you?

Lord, we confess that we have not always done your will and kept your law. Forgive us. Renew our hearts in obedient love so that we might be the body of Christ for the world; in Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.
Lesson 4

Forever Love

Purpose
To experience the unconditional love of God

Hearing the Word

The background text for this lesson is Hosea 1:1–3:5.

Hosea 1:2-11 (NIV)

2 When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, “Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord.”

3 So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

4 Then the Lord said to Hosea, “Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel.

5 In that day I will break Israel’s bow in the Valley of Jezreel.”

6 Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the Lord said to Hosea, “Call her Lo-Ruhamah (which means “not loved”), for I will no longer show love to Israel, that I should at all forgive them.

7 Yet I will show love to Judah; and I will save them—not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but I, the Lord their God, will save them.”

8 After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, Gomer had another son.

9 Then the Lord said, “Call him Lo-Ammi (which means “not my people”), for you are not my people, and I am not your God.

10 Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘children of the living God.’

11 The people of Judah and the people of Israel will come together; they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel.”

Hosea 1:2-11 (KJV)

2 The beginning of the word of the Lord by Hosea. And the Lord said to Hosea, Go, take unto thee a wife of whoresoms and children of whoredoms: for the land hath committed great whoredoms, departing from the Lord.

3 So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim; which conceived, and bare him a son.

4 And the Lord said unto him, Call his name Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will avenge the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and will cause to cease the kingdom of the house of Israel.

5 And it shall come to pass at that day, that I will break the bow of Israel, in the valley of Jezreel.

6 And she conceived again, and bare a daughter. And God said unto him, Call her name Loruhamah: for I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel; but I will utterly take them away.

7 But I will have mercy upon the house of Judah, and will save them by the Lord their God, and will not save them by bow, nor by sword, nor by battle, nor by horses, nor by horsemen.

8 Now when she had weaned Loruhamah, she conceived, and bare a son.

9 Then said God, Call his name Loammi: for ye are not my people, and I will not be your God.

10 Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered; and it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God.

11 Then shall the children of Judah and the children of Israel be gathered together, and appoint themselves one head, and they shall come up out of the land: for great shall be the day of Jezreel.
Seeing the Need

As a child I would occasionally hear someone say, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” I knew they meant that seeing is more persuasive and evidence of a truth than just speaking it. I recall hearing older people in my community during that time make other statements like, “I’d rather see a sermon any day than to hear one.” Still other phrases like, “I can’t hear what you say from seeing what you do,” were common. I don’t know whether these statements were excuses for people not to go to church, but I did get the message. Seeing is believing! Actions do speak louder than words.

This truth was also impressed upon me during my seminary years. My preaching professor told us that persuasion takes place in three ways. Some people are persuaded by logic, while others are persuaded by emotions, and still others are persuaded by the life of the speaker. By far the life of the speaker is the most lasting and persuasive. Can you see Christ in the person’s life? Does the individual model the Christian faith? Does his or her walk compliment or contradict their talk? It is a vivid reminder of the Apostle James’ words: “You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves” (James 1:22).

Hosea’s story is a picture of God’s love toward Israel that no doubt left an indelible impression on the people of his day. The truth for us from his story is that God’s merciful and everlasting love remains the same, and we can experience this love today.

Hosea’s Call

Hosea’s call to ministry was typical of other prophets of his day. The first verse in this short book opens with the words, “The LORD’s word that came to Hosea” (Hosea 1:1). We see this same or a very similar pattern of words used with the introductions to the calls of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Zephaniah, and other prophets. This similarity gives us internal evidence that Hosea’s call and unique assignment was just as authentic as his contemporaries. His prophetic ministry would play a vital role in revealing God’s longstanding and redeeming love toward Israel and Judah. If the people heard the prophet regardless of how he spoke or presented his message, redemption and
restoration would come to the land.

We find God’s commission to Hosea in verse 2: “Go, marry a prostitute and have children of prostitution,” the LORD told him. Wow! I believe this would have taken the breath out of most preachers and Christian workers I know. LORD, you want me to do what? The text records these as God’s exact words to Hosea, but people understand Hosea’s story in different ways. Some see it as a literal story of a God who used radical means to get the attention of fallen humanity. Others see it as allegory pointing us towards deeper truths, while others acknowledge that they simply don’t know. These differing ways of understanding do not lessen the truths it reveals about God. In whatever way we theologically choose to unwrap Hosea’s story, it is part of the historical and holy canon that has been handed down to us today. For the purposes of this lesson, we will simply share the story with its implications for spiritual life and growth and allow God’s gracious love to speak to us.

The LORD made it plain to Hosea that his actions would represent truth and thus give Israel an up close and personal look at divine love. Hosea was to marry a prostitute as a picture of how Israel had prostituted herself to false gods and pagan practices. Israel’s behavior was like that of a prostitute who deliberately and intentionally chose not to change her ways. The very word “prostitute” conjures up ideas like unfaithful, lewd, vulgar, and rebellious. Added to this bizarre marital arrangement was a spouse who publicly and unashamedly refused to receive genuine love. For those with spiritual eyes to see, there was more to this marriage than how things appeared.

The text does not tell us anything about Hosea’s courtship with Gomer. However, the prophet did love Gomer and he did marry her. Personally I believe that in spite of all the community whispers and gossip that likely surrounded this marriage, Hosea’s life was made richer towards God. How? Because he knew personally what it felt like to give love and not have that love returned. He knew and personally experienced the agony and pain of rejection. In short, Hosea got a human glimpse of God’s divine and everlasting love toward humankind. Such love is beyond our ability to comprehend, yet it is God’s free gift bestowed upon us.

Hosea’s socially unacceptable and unorthodox marriage really does have a message for our modern world. In what some have called the Bible in a nutshell, John 3:16 is good news for a troubled world. “God so loved the world that he gave.” This giving is not based on whether we want or deserve this love. Instead, it is simply the nature of the Giver. Hosea knew how it felt as one who freely gave his love to Gomer whether she received it or not. This love was not based on what Gomer did but on what Hosea did. Such love is almost too good to believe. We can see the beauty of Hosea’s story when we accept the free gift of God’s unconditional love. This
redeeming love is our historical witness to a broken world.

**In what ways have you experienced God’s love?**

**Hosea’s Message**

Hosea’s symbolic proclamation went beyond marriage to Gomer. God also commanded him to have children in this marriage. The names of these children would represent and give a deeper explanation of God’s wrath and love towards Israel. In other words, their physical presence would serve as a constant reminder of God’s forewarned actions toward the nation. The Hebrew names of these three children were Jezreel, meaning “God scatters,” Lo-Ruhamah, meaning “No Compassion,” and Lo-Ammi, meaning “Not My People” (Hosea 1:4, 6, 9). Nothing in the text suggests that these children were rebellious in attitude or character. They were very possibly model children. However, God would use their names to remind Israel of her rebellious nature and about things to come.

People sometimes give their children names that characterize a particular time or event in their lives. When the wife of a friend became pregnant, he immediately jumped into action. The couple made doctor’s appointments, prepared a room, and purchased baby clothes. And my friend lavished a little extra dose of TLC on his wife. During the middle of her pregnancy, medical complications arose. Things just didn’t look good. As time went on and delivery day rapidly approached, the doctor informed my friend that he would need to make a decision. Medical complications required either that the pregnancy be terminated so the mother could live, or the mother would die so that the baby could live. Baffled, afraid, and a little angry at God, my friend prayed and sought the prayers of others. His decision, to the dismay of some, was to take no action on the matter, as he felt that life and death are in God’s hands. It would be God’s call. Delivery day arrived, and at last the doctor came to the waiting room. My friend was the proud father of a baby girl, and the mother was miraculously doing fine! At the bedside of the shaky but otherwise well mom, the couple decided to name to the child “Wonder” as a perpetual reminder of God’s unfathomable and redeeming love toward them during a difficult time.

Jezreel (God scatters) would keep before the nation that God’s impending judgment would fall upon the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel (verse 4). The ruling power of this dynasty would soon crumble and the military bow and might of Israel would be broken. God would scatter and shake things up in response to evil and corruption. Lo-Ruhamah (No Compassion) would remind the people that God’s hand of compassion and comfort would be withdrawn (at least temporarily) from Israel (verse 6). Lastly, Lo-Ammi (Not My People) would help these rebellious Israelites to see God’s utter frustration with them. Israel had repeatedly broken covenant with God (verse 9). Yet, and as a review of Israel’s history shows, God’s
love always covers a multitude of faults.

As a pastor for over forty years, I have had the privilege of performing numerous weddings. I require some degree of pastoral counseling before the marriage, which gives me the opportunity to try and assess the seriousness of the soon-to-be union. Marriage is a covenant relationship between two individuals and God and must be entered into reverently under God, with love and loyalty as its anchoring posts. Unfortunately, I cannot boast of a 100% faithfulness success rate on the part of all the couples I married. Hosea’s message was that despite Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, God was always the faithful partner in the covenant.

How do you understand yourself as a covenant partner with God? How does this affect your daily walk with God?

Hope for Israel

The theme of harlotry with other gods as portrayed by Gomer runs throughout the Book of Hosea. The LORD forever reminded Israel of their sins and shortcomings through the words of the prophets of that day. It was not that the nations of Judah and Israel did not know, but instead they chose not to obey. Moses had instructed the people how they were to enter into the Promised Land (see Exodus and Deuteronomy). They were not to take with them the gods of Egypt into this new land nor were they to embrace and worship the gods of the Canaanite world. This command was not antisocial in nature but was designed to keep the people focused on God. Moses had earlier forewarned these Israelites that obedience would bring blessings while disobedience would bring curses and judgment (See Deuteronomy 28). The image of Hosea’s tumultuous marriage so appropriately showed God’s love in the midst of Israel’s lust and spiritual adultery with false gods.

Israel’s past sins and disobedience before God must not be minimized or overshadowed by God’s forgiving and redeeming love. The Gomer and Hosea story is more than a doom and gloom story. Yes, sin is a horrible spiritual disease that only seeks to undermine and destroy our moral integrity as human beings. On the other hand, God is good and rich in grace and love. Gomer was sinful but Hosea was righteous. Paul tells us that “where sin increased, grace multiplied even more” (Romans 5:20). This truth is not a pass to disobey or do wrong but is a constant reminder that God’s forgiving love is constantly near and available to us.

As a child, I got my share of discipline and punishment. The hidden blessing for me was that I so often learned the lesson but forgot the punishment. It had a redemptive and saving quality.

Likewise, God always has a redemptive purpose in bringing judgment. Hebrews tells us that “the Lord disciplines whomever he loves” (Hebrews 12:6). The goal of my mother’s punishment was to make me a better me (and she did).
Likewise, God’s ultimate goal in bringing punishment on Israel was always to make Israel a better Israel. It was never for sport or the actions of a selfish and unsympathetic God. Love always takes whatever steps are necessary to bring about a fruitful end. A friend once thanked me for sharing with him an embarrassing and unChristlike habit he had. “Thanks for caring enough about me to tell me the truth,” he told me. Thank God for caring enough about fallen humanity to discipline us from time to time.

Don’t miss the holy call of Hosea’s story. It is a call to know and experience unconditional love. Furthermore, don’t let the radical and social unacceptability of Hosea’s marriage cause you to miss the free gift of God. God loves us! This holy love plays out in Scripture and in our lives over and over again in spite of our seemingly continuous rebellious attitude.

Meditate on the concept of covenant relationship this coming week. God desires this kind of relationship with each person. God desires this relationship with you. Despite your shortcomings and faults, you are the apple of God’s eye. What manner of love is this? Claim your weakness yet celebrate your redemption through the words of John Newton’s beloved hymn: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.” Experience the love!

How has the knowledge of God’s forgiving grace given you hope for the future?

Lord, may we never forget that your love for us is unending and always seeks to bring us into covenant relationship with you. Thank you! In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.
Promised Restoration

Purpose

To understand how God restores God's people

Hearing the Word

The background text for this lesson is Jeremiah 23:1-8; Isaiah 10:20-27.

Jeremiah 23:1-8 (NIV)
1 “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the Lord.

2 Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the Lord.

3 “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number.

4 I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the Lord.

5 “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.

6 In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

7 Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that they shall no more say, The Lord liveth, which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt;

8 but they will say, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the descendants of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.’ Then they will live in their own land.”

Jeremiah 23:1-8 (KJV)
1 Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the Lord.

2 Therefore thus saith the Lord God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith the Lord.

3 And I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase.

4 And I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith the Lord.

5 Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.

6 In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

7 Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that they shall no more say, The Lord liveth, which brought up and which led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land.
Seeing the Need

“People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” This old adage, attributed to a number of people throughout the years, has guided my ministry for decades. I found it to hold true during hospital visits, funerals, and other crisis moments in people’s lives. Clergy are required by The Book of Discipline to meet educational requirements either through seminary studies or a course of study in preparation for ministry. The Board of Ordained Ministry that I served on for several years frequently reminded its incoming candidates that education and training do not negate or minimize God’s call upon their lives. However, the church believes in first a called ministry and then a trained ministry. We are to love people (in this case the congregants) enough to seek to be the best we can before God and those we serve.

Care and empathy are such common human traits that we sometimes overlook them. We just naturally assume that most people (especially Christian workers) have an innate and inherent care and love for other people. Right? Unfortunately and without condemnation, this is not always the case. What is clear, however, is that God calls us to care. God cares about us and we are to care about others. Caring does not always express itself in doing big things. Little acts of love often speak volumes to hurting people. A telephone call, a thank you note, a quick text message, or a gentle pat on the shoulder is often just the lift a person needs.

A mother and father were having an open conversation with their young daughter regarding her choice of boyfriends. The young man of choice in the eyes of the parents was simply not suitable for their daughter. His cultural background was different; he did not share the values of her upbringing; and he was from “the wrong side of the tracks.” Unfortunately, the young man had been killed in a questionable street incident a few months earlier. The daughter could not seem to turn loose of her affections for him. Frustrated, the puzzled mother persisted, “I just don’t understand what you saw in him.” Tearfully, the daughter said, “But, Mama, he cared about me. He really did care about me!”

