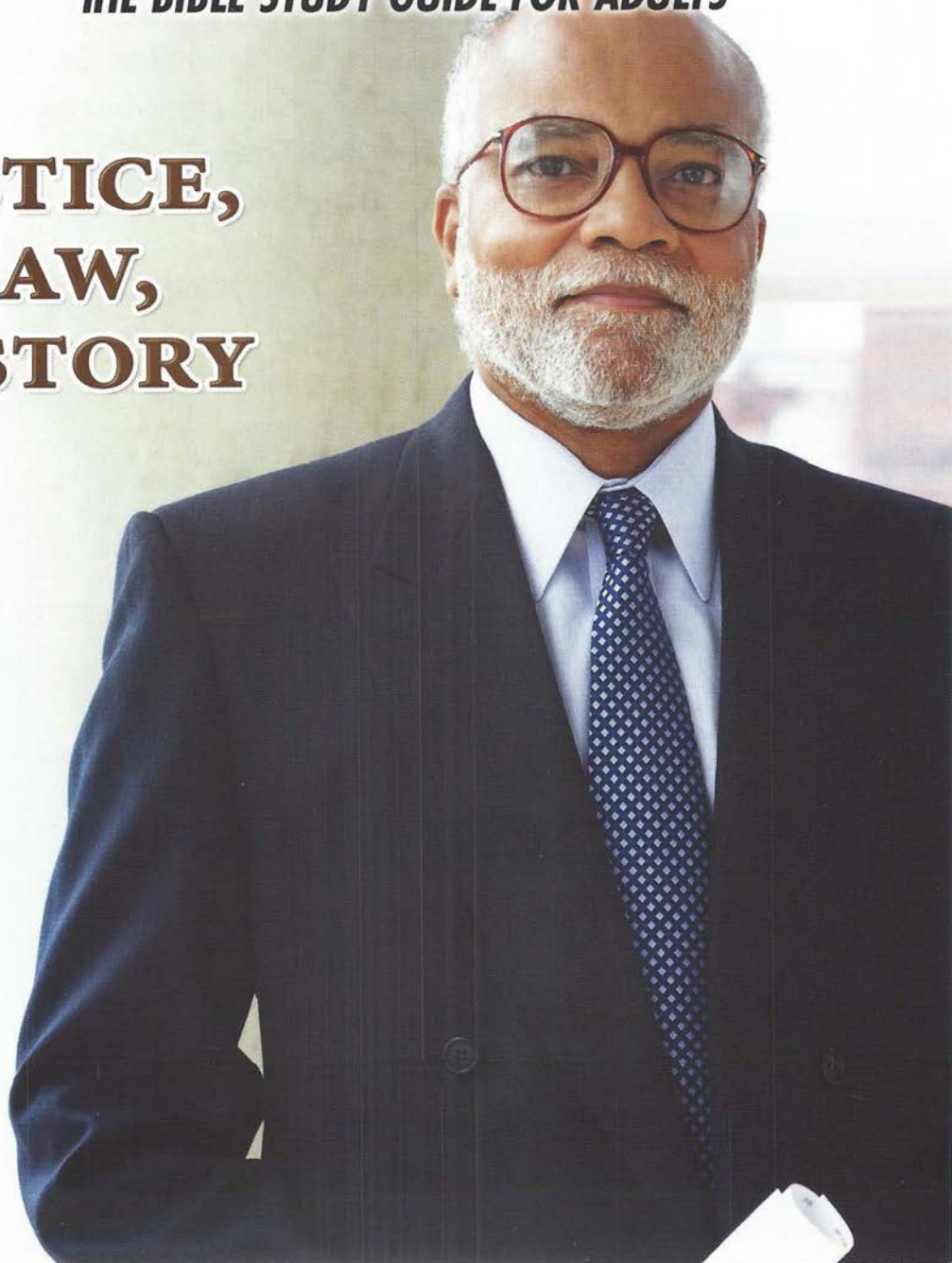


DIRECTION[®]

THE BIBLE STUDY GUIDE FOR ADULTS

**JUSTICE,
LAW,
HISTORY**





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THEME: Justice, Law, History

December 2021 Quarter At-A-Glance1

BIBLE STUDY LESSONS

UNIT 1: GOD REQUIRES JUSTICE

December

5	Justice and Obedience to the Law	2
12	David Administers Justice and Kindness	8
19	Justice and Righteousness Reign	13
26	A Just King Is Born	18

UNIT 2: GOD: THE SOURCE OF JUSTICE

January

2	Justice, Vengeance, and Mercy	24
9	Hagar and Ishmael Not Forgotten	29
16	The Laws of Justice and Mercy	34
23	Justice, Judges, and Priests	39

UNIT 3: JUSTICE AND ADVERSITY

30	Justice and the Marginalized	44
----	------------------------------------	----

February

6	Nathan Condemns David	49
13	Ezra Seeks God's Law	54
20	Bildad Misunderstands God's Justice	59
27	Serving a Just God	64

Quarter At-A-Glance December 2021

Justice, Law, History

The study this quarter focuses on justice as presented in a variety of Old Testament Scriptures. Justice originates in the nature of God and is given to God's people as a gift under the Law. The history of God's covenant people shows that kings who exercised God's justice according to God's Law were considered good kings. Over time, adverse circumstances caused God's people to raise questions about God's justice.

UNIT 1 • God Requires Justice

This unit has four lessons that explore how leaders of God's people must rely on God's Law as they administer justice. Deuteronomy demands that God's people be just and equitable. In 2 Samuel, King David demonstrates justice by showing kindness to Mephibosheth. Isaiah describes a reign of justice and righteousness. The Christmas lesson shows foreign "kings" respecting God's justice more than Israel's own king.

UNIT 2 • God: The Source of Justice

In this unit, four lessons focus on God's justice in the lives of God's people and in the gift of the Law. Stories in Genesis reveal God's justice in the face of human injustice. Included are stories of Cain's murder of his brother Abel, as well as Hagar and Ishmael being cast out of Abraham's household. Exodus demands justice for all people, including one's enemies. In Deuteronomy, judges, officials, and priests work together to administer justice for God's people; in particular, Deuteronomy demands justice for marginalized people.

UNIT 3 • Justice and Adversity

This unit has five lessons that deal with situations in which justice seems absent. In 2 Samuel, Nathan condemns David for his acts of injustice toward Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba's husband. In Ezra, after years of exile in Babylon, Ezra returns to Jerusalem and determines to restore respect for God's Law. Lesson 13 tells the story of Job's faithfulness to God after several tragic events in his life. The Scriptures in Job question the presence of God's justice when Job has suffered greatly.

Justice and Obedience to the Law

Bible Background • DEUTERONOMY 5; 10; 27; 28:1–2 | Printed Text • DEUTERONOMY 5:1–3; 10:12–13; 27:1–10 | Devotional Reading • MATTHEW 22:36–40

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will UNDERSTAND the importance of justice and explore God's commandments, APPRECIATE the blessing God promises as a benefit of obedience, and PRAY for wisdom to know what is right and perseverance to carry it through.

In Focus

Brandon Johnson stood under the canopy of the Jefferson Monument in Washington, DC, with his son Trevor and the rest of Trevor's high school history class. He had taken a day off work so that he could chaperone his son's field trip to the National Mall and nearby monuments. He knew his son would have questions about the nation's heritage and his own.

The tour guide pointed out the famous words inscribed around the top of the rotunda: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal."

Trevor loudly remarked, "And that's why Jefferson recognized Sally Hemings's equal status with himself, right? And allowed her the full freedoms of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?" Trevor's teacher gave him a look to check his attitude.

As the group continued on their way, passing the Japanese cherry trees to the FDR memorial, Brandon put his arm around his son. "I'm glad you brought up Hemings, son. What do you think that means for us today that a man like Jefferson kept one of his slaves as his mistress?"

"That the people who think they're the best and most enlightened people are still full of it," Trevor replied. "You just can't trust anything," he said, full of teenage cynicism.

"Not anything, huh?" Brandon asked. "Not anything we humans make, you mean. Trevor, that's why I'm so glad to be a Christian. America is nice enough; sure is nicer now than when Pops had to fight tooth and nail just to vote. But it still ain't the way it oughta be. That's why I'm glad I follow God's Law. It's always been and will always be perfect and just, and so is the God who administers it."

How do we respond when our country's laws are not in line with God's law of justice?

Keep in Mind

"And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, To keep the commandments of the LORD, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?" (Deuteronomy 10:12–13, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV **Deuteronomy 5:1** And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them.

2 The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb.

3 The LORD made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day.

10:12 And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul,

13 To keep the commandments of the LORD, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?

27:1 And Moses with the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, Keep all the commandments which I command you this day.

2 And it shall be on the day when ye shall pass over Jordan unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, that thou shalt set thee up great stones, and plaister them with plaister:

3 And thou shalt write upon them all the words of this law, when thou art passed over,

that thou mayest go in unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, a land that floweth with milk and honey; as the LORD God of thy fathers hath promised thee.

4 Therefore it shall be when ye be gone over Jordan, that ye shall set up these stones, which I command you this day, in mount Ebal, and thou shalt plaister them with plaister.

5 And there shalt thou build an altar unto the LORD thy God, an altar of stones: thou shalt not lift up any iron tool upon them.

6 Thou shalt build the altar of the LORD thy God of whole stones: and thou shalt offer burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD thy God:

7 And thou shalt offer peace offerings, and shalt eat there, and rejoice before the LORD thy God.

8 And thou shalt write upon the stones all the words of this law very plainly.

9 And Moses and the priests the Levites spake unto all Israel, saying, Take heed, and hearken, O Israel; this day thou art become the people of the LORD thy God.