DAILY BIBLE STUDY

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Scripture</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 29</td>
<td>Ezekiel 6:1-10</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 30</td>
<td>Isaiah 10:20-27</td>
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<td>July 1</td>
<td>Jeremiah 23:1-8</td>
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<td>July 2</td>
<td>Psalm 106:39-48</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 3</td>
<td>Ezra 2:1-2, 64-70</td>
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<td>July 4</td>
<td>Ezra 9:5-15</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 5</td>
<td>Zephaniah 3:9-20</td>
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Judah’s promise of restoration and comfort we find in Jeremiah 23 helps us to see that God cared about the remnant. Likewise, restoration is the evidence that God really cares about us.

A Stern Warning

The first verse in our text definitely speaks to me. It is a firm and unapologetic statement that calls for my undivided attention. “Watch out,” the prophet Jeremiah said to the shepherds of the nation. Other translations use the word “Woe,” which is even more attention-getting. It was a public indictment on all who were in leadership positions who gave little or careless regard to their duties and responsibilities. Although the word “shepherd” is commonly and figuratively understood today to refer to pastors and religious leaders, in biblical usage it can also refer to kings, prophets, and others who hold leadership responsibilities. Leadership (both religious and secular) must work together in a conscientious way to ensure that the needs of the people are met.

What was the indictment and open rebuke against these shepherd leaders? First, our text uses the word “destroy” and “scatter” to describe the severity and results of their actions. These are strong words to say the least. To destroy something or someone is to bring havoc or annihilation, to cast discord and ruin into a situation. The well-being or even loss of a person or a community is at stake. As a result of such destructive actions brought upon their community, God’s people scattered either in their beliefs or in threat of physical harm. The unity of the community of faith was under siege not so much from without but from within. It was a crisis that began at the top and filtered down among the people.

Charge conference was always a turning point for me during my pastoral tenure. I personally did not care for all the paperwork and forms required (though I understood), but I did like the idea that this conference was an opportunity to bring the congregants together, review the past year’s work, and chart plans for the incoming year. It was an opportunity to reflect, readjust if needed, and continue on the journey. Leadership was always a key concern of mine during this time. After nominating and voting in the new year’s leadership, I usually announced that at a future time, we would hold a short recognition ceremony during a morning service. Its purpose was simply to introduce the leaders to the congregation and impress upon the individual leaders the seriousness of their jobs. People need to know who and what their leaders do and how a leadership that works together is a blessing to the entire church.

Everything rises and falls on leadership! No, this is not to say that the leader of a committee or organization should do everything. Leaders are only as strong as those who support them. My point, however, is that over the course of the new year I saw firsthand the power and influence of a dedicated and conscientious
leader versus a leader who carelessly and irresponsibly carried out his or her duties. As a buffer against such lackadaisical behavior, my personal criteria was always commitment and love for the church over knowledge and experience. When people truly love the church and its ministries, we can find suitable training opportunities for them when they need them. The United Methodist Church provides numerous workshops and leadership training events that teach and equip people for service. Second Chronicles 34:33-34 reports that as long as Josiah gave conscientious and godly leadership to the people, “They didn’t turn away from following the Lord God of their ancestors.” Leadership makes a difference!

Specifically, the Lord’s indictment against these shepherd leaders was that they did not “tend to” God’s people (Jeremiah 23:2). The idea of “tending” to someone carries with it the notion of feeding or meeting that individual’s needs. The shepherd tended to the sheep by leading them to grassy meadows and calm and restful waters. Tending to their needs as they traveled along the barren and rugged paths was the shepherd’s highest concern. Psalm 23 gives us a beautiful picture of shepherd leadership on the human and divine level. God’s final word of indictment towards these shameful leaders was that on behalf of the people of God, revenge and judgment would come upon them. This indictment prompts us to thank God for the thousands of dedicated leaders across the land, both religious and secular, who hold the needs of the people in their hearts in carrying out their duties and responsibilities.

How do you encourage and support leaders in your church and in other arenas? If asked, will you accept leadership?

Hope for the Future

God never leaves the righteous without hope! What a marvelous and wonderful truth. After openly chastising and rebuking these misguided leaders, the Lord through Jeremiah spoke promise and hope to the people, solidified by repeated pledges of deliverance. The Lord declared, “I myself will gather,” followed by, “I will bring them back” and then, “I will place over them” (verses 3-4). Herein is another picture of God’s bountiful and unmerited love toward Israel and toward us. Although the people’s sins and disobedience had caused the Lord to disperse and drive them into foreign lands, divine love would eventually draw them back and restore them. The Apostle John’s words ring true here: “How great is the love that the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God” (1 John 3:1, NIV).

God’s promise of hope and restoration would bring tangible blessings for all to see. The people would become “fruitful” and “multiply” (Jeremiah 23:3). The biblical image of these words refers to God’s abundant and overflowing blessings upon them. In light of God’s earlier promises given through Moses, they would be
Lesson 5

blessed in the city and blessed in the field. Their crops would flourish, seasonal rains would come, and their cattle would increase. Furthermore, the Lord would defeat the enemies that came against them (see Deuteronomy 28). Perhaps the best promise for these oppressed and ill-treated Israelites was that the LORD would set over them shepherd leaders with servant’s hearts. It would be a new day in the life of this war-torn nation. Restoration would come as an expression of a loving and merciful God toward the people of God.

Another exciting part of this promise was that in the fullness of time, the promise would surely come to pass. In two verses Jeremiah declared that “the time is coming” (verses 5, 7). Regardless of the current harsh conditions and circumstances, this prophetic promise of a new day was divinely destined to happen. Judah would be saved and Israel would live in safety. God would raise up a king from the lineage of David who would be wise, just, and fair to all the inhabitants of the land. While Zedekiah may be the object of this prophecy, many scholars see this promise not only as hope for the future of Judah and Israel, but as a glimpse of the coming Messiah who is The Lord Our Righteousness. God’s eternal promises go from generation to generation.

Hope is a mark of our identity as followers of Christ. In a world so often marked by hurt and hopelessness, we dare to market ourselves as a people of hope. We dare to look beyond the pain and confusion of the present moment and see a silver lining behind every dark cloud. This hope is not built on wishful thinking or a false and shallow sense of reality, but on the truth of a risen Lord who promises to be with us through the power of the Holy Spirit. This living hope is the inheritance of the righteous and all who believe (1 Peter 1:3). Judah’s faithful few captured this hope. It is through this blessed hope that the church reaches out into a broken world with the message that, “There a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.”

What gives you hope for a brighter future? How can you live into this hope?

The Lord Our Righteousness

Political campaigns always intrigue me. I’ve never wanted to be a politician; however, I do try to take note of a candidate’s position on issues and his or her voting records in an attempt to make an informed decision. Politicians notably seem to love telling their constituents what they are going to do if elected. The follow-through of many of these politician candidates, however, is often predictable. Once elected to office, they confront the realities of political opposition and shortage of funding at the risk of gradually returning to the status quo. Obviously this does not happen in every situation but enough for me not to become overly excited in an election year. The frustration for many voters is that regardless of the complexities and cir-
cumstances that come in moving forward, people by and large simply want leadership to keep its promises.

The promise of a new king arising from a descendant of David was a promise that would be fulfilled. In other words, it would not be an empty promise. This promise gave hope to the people of Judah and Israel that God cares for people and specifically the people of God. The Lord had not forgotten them (although many of them forgot God). This future reality would show the faithfulness of God and radically change the hearts of the observers. Isaiah 23:7 says that the people would no longer hope and swear by the God who brought Israel out of Egypt, but by the God who delivered them from the nations of the world. This soon returning migration would be an event that would capture the attention of the world. The new king would right the wrongs of society and bring peace and prosperity to a broken nation. For some, it may have been a promise too good to believe, but for those who trusted in God, it brought empowering hope that enabled them to overcome the worst of life’s tragedies.

God’s timing and our timing is not always the same. As a youth growing up in rural Tennessee, I often heard people say, “God may not come when you want him, but he’s always on time.” Respectfully, this familiar saying at the time meant little to me until I learned later in life that there is a time and season with God. I recall a situation where I fervently prayed and sought God for an answer regarding a particular problem, only to be disappointed and let down when the answer did not come. Frankly, I got a little upset and even angry at God. However, and as time went by and maturity set in, I found myself re-praying my previous prayer, only this time thanking God for not answering the first prayer. An answered prayer when I first asked at such a young and immature age would have been disastrous for me. Thank you, Lord, for your perfect timing. Despite all the harsh realities and inconsistencies of the present time, Judah’s deliverance and restoration would come at the perfect time that would give glory and honor to God.

God cares about you and me. Ponder and meditate on this thought during the upcoming week. Knowing that God cares about you will change your life. Spiritual and moral inconsistencies will always exist in the world. However, the more we prayerfully study and reflect on God’s acts of grace, the more faith and hope begins to take shape in our lives.

How does God’s promise of restoration empower you in your daily living?

Lord, thank you for the promise and free gift of restoration. We love you because you first loved us; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.
Wisdom to Navigate Life’s Challenges

Purpose
To learn how God’s people receive God’s wisdom.

Hearing the Word

The background scripture for this lesson is Daniel 1:1-17.

Daniel 1:8-17 (NIV)
8 But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.
9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel,
10 but the official told Daniel, “I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you.”
11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah,
12 “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink.
13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.”
14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.
15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.
16 So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.
17 To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

Daniel 1:8-17 (KJV)
8 But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.
9 Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs.
10 And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king.
11 Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah,
12 Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days: and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink.
13 Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king’s meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants.
14 So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days.
15 And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king’s meat.
16 Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and
gave them pulse.

17 As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom:

and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY

| July 6 | Deuteronomy 29:1-6 |
| July 7 | Jeremiah 35:1-14 |
| July 8 | Luke 1:11-16 |
| July 9 | Daniel 1:1-7 |
| July 10 | Daniel 1:8-17 |
| July 11 | Daniel 1:18-21 |
| July 12 | 1 Corinthians 10:23-31 |

Seeing the Need

Success stories have always impressed me. Some people refer to these stories as “Horatio Alger stories,” named after the great American author Horatio Alger. Alger primarily wrote novels about young boys living in poverty who rose to wealth and fame through determination and hard work. These stories were particularly attractive to me as a young pastor freshly starting my ministry. I never had an urgent and overwhelming desire to become rich and famous; however, I did enjoy reading and gaining insight into how to make the best out of a bad situation. These “rags to riches” stories and their illustrations set a mindset within me that often enabled me to see the bright side in the worst of situations. Later, and probably as can be expected, my library grew to have its share of positive-thinking books mixed in with books on theology and other pastoral concerns.

Corrie ten Boom was a great success story for me. Although hers was not a “rags to riches success story,” we nevertheless see her success in how she made the best out of a bad situation. Born in 1892 into a devout Christian family in the Netherlands, Corrie’s faith moved her to reach out to help others. When Nazi soldiers invaded her country, she and her family provided a safe haven for many Jews who needed food and shelter. Later she and her family would be caught by the Nazi regime and put into a concentration camp. The trauma of mental and physical abuse along with witnessing the deaths of several of her family members left a permanent scar on her life. Corrie ten Boom’s success, however, was her faith and her commitment to Christ that empowered her to forgive her attackers and rise above the horrors of a devastating ordeal.

Daniel’s captivity story helps us to see that faith in God can empower us to receive wisdom and guidance to endure and rise above life’s negative situations.
Lesson 6  

Daniel’s Decision

Daniel’s story begins in the harsh realities of war. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had attacked and invaded Jerusalem. This ruthless king spared nothing and no one from his wrath. Holy and sacred items were taken from the Lord’s Temple and placed into Nebuchadnezzar’s pagan god shrine in Babylon. This act would have been especially heartbreaking and discouraging to the Jews of that community. Furthermore, destroying the Temple and capturing its sacred artifacts would show dominance of a pagan god over Israel’s God. When the Philistines defeated Israel and captured the Ark of the Covenant, Eli’s daughter-in-law gave birth to a son, Ichabod, whose name declared that “The glory [of the Lord] has left Israel” (1 Samuel 4:21). Such an attitude would likewise have characterized the people’s feelings when the Temple at Jerusalem was ransacked.

Lastly, Nebuchadnezzar would make use of slave labor from the captives. This would have been a slow and methodical process of cultural assimilation, or in layman’s terms, brainwashing. Daniel 1:4 lists Nebuchadnezzar’s standards and qualifications for workers. These persons were expected to be “good looking young men without defects, skilled in all wisdom, possessing knowledge, conversant with learning, and capable of serving in the king’s palace.” The fact that Nebuchadnezzar ordered his chief official to draw this pool from the “ruling class” (verse 3) of Israelites suggests that Daniel was already a person of high social and moral character.

War can be a prosperous adventure. A major benefit of the conquering army in battle is that it captures the goods and supplies of its captives. When Jehoshaphat defeated the Moabite and Ammonite armies, it took three days to collect the spoils (2 Chronicles 20:25). These collected spears, armor, chariots, food, and other supplies in addition to horses would easily add to the economy of any nation. Most likely many of the men captured during a battle would be used as chariot and cavalry drivers, and women would become cooks and bakers (1 Samuel 8:11-13). Nebuchadnezzar saw his conquest over Jerusalem as an opportunity to use everything and everyone to help build up and sustain the nation of Babylon.

Daniel’s training would last for three years. The first steps for these new captives in becoming culturally assimilated into Babylonian society involved learning the language of the nation, undergoing name changes, and receiving a daily allotment of the king’s food and drink. It was at the dinner table, so to speak, that Daniel drew the line. Daniel 1:8 says that Daniel would not “pollute” himself with the king’s food or wine. This open and public refusal was a bold act to say the least. Such overt and public resistance could very easily have resulted in negative consequences for Daniel. Common sense, along with being a captive in a for-
eign land and subject to mistreatment and possible death, would suggest that offending the king was not in Daniel’s best interest. However, Daniel’s decision and resolve stood firm and without apology. He would not do anything that would compromise his faith.