10 Thou shalt therefore obey the voice of the LORD thy God, and do his commandments and his statutes, which I command thee this day.

The People, Places, and Times

Burnt Offering. A sacrifice that was burned entirely to God was called a burnt offering. One might sacrifice a bull, goat, lamb, or dove, but it had to be a male animal without defect. As you entered the Tabernacle, you had to lay your hand on the animal's head and dedicate it as a burnt offering (Leviticus 1:1–17). The Israelites were to perform these offerings with certain purification rituals, and the priests were to administer them daily, weekly, monthly, and during festivals. This was the most common

form of sacrifice and was meant to show one's complete devotion to God.

Peace Offering. A peace offering proceeded much like a burnt offering, but the animal could be male or female, and instead of the entire animal being burned up on the altar, only the animal's entrails were burned (Leviticus 3:1–17). Sacrificing the animal's liver and kidneys to God was indeed a sacrifice at the time, as those organs are dense with fats and nutrients. At the time, the liver (and often the kidneys, too) were used regularly in divination, as they had sacred

significance in Egypt and Babylon. Israelites set themselves apart by simply disposing of these organs. The meat of the animal would then be distributed to the priests and those bringing the offering (Deuteronomy 12:27).

Background

The people of Israel—who had been eyewitnesses to the ten plagues that visited their oppressors, seen God part the Red Sea so that they could escape an advancing army, heard God's voice at Mount Sinai, received His commandments, dined on food from heaven, and drank water from a rock—failed to believe that God could take them into the land He had promised them. Fearful, they believed it was better to die in a wilderness than enter God's Promised Land. God gave them what they wanted. Instead of moving forward, they wandered in a wilderness for 40 years until unbelief died out and a new generation was at the threshold of actualizing God's promise. Moses, knowing that he would not be going into the promised homeland, used a farewell address to remind this new generation of God's greatness and holiness. Moses conveyed God's desire for them to have just relationships with each other and foreigners, and the need to remember their history so they would not repeat it.

At-A-Glance

1. A Promise to Everyone (Deuteronomy 5:1–3)
2. A Promise to Live By (10:12–13)
3. A Promise to Remember (27:1–10)

In Depth

1. A Promise to Everyone (Deuteronomy 5:1–3)

The people who listened to Moses speak from a hilltop in Moab were very young, or perhaps not even born, when their parents camped at Mount Sinai and agreed to obey God's commandments. Sadly, that former generation failed to trust God's ability to secure the promised homeland. Now, a new generation was on the threshold of receiving God's promise. Moses wanted them to understand that God's promise was made, not only to the previous generation, but also to all who had been delivered from Egypt, even those who were yet to be born. The people standing before Moses were heirs of a promise that God had made to Abraham and then passed on to Isaac, Jacob, and his descendants. Now the promise was theirs. They were within sight of the homeland, and Moses wanted them to know they would experience the blessings of God's promise as they trusted and loved God and lived with each other according to the just ways God had ordained.

What did Moses want his listeners to do with the message they heard?

2. A Promise to Live By (10:12–13)

To prepare the people to live in their homeland, Moses detailed God's design for a good relationship with God and others. They were to love God with their whole hearts, avoiding idolatry. They were to follow God's commandments for living with each other. Though they were free, following God's just laws would keep them from actions and behaviors that would harm the well-being of the entire community. After a time of speaking, Moses summarized God's desire in the form of a question. *What did God want?* The answer was uncomplicated: God wanted a loving relationship with His people and for

His people to have just relationships with each other. The laws Moses shared were to be seen as protections, not prohibitions. God knew the way to a blessed life was to follow His loving and just instructions. The defining characteristic of God's people was their love for God and each other.

Name the five requirements God expected from the people listening to Moses' speech.

3. A Promise to Remember (27:1–10)

When the Israelites would finally enter the land of Canaan, Moses did not want the land's abundance to distract them from their relationship with God. Their first priority was to write the commandments on whitewashed stones and build an altar at Mount Ebal. The city of Shechem was at the base of Mount Ebal. This was where the Lord had appeared to Abraham, promising him that his descendants would have a land they could call their own (Genesis 12:6–7). Those entering Canaan would be fulfilling that promise. Writing the commandments for all to see would be a reminder that they had agreed to have a loving relationship with God and had chosen to obey God's just laws.

What does public display of the law mean for the common citizen?

Search the Scriptures

1. What are the responsibilities and benefits of following God's commandments? (Deuteronomy 5:1–21, 32)
2. Why did Moses say that the people of Israel were supposed to treat foreigners fairly? (Deuteronomy 10:19)

Discuss the Meaning

Words like commandments, laws, and decrees can leave some readers with the opinion that God is more concerned about people following rules than having an abundant life based on a relationship with Him. Yet, from the

time of God's visits with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening to His embodiment in Jesus Christ, God has desired a loving relationship with people. One reason the laws were given was for the people's good, to uphold justice in relationship with others and with God.

1. What are some examples from the lesson's Background and Focal Verses that indicate God's desire for a loving relationship with people?

2. What is the role of God's commandments, laws, and decrees in the lives of individuals who desire to develop a loving and just relationship with God and with other people?

Liberating Lesson

When a middle-aged woman refused to give up her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama, she was agreeing with God that her life possessed intrinsic value. No longer would Rosa Parks allow herself to be unfairly treated. On December 1, 1955, she began a journey that secured for herself and countless descendants of African slaves the freedoms promised in the Constitution of the country which was now their homeland. Her lived experience was going to align with the truth that all people were created by God with equal worth. Justice, she believed, was to be evenly dispersed. What can you do to help ensure more people experience the benefits of a just society?

Application for Activation

For each generation, there are justice issues that selfless men and women need to address on the behalf of others. Some of our current issues include mass incarceration, child and senior care, affordable health care, adequate education, and immigration pathways. Make a commitment to visit, talk with, or serve with a local organization that ministers to people who are impacted by inequitable systems.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Say It Correctly

Horeb. HOAR-ebb.
Ebal. EE-ball.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

The Law of Justice
(Deuteronomy 5:6-21)

TUESDAY

Follow the Path of God's Law
(Deuteronomy 5:23-33)

WEDNESDAY

Discern the Good, Acceptable, and
Perfect
(Romans 12:1-2, 9-21)

THURSDAY

The Written Law and the Ark of Wood
(Deuteronomy 10:1-11)

FRIDAY

Jesus Fulfills the Law
(Matthew 5:17-20)

SATURDAY

Curses upon Disobedience
(Deuteronomy 27:14-26)

SUNDAY

Obey the Statutes and Ordinances
(Deuteronomy 5:1-3; 10:12-13; 28:1-10)

Notes

David Administers Justice and Kindness

Bible Background • 2 SAMUEL 9

Printed Text • 2 SAMUEL 9:1–12 | Devotional Reading • PROVERBS 18:24

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXPLORE David's kindness toward Mephibosheth as an act of justice and equity, REFLECT on the value of keeping our word, and SHOW radical kindness to someone in need.

In Focus

Carl and Eddie had been best friends since seventh grade, when they were the only two Black kids in their suburban junior high school. They stuck together through high stakes tests, team try-outs, and asking out the prettiest girls. The boys promised they would always look out for each other. Always.

After high school, Eddie followed in his father's footsteps and joined the Navy. Carl earned an academic scholarship to a good college, where he studied robotics. As they entered adulthood, it was harder and harder for Carl and Eddie to stay connected, but they would send each other birthday and Christmas cards.

Just as Carl had established himself in a good company, tragedy struck. Eddie and his wife died in a car wreck as she picked him up to come home after a long deployment. Eddie's young son, Junior, was suddenly orphaned. Carl was heartbroken and prayed to God asking what he should do. God moved him to show his friend's child the most kindness he could.

"Junior," Carl said to the youngster. "I want you to come home with me. I'll adopt you and raise you as best I can."

Junior was having trouble sorting it all out. "Why would you do that? You have your own kids to raise."

"I made a promise to your father," Carl said. "We were always going to look out for each other. I couldn't help much before. No way I could stop that truck from hitting them. But I can help now. I can help you. It's the least I could do for Eddie."

How has God ever moved you to show great kindness?

Keep in Mind

"And David said, Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul, that I may shew him kindness for Jonathan's sake?" (2 Samuel 9:1, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV 2 Samuel 9:1 And David said, Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul, that I may shew him kindness for Jonathan's sake?

2 And there was of the house of Saul a servant whose name was Ziba. And when they had called him unto David, the king said unto him, Art thou Ziba? And he said, Thy servant is he.

3 And the king said, Is there not yet any of the house of Saul, that I may shew the kindness of God unto him? And Ziba said unto the king, Jonathan hath yet a son, which is lame on his feet.

4 And the king said unto him, Where is he? And Ziba said unto the king, Behold, he is in the house of Machir, the son of Ammiel, in Lodebar.

5 Then king David sent, and fetched him out of the house of Machir, the son of Ammiel, from Lodebar.

6 Now when Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, was come unto David, he fell on his face, and did reverence. And David said, Mephibosheth. And he answered, Behold thy servant!

7 And David said unto him, Fear not: for I will surely shew thee kindness for Jonathan thy father's sake, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father; and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually.

8 And he bowed himself, and said, What is thy servant, that thou shouldest look upon such a dead dog as I am?

9 Then the king called to Ziba, Saul's servant, and said unto him, I have given unto thy master's son all that pertained to Saul and to all his house.

10 Thou therefore, and thy sons, and thy servants, shall till the land for him, and thou shalt bring in the fruits, that thy master's son may have food to eat: but Mephibosheth thy master's son shall eat bread alway at my table. Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants.

11 Then said Ziba unto the king, According to all that my lord the king hath commanded his servant, so shall thy servant do. As for Mephibosheth, said the king, he shall eat at my table, as one of the king's sons.

12 And Mephibosheth had a young son, whose name was Micha. And all that dwelt in the house of Ziba were servants unto Mephibosheth.

The People, Places, and Times

Lameness. People who did not have able bodies in David's day would almost always become beggars. Families would not have the resources to care for them properly, and they could not do most kinds of work that was available, which was usually agricultural work. Even though today we know to care for those who need physical accommodations, in David's day any physical abnormality was seen as a mark of shame. In neighboring cultures, they would be laughed at and ridiculed just for being differently abled. Even in Israel, the

Law prohibited people with some forms of disfigurement from acting as priests (Leviticus 21:16–23), or even worshiping in the assembly (Deuteronomy 23:1). Other kings might not even allow differently abled people into their presence. By welcoming Mephibosheth to his own table, David is showing conspicuous kindness to this young man whose feet never supported him.

Dogs. In David's day, there were some breeds of hunting hounds that people kept, but most of the dogs were strays. These animals were nearly feral, and might surround and attack

people (Psalm 22:16, Jeremiah 15:3). Dogs were considered extremely unclean (Isaiah 66:3), and were thought to be especially stupid animals (Proverbs 26:11). Calling someone a dog was a supreme insult.

Background

After returning the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, and establishing himself as king over Israel, David set about subjugating his enemies. David conquered the Philistines, the Moabites, the Syrians, and the Edomites, giving Israel control of land as far as the Euphrates (2 Samuel 8). David was at the height of his power. Still, he remembered his close friend, Jonathan.

David and Jonathan had grown to be the closest of friends. Though Jonathan was Saul's biological heir, he recognized that God's hand was on David to be the next ruler. Jonathan even stopped his father Saul from taking David's life (1 Samuel 19:1–7). Jonathan had been fully devoted to David, and David was fully devoted to Jonathan in return. This devotion continued even after Jonathan's death.

At-A-Glance

1. David Inquires (2 Samuel 9:1–3)
2. Mephibosheth Appears before David (2 Samuel 9:4–7)
3. David Establishes Saul's Legacy (2 Samuel 9:8–12)

In Depth

1. David Inquires (2 Samuel 9:1–3)

In addition to being a fierce warrior and a capable administrator, David proved himself to be a kind and just king. He sought to honor the pledge he made to Jonathan (1 Samuel 20:14–15), where he agreed to treat Jonathan's family with faithful love. Once established in

his reign, David inquired after the descendants of Saul to whom he could show the kindness of God because of his love for Jonathan.

David consults with Saul's land steward who informs him that a son of Jonathan still lives. His name was Mephibosheth. Unfortunately, Mephibosheth was crippled and living in the obscure village of Lo-debar. The name Lo-debar is thought to mean "without pasture." This was not choice land by any means. Mephibosheth was only five when his father Jonathan was killed. David was in exile during that time and knew nothing of Mephibosheth.

David's inquiry about the descendants of Saul demonstrates a profound devotion to Jonathan and his memory. It also reveals something about David personally. He had achieved great success, and he still felt it important to show kindness.

Is it always best to withhold the fulfillment of a promise until you are able to do so in a big way?

2. Mephibosheth Appears before David (2 Samuel 9:4–7)

Upon learning Mephibosheth's whereabouts, David sends for him at once. Mephibosheth appears before David bowing low to show him utmost respect. Mephibosheth is afraid when he approaches David, and with good reason. It was customary for a new king to wipe out any remnants of rival dynasties. David acts quickly to allay his fears, however (v. 7).

David tells Mephibosheth not to be afraid because David intends to show him kindness to honor the memory of Jonathan. Saul's family estate had fallen to David either through Michal, his wife, or the rebellion of Ish-bosheth. David intends to restore Saul's property to Mephibosheth and offers him a place at the king's table.

Mephibosheth responds with great humility. He had been afraid of finding his own destruction, but now Mephibosheth realizes

that David had summoned him so he could honor him and restore his family's land. He became the stunned beneficiary of a pact David had made with his father years before.

How do you react when showered with unexpected praise or reward?

3. David Establishes Saul's Legacy (2 Samuel 9:8–12)

Restoring Saul's family estate was an act of extreme kindness. Saul's ancestral lands would become Mephibosheth's. David then goes even further, establishing a means for Mephibosheth to collect an income for years to come.

Ziba, the land steward, is appointed to manage the land for Mephibosheth. In exchange, he would receive half of the proceeds of the land. The rest would go to Mephibosheth. Ziba himself has fifteen sons and twenty servants. This is mentioned to show that Mephibosheth would be honored like one of the king's sons.

Finally, Mephibosheth also had a son. This son would carry on the name and preserve the memory of David's dear friend Jonathan.

How is your legacy protected for future generations?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why does David inquire after Saul's descendants (2 Samuel 9:1, 3)?
2. How does Mephibosheth respond when he learns that David intends to restore his ancestral lands instead of killing him, as dictated by custom (v. 8)?

Discuss the Meaning

This passage describes an extraordinary turn of events for Mephibosheth. He was the recipient of restoration so profound that it forever changed his life and that of his descendants. As illustrated in this passage, God is the God of radical restoration. God seeks to restore individuals, communities, and the

world. How can we ask God to restore us so that we may show His love and kindness to others?

Liberating Lesson

The story of David and Mephibosheth is a story about kindness, restoration, and justice. However, at its core, it is a story about relationship. David had a very close friendship with Jonathan. Years after Jonathan's death, David was still devoted to him. Upon hearing about Mephibosheth, David restored Saul's family estate. In addition, David offered Mephibosheth a place at his own table. Instead of passing his days in Lo-debar, he ate at the table as if he were David's own son.

Similarly, we can show God's kindness and justice to the world around us. David's kindness to Mephibosheth was rooted in relationship. We should demonstrate kindness and justice to those around us, bringing them into a right relationship with us and pointing them toward a right relationship with God.

Application for Activation

The church provides a number of opportunities to grow in community and to form meaningful relationships. Look for someone to disciple and grow in friendship.

The church also provides opportunities to work together to serve as agents of God's love. Also look for opportunities to show the kindness and justice of God to the wider community at large.

God cares deeply for the poor and marginalized. Mephibosheth was physically impaired, but there are several people groups that are marginalized. Women, ethnic minorities, the elderly, the poor, people suffering from mental illness, and people in numerous other groups can be marginalized, as well. They need to receive God's kindness and justice, just as Mephibosheth did.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Say It Correctly

Ammiel. AM-ee-uhl.
Lo-debar. loh-DEE-bar.
Mephibosheth. muh-FIH-bo-sheth.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Death of Saul and Jonathan Mourned
(2 Samuel 1:1-12)

TUESDAY

A Lament from a Just Heart
(2 Samuel 1:17-27)

WEDNESDAY

A Cry for Justice
(Luke 18:1-8)

THURSDAY

Mercy from the Son of David
(Matthew 20:29-34)

FRIDAY

David Made King Over All Israel
(2 Samuel 3:1-5; 5:1-5)

SATURDAY

The King Rejoices in God
(Psalm 21)

SUNDAY

David Shows Kindness
to Saul's Descendant
(2 Samuel 9:1-7, 9-12)

Justice and Righteousness Reign

Bible Background • ISAIAH 9:1-7

Printed Text • ISAIAH 9:2-7 | Devotional Reading • MICAH 6:1-8

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will **ANALYZE** the importance of this prophecy for the people of God in Isaiah's time and today; **CELEBRATE** the justice, righteousness, and peace that Jesus brings to God's people; and **SHARE** with others the hope of eternal peace and justice found in Jesus' reign.

In Focus

Maxine's teenage daughter Taneisha was excited because they were leaving Detroit for Christmas to spend time with her grandmother in Memphis. Taneisha had never been on a plane before. When they arrived at Detroit's Metro International Airport, Maxine had to all but threatened Taneisha to calm down so they could hear their flight being announced.

Later, as Northwest Airlines flight #743 took off from Detroit, Taneisha became a chatterbox. She talked to Maxine all the way to Memphis. A few hours later, when Maxine and Taneisha stepped off the plane, Maxine's mother was there to meet them. Taneisha ran and jumped into her grandmother's arms, laughing and squealing all the way.

After Maxine had unpacked and settled in front of the fireplace and Christmas tree with a cup of cocoa, she thought about her daughter's excitement and the day's events. Maxine truly loved Taneisha. But as the girl slept soundly in bed, Maxine valued the peace and quiet she now enjoyed while she sat looking at the fire dance around the logs. Now that they were with their family for Christmas, she could slow down and thank God for sending His blessing of peace on earth.

Peace was a treasured commodity that Maxine did not often get to enjoy. Her fast-paced job and Taneisha's full school schedule created tension and fatigue in their lives. However, Maxine also knew they needed to take time out to enjoy the simple things in life, so that they could experience tranquility and peace in the midst of the chaos.

How does Jesus help you experience true and lasting peace in your personal life?

Keep in Mind

"Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this."

(Isaiah 9:7, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV **Isaiah 9:2** The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

3 Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil.