When we understand the Jewish concepts of clean and unclean, we see the why of Daniel’s actions. The dietary laws found in the Book of Leviticus declare that certain foods are clean while others are unclean (Leviticus 11). These laws applied to domestic and wild animals, fish, birds, and other flying and crawling creatures. The spiritual reason for these laws was to establish and set Israel apart as a sanctified and holy people. Anyone who ate (or touched) anything that was unclean lost fellowship with the covenant community. In some cases, one who was considered unclean would be forced to go outside the camp (Numbers 5:1-4). Therefore, for Daniel it was not so much a matter of cultural taste in refusing to eat a foreign dish as it was a faithful expression of commitment and loyalty to the community of faith. Daniel refused to sacrifice his relationship with God and the covenant community because of physical appetite.

**What things or experiences might “pollute” your faith?**

**A Challenging Test**

Daniel’s commitment and determination to live for God in a hostile environment strangely gained him favor in the eyes of palace officials. His approach might be seen as consistent diplomacy. His decision and determination were fixed; however, Daniel prayerfully and over time slowly negotiated his way into the good graces of his captors. Daniel seemed to understand that even in enemy territory, communication and understanding can be powerful weapons in reaching your goal. Daniel 1:9 says that “God had established faithful loyalty between Daniel and the chief official.” God can always touch the hearts of others on behalf of the faithful. Fear of the king’s reprimand toward him, however, made this official refuse Daniel’s request.

Nonetheless, this refusal did not diminish Daniel’s resolve and commitment to stay faithful to God and the covenant community.

We learn and grow in our faith commitment to God in our local covenant communities. Other places can provide this experience; however, for most people, it is our relationship with the local church where we learn and grow in discipleship. Daniel’s great and uncompromising faith grew out of his connection to and participation in the covenant community. There is something life-changing about being a part of something bigger than ourselves. I often feel this way when I attend annual conference gatherings. The local church is the primary means through which the body of believers gathers for worship and fellowship and people are brought into saving relationship with God. It is where
the word of God is preached, sacraments are administered, and salvation is freely offered to a hurting world. Part of a church’s baptismal ceremony reads, “The church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time. All, of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies.”

Daniel’s proposed test offered a challenge to himself and the palace officials. He was not reluctant or cowardly in his request. After being rejected by the chief official of the palace, Daniel then went with a proposal to the guard this official had appointed over Daniel and his friends. His persistence not to pollute or defile himself with the king’s food is seen in his actions. Again, he was polite and conversational in his approach: “Why not test your servants for ten days? You could give us a diet of vegetables to eat and water to drink” (verse 12). His attitude was not to insult the king and his royal delicacies, but to offer an option and perhaps even a challenge to the quality of palace food. Furthermore, it might be an opportunity in the minds of some palace officials to show the health superiority of Babylonian food (verse 10). The challenge was that after the ten-day period had ended, the appearance of Daniel and his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, would be compared to that of those who ate the king’s food. The results would determine the consequences and how he and his friends would conduct themselves. It was cordial diplomacy. For some it was a risky challenge; for Daniel it was matter of faith and trust in God.

Life is often filled with tests. That is, it seems that we are regularly confronted with negative predicaments and unwanted circumstances. These problems and unsolicited difficulties challenge our faith and spiritual integrity. As someone once said, “If it’s not one thing, it’s another.” Unwanted troubles just seem to pop up. Over the years I believe I have mastered the art of how to calmly handle life when bad things happen. The secret for me is realizing that while bad things do happen to good people, God is in control and this too shall past. It works for me! Jesus told the worried disciples, “In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world” (John 16:33). Keeping our eyes on God in uncertain times keeps us calm in the midst of the storm. This was Daniel’s secret and how he was able despite his uncertainties to sing a new song in a strange land.

Daniel’s commitment and determination to remain faithful to God speaks a positive word to us today. Commitment and dedication in doing the right thing does not have to be loud and animated. Daniel exemplified quiet strength in the midst of a challenging time. It would have been so easy (and common sense for some) to simply “fit in” until reaching a point of safety. However, Daniel’s persistence in not defiling himself was anchored in a knowing that God was fully able to handle the crisis of the moment. He chose to respect and even be sensitive to the fear of the palace officials while at
the same time holding firm to his faith. It was a precarious and risky situation to be in, yet Daniel’s faith in God balanced the scales.

**What troubles and difficulties have you experienced that have tested your faith in God?**

**Remarkable Results**

At the end of the ten-day period, the results were clear. Daniel and his friends “looked better and healthier than all the young men who were eating the king’s food” (verse 15). It is important to understand that while better appearance and health were a good result, this was not Daniel’s intent. It was never so much about food for Daniel but about faith and obedience to God. Eating the king’s food was an act of disobedience that would pollute the spiritual integrity of Daniel and prove him unfaithful to the covenant community. Health and better appearance were simply the by-products or side effects of trusting God. Special diets do not gauge or determine our level of spirituality. On the other hand, respecting our bodies with proper eating (and exercise for me) honors God. The final score of this challenging test was that Daniel was able to remain faithful to covenant law and the God of Israel was glorified.

Verse 17 says that “God gave knowledge, mastery of all literature, and wisdom” to Daniel and his three friends. In addition, Daniel received the gifts of vision and dream interpretation. “Knowledge” in Hebrew context generally refers to the ability to understand and perceive through one’s sight, touch, and hearing. It is the ability to discern truth in life’s puzzling moments. “Wisdom” in similar fashion makes reference to the act of skillfully and wisely living in our surroundings. These anointed and special gifts gave Daniel and his three friends an edge above the other captives and established them as persons of high potential in the king’s eyes. It is a beautiful picture of how God can raise up the faithful in a hostile and uncertain environment.

God gave Daniel wisdom. God gives us wisdom. This wisdom as the holy endowment of God is our free gift. It is God’s promise for all who trust and obey. This wisdom is not worldly but heavenly. True wisdom is found in Christ who is God’s wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:24). James tells his readers that if any desire wisdom, he or she should simply ask God, who liberally gives to all who ask (James 1:5). He continues by saying that this wisdom which comes from above is first “pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine” (James 3:17). The point here is that God is actively involved in directing the paths of the faithful. Claim the wisdom of God this coming week through observing the beauty of life and the handiwork of creation. When Daniel tapped into God through his faithfulness, he tapped into heaven’s wisdom and guidance. Trusting God enables us to access heaven’s best in knowing how to successfully navigate life.
What helps you to discern truth in any given situation?

God of Grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power. Grant us wisdom and grant us courage for the living of these days; in Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.
Our Always Faithful God

Purpose

To help God’s people endure in faith despite the consequences.

Hearing the Word

The background Text for this lesson is Daniel 3:1-30.

Daniel 3:19-30 (NIV)

19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual.

20 He commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace.

21 So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace.

22 The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego,

23 and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, “Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?” They replied, “Certainly, Your Majesty.”

25 He said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”

26 Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire,

27 and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

28 Then Nebuchadnezzar said, “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.

29 Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.”

30 Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon

Daniel 3:19-30 (KJV)

19 Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated.

20 And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace.

21 Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.

22 Therefore because the king’s commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flames of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

23 And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.
Lesson 7

24 Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, 0 king.

25 He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.

26 Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, came forth of the midst of the fire.

27 And the princes, governors, and captains, and the king’s counsellors, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them.

28 Then Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king’s word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God.

29 Therefore I make a decree, That every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort.

30 Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, in the province of Babylon.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY

| July 13 | Exodus 20:1-6 |
| July 14 | Psalm 34:1-10 |
| July 15 | Isaiah 43:1-7 |
| July 16 | Daniel 3:1-12 |
| July 17 | Daniel 3:13-18 |
| July 18 | Daniel 3:19-25 |
| July 19 | Daniel 3:26-30 |

Seeing the Need

In his book Profiles in Courage, then-Senator John F. Kennedy profiled the careers of eight United States Senators who through their sacrificial and unpopular positions brought change to the nation. Kennedy highlighted the careers of persons like John Quincy Adams, whose political views caused him to break away from the Federalist Party; Edmund G. Ross, who unpopularly voted to acquit a sitting president; and Robert A. Taft, who openly criticized the process of trying Nazi war criminals. The consequences of voting and living out their consciences often brought public ostracism, severe criticism, and even political ruin for some. Kennedy wanted his readers to know that courage that brings about constructive change for the good of all goes across social and party lines. His book went on to later win a Pulitzer Prize for short biographies.

In memory of her father, Caroline Kennedy and others later established the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award and Foundation. The purpose of this non-
Lesson 7

profit is to recognize public officials on all levels of government who demonstrate bravery and integrity in civic leadership. At one of the Foundation’s annual events, Congressman John Lewis was given this prestigious award. Addressing the conference, Lewis began with a brief overview of his life. He grew up in rural Alabama and recalled the days of overt racism and segregation. He personally experienced the humiliation of segregated bathrooms, restaurants, and substandard public schools. Frustrated with the hypocrisy of “with liberty and justice for all” as it played out in society, Lewis began participating in civil rights movements in an attempt to find a way to do the right thing. Lewis concluded his remarks by telling his audience that regardless of the consequences, he always felt free and liberated in heart when he did the right thing.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s fiery furnace experience showed them that while doing right can be trying, God is always with the righteous. God is also with us.

Worship Demanded

Our Scripture begins by noting that “Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and his face twisted beyond recognition” in anger towards Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3:19). However, things did not start off this way. In Daniel 2, we read that after Daniel had revealed the mystery of Nebuchadnezzar’s agonizing dream, he found favor in the king’s eyes. Daniel was rewarded with lavish gifts and promoted as “ruler over all the province of Babylon and chief minister over all Babylon’s sages” (Daniel 2:48). Further, “At Daniel’s urging, the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to administer the province of Babylon” (verse 49). This was no doubt seen as a great and admirable achievement in the eyes of many of their fellow Jews. It was, in retrospect, the hand of God moving on behalf of the righteous to enable them to sing a new song in a strange land.

After Daniel had given the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, it appears that this king’s heart swelled with pride and a sense of self-importance. Daniel 3 opens by telling us that Nebuchadnezzar “made a gold statue ... ninety feet high and nine feet wide” (verse 1). This golden statue would alert the nations of the world that Nebuchadnezzar’s greatness towered over all others. He then “ordered the chief administrators, ministers, governors, counselors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials to assemble and come for the dedication of the statue that he had set up” (verse 2). In addition, a full ensemble of “horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument” called the people to “bow down and worship the statue” (verse 5). It would be a grand and unforgettable event to say the least. However, and unbeknown to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the stage had been set for the world to see that God is always with the faithful.
Nebuchadnezzar’s anger towards Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego grew out of their direct refusal to bow in homage and offer worship to this gold statue. Their refusal to bow was not arrogant and boisterous, but calm and unwavering. “We will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you’ve set up,” they told the king (verse 18), even though he told them they would “be thrown straight into the furnace of flaming fire” if they didn’t (verse 15). They did not know God’s plan for the moment, but they were confident that regardless of the outcome, God would have the final word on the matter. Nebuchadnezzar ordered the furnace to be “heated to seven times its normal heat” (verse 19). This act would in his mind answer the question he had asked these three men earlier: “Then what god will rescue you from my power?” (verse 15).

We do not always know how circumstances will turn out for us when we are obedient to God. But we do know that God loves us and is always on the side of the righteous. Our timing is not always God’s timing. Neither is our understanding and God’s understanding of deliverance the same. This is what God meant when he said through the prophet Isaiah to Israel, “My plans aren’t your plans, nor are your ways my ways, says the L ORD” (Isaiah 55:8). God’s infinite ways are beyond and higher than our finite and limited ways. Our best choice, then, is to humbly subject ourselves in faith to a loving God who sees beyond every negative situation and promises our victory in times of crisis. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego may not have known the outcome of their plight, but they did by faith know who held their future.

Nebuchadnezzar’s out-of-control pride caused his downfall. Pride and arrogance are serious temptations in the lives of every believer. This is especially true for leaders. This subtle and sometimes unassuming sin can wreak havoc in our lives. Proverbs 16:18 warns, “Pride comes before disaster, and arrogance before a fall.” Self-esteem and ego are not always the same. Healthy self-esteem might say, “I am an important person in the room,” while arrogant ego would say, “I am the only important person in the room.” One leads to respect for self and respect for others, while the other leads to a superior and demeaning attitude toward others. Nebuchadnezzar’s pride and sense of self-importance caused him to disrespect and overlook the gifts and graces of these three Hebrew men.

How might we address the issue of spiritual pride?

Four, Not Three

It seems that deep in his heart, King Nebuchadnezzar did have some sense of respect for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. After their three-year training was complete, “he found no one as good as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah [their Hebrew names]. So they took their place in the king’s service” (Daniel 1:19). Saving face before the crowd, however, was on trial, so he asserted his pride and inflated ego. We
can only try to get into the mindset of this ruthless king who would do almost anything for fame and power. However, the fiery furnace was the means through which Nebuchadnezzar would see true power—that is, God’s power!

“So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound, still dressed in all their clothes, and thrown into the furnace of flaming fire,” a fire so intense that it killed the men charged with sending the three Hebrew men into it (verses 21-22). But suddenly, the king “jumped up in shock” and asked those assisting him, “Didn’t we throw three men, bound, into the fire?” (verse 24). Had one of the strongmen ordered to deliver these three into the furnace accidently fallen into the fire? We see Nebuchadnezzar’s insistence that something was out of order in his frantic call for these officials to “Look!” The king’s description of what he saw was vivid and detailed. He saw three go into the furnace, but now he saw four. They all were walking around, no one was hurt, and the fourth person looked “like one of the gods.” This descriptive phrase may have been drawn from the appearance of one of several pagan gods that likely was housed in the palace. What Nebuchadnezzar saw clearly got his attention and called him to investigate the matter.

The earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew text of this event (called the Septuagint) says that when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in the burning furnace, they were singing. This would have made this event even more dramatic and spectacular to these onlookers. It would also have testified to the power of God on behalf of the faithful. It may recall for us Paul and Silas, locked in the dungeon of a Macedonian jail, who prayed and sang hymns at midnight (Acts 16:16-40). This brought comfort to them as God heard their praises and delivered them in their crisis. Certainly this has a pertinent word for us today when we find ourselves in the dungeons and fiery furnaces of life. Many times God delivers us “out” of some situations and “through” others. Either way, God gets the glory and our faith renders us victors.

The amazement of this fiery trial was that after it was all over, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were unharmed. Verse 27 says that “the fire hadn’t done anything to them; their hair wasn’t singed; their garments looked the same as before; they didn’t even smell like fire!” Wow! God’s message of deliverance is clear for all to see. There was no doubt in the minds of these palace leaders that something miraculous and awe-inspiring had taken place. What God and God alone had done for these three Hebrew men left a lasting and life-changing mark on its onlookers.

Witnessing to our faith often goes beyond words. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not preachy or attempting to change the heart of the king and those around him. They were not demeaning towards the gods of Babylon. On the other hand, they were neither apologetic nor compromising in their faith and loyalty to the God of their ances-
 tors. Many times the most powerful wit- ness to our faith is when people observe how God works in our lives. Little disappointments and how we react to them before others can speak a positive and persuasive word to others.

Nebuchadnezzar heard their testimony but saw the power of their witness played out before them.

How have you experienced times of God's deliverance in your life?

Nebuchadnezzar Praises

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s fiery furnace ordeal left a lasting impression on King Nebuchadnezzar. It brought about a total change in his attitude and behavior toward them. He went from criticism and condemnation to praise and adoration for the God of these young men. He publicly called for all who were present to respect, honor, and praise the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3:28). We do not know how this experience played out in reference to the king’s command to bow to the golden statue. However, no one could deny that something miraculous had happened that commanded the attention and respect of everyone present.

Nebuchadnezzar next began to interpret his understanding of this fiery furnace event. First, God “sent his messenger to rescue his servants who trusted him,” he said (verse 28). They had put their hope and trust in the God of their ancestors and God had delivered them for all to see. Next, Nebuchadnezzar honored the boldness these three men, who ignored the king’s order and decree at the expense of possible death. Nebuchadnezzar saw that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s actions were not a show of arrogant and misinformed stupidity, but confident faith and trust in God. Such faith at the very least had to be respected and honored. The miracle at the fiery furnace changed government policy and the social and spiritual course of an empire.

We may not always approve or agree with the actions of others. However, there are times when the tenacity and determination of watching someone reach his or her goal overrides what the person accomplishes. Specifically, I recall a politician running for an office who was not of my political party. Out of party loyalty I did not cast my vote for this person. However, I could not help but to appreciate and respect this person’s diligence and sacrifice in campaigning for office. This person’s uncompromising and unyielding actions demanded the respect of others and even opponents.

Nebuchadnezzar may never actually have bowed and worshipped the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, but he definitely and unapologetically gave respect and honor to God. It is my sincere hope that we prayerfully hear and put into practice the message of this biblical event. God is still the God of deliverance from life’s most difficult and trying situations. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s story hails this truth for all to hear. Crisis will always be a part of life, yet God’s promise to the faithful remains.
Take a few moments this week and reflect on a crisis in your life and how your faith in God helped you to overcome the situation. God brought you out of your fire! It will be meditation well worth it.

*What memories of past victories bring praise to your heart?*

Lord, we worship you as the God who meets us with comfort and peace in life’s most trying times. Help us to hold on to your promise so that we might see your grace; in Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.
Forgiving, Merciful, Compassionate

Purpose

To remember how God has saved God’s people even when they turned away.

Hearing the Word

The background Text for this lesson is Nehemiah 9:1-38 below.

Nehemiah 9:9-17, 32-33 (NIV)
Nehemiah 9:9-17
9 “You saw the suffering of our ancestors in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea.
10 You sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day.
11 You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters.
12 By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take.
13 You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good.
14 You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses.
15 In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.
16 But they, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands.
17 They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them,...”

32-33
32 “Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today.
33 In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly.”

Nehemiah 9:9-17, 32-33 (KJV)
Nehemiah 9:9-17
9 And didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and hearest their cry by the Red sea;
10 And shewedst signs and wonders upon Pharaoh, and on all his servants, and on all the people of his land: for thou knewest that they dealt proudly against them. So didst thou get thee a name, as it is this day.
11 And thou didst divide the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land; and their persecutors thou threwest into the deeps, as a stone into the mighty waters.
12 Moreover thou leddest them in the day by a cloudy pillar; and in the night by a pillar of fire, to give them light in the way wherein they should go.
13 Thou camest down also upon mount Sinai, and spakest with them from heaven, and gavest them right judgments, and true laws, good statutes and commandments:
14 And madest known unto them thy holy sabbath, and commandedst them precepts, statutes, and laws, by the hand of Moses thy servant:
Lesson 8

15 And gavest them bread from heaven for their hunger, and broughtest forth water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and promisedst them that they should go in to possess the land which thou hadst sworn to give them.

16 But they and our fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their necks, and hearkened not to thy commandments,

17 And refused to obey, neither were mindful of thy wonders that thou didst among them; but hardened their necks, and in their rebellion appointed a captain to return to their bondage: but thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not.

32-33

32 Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.

33 Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly:....

DAILY BIBLE STUDY

July 20 Psalm 119:129-136
July 21 Nehemiah 9:1-8
July 22 Nehemiah 9:9-17
July 23 Nehemiah 9:18-25
July 24 Nehemiah 9:26-31
July 25 Nehemiah 9:32-38
July 26 Psalm 136:1-2, 10-16, 23-26

Seeing the Need

From time to time, I watch a television documentary called “Modern Marvels,” which looks at the history and mysteries of some of the world’s unique discoveries and historical sites. I believe that an understanding of the past can give us a better perspective on the present. The episodes about Egyptian Pyramids and the invention of the mechanical clock particularly stood out to me. What amazed me was seeing the complex and superior engineering and mathematical ingenuities used to construct these ancient inventions and structures. Even more amazing was how the imagination and skill demonstrated by these ancient entrepreneurs is often still puzzling and even unmatched by engineers today.

How did those primitive Egyptians chisel out and place thousands of interlocking blocks into a mathematically precise pattern? Better still, how did they transport and hoist those stone blocks weighing from two to seventy tons into place? Equally amazing to me is the invention of the mechanical clock. Through an elaborate system of wheels, shafts, pins, and interlocking rods, Yi Xing, a Buddhist monk, devised a clock operated by dripping water that powered a wheel to make one complete revolution every twenty four hours. The accuracy of this ancient clock compares with the precision of the most modern of clocks today. Scientists today are still trying to understand the
Lesson 8

“how” of Yi Xing’s invention.

“Modern Marvels” and similar TV documentaries give me a deeper appreciation of the jewels that lie in our past. Nehemiah’s call to the inhabitants of Jerusalem is a spiritual jewel in our past. Nehemiah challenged the Israelites to remember the Lord’s mighty acts of love toward them in spite of their ancestors’ unfaithfulness.

Israel’s Past

Nehemiah’s concern for Jerusalem went beyond merely rebuilding the broken walls of the city. If the nation was to have complete restoration, the lives of the people would also need to be rebuilt. The effects of war and famine had wreaked physical havoc on the city’s inhabitants. Poverty and dire social conditions were the order of the day. Added to this was the separation and displacement of family members and friends as a result of captivity. Many of these families who had recently returned from captivity would now be faced with the challenges of reuniting and starting their lives over. Perhaps even worse was the spiritual and moral depression brought on by the physical destruction and vandalism of the Temple. Nehemiah had not arrived a day too soon.

After Nehemiah led in rebuilding the city walls, he then registered the families of the community and Temple leaders and made a head count of all the farm animals and other livestock. It was at this point that Ezra the priest (see Nehemiah 8) appeared as the community minister and assembled the people at the city’s Water Gate for a covenant ceremony. Ezra along with the Levites and the people participated in the public reading of the Law, offered prayers of confession and thanksgiving, and openly celebrated the Festival of Booths. This sacred and holy celebration marked the dawn of a new day in the life of this war-torn nation.

The prayer we read from Nehemiah 9 offers a model prayer for us today. Some of the events may be time-bound for that period, but the flow of the prayer offers us insight into human nature and God’s gracious love toward us. The prayer begins with a call first to recognize the sovereignty of God. The people were asked to “Stand up and bless the Lord your God” (verse 5). Recognizing the worthiness of God is the best way to begin our prayers. The awesomeness of God reminds us that in the midst of our most pressing needs, we stand before the Creator and Supreme Ruler of the universe. The question for me has always been not “How big is your problem?” but “How big is your God?”

Ezra’s prayer next acknowledged that regardless of Israel’s tragic and devastating history, nothing had escaped the ever-present and all-seeing eye of God. The Lord “saw the affliction of our ancestors in Egypt and heard their cry at the Reed Sea” (verse 9). Furthermore, God “knew that they [Pharoah and his cohorts] had acted arrogantly against our ancestors” (verse 10). Knowing that God knows our innermost needs and concerns gives us hope. Reality has a way of challenging our faith, especially in times of grave need and tragedy. However,
trusting in God as the lover and keeper of our soul comforts and reassures us that no matter the predicament, God’s delays are not God’s denial.

Another powerful point of this prayer is that Ezra and those praying with him recognized that God’s awareness and concern about Israel’s suffering and hardship showed itself in divine actions on behalf of the people. What did God do? Better still, what didn’t God do? The LORD performed “signs and wonders” that left no doubt that Israel was a chosen people (verse 10). We might want to review these marvelous acts found in the Book of Exodus to capture a glimpse of God’s awesome favor upon Israel (Exodus 7–11). In addition, miracles of food and water in the desert gave testimony of God’s mighty provision to Israel. God’s presence at Mount Sinai sought to establish these homeless nomads as a people of purpose and mission in a barren land. Israel’s history had been so highlighted with such mighty signs and wonders that the most skeptic mind could not deny the LORD’s abiding presence.

The power of remembrance can change our lives. Ezra’s prayer called for the people of Israel to look back to past error so that they might see future hope. Likewise, our hope today comes in knowing that the God of the past is the same as the God of the future and that the LORD of the mountains is the LORD of the valleys (1 Kings 20:28). Hope that is founded and based on God’s past and eternal promises always brightens our paths.

**How have your past experiences affected and changed your life? What**

**Israel’s Confession**

A first step toward healing in overcoming any problem begins when we acknowledge and accept the reality of the problem. We see this played out in twelve-step groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. The purpose and mission of AA is to help people recover and maintain sobriety from the effects of alcoholism. Through a series of group sessions and shared experiences, individual A.A. group members look deeply within themselves and honestly acknowledge their dependency upon alcohol. A fundamental step towards sobriety is for the person to stand up and openly admit in the group that he or she is an alcoholic. This simple act is a milestone because it brings the person into the reality of his or her failed past and lays the foundation for the next step.

Likewise, confession is a first step toward spiritual health. It was here that the people of Israel took ownership of their spiritual and moral downfall. We have to admire their openness in admitting before God that “our ancestors acted arrogantly. They were stubborn and wouldn’t obey your commandments” (Nehemiah 9:16). Ezra did not try and hide the sins of the people or pretend that they did not know the seriousness of the problem. In truth, Israel knew that disobeying and rejecting God was not in their best interest. They did not blindly fall into the sins that led them into a life of ruin and public shame. Recognizing and accepting the truth of their spiritual condition before God and their violations
to covenant living would eventually help them to see the merciful and forgiving hand of God.

Part of Israel's spiritual problem was not so much that they were arrogant and stubborn, but that they simply “didn’t remember the wonders that [God] accomplished in their midst” (verse 17). This was not as much a heart problem as it was a head problem. We might call it an honest mistake, though it carried with it dire consequences. Somewhere along the way, the people had forgotten the magnificent things God had done in their lives. Experience has taught me that the farther away we get from an occurrence, the more it begins to fade in our memory. On the other hand, these Israelites may have just used selective memory in remembering God's love towards them. Whatever the case, the passing of time had caused them to alienate and separate themselves from God.

Verse 17 acknowledges, “You are a God ready to forgive.” This should have been a point of joy and jubilation. We must never minimize the gift of forgiveness. God's forgiveness grows out of God's love towards us. It is God's free gift to us. We humans can neither earn nor manufacture it. Romans 5:8 says that “God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” The tragedy is that when people choose to reject this gift of forgiveness, they make void the death of Christ in their lives.

The last sentence in verse 17 gives us a clear and powerful picture of God's enduring and everlasting love. It simply says, “You didn’t forsake them.” Don’t overlook this profound insight! Ezra wanted the people to understand that Israel's beginning and very existence did not depend upon their efforts but on God's grace and provision. In spite of all that Israel did (or did not do), the LORD's love prevailed. Even in captivity, God sent prophets to speak comfort and hope into their bleak conditions. Realizing God's constant presence in all of life's experiences empowers us to withstand the worst of life's circumstances.

How do confessional prayers draw you closer to God?

Israel's Commitment

This covenant prayer made a powerful impact on both leader and people. It was not just the reading of a litany but a serious and holy call to action. The message was clear. God had been good to Israel and the people needed to return to God. God's great and mighty acts toward them served as evidence of how much God loved them. When we carefully study this prayer in its entirety (verses 5-38), we see a candid account of God's goodness to Israel over against the stubborn and arrogant ways of their ancestors. God was forever giving and blessing while Israel was forever receiving and rebelling. It was an unbalanced and lopsided relationship, yet through it all God was forever good and faithful. God still is.