4 For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.

5 For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire.

6 For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

7 Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

The People, Places, and Times

Isaiah. One of the most influential Old Testament prophets, Isaiah lived and ministered in the Southern Kingdom of Judah for 58 years. Isaiah lived through one of his nation's most turbulent periods, during which he witnessed Judah's defeat by the Babylonian Empire and actually saw his fellow citizens taken into captivity. He prophesies during the reigns of five kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, and Manasseh. His free access to the palace in Jerusalem and his familiarity with court life imply that Isaiah belonged to Judah's wealthy class and may have been related to the ruling family. However, this did not keep Isaiah from verbally attacking the aristocracy in defense of the common people. Scripture refers to his wife as a "prophetess" and identifies him as the father of at least two sons: Shear-jashub and Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Isaiah 7:1-3; 8:1-3).

Background

Much of Isaiah's writings strongly criticizes the people of Judah for their sinfulness and unwillingness to be faithful to the one true God.

During the reign of King Ahaz of Judah, the kings of Israel and Damascus waged war against him. Instead of looking to God for support, Ahaz foolishly allied himself with the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser. Judah soon found itself a vassal state under the Assyrians. Later, the Assyrians invaded Judah and demanded great amounts of tribute. Ahaz's successor and son, King Hezekiah, rebelled, but his revolt was squashed out. Isaiah warned that their continued refusal to be faithful to God would result in disaster for the entire nation. King Hezekiah refused to heed the prophet, and Judah was almost destroyed before the people turned back to God and begged Him to come to their aide.

Throughout his ministry, Isaiah repeatedly called on the nation to rely on God, rather than military strength or political alliances. The Northern Kingdom had refused to listen to their prophets, Amos and Hosea. Instead, Israel had resorted to military might to assert their nationhood, and as a result had been soundly defeated and no longer existed as a nation. By the grace of God, Judah was for a time spared.

How does Isaiah's prophecy show that God's plans are better than a king's plans?

At-A-Glance

1. End of the Darkness (Isaiah 9:2–5)
2. Gift of Forthcoming Peace (v. 6–7)

In Depth

1. End of the Darkness (Isaiah 9:2–5)

During the time Isaiah lived, Assyria was a major military force that was defeating many countries. It is understandable that the future appeared foreboding and hopeless to the people of Judah. Judah was in a state of spiritual darkness and political distress as it helplessly watched the scorched earth policy of the invading Assyrians.

It is onto this scene that the prophet Isaiah introduces a wonderful prophecy of hope. Isaiah makes it clear that he is addressing Judah, the people who had walked in “darkness” and dwelled “in the land of the shadow of death” (Isaiah 9:2). This kind of darkness is a frightening but apt description of sin. This spiritual darkness contributes to the encompassing sense of hopelessness and helplessness.

Conversely, God's presence is equated with light. God declares that Israel will receive His light—His life and wisdom—in the midst of chaos and confusion. The great light that will appear is Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Seven hundred years later, Jesus would begin His ministry and bring light into this very land that is now plunged into darkness (John 8:12). Isaiah insists that because a Messiah is coming, there will be “joy” instead of gloom (Isaiah 9:3). The hope of the people is to be placed in the Lord, not in reliance on military strength or political savvy.

Present-day saints should be reminded that we are not bound by our present circumstances; we can rejoice in our hope in the only One who can remove the gloom from our lives. From a Roman prison, the Apostle Paul rejoiced in his chains: “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4:4).

Isaiah likens the time of Israel's ultimate deliverance to the time when God used Gideon to free Israel from the Midianites (see Judges 7:1–25). Like Gideon, the Deliverer will lead God's people from the battle with their enemies with full assurance of victory on their side. Isaiah also states that the “warrior's garments” would be “rolled in blood” (v. 5). Jesus would pay the highest price for our freedom from darkness and bondage: His death on the Cross.

Whom do you see today standing against the darkness and helping shine God's light?

2. Gift of Forthcoming Peace (v. 6–7)

How wonderful it is to Christians to note that the birth of this Child, introduced by Isaiah, is a gift to us from God Himself. Isaiah stresses that He will “be given” (Isaiah 9:6). Here, Isaiah's prophecy recognizes that the Messiah will be a legitimate heir to the Davidic throne, a point of paramount importance to the people living in the time of this writing.

When Jesus came to redeem Israel, He became the focal point of a new and better “government” (v. 6). His kingdom is eternal, and all who come to God through Him in humble submission will be a part of His government, of which He is the head (Ephesians 5:23). When we read “the government will rest on his shoulders” (9:6, NLT), we see Isaiah's poetic description of the Messiah as a capable and sovereign ruler, not to be confused with a mere human king.

Isaiah further identifies the Messiah as “Wonderful, Counsellor” (v. 6). Here, we are assured that the Messiah will rule with infinite wisdom that exceeds human limitations. He

will be efficient and effective in the planning and implementation of His divine plans. When we affirm Jesus as our greatest counselor, we will cease our desire to lean on human understanding and reasoning for solutions to life's problems.

The prophet's description of the Messiah as "Mighty God" recognizes the full omnipotence and absolute deity of the Savior (v. 6). The qualities of eternal tenderness and protection are evoked with the title "Everlasting Father." Jesus offers us the same compassion and provision that the loving and caring Father shows toward His children who love, fear, and obey Him.

Finally, Isaiah declares that the Messiah is the "Prince of Peace" (v. 6). Not only will He bring peace, but He will rule with peace. As the Prince of Peace, He will provide His children with eternal rest and joy that will be an integral part of His kingdom. Christians have the blessed assurance that at the very moment we place our trust in Jesus, He gives us His perfect peace. This does not mean that all of our problems will go away. Professing Christ will sometimes bring strife as Paul found. However, because he was so steadfast in preaching and believing Christ, Paul also found God's peace to "passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). Today too, we can have confidence that we will never face our problems alone—He will always be with us, guiding and providing protection through our darkest hours.

Why does Isaiah use so many different expressions to describe the Messiah?

Search the Scriptures

1. According to Isaiah, where will the government of God reside (v. 6)?
2. How will God's government increase (v. 7)?

Discuss the Meaning

Do you think that our society is suffering from the effects of spiritual darkness? In what ways? How does God's just kingdom lead us out of and protect us from this spiritual darkness?

Liberating Lesson

The growing number of global military conflicts and economic meltdowns that have left millions jobless and homeless only add to a growing sense of helplessness throughout the world. Alarming crime rates have also left many frightened and insecure. Few, if any, leave their doors unlocked, and many are afraid to travel. Every day we see examples of people with money, power, and position afforded one form of treatment within the judicial system, while the poor and disadvantaged are treated radically different. There are some rich people who steal millions and get away with little more than a slap on the wrist, and there are poor individuals sentenced to prison for stealing a pair of shoes.

What can we learn from today's lesson that can help people whose lives are unsettled and dysfunctional because of unjust systems? Develop a specific plan that you can share with people, especially during the holiday season.

Application for Activation

The prophet Isaiah lived in a time of political turmoil and spiritual confusion. The people of Judah were understandably anxious as the powerful Assyrian army gathered at the gates of Jerusalem. Their world was similar to ours in some ways. Many people are stressed and feel powerless, hopeless, and helpless. Similar to Isaiah, reach out to someone this week and let them know that God is still in control. Speak words of comfort to them and let them know that God knows and He cares.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Say It Correctly

Gideon. GID-ee-uhn.

Hezekiah. heh-zuh-KI-uh.

Jotham. JOH-thuhm.

Midian. MID-ee-uhn.

Tiglath-pileser. TI-glath puh-LEE-zuhr.

Zebulun. ZEB-yuh-luhn.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

God's Holy People Live Justly
(Leviticus 19:1–2, 11–18)

TUESDAY

Enthroned upon Righteousness
and Justice
(Psalm 89:14–21)

WEDNESDAY

Be Content; Pursue Righteousness
(1 Timothy 6:6–12)

THURSDAY

Do Justice, Love Kindness, Walk Humbly
(Micah 6:1–8)

FRIDAY

Seek God's Kingdom and Righteousness
(Matthew 6:25–34)

SATURDAY

God's King Will Judge with Righteousness
(Isaiah 11:1–9)

SUNDAY

God's Light Has Shined
(Isaiah 9:1–7)

A Just King Is Born

Bible Background • MATTHEW 2

Printed Text • MATTHEW 2:1–12 | Devotional Reading • EXODUS 34:1–10

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXPLAIN how the wise men point to the inclusion of the marginalized, GRIEVE for those who suffer innocently due to the world's brokenness and sin, and IDENTIFY with the wise men's decision to perform an act of civil disobedience.

In Focus

Edward had been living in El Paso, Texas, for about a year after he moved from Washington, DC. The cost of living had gotten too high for him to maintain in DC, so he saved up, found an apartment, and got a part-time job at a small restaurant while he looked for a better position. One day while he was at the restaurant, a lady came in carrying a small child who was probably about two years old. She looked like she hadn't bathed in days and the baby was crying. Edward tried speaking to her and realized she didn't speak English.

Edward felt moved to offer her something to eat, so he went to the kitchen to check with his manager about giving her some food and some oatmeal for the child. His manager replied that he didn't like to give away free food, but he would make an exception since Edward seemed so moved.

Then Edward heard sirens outside as he walked back to the front of the restaurant. He figured it was the police, but then he saw the immigration van. His heart sank. What should he do?

The laws of the land often seem to least protect the lives of the most vulnerable people. Widows, children, and immigrants can easily be overlooked or even opposed by those with power and authority who see the actions of the vulnerable as threats to order instead of cries for help. How do we discern God's justice when the innocent are in danger?

Keep in Mind

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.” (Matthew 2:11, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV **Matthew 2:1** Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

3 When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

The People, Places, and Times

Magi. Matthew 2 opens with wise men coming from “the East.” To people of New Testament days, that would probably have been from Persia, modern-day Iran. This was a center of much belief in astrology. The Bible makes very clear that the study of horoscopes is wrong (Deuteronomy 4:19; 18:9–14; Isaiah 47:11–14), but sometimes God uses the unexpected to bring people to Himself. God most fully revealed Himself to humans through Jesus, but He also uses nature to reveal Himself to all people—not just Judeans of the first century AD. These Magi seem to be responding to “general revelation” that God provided for them in the stars (Deuteronomy 4:19). In calling these Gentiles from far away, God showed that Christ came for us all.

The wise men were astrologers and saw some sort of unusual star (possibly a conjunction of planets) that indicated to them that a new king of the Jews was born; and so they traveled to Jerusalem, the Jewish capital, where they expected to see this baby. They almost certainly arrived in a great caravan with many servants. Scripture mentions three gifts (Matthew 2:11), but it does not say how many wise men there were, nor does it say they came riding on camels—it may have been horses. Their arrival caused quite a stir in Jerusalem, especially as they were asking about the birth of a king.

Background

Herod the Great was the provincial king of Judea who governed from 37 BC until his death around 4 BC. He was a Jewish king, but

worked on behalf of the Roman Empire that actually ruled the region. He was known for his tremendous architectural feats, supervising construction and design of many Romanized cities in Judea and most famously the renovating of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Herod the Great was also known for his terrible violence that was fueled by paranoia. He is said to be responsible for the murders of not only enemies, but also several of his own children and wives that he felt threatened his position. By the first century AD, the oppressive rule of the Romans—who were known for executing anyone who questioned their rule and allowing Herod and his colleagues to charge the Judeans excessive taxes—had led to a height of expectation that the Messiah would come to liberate Judah from its oppressors. It was into this environment that Jesus was born, not as the king that was expected, but as a baby boy born to a poor and faithful woman and her new husband from a small village.

Why is it important to hold people accountable in weak areas even when they are gifted in other areas?

At-A-Glance

1. Revelation from Outsiders
(Matthew 2:1–3)
2. Information from Insiders (vv. 4–8)
3. The Savior at His Mother's Side
(vv. 9–12)

In Depth

1. Revelation from Outsiders (Matthew 2:1–3)

Jesus was born just a few years after the Second Temple in Jerusalem was completed. His mother Mary and her husband Joseph were from Nazareth, which was a little village

near the Sea of Galilee, north of the big city Jerusalem. They had come to Bethlehem to be counted in Caesar Augustus' census because Joseph's family was from Bethlehem. Matthew 1 traces Joseph's lineage, which puts him firmly in the line of King David, and Jesus as the son of David born in the hometown of David.

The wise men, also called Magi, were eastern experts in sacred texts and astrologers who were likely from the former Persian Empire. They were apparently familiar with Jewish traditions about the Messiah, and came to Jerusalem as men who did not know the Lord, but were interested in prophecies about the Savior King of the Jews. They were probably wealthy and influential, which is why they sought direction directly from King Herod to properly identify the Messiah and worship Him. They may have assumed that the prophesied king of the Jews would be easily found at the palace in the capital of Jerusalem. They were likely surprised to find out that the King of Judea did not know where the new king of the Jews was to be found.

The king and his subjects were surprised that there was another king of the Jews they hadn't heard about! This was the ultimate threat to King Herod. Influential foreigners knew about a Jewish prophesy that he was not aware of and had come to worship a newborn that was meant to take the throne of Judea from King Herod.

How can someone's rules, assumptions, and behaviors keep other people from encountering Jesus?

2. Information from Insiders (vv. 4–8)

Herod moves to get more information and form a response to this news. This was Good News—Gospel for the world—but was taken as bad news for Herod and the elite. He gathers together the religious leaders in Jerusalem and inquires of them. The question he asks was reasonable and shows something about the culture. An expert in religious texts in

that society could be expected to know where the Messiah would be born. The average person would not be able to recall that kind of information from casual study. It is both telling and can be criticized that the king of Judea did not know that information but had just finished rebuilding the most important place in the Jewish faith. He had centered his faith in outward appearances rather than inward devotion.

The religious leaders inform him that the Messiah was supposed to be born in Bethlehem. How do they know? They knew because they had meticulously studied the Scriptures and knew of the verse from Micah 5:2 (quoted in Matthew 2:6) that revealed the Ruler/Shepherd would come from Bethlehem. But they also knew it because the Messiah had to be from the line of David, and David was raised in Bethlehem.

Then Herod goes and speaks privately with the wise men. He did not want his plan foiled or his ignorance exposed to any outsiders. He gathers more information about when the star they had followed arose. Then he tells them to go find the Messiah and let him know where he is. Herod was clearly trying to use the Wise Men to get to the newborn Savior. Herod did not want to worship Him as he stated. He wanted to eliminate Him so he could stay in power. This powerful man was intimidated and willing to murder an innocent baby in order to maintain his position.

What are some ways leaders need to learn from those they lead?

3. The Savior at His Mother's Side (vv. 9–12)

The Magi followed the star from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. The star led them right to the house where Mary was staying with her baby Jesus. They rejoiced to see the star rest over a particular place where they knew they would

find the Savior. Their hope was rewarded as they saw the child with his mother and they were able to worship Him as they desired. They not only brought gestures of honor, but they also brought very expensive gifts. These wealthy and influential men bowed to worship the Son of a poor girl from an unpopular village who was pregnant before she was married.

We do not know how many wise men were there, but three gifts are described: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Frankincense and myrrh were both powerful perfumes that were costly in Jesus' day. Myrrh was more commonly used for burials and the other for anointing kings. The Magi honored the Savior King who was born to die for the sins of the world. They were influential outsiders who were some of the first people to recognize, humble themselves, and worship the King of Israel. They represented—from the very beginning of the Gospel—that Jesus Christ was not simply Savior of the Jews, but the Savior of the world.

They could have gone from that place and followed Herod's directions, which would have led to an attack on Jesus by Herod. But God was at work in the lives of these non-Jews. These religious outsiders, who did not have the background to follow God as the Jews did, were able to hear God clearly because they had humbled themselves to listen. The Lord warned them in a dream not to return to Herod and so they went back to their own country another way, disobeying King Herod to protect the King of kings.

What is the importance of Christmas in your life? How does God speak to you this season?

Search the Scriptures

1. How did the priests and religious leaders know Bethlehem was the place where the Messiah was born (Matthew 2:5–6)?

2. How did God communicate with the wise men even though they weren't Israelites (Matthew 2:9, 12)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. There are a variety of reactions to the birth of Jesus in our Scripture today, ranging from fear and anger to excitement and worship. Why do people react so differently to Jesus? How do you react to Jesus' birth? Do you react differently knowing that following Jesus may cost your comfort and put you at odds with influential people?

2. The Magi remind us that it is not always the religious insiders who recognize God's work in the world. How can we create room and be open to people whom we may not expect in church to come to know Jesus? How can we invite them to worship with us, learn with us, and work with us for Kingdom-impact in our communities?

Liberating Lesson

The story of Christmas and the Magi invites us to consider standing in solidarity with the most vulnerable among us. The Savior of the world was born as an innocent baby instead of descending from the heavens with angels. The Son of God, who had all glory, chose to be the Son of Man who was rejected by His own people. Our Savior King chose to give up heaven to love us and live with us on Earth.

The Magi were influential outsiders who were willing to leave their places of comfort and familiarity to find a newborn King who could be Savior of the world. They did not worry about being rejected because they weren't born into the chosen people; they humbled themselves to worship the Messiah. They were willing to risk upsetting the violent King Herod to protect the innocent King Jesus and His family. They were willing to follow a God they just met and disobey the laws of a liar to show their devotion to the Light of the world.

We are called to follow the example of the Magi, and ultimately of Jesus. Will we give up or use our positions, our influence, our resources, our time, our reputations to worship God and protect the vulnerable? Will we risk upsetting unjust leaders to pursue true righteousness before God? Will we stand in humble solidarity with those at risk of being hurt the most? Will we care for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the prisoner, the vulnerable, and the innocent by giving of ourselves? Think about how you can challenge yourself and your church to live more into these calls of Jesus' birth and example this holiday season.

Application for Activation

We are entering a new year next week, and often people make New Year's resolutions. But as we remember Jesus' birth and the Magi's worship of the Savior, let's make sure we put seeking God as the top priority of the New Year. How can we worship God in new ways in the New Year? How can we make seeking justice part of our worship? Take some time to pray and write down a person or group of people you want to advocate for, extend hospitality toward, or share Jesus with in the New Year. Spend the week praying for yourself and that person or group so that you can turn that compassion into Spirit-led action in the New Year.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Say It Correctly

Magi. MAH-jie.
Archelaus. AR-keh-LAY-us.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

God's Chosen Nation
(Psalm 33:1–12)

TUESDAY

A People Whom God Has Blessed
(Isaiah 61:4–9)

WEDNESDAY

Mary, the Servant of the Lord
(Luke 1:26–37)

THURSDAY

May God's King Rule Justly
(Psalm 72:1–8, 11–14)

FRIDAY

God Lifts Up the Lowly
(Luke 1:46–55)

SATURDAY

Jesus Born Into an Unjust World
(Luke 2:1–7)

SUNDAY

God Avenges God's People
(Matthew 2:1–12)

Notes

Justice, Vengeance, and Mercy

Bible Background • GENESIS 4

Printed Text • GENESIS 4:1–16 | Devotional Reading • HEBREWS 2:14–18

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXPLORE God's justice in the face of human sinfulness; REFLECT on the dangers of allowing sin to control us; and REPENT of thoughts and actions that could harm others and ask for God's mercy and forgiveness.