In verse 32, the people acknowledge God as “our God, great and mighty and awesome.” The word “our” signifies a real sense of personal ownership. God is not just another of many deities, but our
God who is great, mighty, and awesome. These adjectives suggest a level of reverence and adoration. Long years of captivity and Babylonian exile had convicted them of the knowledge that the only hope for a brighter day would be found in God. It was a marvelous insight that promised to restore the nation back into wholeness and covenant fellowship.

When God becomes “our” God and not merely a casual centerpiece of weekly worship, radical changes begin to occur in us. When I joined my local church at age 13, I felt an obligation as a new church member to start acting “church-like” in my thinking and behavior. Church people regularly attend church, read the Bible, and participate in church activities. I felt the need to do this because, after all, this is what church people do. Right? In retrospect I recall spending long periods of time agonizingly trying to play out the role of these traditional expectations. Thankfully, years of nurture and support by a loving congregation brought me into a personal relationship with God in which God became “my” Lord and Savior. This spiritual connection moved me from casual fellowship to desired fellowship and communion with a living Savior.

Conviction leads to commitment. This was the case with Israel. The word “convict” in its biblical context essentially means to reprove or convince. A convicted person is someone who is convinced about the truth or error of a particular matter. This conviction can be based on internal or external evidence. A person just knows that they know. Jesus told his disciples, “And He [the Holy Spirit], when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8, NASB). Israel was convinced that sin had brought them into social and spiritual captivity and that God was their deliverer in spite of past wrongs. The knowledge and evidence of things hoped for but not seen had led the officials and people to make a public declaration of their faith (verse 38).

Take time this week to reflect on your past life journey. Look at those times in which God’s hand was active whether you realized it at the time or not. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you and then convict you. An honest look in the rearview mirror will show you how far you have come in light of where you are going.

What encourages you to become more committed in your walk with God?

Mighty God, we acknowledge and remember your wonderful deeds of love towards us. Convict us and forgive us of our past wrongs so that we might become the body of Christ in the world today; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.
Luke 19:1-10 (NIV)

1 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.
2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.
3 He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd.
4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.
5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”
6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.
7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”
8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”
9 Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.
10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Luke 19:1-10 (KJV)

1 And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho.
2 And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich.
3 And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature.
4 And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way.
5 And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house.
6 And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully.
7 And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner.
8 And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord: Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.
9 And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham.
10 For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.
Life-changing events do not happen every day. But they do happen! One particular event that comes to mind occurred years ago when my District Superintendent invited me along with several fellow ministers to attend an ecumenical men’s conference. We traveled by van to make the ten-hour trip. To the best of my recollection it was a three- or four-day event, held in Dallas, Texas, at the well-known domed football stadium. A final headcount at some point during the meeting revealed that 40,000 men were in attendance. I clearly remember the amazement of seeing droves of men coming from every direction, wearing everything from suits to casual dress, walking toward that massive stadium.

The fact that this was an ecumenical event made it even more amazing and exciting for me. There may have been a dominant group in the gathering; nonetheless, numerous denominations, races, and people from every geographical area were represented. The musical selections, keynote speakers, and other supporting personnel reflected this multiplicity of people. We sang familiar church songs that took us back to our childhood days. One of the highlights for me was standing in the bleachers with 40,000 people collectively singing, “O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer’s praise.” The harmony was beautiful. Seemingly (and I’m not really a singer), everyone was on key. It was electrifying! I instantly felt a bond of brotherhood with thousands of people I did not know and probably would never meet. Well-known speakers talked about how to become better husbands to our wives and how to be faithful witnesses for Christ in an ever-changing world. As part of our conference registration, we received boxed lunches and then scattered to places nearby to eat our meals. The amazement here was that it took no more than 20 minutes to serve 40,000 people. Now that’s organization!

When I returned home and shared with my wife some of the conference highlights, at one point she looked at me and said, “Something’s different about you. There’s a glow about you.” In truth, something was different about me. I was one of many individuals who had undergone
a life-changing experience at this event. I have long since forgotten many of the conference details, but the experience lingers with me.

Zacchaeus also had a life-changing experience. When he met Jesus, he went from a powerful and untrustworthy tax collector to a repentant and neighborly friend to others. What did he see in Jesus? How did this casual meeting bring about such a radical change in his life? Zacchaeus’ story shows us that when we meet Christ, something wonderful and life-changing takes place in our lives and blesses others around us.

Zacchaeus’ Curiosity

Zacchaeus’ curiosity got the best of him. He had to see Jesus! Luke presents his story in the wider context of a miracle that Jesus had just performed on the road to Jericho (Luke 18:35-42). A blind man sitting alongside the road shouted to Jesus, “Son of David, show me mercy” (Luke 18:38). Mark’s Gospel introduces this man as Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus (Mark 10:46). As usual, Jesus stopped and gave assistance to this person. After a short exchange of words, Jesus told him, “Receive your sight! Your faith has healed you” (Luke 18:42). Praise and joy immediately erupted in the hearts of the onlookers. Zacchaeus may have heard the sounds of this open-air praise. Whatever the reason, he was determined to seize the moment and get a look at the person named Jesus.

Our Scripture begins with Jesus and the disciples entering into the city of Jericho. Jericho, we may remember, was Joshua’s first military conquest when the Israelites entered into their Promised Land. This city of antiquity became the proving ground of God’s love for Israel. In New Testament times, Jericho was a prosperous and flourishing trade center located about five miles west of Jerusalem. Jericho and vicinity appear to have been territory where Jesus and the disciples frequently traveled. The road to Jericho was also a place where robbery and other violent acts were common, yet Jesus never allowed this to deter him from his ministry.

Likewise, the Christ within our hearts calls us to be courageous in meeting people’s needs and sharing our faith. If “the world is our parish,” as John Wesley believed, then our witness must be bold and unapologetic witness and seek to touch hurting humanity regardless of race, color, social, or economic status with heaven’s redeeming love. Everyone needs to know who Jesus is, even Zacchaeus.

Luke describes Zacchaeus as a “ruler of tax collectors” (Luke 19:2), a wealthy person. Other Bible translations use the word “chief” to describe his status among tax collectors. This positioned him as someone prestigious and prominent in the community. However, many in the Jewish community would have seen him as an insult and embarrassment to his Jewish heritage because he worked for the Roman government. The fact that tax collectors were known to cheat people out of their mandatory payment of taxes
to the Roman government made them even more repugnant. In the minds of many of his fellow Jews, Zacchaeus was a traitor and con man all wrapped into one. Yet as Scripture shows, one touch from heaven can make the vilest clean.

In verse 3 we see the intense curiosity of Zacchaeus playing out. Again, Zacchaeus had to see Jesus. He was not about to let his short stature or the large crowd rob him of this opportunity. The fact that he physically ran, climbed into a sycamore tree, and there waited until Jesus came by shows the level of his determination. This would be his moment, and Zacchaeus would not miss it. How great and on fire would the church be today if people had that level of commitment to see and follow Jesus?

How would you describe your level of pursuit and commitment in following Christ?

Zacchaeus Meets Jesus

We can only imagine the excitement that must have been welling up in Zacchaeus as Jesus approached the tree where he had lodged himself. What would Jesus look like? Tall? Short? Distinguished-looking? Would he heal someone else? Zacchaeus’s thoughts must’ve been endless. He was poised and ready to satisfy his curiosity and to see firsthand all the excitement was about. In verse 5 Zacchaeus’ eagerness comes to a climax. Instead of continuing to walk along the road and perhaps wave or greet the local people, Jesus went to the tree where Zacchaeus was and stopped. Can the excitement get any higher? The Lord then looked up, and without hesitation or any prompting, told Zacchaeus to “come down at once, I must stay in your home today.” Just as urgently and directly as Jesus had extended the call, Zacchaeus “came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus” (verse 6).

The lack of explanation in this verse as to exactly what took place in this short two-sentence conversation is mind-boggling for me. The results are clear, but the dynamics of what brought about the sudden change in this dishonest tax collector still leave me mystified. Zacchaeus had hastily run and climbed into a tree looking for Jesus, only to discover that it was Jesus who was looking for him. Perhaps that is a message for us today. In an attempt to find meaning and purpose in our lives, we often find ourselves running toward things like power, position, money, and other pursuits that only offer us temporary fixes at best. Jesus presents himself at whatever point we find ourselves in life with living water and bread that quench our deepest thirst and hunger.

When Zacchaeus heard the call of Jesus, he immediately responded. Jesus called. Zacchaeus answered. Is this not a message for us today? Furthermore, the text says that he came down “happy to welcome Jesus.” The idea of happiness suggests that there was no stress or tension in making this decision. Zacchaeus’ prompt action shows that deep down he
knew that inviting and welcoming Jesus into his midst and home would somehow prove to be a blessing. The blessing that would come from this encounter demanded immediate action. Two phrases in verse 5 are “immediately” and “today.” Christ bids all to seize the “now” of this moment in discovering the wonders of God’s love.

God is still calling! Are we listening? One of the great appeals and appreciation for me about the church is its open invitation and display of opportunities whereby God calls us into ministry. Everyone, both lay and clergy, has a place of worth and is welcomed at the table. Whether we preach, teach, sing, administer, counsel, whatever the job, opportunities and training are available. Our response is simply to answer the “whosoever will” call that God places upon us.

Verse 7 is an unfortunate reality of life. Everyone does not always share our joy and happiness in finding meaning and purpose in life. The crowd that had just erupted in praise after witnessing the miracle of Jesus healing the blind man on the road to Jericho now could not celebrate over the salvation of a sinner. Instead, when Zacchaeus came down to receive Jesus, “Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, ‘He [Jesus] has gone to be the guest of a sinner’” (verse 7). The blessing that had just happened in the midst of the crowd’s condemning atmosphere, however, was that salvation had indeed come into the life of this tax collector and had brought him out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.

What is God calling you to do? How do you plan to respond?

Zacchaeus’ Salvation

Christ makes a difference in our lives. This truth is attested to by all who sincerely trust and obey God. It is a historical proclamation in the lives of the saints of God. When Zacchaeus met Jesus, something miraculous and life-changing happened in his life that others could see. Jesus did not call him to change; instead, Zacchaeus announced his intention to change saying, “Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much.” Zacchaeus’ conviction and guilt had prompted him to renounce his deceptive and cheating lifestyle. The idea of returning “half of my possessions” to the poor shows his level of remorsefulness for his actions. Repaying four times as much as an act of restitution also would have satisfied the requirements of the Law in the case of theft (Exodus 22:1). Actions always speak louder than words.

Zacchaeus’ story ends on a very positive note. In spite of all of his sins misdoings, Zacchaeus was born anew into the kingdom of God. Salvation had come to Zacchaeus’ house! (verse 9) The word “salvation” generally refers to God’s deliverance from the power of sin in our lives. A review of Hebrew and Greek origins also reveals that words like safety, welfare, peace, wholeness, prosperity,
and cure from disease all come under the umbrella of this word “salvation.” In short, salvation is the total package of God’s extended love towards humankind. Zacchaeus’ encounter with Jesus had brought God’s total plan of salvation and redemption to him and laid it at his doorstep.

Finally, Jesus used his visit to Zacchaeus’ house as a teaching moment on his purpose for coming into the world. He came to “seek and save the lost” (verse 10). Mark’s Gospel says that Jesus “didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people” (Mark 10:45). Early in Luke’s Gospel we read Jesus’ announcement in the synagogue that, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18). In light of these Scriptures, Jesus’ meeting with Zacchaeus was not an accident but an intentional effort to seek out and bring a lost soul into the kingdom. Zacchaeus was on Jesus’ list as a “son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9) to experience the love that only comes from God. What a wonderful thing to know that regardless of our past sins and failures in life, God still values us and places us on heaven’s redemption list. No one is out of the reach of God’s love.

The powerful message of Zacchaeus’ story is that we are part of the cast in the story. God still speaks today. Consciously use this week as an opportunity to listen to the voice of God through your prayers, reading Scripture, relationships with friends and neighbors, and moments of quiet before the Master. It will be a life-changing word and one that others will want to hear.

What excites you most about salvation?

Lord, thank you for caring enough about us to stop by and call our name. May we hear, obey, and receive with joy and celebration the salvation you offer; in Jesus name we pray. Amen.
John 4:7-30, 39-42 (NIV)

John 4:7-30

7 When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?”
8 (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)
9 The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)
10 Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”
11 “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?
12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”
13 Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again,
14 but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”
15 The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”
16 He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”
17 “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband.
18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”
19 “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet.
20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”
21 “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.
22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.
23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.
24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”
25 The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”
26 Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”
27 Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”
28 Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people,
29 “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?”
30 They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

Come and See

Purpose

To hear Jesus speak grace to those who are outsiders.

Hearing the Word

The background text for this lesson is John 4:4-42
39-42

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.”

So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days.

And because of his words many more became believers.

They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”

John 4:7-30, 39-42 (KJV)

John 4:7-30

There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water: Jesus saith unto her, Give me to drink.

(For his disciples were gone away unto the city to buy meat.)

Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.

Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.

The woman saith unto him, Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast thou that living water?

Art thou greater than our father Jacob, which gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children, and his cattle?

Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again:

But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

The woman saith unto him, Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw.

Jesus saith unto her, Go, call thy husband, and come hither.

The woman answered and said, I have no husband. Jesus said unto her, Thou hast well said, I have no husband:

For thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly.

The woman saith unto him, Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet.

Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.

Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.

Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews.

But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.

The woman saith unto him, I know that Messias cometh, which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things.

Jesus saith unto her, I that speak unto thee am he.

And upon this came his disciples, and marvelled that he talked with the woman: yet no man said, What seekest thou? or, Why talkest thou with her?

The woman then left her waterpot, and went her way into the city, and saith to the men,

Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?

Then they went out of the city, and came unto him.

And many of the Samaritans of that city believed on him for the saying of the woman, which testified, He told me all that ever I did.