In Focus

Reginald remembered the anger that once burned like a hot coal in his heart. He had spent most of his life as a troubled person. By the age of 37, he had not held a job for longer than a couple of years and was about to be fired from his present job.

He was in a terrible state back then. His wife had just left him, taking their only child, a son he adored. She was no longer willing to bear the brunt of his angry outbursts. He had lost all that was dear to him because of his bad temper.

Reginald's life probably would have remained unchanged had it not been for his coworker Cheryl who sat down with him during lunch one day. They got to chatting about their families, and Reginald ended up admitting that he was having troubles. Cheryl prayed for him right then and there, and told him, "God has a better way for you." That message of hope started Reginald on the road to the righteous life that God desires for everyone.

After a time of working through his anger and committing his life to Christ, Reginald's family was reunited. As he thinks about the peaceful life he enjoys today, he wonders how different things would be if his former coworker had not had the courage to confront his negative behavior.

How do you react when someone confronts you about your harmful actions? Ask members to share periods in their lives when they felt deluged by tragic events. Invite them to share how God's grace sustained them.

Keep in Mind

"And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground." (Genesis 4:10, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV **Genesis 4:1** And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD.

2 And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.

3 And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD.

4 And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering:

5 But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.

6 And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen?

7 If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.

8 And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

9 And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?

10 And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.

11 And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand;

12 When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

13 And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

14 Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.

15 And the LORD said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.

16 And Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.

The People, Places, and Times

Firstfruits. This word was used in reference to the choicest examples of the harvest that should be dedicated to God. According to Mosaic Law, individual Israelites brought the best of the firstfruits of the land to Yahweh (Exodus 23:19; 34:26). The Book of Proverbs promises prosperity to those who honor God with their firstfruits (Proverbs 3:9).

The term is also used figuratively for a person or group that represents a special, preeminent treasure. Israel was described as God's "firstfruits" (Jeremiah 2:3). Christ, in His

Resurrection, was described as the "firstfruits" of those who have died (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23). The Holy Spirit is referred to as a "firstfruits" in Romans 8:23. Believers are a "kind of firstfruits," according to James 1:18.

Firstborn. A couple's first born son was required to be dedicated to Yahweh, in remembrance of the Passover when God claimed all the firstborns. The firstborn of a newly married couple, according to tradition, was believed to represent the prime of human vitality (Genesis 49:3).

The birthright of a firstborn son included a double portion of the family estate and leadership of the family. The firstborn would become head of the household upon his father's death. He could sell his birthright, as Esau did (Genesis 25:29–34) or forfeit it due to misconduct, as Reuben did (Genesis 35:22; 49:3, 4).

How do you give the first and the best to God in your offerings, including time, talent, and money?

Background

Sons were important to the Hebrew people for a variety of reasons. The ability to farm and herd animals was vital to their survival, a task well-performed by strong, young men. Fathers who had sons gained a measure of respect from the community.

The birth of Adam and Eve's sons was the beginning of the fulfillment of God's directive to them that they "be fruitful and multiply" (see Genesis 1:22). Some Bible scholars believe that the phrase "and she again bare" (v. 2) suggests that Cain and Abel were twins. The text is not explicit, however, as it is with the birth of later twins (Genesis 25:24; 38:27).

The story of these two brothers is deeper than that of sibling rivalry. It reflects the willingness and desire of one faithful steward to give his best to please the Lord. Another steward, his own brother, wanted God's favor, yet, did not want to give his best in order to obtain it. The jealousy and anger which Cain held for his brother led him to take Abel's life.

What actions have you taken in jealousy or anger that you regretted later?

At-A-Glance

1. The First Brothers (Genesis 4:1–7)
2. Jealousy Leads to Sin (vv. 8–9)
3. God Deals with Cain (vv. 10–16)

In Depth

1. The First Brothers (Genesis 4:1–7)

Eve readily acknowledges that the birth of her first son is the work of the Lord. She also gives birth to another son, Abel. The brothers assume occupations vital to their survival and well-being. These brothers were comparably employed, and each makes an offering of their wares to the Lord. God looks with favor upon Abel's offering, but not Cain's.

When God does not look upon Cain's offering with favor, Cain becomes very angry. No different than any of us, Cain wants God to approve of him. Instead of examining himself to find any hidden sin, however, Cain chose to direct his anger toward Abel.

Not all gifts are equal before God. He weighs both what we give as well as our attitude about our gift. Anger, envy, and self-pity can twist our minds and lay the foundation for trouble. God knew that if Cain did not examine his own shortcomings and try to do right, Cain would fall to sin. Anger's sinful fruit was perched at Cain's door. God makes it clear to Cain that he has to master the sin. When we become angry, we must learn to control and channel it into positive results.

What are positive, constructive channels for your anger?

2. Jealousy Leads to Sin (vv. 8–9)

The fact that Cain invites Abel to go out into the field indicates possible premeditation of his deed. However, it is equally possible that Cain led his brother into the field simply to scare or bully him. Either way, Cain's anger ruled the moment. Anger can provoke us to do things we would not do normally. In this case, anger took control of Cain, and in the end, his brother was dead. Cain refused to feel any sense of responsibility for what happened. Instead of focusing on doing what was right, as God had told him to do, Cain chose to make his brother the problem.

God questioned the whereabouts of Cain's brother: "Where is Abel thy brother?" Cain's unrepentant guilt prompted him to answer the Lord's question with a question (v. 9), "Am I my brother's keeper?" Apparently, God's answer to Cain's question was "Yes" as He continued to query the guilty firstborn about his younger brother.

3. God Deals with Cain (vv. 10–16)

The expression used in verse 10 concerning the earth "which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood," is consistent with an Old Testament concern that the depths of the earth (Sheol, hell) have an insatiable appetite for human beings, wanting to devour them at every opportunity. Sheol is not so deep, however, that God did not hear the cry of Abel's blood.

Cain is punished with a nomadic lifestyle because the earth, now holding his brother's blood, will no longer yield crops for him. Life as he knew it as a farmer would be no more. At this point, Cain finally exhibits sorrow, but it is because of his punishment and not for his misdeed, complaining that his punishment was more that he can bear.

In His grace, God places a mark (v. 15) of protection upon Cain to prevent harm from coming to him. Cain then leaves the presence of the Lord because there was no longer fellowship between him and Yahweh. His sin was unpardonable because Cain displays no desire to repent or reconcile with the Lord. The broken bond between Cain and God was the result of Cain's lack of faith, not God's lack of mercy.

Is Cain's punishment and protection fair?

Search the Scriptures

1. What was Eve's comment concerning her first born (v. 1)?
2. What advice did the Lord give to Cain concerning his offering (vv. 6–7)?
3. What punishment and what mercy did Cain receive for his misdeed (vv. 12–14)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Why was it easier for Cain to focus on Abel rather than on himself and his own offerings to the Lord?
2. How is it possible that Cain felt no responsibility for Abel's whereabouts, yet he felt Abel had been responsible for the poor reception of his own offerings?
3. Are you your "brother's" keeper? Look for biblical references to support the fact that believers do bear some responsibility for one another.

Liberating Lesson

The term "rageaholic" describes those who appear to be addicted to anger. Such people have rampant anger that may often be directed at unsuspecting, innocent people. Anger can lead us to commit acts that we later regret, including acts of violence. Even though our anger may only last for a moment, like a bomb, anger's momentary explosion can cause widespread damage. Discuss possible ways that people become addicted to anger. How can Christians be rageaholics? How can rage affect a person's ability to be an effective witness for Christ?

Application for Activation

Consider times when you have chosen to focus on another person's ability or dedication, rather than on your own shortcomings? What factors influenced your actions? How, if at all, did you resolve the issue? Take an honest assessment of yourself to determine whether you have feelings of anger or jealousy toward someone because you do not want to take responsibility for your own behavior. Share with the class what you feel the root causes of anger and jealousy are. Prayerfully consider feelings of anger or jealousy you may harbor which have shattered one or more relationships.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Walton, John H. *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.

Say It Correctly

Sheol. SHEE-ole.
Euphemistically.
YOU-feh-MISS-tih-kal-lee.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Stephen Prays for Mercy
for His Persecutors
(Acts 7:54–60)

TUESDAY

Herod's Vengeance
(Matthew 2:1–8, 16–18)

WEDNESDAY

Martyrs Long for Justice
(Revelation 6:9–17)

THURSDAY

Shine Forth, God of Vengeance!
(Psalm 94:1–10)

FRIDAY

God's Just Acts
(Psalm 94:11–23)

SATURDAY

Love One Another
(1 John 3:4–13)

SUNDAY

Abel's Blood Cries Out for Vengeance
(Genesis 4:1–13)

Hagar and Ishmael Not Forgotten

Bible Background • GENESIS 21:8–21

Printed Text • GENESIS 21:8–20 | Devotional Reading • LUKE 2:52

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will **DISCOVER** how God was with Hagar and Ishmael; **BELIEVE** that God is at work, even in the midst of hopeless situations; and **TRUST** in God's presence and provision, even when experiencing injustice.