So when the Samaritans were come unto him, they besought him that he would tarry with them: and he abode there two days.

And many more believed because of his own word;

And said unto the woman, Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world.
The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States was a source of great pride for many African Americans. Obama was born in Honolulu, Hawaii to an interracial couple. Years later, while at Harvard Law School, he became the first African American editor of the Harvard Law Review. While Hawaii had provided a backdrop of numerous cultural groups for him as a biracial child, he at times seemed to struggle to find his identity as a young black man living on the US mainland. Because of his race and heritage, many saw him as an outsider. Nonetheless, he exemplified the fact that with determination and hard work, opportunity is open to everyone.

The Samaritan woman’s conversation with Jesus at a community well, the focus of this lesson, ensured her that no one, regardless of cultural or racial background, is exempt from God’s love. Jesus’ words changed her life and the lives of those in her community.

### A Samaritan Woman

In the previous lesson, we saw Jesus on the road to Jericho. In this lesson, we see him traveling on the road to Samaria. John’s Gospel provides us with an ordinary story that yields extraordinary results in the life of a Samaritan woman.

After Jesus had finished his visit in Judea, he then returned to Galilee. John says that “Jesus had to go through Samaria” (John 4:4). Given the years of racial and religious bickering that existed between the Jews and Samaritans, we may wonder why Jesus felt so compelled to travel this route. Many if not most Jews would have taken a detour around Samaria in an effort to bypass this part of the country. Yet Jesus, as he did on the hazardous road to Jericho, took this route without regard to what people may have thought. He allowed nothing to prevent him from ministering wherever there was need.

Sychar was a Samaritan township located near Mount Gerizim. It became for Jesus and his disciples a stopping place where they could rest from their journey. A community well provided a cool drink for Jesus while the disciples went into the city to buy food. It was in the heat of the day, and Jesus was tired, yet not so tired that he could not minister life to a bewildered soul. Jesus initiated the conversation saying, “Give me some water to drink” (verse 7). As harmless as this may sound to us, it broke rank with tradition and the expectations of society. In what
may have been an honest effort to correct a social offense, the Samaritan woman confronted Jesus about his actions. Jews and Samaritan people do not associate, sir! Where have you been? This social and cultural barrier had existed for so long in the community that most everyone understood that it was the “right” thing to do.

How regrettable is it that barriers still separate people! Prejudice and racism are not new problems. “Ethnocentrism” is the sociological word that describes the attitude and act of judging other cultures with our personal standards of right and wrong. In other words, we may look at individuals or other groups of people and somehow conclude that we are better or more deserving than they are. No one group is totally innocent. This skewed attitude of superiority and its resulting discrimination might be based on appearance, sex, age, national origin, language, or just a desire to control and dominate. Whatever the reason, racism and other forms of discrimination are ugly and have no place in the body of Christ.

In verse 10, Jesus took the conversation with the woman to a deeper dimension. The need for physical water paved the way for him to talk about people’s need for spiritual water. In Scripture, water often symbolizes new life, and with that, the power that comes only from a relationship with Christ. Water soothes, refreshes, and nourishes our bodies. Many dietitians conclude that water is the only drink that can completely satisfy thirst. I have experienced this after drinking lots of pop, only to become fully satisfied when I drank a glass of cool water. Jesus wanted this woman to understand that he represented heaven’s living water and that “whoever drinks from the water that I will give will never be thirsty again” (verse 14). Although she was likely still trying to grasp the meaning of “living water,” the woman accepted Jesus’ offer and said, “Give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty” (verse 15). We may not always fully understand spiritual truth at first, but faith in God’s word enables us to reap the blessing of God’s grace.

Jesus’ request for her to “Go, get your husband, and come back here” may have been a test of this woman’s truthfulness. Divorced for five times would have rendered her a social outcast. Whatever the case, she passed the test honestly saying, “I don’t have a husband” (verse 17). Her honesty again opened up a door for her to see the prophetic side of Jesus. Indeed, this was more than a weary traveler on his way through the land. Her conversation immediately turned to worship and what is necessary for worship. She would learn that true worship transcends cultural and social barriers.

What might you do to break barriers that hinder you from sharing your faith with others?

True Worship

Jesus’ conversation with the woman about worship was direct and straightforward. God is concerned about worship in the life of the believer. Jesus quickly settled the question about the “right” place to worship. Is it at the Samaritan temple
built on Mount Gerizim or the Jewish temple built in Jerusalem? The answer is, neither one! Jesus told the woman that true worship will come, but it will be “neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (verse 21). That is, true worship is not so much a matter of place but of the heart. The first stanza of a familiar hymn The Church is Not a Building says it so well, “The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people,” followed by a beautiful refrain that says it all for me, “I am the church! You are the church! We are the church together! All who follow Jesus, all around the world! Yes, we’re the church together!” Worship starts with you. You are the “right” place.

Jesus next made a statement that might seem at first a little harsh to us. “You and your people [Samaritans] worship what you don’t know; we worship what we know because salvation is from the Jews,” he told the woman (verse 22). However, this statement is softened when we look at it in light of Samaritan history and theology. While Samaritan believers worshipped God, some Bible scholars tell us that they only used the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) as their Scriptures. Hence, their faith in God was not inferior to the Jews; nonetheless Jesus pointed out to the woman that Samaritans did not have the complete revelation of the coming Messiah as did the Jews. Rather than arrogance, “salvation is from the Jews” is simply a statement of God’s historical act and choice in using a people through which salvation would come into the world. The wonderful bottom line truth of this story is that Jews and Samaritans alike can worship God in spirit and truth. Everyone can come to the table!

God is serious about worship. The Exodus story and other stories in the Old Testament testify to this truth. God goes the extra mile and takes unprecedented steps to seek out and deliver people from their distress so that they can worship. The centerpiece of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt was that the people might go into the desert and establish themselves through worship and obedience as a new spiritual nation. Jesus told this woman that God is actively looking for worshippers (verse 23). It is a call to connect to the only One who can give us purpose and meaning in life.

John Wesley referred to this seeking love as “prevenient grace.” It is not so much that we are seeking God as God is first seeking us. God is the one who makes the first move in terms of looking for the least, the last, and the lost. Prevenient grace is that love that goes before and seeks to bring us into relationship with a loving Savior in spite of our sins. It is comprehending what John meant when he wrote, “We love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19). God offers this love to us whether we accept it or not. Jesus wanted this woman to understand that God seeks to connect with our human spirits so that we might know that “we are God’s children” (Romans 8:16).

We can only imagine the awe that came into the heart of this Samaritan woman when Jesus identified himself.
She told Jesus that she knew that the Messiah or Anointed One would come one day, only to hear the Lord say, “I Am—the one who speaks with you” (verse 26). Again, we do not know her thoughts, but her actions were clear. In her short and unassuming conversation with Jesus at Jacob’s well, new life and purpose had been birthed in her.

**What is your understanding of true worship?**

**Many Samaritans Believe**

Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman was abruptly interrupted by the returning disciples who were “shocked” to see this Jewish rabbi talking with a foreigner (verse 27). The impression is that they were just as culturally and socially marred in their thinking as was the Samaritan woman. Their decision not to question Jesus about his actions suggests that they were perhaps embarrassed and lost for words. Jesus, however, gave no apology for his actions. The conversation was over but the impression on this woman had just begun. Her witness was twofold. She first told those whom she met to “Come and see a man,” then asked, “Could this man be the Christ?” (verse 29). Some Jewish scholars interpret this as saying, “Surely, this cannot be the Christ?” It was as if she could not believe what had just happened, yet she could not deny the effects of Jesus’ penetrating and life-changing words on her life. She was convinced that other people needed to see Jesus.

Never underestimate the power of one. It is easy to think that one person cannot make a difference. However, history records numerous individuals in all walks of life who took bold positions of courage and determination in what appeared to be hopeless situations. Their hearts connected with other kindred hearts and something great happened. Enthusiasm is contagious! Despite this Samaritan woman’s lack of moral and social credibility in the community, the townspeople could not overlook her enthusiasm. Something very real had just happened in her life. People heard her confession and saw her zeal. “Come and see” was the urgent request. The result was “They left the city and were on their way to see Jesus” (verse 30). Through the power of one person, cultural barriers would be broken and the stage set for spiritual renewal in her community.

A heart on fire can set other hearts on fire. This is what happened in the case of the Samaritan woman. “Many Samaritans in that city believed in Jesus because of the woman’s word” (verse 39). Upon going and seeing Jesus for themselves, these townspeople asked the Lord to stay a little longer. Their curiosity and hunger for truth overrode any apparent prejudices. No one questioned the authenticity of Jesus’ identity and witness. Instead, they offered Jesus an invitation to stay with them longer so that they might hear the message of God’s redeeming love. John does not give us specific details of Jesus’ actions on his two-day visit in the city; however, it is highly likely that our Lord spent much time teaching and sharing kingdom principles. It was a gathering I certainly would
like to have attended!

The conversation of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is a conversation for all of us. It is a conversation that confronts us with the reality of who we are as members of the human family. This Samaritan woman, unfortunately like many today, was locked into a social and moral attitude that kept her from seeing the inclusiveness of God’s love. She needed this conversation. She needed to experience for herself the power of divine love and to know that, “There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Take advantage this week of the many opportunities to hear and share the love of Christ with those around you. People need a word from God and you may just be God’s instrument for the day.

What has your relationship with Christ motivated you to do?

Lord, open our hearts and minds so that we might hear your wonderful words of life and worship you in spirit and in truth. May others see your glory in us; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

1 From theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/ta-nehisi-coates-obama-transcript-iii/511475/. 
Luke 10:25-37 (NIV)

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

26 “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

27 He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

30 In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.

32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.

35 The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

36 Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

37 The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Luke 10:25-37 (KJV)

25 And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

26 He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou?

27 And he answering said, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

29 But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

30 And Jesus answering said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

31 And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

32 And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.

33 But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,

34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.

35 And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and gave the excess for his nourishment.”

Who Is My Neighbor?

Purpose

To learn who our neighbors might be.

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.
said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.

36 Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?

37 And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.

**DAILY BIBLE STUDY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>August 10</th>
<th>Leviticus 19:9-18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 11</td>
<td>Romans 13:8-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 12</td>
<td>Romans 15:1-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 13</td>
<td>Galatians 5:4-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 14</td>
<td>Acts 27:3—28:2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 16</td>
<td>Luke 10:29-37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Seeing the Need**

Several years ago I became familiar with the phrase “random acts of kindness.” I first discovered this popular saying while watching a well-known talk show on television. The host of this particular show was interviewing individuals about doing acts of kindness in their communities. A random act of kindness might be defined as any unannounced and unplanned act of hospitality or kindness freely extended toward others. RAKs, as they are sometimes called, can also be preplanned events. They can range from sending a note to someone, walking a friend’s dog, stopping to talk to a homeless person, giving up a seat for an elderly person, recycling cans and plastic containers, donating used books to a library, to simply giving someone a friendly smile. Needless to say, the ways to be kind to others are endless and limited only by our imaginations.

Later I would learn through research and personal inquiry that Random Acts of Kindness had become a national and international trend that seeks to inspire and empower people to share kind acts of love and compassion to others. I was amazed at the numerous books, videos, calendars, and educational research launched by the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation. There is even a Random Acts of Kindness Day on the calendar. Although many people regularly do random acts of kindness, an organized and structured effort like this, with its intentional attempt to unite hearts to collectively make the world a better place through kindness, holds great power.

The science of kindness teaches us that there is a positive power in being kind. Kindness is contagious. The good in us tends to draw out the good in others. Research has found that kindness increases love, energy, happiness, and the lifespan of individuals. Kindness tends to decrease pain, stress, anxiety,
depression, and blood pressure. In short, kindness blesses us and those around us. Is there any wonder why John Wesley advised, “Do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, to all the souls you can”? 1

The example Jesus described in Luke 10:25-37, which we typically call the story of the Good Samaritan, calls us to look at what it means to be a neighbor and to seek ways we can show kindness and extend God’s love to others.

A Lawyer’s Question

The biblical text for this lesson opens with a familiar and unfortunate scene. A religious group in the community once again tried to entrap Jesus in his words or actions. Luke 10:25 tells us that, “A legal expert stood up to test Jesus.” The word “test” or “tempt” (used in some translations) shows a clear intent of dishonesty on the part of the legal expert. On one occasion the Pharisees questioned Jesus about taxes in an attempt to trap him (Matthew 22:15), while Mark reports that the religious authorities watched Jesus in the Temple to see if he would heal on the Sabbath so that charges could be brought against him (Mark 3:2). On another occasion these pious do-gooders brought to Jesus a woman taken in adultery in an attempt to test Jesus so that they might accuse him (John 8:6). To say the least, it was a hostile and unfriendly environment in which to do ministry. Yet Jesus confronted each situation with God’s love and compassion.

In response to the deceitful question from the legal expert, Jesus immediately referred him to the teachings of the Law, saying, “What is written in the Law?” (Luke 10:26). After all, shouldn’t a lawyer or legal expert who was versed in the laws of Moses be able to answer this question? The lawyer quickly displayed his knowledge, drawn from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, declaring that we are to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself” (verse 27). Jesus then complimented this lawyer for his superb knowledge, yet candidly told him that knowing must lead to doing. If this lawyer was going to inherit eternal life, he must “Do this and you will live” (verse 28).