In Focus

Carol slowly opened the envelope. She already knew what was inside: the same birthday card and \$100 check that her father sent her every year since she had turned thirteen.

Her father had never really been a part of her life. Carol prayed often that he would take more of an interest in her, maybe even attend church with her. She tried to wait patiently for God's timing, but a part of her resented this annual token "gift" from him. Carol's father and mother had dated in high school and married shortly after that. When Carol's mother became pregnant, her father had broken all ties. Not long after, he married again, and now lived a happy life with his new wife, their two daughters, and a dog in the suburbs.

He sent regular child support payments, but rarely visited Carol, even though they lived in the same city. If they happened to bump into one another at stores or on the street, he would say hello and then claim to have to hurry off somewhere. When she graduated from high school, he had sent a note congratulating her and a check. Friends had told her that he attended the graduations of both of his other daughters and had given them floral bouquets.

After years of scraping together enough for tuition, Carol was one semester away from finishing college and graduating with honors. She already knew that her father would have some excuse for not attending. She knew there would probably be another note and a check.

How do you avoid bitterness while looking forward to God's timing?

Keep in Mind

"And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation." (Genesis 21:17–18, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV **Genesis 21:8** And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned.

9 And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking.

10 Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac.

11 And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son.

12 And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called.

13 And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed.

14 And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and

she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

15 And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs.

16 And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bow shot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against him, and lift up her voice, and wept.

17 And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is.

18 Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation.

19 And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink.

20 And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer.

The People, Places, and Times

The Wilderness of Paran. Paran is a desert area located in the northeastern section of the Sinai Peninsula, with the Arabah on the east and the wilderness of Shur on the west. The region experiences very little rainfall (fewer than 10 inches per year). The Wilderness or Desert of Paran was one of the places where the Israelites spent part of their 40 years of wandering. It was from Kadesh, in Paran, that the twelve scouts were sent into the Promised Land to gather information prior to what would have been the Israelites' entry just a little more than two years after the Exodus from Egypt (Numbers 10:11). King David spent some time in the wilderness of Paran after Samuel died (1 Samuel 25:1). This region is part of modern-day Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Background

The incident in today's lesson is not the first time Hagar left Abraham's household because of Ishmael. When Hagar first became pregnant, jealousy, hostility, and turmoil ruled the day too. Even though it was Sarah's idea to have her servant Hagar bear a child for her by Abraham, Sarah treated the pregnant Hagar so harshly that the Egyptian girl ran away into the wilderness. There, an angel of the Lord appeared to the abused Hagar and instructed her not only to return, but to also submit herself to Sarah! The angel promised Hagar that from her seed would come countless descendants. Hagar was told she would have a son, and was instructed: "Call his name Ishmael; because the LORD hath heard thy affliction" (Genesis 16:11).

God's instructions challenge Hagar. She was instructed to return to the very same abusive and painful situation that sent her to the wilderness in the first place. God's direction, while uncomfortable for the young girl, held the promise of wonderful blessings from the God who heard and responded to her crying in the middle of the desert. When Hagar is again in a desperate situation in the desert, God again hears her.

When and how has God unexpectedly shown up for you?

At-A-Glance

1. The Cause of the Conflict
(Genesis 21:8–10)
2. The Comfort in the Conflict
(vv. 11–13)
3. The Cost in the Conflict (vv. 14–16)
4. The Provision in the Conflict
(vv. 17–20)

In Depth

1. The Cause of the Conflict (Genesis 21:8–10)

When Genesis 21 opens, a feast is being held to celebrate the weaning of Isaac. Children tended to nurse longer in those days, so Isaac may have been as old as three or four years old when he was finally weaned. The enjoyment of the day was interrupted when Sarah observed Ishmael mocking his little brother. Though Ishmael's behavior seemed questionable, we must recognize that for the past 13 years he had been the only child of an aging man who desperately wanted children. Abraham was a very wealthy and very powerful man, and Ishmael had enjoyed a privileged childhood that he now had to share with a brother.

Sarah demanded that Abraham “cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son” (v. 10). Though her motivation was wrong, Sarah was absolutely right on one key point—Ishmael was not the child of promise! It was Isaac whom God had promised would bring Abraham a line of descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky. Ishmael was not the result of God's supernatural movement in the life of Abraham; he was the result of impatience and self-indulgence on the part of Sarah and Abraham. Isaac, not Ishmael, was God's choice.

2. The Comfort in the Conflict (vv. 11–13)

Sarah's request that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael is heartbreaking to Abraham. However, God reminded Abraham of His promise, telling him to do as Sarah said and to send both Hagar and Ishmael away. In the face of this heart-wrenching pronouncement, God comforted Abraham by assuring him that His blessing toward Ishmael would mirror the blessing He had in store for Isaac.

What a powerful reminder that the God we serve is in control of everything. We must develop a spirit of obedience—even when we don't understand what lies ahead. We must trust that God knows and that He cares. He requires that each of us commit to obediently trusting and following His Word. Even in the midst of our anguish, our comfort lies in knowing God loves us and wants what is best for us. God's will, not our immediate comfort, must reign supreme if we are to triumph.

What is something difficult God has asked you to do? Did you do it?

3. The Cost of the Conflict (vv. 14–16)

After receiving provisions from Abraham—bread and water—Hagar and her son left the safety of the tents of Abraham and headed off into the desert. Instead of heading west into

Egypt, Hagar and Ishmael traveled east into the wilderness of Beersheba. Soon enough, the water Hagar received from Abraham ran out, and she and Ishmael faced a slow and agonizing death by dehydration. Unwilling to watch her son die, Hagar moved a “bowshot” away from her son and began to cry.

4. The Provision in the Conflict (vv. 17–20)

God had not abandoned Hagar or her son. Through His angel, God addresses Hagar by name. He knows her, and He knows all about her troubles. She is called to trust God. “Fear not,” she is told, “God hath heard the voice of the lad.” The same God who heard her voice years ago assures her that He now hears Ishmael’s voice. God responds when someone cries out from a situation of helplessness and hopelessness.

God renews His promise regarding Ishmael’s descendants becoming a nation. It is only when Hagar obeys God that she sees a well from which she can draw the water to sustain both of them. God’s blessing to her was made evident in a real and needed way.

The account ends with the indication that God’s promise had been fulfilled. Ishmael’s future had been accurately prophesied: his descendants, the Arabian nomads or Bedouins, indeed roamed the wilds of the desert. Ishmael himself becomes an archer and a skilled hunter who would be more than able to kill game for food and be a formidable opponent to any human enemy.

Discuss a time God when provided for your immediate and long-term needs at once.

Search the Scriptures

1. How did Abraham feel about Sarah’s demand (Genesis 21:11)?
2. What provisions did Abraham make for Hagar and Ishmael (v. 14)?
3. What promise was made to Hagar in the desert (v. 18)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. In verse 9, it appears that Sarah wanted Hagar and Ishmael cast out because Ishmael posed a threat to Isaac’s inheritance. Do you think there may have been other factors that caused Sarah to demand the eviction of Hagar and Ishmael? Are these types of issues still faced by families today? How are Christians expected to deal with these types of issues?

2. Do you think that Hagar’s Egyptian ethnicity contributed to her victimization? If you do, why do you believe this?

Liberating Lesson

Very often when we are feeling isolated, hurt, or even victimized, it is difficult to remember that the God we serve is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. He knows everything that is going on in our lives. He knows when we are hurt, and He knows who is hurting us. Our faith demands that we trust Him to reconcile every situation in His appointed time. God is everywhere all of the time. There is no situation that we endure alone. He is available to comfort us if we ask Him. God is all-powerful. When present trials make us anxious or fearful, we must remember that the provision for all we need rests in His hands. Christians are not immune from tests, trials, and tribulations, nor are Christian families immune from dysfunctions. Through these hardships, we must hold on to the promise and the hope that only God can provide.

Application for Activation

It is often difficult for us to recollect abusive incidents that have occurred in our families. It is much easier to maintain a safe distance between us and the offending relative. This week, ask God to provide an opportunity for you to be reconciled with someone in your family and begin the healing process that will allow you to fully embrace, rather than just

tolerate, that family member. Spend time in prayer and Scripture study so that you may be prepared when this opportunity presents itself. If you are not presently at odds with a family member, think of what other types of families (or communities) you are a part of; think of someone you might be at odds with and reconcile your differences with that person.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

Sources:

Landman, Isaac, ed. "Ishmaelites." In *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*. Vol. 5. New York: The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, Inc., 1941. 609–10.

Packer, J. I., and M. C. Tenney, eds. *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980. 592–94.

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Say It Correctly

Arabah. AIR–uh–buh.

Paran. pah–RON.

Kadesh. KAY–desh.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

The Lord Blesses Hagar and Ishmael
(Genesis 16:1–15)

TUESDAY

Hear My Prayer, O God
(Psalm 5)

WEDNESDAY

The Pure in Heart Will See God
(Matthew 5:3–12)

THURSDAY

Abraham and Ishmael Are Circumcised
(Genesis 17:23–27)

FRIDAY

The Twelve Tribes of Ishmael
(Genesis 25:12–18)

SATURDAY

Remember Me, O Lord
(Psalm 106:1–5)

SUNDAY

God Hears Ishmael's Voice
(Genesis 21:8–21)

The Laws of Justice and Mercy

Bible Background • EXODUS 23

Printed Text • EXODUS 23:1-12 | Devotional Reading • 2 JOHN 1:4-6

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will REMEMBER that God expects believers to care for others, ASPIRE to be impartial in showing justice and mercy, and PRACTICE helping those who are in need.