Doing or following the commandments of God is where many people fall short in their spiritual walk. It is my hunch that most people know and have a real sense of right from wrong. Many people “know” to do right; however, the “doing” seems to trip them up. Jesus concluded his Sermon on the Mount with a call to not merely hear his words but to do or practice them (Matthew 7:24-27). A person who hears Jesus’ words but does not put them into practice is like “a fool who built a house on sand,” Jesus said. “The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It fell and was completely destroyed” (verses 26b-27). Likewise, the Apostle James reminds us to be doers of the word and not hearers only lest we mislead ourselves (James 1:22). Our human natures have no real desire to do good and serve God. Yet our spiritual selves remind us that, “God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good pur-
In an attempt to “prove that he was right,” the legal expert advanced the question. He moved from “what must I do to gain eternal life” to “who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). He apparently wanted Jesus to know that he was righteous in keeping all the Law. As a Pharisee, he not only loved God but loved his fellow Pharisees and those of his sect. A neighbor in his mind was very likely a person of the same cultural, racial, and religious identity. Thus he was probably a little bewildered that Jesus would tell a story complimenting a Samaritan giving unselfish aid to a Jew. Jesus, however, wanted this self-righteous Pharisee to know that the qualifications for being a true neighbor were not bound to Jewish heritage. Anyone who truly loves God will love others. Love does not overlook the needs of others. Neither is love arrogant and self-seeking but instead seeks to build up and give hope to others. If this Pharisee received this truth, he would be that much closer to eternal life.

*What does it mean to you to love God with “all your being”—your heart, soul, mind, and strength?*

**Jesus’ Answer**

Jesus answered this Pharisee’s question by telling a story. The power of a story is that people can see themselves in it. When we see ourselves through a character in a story, we very often see the answers to our questions. This was Jesus’ intent. If this Pharisee could see what a true neighbor looks like, he would hopefully repent of his arrogance and recognize God’s desire for people to love one another.

Jesus began by telling about a man who “went down from Jerusalem to Jericho” (verse 30). Let’s not overlook the word “down” in understanding the geography of this trip. Jerusalem is built on a hill overlooking lower valleys and regions. Going “up” to Jerusalem literally means up, while going “down” literally means down. Jericho was 17 miles of rocky and rough terrain headed down from Jerusalem, the conditions ideal for bandits and thieves to prey on unsuspecting travelers. It was on this hazardous road to Jericho that Jesus provided a spiritual insight to this Pharisee.

The attack on the man traveling the Jericho road was brutal. If we are not careful, our familiarity with this story can make us insensitive to this man’s sad plight and cause us to miss the severe nature of this offense. This was a terrible violation against one human being by other human beings. He was stripped naked, beaten, and left for dead. His condition was critical and dehumanizing to say the least. We do not know how long he lay in his debilitating and weakened condition. We can only imagine his pain, anguish, and fear. He could have been killed.

This horrible incident calls our attention to the cruel reality of life. Our faith will empower and sustain us to confront and overcome the tragedies of life. Yet we cannot make light of the fact that we live in a world that often rejects good and will stop at nothing short of doing us harm in one way or another. When Jesus commis-
sioned the twelve disciples, he told them, “I’m sending you as sheep among wolves” (Matthew 10:16). What a charge! This was not a mission of naivety. Jesus wanted them to know that through the power of the Holy Spirit, they would be change agents of salt and light. God’s promise assured victory. Courage and peace comes in knowing that just as Jesus overcame the world, we too can have this same victory.

What are we to make of Luke 10:31-32? It is tempting for me as a clergy person to politely shy away from this part of the story. But the reality of this truth stares us in the face even today. Luke says that a priest came along, and upon seeing this injured man, crossed over to the other side and continued on his journey. A Levite then came along and reacted in the same way, bypassing this injured person. As a Levite, he would have assisted the priest and carried out other special duties in the Temple. These persons represented God and righteousness in the community. We like to think that their professions would demand a level of compassion on their part. Maybe they really didn’t get a good look at the injured man. Maybe they were late, had to get to the Temple, and knew that others would be coming behind them who would help. Or maybe they just didn’t care! Some have suggested that the Jewish laws related to clean and unclean forbade the priest and Levite from touching this man. Whatever the reason, Jesus saw their actions as a violation of respect for others. It certainly violated the definition of neighbor.

The Samaritan’s radical and unsolicited behavior arose from the fact that “he was moved with compassion” (verse 33). Compassion makes a difference in our relationships with others. A compassionate person has pity on the plight of others. He or she has sympathy for someone and empathizes with the feelings of another. How would I feel if someone robbed, beat, and left me for dead on this dusty road? Would I appreciate someone stopping to help me? Christian empathy moves us to act out the teaching of Christ to “Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you” (Luke 6:31).

Our means to help others might be limited and not as extensive as what the Samaritan did for this injured man, but our compassion should be limitless. Helping others in times of need is a clear and positive expression of God’s healing hand in the world. Compassionate acts are a vehicle by which we penetrate the darkness and flavor the world with signs and wonders of hope and deliverance. The great witness of showing compassion in an often compassionless world is that we declare ourselves as co-laborers with God in ushering forth God’s kingdom into the world.

Do you see yourself as a co-laborer with God? How?

Go and Do Likewise!

Jesus’ first question to the Pharisee (verse 26) showed that this legal expert understood the Law. His second question, however—“Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man?” (verse 36)—was designed to reveal whether this
Lesson 11

Pharisee was ready to follow Jesus’ command. Jesus’ story gave him a picture of what God looks for in our relationships with others. Barriers and traditions should not limit love. Jesus’ question of “What do you think?” gave the man a chance to reflect on the seriousness of this matter. The actions of these three travelers showed the seriousness of their faith. Jesus’ question to the Pharisee demanded an answer.

His answer to Jesus was a turning point in his life. His answer—“the one who demonstrated mercy” (verse 37)—was not just a kingdom principle he had learned from Jesus, but a self-revelation of truth. It is always more meaningful and life-changing when we discover a truth for ourselves.

Jesus’ final word to this Pharisee was, “Go and do likewise” (verse 37). This is our assignment as well. Hurt is everywhere and on all sides. We do not have to search for pain and trouble. It is all around us. This Scripture text so clearly calls us to let God’s love abiding in us flow to others around us. John Wesley referred to this as scriptural holiness and social holiness. Jesus said that when we minister to others and provide for their needs, it is the same as doing it for him (Matthew 25:31-46).

Take time this week to be a neighbor who cares and shares. Life this week will present us with many opportunities in various places to be the hands and feet and mouth of Jesus. Our challenge is to “go” so that others might see God’s unconditional love.

What acts of love and kindness might you share with others in this coming week?

Lord, thank you for your love and care that knows no bounds or limits. Give us a heart that looks beyond the outer surface of others so that we might freely display the love of a compassionate Savior; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

1 From umcdiscipleship.org/resources/rule-of-life.
Great Faith

Purpose
To discover how faith can be found in one who is not a part of the community.

Hearing the Word
The background text for this lesson is Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-29.

Matthew 15:21-28 (NIV)
21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.
22 A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”
23 Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”
24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”
25 The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.
26 He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”
27 “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”
28 Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.

Matthew 15:21-28 (KJV)
21 Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.
22 And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.
23 But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.
24 But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
25 Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.
26 But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs.
27 And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.
28 Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.
Seeing the Need

I am not what someone would call an avid movie watcher. A trailer or preview of a film will often satisfy my curiosity, especially if I know the general plot of that type of movie. “Enough,” starring Latin actress Jennifer Lopez, is an exception. The movie’s subtitle is “Everyone Has a Limit.” Although it did not receive high marks by movie critics or break box office records, it spoke to me. In the movie, Slim (Jennifer Lopez) is a young and attractive single woman working as a waitress at a restaurant in a large city. She meets a handsome but not so honest young man named Mitch who is a customer at the restaurant. A friendship develops between the two that soon leads to marriage and later the birth of a daughter. Years later, the marriage begins to sour as Slim discovers that Mitch is having an extramarital affair. Frustrated and upset, she threatens to leave, only to be physically abused by her husband and told that his financial support of the family entitles him to come and go as he pleases. The abuse escalates into further verbal and physical attacks against her and any relative who tries to help her.

Desperate, depressed, and running out of options, Slim decides to leave the house with her young daughter out of fear for their physical safety. She changes her name and appearance and takes refuge in an isolated and cheap hotel. Later her abusive husband finds her and she narrowly escapes with her life and that of her daughter. She later flees to another state, only to be eventually found again by the sadistic husband. Desperation increases as Slim discovers that her credit cards and other sources of money have been frozen. A candid conversation with an elderly lawyer informs her that no crime has been committed and even the police cannot help her situation. Recognizing that she can no longer live in fear and hiding, Slim decides to fight back in order to save herself and the life of her young daughter. As with most good thriller movies, she wins.

What drew and kept my attention in this movie was watching the bulldog tenacity and determination of this battered woman to break out of a terrible situation. For the sake of her daughter’s future, she let nothing and no one deter her. This Bible lesson explores a powerful story of a Canaanite woman whose faith allowed nothing to prevent her from going
into the presence of Jesus. Her great faith yielded her great results.

**A Canaanite Woman’s Plea**

This account from Matthew’s Gospel is also found in Mark 7:24-30. In it, we find Jesus again in what some would see as forbidden territory. The regions of Tyre and Sidon were Gentile cities and steeped in Canaanite paganism. The text does not tell us what Jesus’ purpose was in visiting this area. However, Matthew says that a Canaanite woman from the region came out and began to cry out to Jesus. Mark corroborates this story, saying that she was of Greek heritage and a Syrophoenician woman, meaning that she was born somewhere in the Syrian Phoenicia area.

Her cry was desperate and direct: “Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession” (Matthew 15:22). It was the cry of a mother’s heart seeking help for her sick daughter. Her persistence shows the level of her pain. What would Jesus do and how would he respond to this particular crisis?

The fact that this woman cried out to Jesus shows his renown throughout the region. When people saw the miracles and heard the teachings of Jesus, his fame almost instantly catapulted. Mark says that after Jesus had cast out a demon in a person at Capernaum, “the news about him spread throughout the entire region of Galilee” (Mark 1:28). On another occasion we read that the people heard him “with delight” (Mark 12:37). In response to why they did not arrest Jesus, the Temple guards told the Pharisees that, “No one has ever spoken the way he does” (John 7:46). Jesus’ reputation had without doubt spread across the nation and beyond.

Mark points out in his account of this encounter that when Jesus went into the region, he sought to be discreet and keep a low profile, yet “he couldn’t hide” (Mark 7:24). Notoriety on any level can have its ups and downs. It is certainly nice to be appreciated and recognized for a quality or an accomplishment. People need to be affirmed. On the other hand, fame and public recognition can be taxing on a person. Jesus’ “celebrity” status translated into a constant schedule of ministering to the hurts and needs of people. He sometimes taught the multitudes in a boat on the sea so as not to be thronged by the crowd (Matthew 13:2; Luke 5:3). On other occasions, Jesus retreated to secluded areas in order to recuperate and spend time with God.

This Canaanite woman had heard about Jesus. She may have even seen him at some point. Whatever the case, she was not about to miss the moment; neither would she let her Canaanite ancestry and history as Israel’s foe distract her. Her desperate cry clearly says that she knew that help and hope would be found in Jesus. Her daughter was suffering “terribly” and needed immediate attention. Any parent who has ever experienced a sick or suffering child with seemingly no relief in sight can empathize with this cry of hopelessness and utter frustration. However, our hope in times like this is found in the assurance that God is concerned and hears...
the cries of the righteous. We must never lose this hope.

We can only speculate about why Jesus “didn’t respond to her at all” (verse 23). Perhaps he did not hear her, or maybe he was trying to assess her situation. The good news, however, is that this woman would be heard and her problem would be solved. This brings to our attention the reality of God’s timing in our lives. God doesn’t always respond to our problems in our time and the way we think the Lord should respond. Yet faith comforts and assures us of things hoped for and even provides the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). It is the foreknowledge that God loves and promises to be with us in life’s most uncertain times. For those who might be at their wits end, hold on!

Does it ever seem to you that God at times does not hear your prayers? What do you do about it?

The Disciples’ Request

After this Canaanite woman shouted for Jesus to show mercy upon her, the disciples immediately took offense and urged Jesus to “Send her away; she keeps shouting out after us” (verse 23). As a minister, my first thought is, what’s going on here? The woman was frantic and at her wits end because of a sick daughter, yet she got a direct rebuttal from people who were supposedly representing God. This rebuttal may have been justified in the minds of these disciples because she was outside the Jewish covenant. This rebuttal may have been justified in the minds of these disciples because she was outside the Jewish covenant. Although Jesus’ comments would challenge her right to receive God’s covenant blessings, nonetheless the disciples were seemingly not concerned enough about her plight to even talk with her about the matter. Her constant shouting for help was annoying and perhaps even embarrassing to them. Their solution was to just “send her away.” In their minds this would somehow have solved the problem and allowed them to go about their business. They had clearly not heard the cry of the needy, yet Jesus cared enough to stop and engage in conversation with the woman.

We may not always agree with people for whatever reason, yet a listening ear sometimes does wonders. Taking the time to listen to another person’s story is an expression of concern for them and their situation. It also allows the person to vent his or her feelings and perhaps get a clearer perspective about their dilemma. I have counseled people over the years and offered them what I felt was very little constructive advice, only to have these persons gratefully and humbly thank me for just listening. My concern and willingness to offer them a listening ear and an open heart satisfied them as a meaningful counseling session.

In verse 24 Jesus seemingly speaks to the woman about the rights of covenant believers. Those who are outside the Jewish covenant are forbidden and thus not entitled to the promises of God. Some Bible scholars see this act as an initial part of God’s plan of redemption to the world. Thus Jesus’ original mission was only to the lost house of Israel. However, after the resurrection of Christ,
God engrafted the Gentiles as branches from a wild olive tree into the family of God and as children of Abraham (See Romans 11:17). After the resurrection, Jesus commanded the disciples to go into the entire world and make more disciples. For this desperate Canaanite woman, the urgency of her immediate need warranted Jesus’ special consideration to hear her cry.

The woman’s second cry for help (“Lord, help me,” verse 25) again was challenged by Jesus telling her that “It is not good to take the children’s bread and toss it to dogs” (verse 26). This rebuttal would have caused many seekers to have given up at this point. However, her need and desperation again overrode any circumstances that might try and challenge her actions. The words “children’s bread” refers to the rights of those who had legal and ancestry heritage to the Jewish covenant. Jesus’ use of the word “dogs” has long been a source of debate and confusion among scholars. Some have tried to soften this word, understanding it to mean cute little puppies. Others understand this word as simply the vernacular of the day. Still others go so far as to see this as a cultural and insensitive misstep on the part of Jesus. However we interpret this word, the message is clear. This woman was forbidden to share in the blessing of the covenant.

Her persistence made a final defense when she said, “Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their master’s table” (verse 27). We cannot overlook her refusal to take no for an answer. She did not claim to be a daughter of Abraham nor did she deny her heritage as a Gentile. Instead, she looked beyond the Law and covenant and appealed to the goodness of Jesus. The children’s bread might be only for the Israelites, yet she claimed her portion of God’s love saying, “even the dogs eat the crumbs” that fall off the table. Such a persistent faith demanded a response.

What are some things that hinder you in your quest to know Christ?

Jesus’ Answer

Up to this point, the disciples had apparently been without comment. We can only speculate as to their attitude and feelings about Jesus’ open conversation with the woman. Very likely it was similar to that of the Samaritan woman. Hence what Jesus said next would surely have bewildered them. Jesus stopped his back and forth conversational exchange with the woman and complimented her persistent faith. “Woman, you have great faith” (verse 28). The word “great” suggests that she had a level of belief and confidence in Jesus that went beyond the ordinary. She had settled it in her mind that Jesus was the answer to her problem. No legal or religious protocol or even the corrective and instructive words of Jesus would hinder her actions. She had no disrespect or antagonism toward Jesus and the disciples or even the Jewish covenant, but she had a surety within her heart that grace in her time of need could only be found at the feet of Jesus. His answer to her was, “It will be just as you wish” (verse 28). Jesus heard and answered her persistent prayers. Mark’s account says that Jesus told her...
to go home because the demonic spirit had left her daughter (Mark 7:29).

The object of our faith always makes a difference. Who and what we put our trust in determines the results we receive. Furthermore, who and what we choose to trust also determines the extent and level of the blessings we receive. If we put our trust in ourselves or the best of human ingenuity, we only reap the benefits of trusting in these sources. This is not always bad. The point is, however, that if we put our faith and trust in God, we reap the blessings and benefits we find only in a relationship with God. This was the success of the Canaanite woman along with the heroes and heroines of the faith (see Hebrews 11). Through their uncompromising and unrelenting faith in God, these pioneers “conquered kingdoms, brought about justice, realized promises, shut the mouths of lions, put out raging fires, escaped from the edge of the sword, [and] found strength in weakness” (Hebrews 11:33-34). These saints looked beyond their circumstances and saw faith’s promise to those who will not give up.

God still responds to our faith! If we learn anything from this persistent woman, it is that faith is color and culture blind. While God is no respecter of persons, God is a respecter of faith. The Hebrews’ writer tells us that it is impossible to please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6). Get serious about your faith! Take time this week to make an honest inventory of yourself and how much you trust and rely on God to help you in the daily needs of life. Who do you turn to when disaster strikes in your life? How sure are you that God will provide when these difficult times come? Trust God when it is hard to trust. Remember that God cares enough to stop and commune with you. The Lord will speak to your deepest need. Our faith in God assures us that in spite of how things might appear, our future is always hopeful when we stand on heaven’s eternal promises.

*How has your faith in God enabled you to weather the storms of life? What can you do to increase your faith in God?*

Merciful God, in the cry of the songwriter we pray, “My faith looks up to thee, thou lamb of Calvary, Savior Divine! Now hear me while I pray, take all my guilt away, O let me from this day be wholly thine.” In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.
Mark 5:1-20 (NIV)

11 They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes.
2 When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him.
3 This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain.
4 For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him.
5 Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.
6 When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him.
7 He shouted at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God’s name don’t torture me!”
8 For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!”
9 Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” “My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.”
10 And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.
11 A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside.
12 The demons begged Jesus, “Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.”
13 He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.
14 Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened.
15 When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.
16 Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well.
17 Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.
18 As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him.
19 Jesus did not let him, but said, “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”
20 So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

Great Mercy

Purpose

To learn to listen to Jesus' words of grace and hope in our dying

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Mark 5:1-20 (KJV)

11 They came over unto the other side of the sea, into the country of the Gadarenes.
2 When he was come out of the ship, immediately there met him out of the tombs an unclean spirit,
3 Who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no man could bind him, no, not with chains:
4 Because that he had been often bound with fetters and chains, and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces: neither could any man tame him.
5 And always, night and day, he was in the mountains, and in the tombs, crying, and cutting
himself with stones.

6 But when he saw Jesus afar off, he ran and worshipped him,

7 And cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not.

8 For he said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit.

9 And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many.

10 And he besought him much that he would not send them away out of the country.

11 Now there was there nigh unto the mountains a great herd of swine feeding.

12 And all the devils besought him, saying, Send us into the swine, that we may enter into them.

13 And forthwith Jesus gave them leave. And the unclean spirits went out, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea, (they were about two thousand;) and were choked in the sea.

14 And they that fed the swine fled, and told it in the city, and in the country. And they went out to see what it was that was done.

15 And they come to Jesus, and see him that was possessed with the devil, and had the legion, sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid.

16 And they that saw it told them how it befell to him that was possessed with the devil, and also concerning the swine.

17 And they began to pray him to depart out of their coasts.

18 And when he was come into the ship, he that had been possessed with the devil prayed him that he might be with him.

19 Howbeit Jesus suffered him not, but saith unto him, Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee.

20 And he departed, and began to publish in Decapolis how great things Jesus had done for him: and all men did marvel.

Seeing the Need

Webster’s Dictionary gives us an extensive list of definitions for the word “broken”: fractured, shattered, splintered, crushed, not complete or full. The idea of brokenness is based on the understanding of what wholeness might look like. Broken things are usually thrown away or rejected. Obviously, wholeness refers to something that is complete and entire in its makeup.

We often hear people talk about broken institutions and organizations. Our educational system is broken because in many cases, in areas of funding, adequate equipment and resources, graduation rates, and overall quality, we still have much work to do. Health care systems are broken in light of the overall
need and services provided to people, especially the marginalized. Most important for me is to consider the brokenness in the lives of people. As I am writing this lesson during the Christmas season, I am reminded that for many, this is one of the saddest and most depressing times of the year. Suicide watch is heightened during this season. Crime rates are subject to increase. How ironic in a season of good will and peace on earth.

Jesus confronted brokenness on every level. In this lesson we read about a broken man who met Jesus at his lowest moment. Jesus’ redemptive love brought spiritual and physical wholeness to him. His restoration story became the means by which others in his community also found healing and wholeness.

**A Demon-possessed Man**

Jesus and the disciples seem to have been always on the move. In Mark 5, we read about them in a boat going across the Sea of Galilee on their way to the city of Gadara. Mark’s Gospel refers to this location as “the region of the Gerasenes” (Mark 5:1). A map of this terrain shows that this was a mountainous area with many caves, which were often used as places for burial as well as living quarters for local residents. It was in this rugged Gentile region located about 35 miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee that Mark’s account of a broken man begins. We don’t know why Jesus and the disciples were visiting this area, but as a result of this visit, Jesus made an unforgettable impact on an individual and an entire community.

Mark says that no sooner than Jesus had arrived on shore, “a man possessed by an evil spirit came out of the tombs” (verse 2). The Message Bible refers to him as a “madman.” We do not know whether this possessed man was watching Jesus from a distance or whether curiosity just got the best of him. In any case, he had no problem making himself known to Jesus and the disciples. Who was this man? Mark gives us a vivid and somewhat depressing account of his identity. First, he lived among the tombs. The assumption is that he was perhaps a local person who may have been homeless or destitute in some way. Mark says that he howled day and night, and apparently he had either cut himself on rocks in a cave or had self-inflicted cuts from rocks. The fact that he had at one point been chained suggests a possible mental condition that made him a threat to himself and others. It seems that the larger community had at some point tried to help him, but in the final analysis, “No one was tough enough to control him” (verse 4). His plight is sad, as he was apparently a “throw-away,” left to fend for himself.

It is so easy to discard persons who are not like us or who may have limiting conditions. Unfortunately, I saw this attitude to some degree when I worked years ago in a special needs classroom at a public school. My impression was that some people tend to overlook the disabilities of others and offer them at best a condescending and uneasy politeness. They seem to label these individuals as persons with a preset destiny of doom and failure. Yet God’s mercy and abundant love greets and makes a place for every-
one as persons of sacred worth.

When the possessed man met Jesus, something unusual happened. We do not know exactly what he was thinking, but his actions show that the presence of Jesus had commanded his attention and that of the evil spirit within him. He ran to Jesus and knelt before him. This does not seem to have been a worshipful act on his part, but an expression of humble submission from the demon or evil spirit within him. The part of this individual that controlled his behavior was reacting to the power of the living Christ standing before him. This evil spirit therefore candidly spoke, saying, “Swear to God that you won’t torture me!” (verse 7). While this story might be a little eerie and baffling to the modern mind, the message is clear. Jesus commands and overpowers the forces of evil meant to do us harm.

What concerns you most about the needs of the poor and marginalized in society?

The Demons Expelled

The sports announcer at my hometown football game often described a winning play by saying that the player on our team introduced himself “up close and personal” to his opponent. Likewise, Jesus got right into the space of this possessed man and spoke to his issue. “Unclean spirit, come out of the man!” (verse 8) Jesus’ spiritual diagnosis was spot on. This man was spiritually and physically controlled by a power greater than himself. He needed deliverance. The Lord’s direct question was, “What is your name?” (verse 9). “Legion” (signifying a large number) gave Jesus and the discip-
source of meat. If that be the case, this would have been an economic crisis in that community. This would have explained why “they pleaded with Jesus to leave their region” (verse 17). From another angle, the undeniable and inexplicable events may have simply been overwhelming, too much for these residents to comfortably take in.

Demons and evil spirits are first-century vernacular and are for the most part no longer used to describe physical and mental conditions of individuals. Yet we can still glean some truth from this miracle of Jesus and these ancient words. Judging from the seemingly continuous array of violent acts like kidnapping, rape, drive-by shootings, mass murders, and all the other cruel things that human beings do against other human beings, demons and evil spirits seem to me to be fairly accurate descriptions of people’s behavior. Jesus understood the heart as being deceitful, out of which come evil thoughts leading to “sexual sins, thefts, murders, adultery, greed, evil actions, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, insults, arrogance and foolishness” (Mark 7:21-22). Regardless of terminology, one thing is for sure. Christ makes a difference in the human heart.

A final note of celebration in this passage is that after all the commotion of the day was over, the demon-possessed man was free. Hallelujah! This man who had probably spent a good part of his life being a victim of public shame and rejection by his peers, in addition to suffering from mental and physical anguish, was now free. This man was not only amazing to the community but amazing to himself.

See the change in this man with your mind’s eye as Mark says that he was “fully dressed and completely sane” (Mark 5:15). He was a living testimony of the power of Christ to give new life. Jesus now gave him the opportunity to share the good news of God’s grace and mercy with others.

When have you felt that God delivered you out of something?

A Witness for Christ

Jesus’ mission in the area was now complete. Verse 18 tells us that he climbed into a boat ready to depart, only to notice that the once demon-possessed man wanted to go with him. Obviously, the Lord had made a powerful impression on this man. Jesus had affected his life both spiritually and physically. What exactly this man would do on Jesus’ team was debatable. Yet the influence of Jesus on his life is seen in that he “pleaded” with the Lord to let him go along (verse 18). The fact that he was ready to leave his homeland and follow Jesus again shows the difference Jesus had made on his life. However, and despite his urgent and heartfelt plea, Jesus would not allow this man to go with him. This was not rude or arrogant on the part of our Lord. Instead, Jesus knew that a greater purpose would be served if the man stayed in his homeland. This man who was once lost but now found would become an extension of the Gospel in this Gentile region.

The Lord instructed him to “Go home to your own people” (verse 19).
advice serves as a biblical foundation and plan for world evangelism. Any attempt to reach and convince others must begin with ourselves. Jesus told the first disciples to begin their ministry in Jerusalem, then move to the surrounding areas of Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). It would undoubtedly be through the excitement of this one Gentile convert that an entire region would hear the good news of God’s redeeming love. Never underestimate the power of one burning heart! John Wesley’s private experience at a place called Aldersgate in which he felt his heart strangely warmed became the spark that brought spiritual and moral revival to England and America. Wesley is said to have told other ministers that if they would but build a fire of enthusiasm for Christ, people would come from miles around to watch it burn.

What specifically would be this man’s message? First, he would no doubt tell the people of that region what the Lord had done for him. It would be a living and personal testimony gone public. He would likely explain where he used to be and where he was now. His saneness of mind and heart coupled with a healed body would be a sign that confirmed the truth and power of Christ. It is hard to argue with results. And he would tell people about how the Lord had shown mercy upon him.

This man’s life story was a record of hurt, abuse, and rejection. He was an outcast, a “broken” person, an undesirable. Yet Jesus confronted his pain and showed him mercy. This once broken man would now become a witness for Christ and a bearer of good news.

The healing stories of Jesus always show us the hands-on approach of God’s love. It is in narratives like this one that we see the human side of Jesus sympathizing and empathizing with our pain and sorrow. Jesus is not afraid to confront our hurt. The Lord sees our torment and calls it out by name. Jesus looks at the broken heart and commands peace in the midst of the storm.

Use this coming week as an opportunity to consciously reflect on God’s healing presence in your life. Look back on those positive things that have happened in your life that clearly were not brought about by human effort. Be grateful for a God who not only sees but speaks healing and wholeness to our brokenness.

How grateful are you for God’s blessings in your life?

Healing God, thank you for love that sees our hurts and speaks wholeness to our brokenness. May we go that others might know the wonders of your love; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.
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