In Focus

Toni had lived in her neighborhood for ten years. She tried to take an active role in helping the neighborhood be a safe and welcoming place. One afternoon while resting on her front porch, Toni's neighbor Binta stopped by to chat.

"When are you going to bring your family over for dinner with us?" Toni asked. "We really do need to return the favor for that delicious ablo and grilled chicken you made for us last week!"

Binta smiled. "I hope we can join you soon, my friend. But this week I am too busy with business troubles."

Binta explained she was planning to rent a local storefront to sell furniture and antiques. However, she was a little uncomfortable with the contract for the lease agreement. English wasn't Binta's first language, so some of the contract wording was difficult for her to understand. Toni agreed to take a look at the lease paperwork.

After reviewing Binta's paperwork, Toni discovered that several of the rules in the lease were unusual and seemed to favor the landlord. She suspected that the landlord was trying to take advantage of Binta. Toni worked with Binta to renegotiate the lease so that the terms were reasonable. The following week, Binta happily reported that the landlord had agreed to the new terms. She thanked Toni with a big hug. "Thanks for looking out! You're a true friend!"

How do you help those around you who are new to the area or to the country?

Keep in Mind

"Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil; neither shalt thou speak in a cause to decline after many to wrest judgment: Neither shalt thou countenance a poor man in his cause."

(Exodus 23:2-3, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV Exodus 23:1 Thou shalt not raise a false report: put not thine hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.

2 Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil; neither shalt thou speak in a cause to decline after many to wrest judgment:

3 Neither shalt thou countenance a poor man in his cause.

4 If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again.

5 If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden, and wouldest forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him.

6 Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of thy poor in his cause.

7 Keep thee far from a false matter; and the innocent and righteous slay thou not: for I will not justify the wicked.

8 And thou shalt take no gift: for the gift blindeth the wise, and perverteth the words of the righteous.

9 Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.

10 And six years thou shalt sow thy land, and shalt gather in the fruits thereof:

11 But the seventh year thou shalt let it rest and lie still; that the poor of thy people may eat: and what they leave the beasts of the field shall eat. In like manner thou shalt deal with thy vineyard, and with thy oliveyard.

12 Six days thou shalt do thy work, and on the seventh day thou shalt rest: that thine ox and thine ass may rest, and the son of thy handmaid, and the stranger, may be refreshed.

The People, Places, and Times

Perjury. The Ten Commandments clearly state God's law against "false witness." Elaborating from this, the Law of Moses often reiterates how negatively God feels toward lying. A lying tongue is one of the few things God hates (Proverbs 6:17). Today, before witnesses may testify during a trial, they must swear to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." This reinforces the law of perjury, and if violated and proven that one has lied under oath, it carries a serious penalty. In non-legal settings, the justice principle of speaking truthfully about others extends to gossip and slander.

Law Codes. Today's Scriptures focus on the arena of law called "social justice" legislation. The first set of judicial imperatives is addressed to witnesses in a legal proceeding. These are given as examples of the types of things that

constitute injustice, which are to be avoided under penalty of judgment. The list was not meant to be exhaustive, and there are many other similar situations that would involve the same principles of not only avoiding injustice, but also doing justice. Most ancient law codes, including the Law of Moses, should not be read as a full listing of society's dos and don'ts. They are examples of wise standards of justice. Judges would familiarize themselves with all these laws and extrapolate from them what verdict to give in a particular situation.

Background

The Covenant Code of Exodus 20:22–23:33, also known as "The Book of the Covenant," follows and expands on the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. This was not a one-way relationship, because Israel had readily

agreed to obey God's laws (Exodus 19:2–8). It was their voluntary agreement to follow and obey God that caused Israel to suffer God's judgment when they disobeyed the covenant laws. Implicit in any law forbidding something is a judgment for disobedience. Because of the justice and mercy infusing God's character and His Covenant Code, God's anger was kindled when His people engaged in injustice and did not show mercy to others.

At-A-Glance

1. Five Judicial Imperatives (Exodus 23:1–3)
2. Two Case Studies (vv. 4–6)
3. Five More Judicial Imperatives (vv. 7–9)
4. The Sabbath Year (vv. 10–12)

In Depth

1. Five Judicial Imperatives (Exodus 23:1–3)

Lying is forbidden in two legal situations: in bringing a false accusation (KJV: “a false report,” v. 1) and while acting as a witness in a trial. This is reiterated in the case of popular opinion, too. Going along with a “multitude” does not protect you if you do evil, especially if it causes you to lie and pervert justice. Not only must a just person not follow the crowd, but also he or she must be willing to speak out against it.

While many Old Testament laws encourage the Israelites to show kindness to the poor, God also cautions them to not automatically show partiality for a poor person, just because he or she is poor. A normal, flawed human system might not give the poor a fair shake, but the pendulum should not swing the other way. The just child of God must be equitable to all, whether poor or wealthy.

How do your stereotypes of the poor and the wealthy affect how you view them?

2. Two Case Studies (vv. 4–6)

The just person is to help a man whose donkey has strayed, even if that person is an enemy. Through the ages, this has been the testimony that often has won converts because they saw God's people being kind and just, even to their enemies. Similarly, the just person must also help a person whose donkey has fallen with a load, even if that person is an enemy. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a perfect New Testament parallel to this Old Testament injunction. The just person must offer help in all situations, whether the person needing help is a friend or foe.

When have you had an opportunity to help your enemy?

3. Five More Judicial Imperatives (vv. 7–9)

Just as one should not deny justice to a rich person just because he or she is rich (v. 3), so the just person must not deny justice to a poor person just because he or she is poor. A judge must never falsely charge anyone and must never put an innocent person to death. Particularly when it comes to matters of life and death, God specifically will not excuse any with innocent blood on their hands, but will Himself judge the unjust judge.

Sadly, bribing judges and other officials is a sin that continues to this day. No one in a position of authority should take a bribe. Bribes blind judges to justice, when instead judges are to be blind to partiality.

As the Israelites were once oppressed as strangers in Egypt, they are not to oppress strangers (e.g., foreigners and travelers) in their own land. While this injunction is likely spoken specifically to judges, the guideline applies to any just God-follower. No one, especial a person on trial, should be judged in light of their nationality or ethnicity.

How have you seen justice perverted because of bribes?

4. The Sabbath Year (vv. 10–12)

Finally, God institutes the practice of a Sabbath year that provides many righteous outcomes. Besides the obvious rest for the farmer, a Sabbath year also allows the animals and the land itself to rest, showing them respect. During this rest time, the farmers are compelled to rely on the grace of God to get by, which strengthens their faith. The Sabbath year also provides food for the poor, who are allowed to reap freely of the vineyards, olive groves, and fields during that time. A Sabbath year is to proceed much as a Sabbath day would. God's just provision provides rest for all: His people, their land, their animals, their servants, and even the foreigners among them.

What would a Sabbath Year look like among God's people today?

Search the Scriptures

1. How do popular opinions and bribes affect the administration of justice (Exodus 23:2, 8)?
2. What steps does God's Law take to systemically protect the poor?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Compare the examples of injustice given in the Covenant Code. Try to find modern examples that would parallel the same principles. Have you ever witnessed injustice firsthand or participated in it?
2. How can Christians protect their hearts from wanting to see their enemies suffer? How do Christians ensure they will stop and help their enemies when the chance arises?

Liberating Lesson

One hears a lot about social justice in the news, and it is only natural for victims of injustice to cry out for justice in every aspect of society. Studying the Scriptures that pertain to social justice

presents a clear picture of what it means for God's people to embody justice in society—how they are to both avoid injustice and exercise justice. This clear picture must be preserved in a world where so many believe that only political solutions or new laws will fulfill God's requirements for justice. Governments are capable of doing things that individuals cannot, as they enact sweeping laws that shape our perspectives and begin to change the way we treat each other. But according to God's Word, individuals are always responsible for their own actions and decisions. Even governments are made up of individuals, and each will give an account of every decision, whether it was just or unjust. Ultimately, no one will be excused for inflicting or enabling injustice.

Application for Activation

Even though today's believers live in the New Covenant, God's holy character and standards have not changed. He still does not tolerate injustice among His people. He still calls His people to be holy and to come out from among those in the world who commit such evil, as stated in 1 Peter 2:9, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." The challenge for believers today is to correct injustices when they are found and to act justly, even when there is compelling reason or temptation to do otherwise.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Say It Correctly

Decalogue. DEH-kah-log.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Serve God Alone
(Exodus 23:13–19)

TUESDAY

Blessings for the Obedient
(Exodus 23:20–33)

WEDNESDAY

Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment
(James 2:1–13)

THURSDAY

Faith Without Works Is Dead
(James 2:14–26)

FRIDAY

Seek the Advantage of Others
(1 Corinthians 10:23–33)

SATURDAY

Steadfast Love and Faithfulness
(Psalm 85)

SUNDAY

Treat Others Justly
(Exodus 23:1–12)

Notes

Justice, Judges, and Priests

Bible Background • DEUTERONOMY 16:18–20; 17:8–13; 19:15–21 | Printed Text • DEUTERONOMY 16:18–20; 17:8–13 | Devotional Reading • PROVERBS 15:25–26

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will **DISCOVER** why God established the roles of judges, officials, and priests and what those roles entailed; **VALUE** people who make decisions based on God's justice; and **PRACTICE** justice in our roles as leaders.

In Focus

Rev. Dr. James Sheldon was the newly appointed pastor of a historic church. He spent much of his life and ministry focused on being a bridge between elected officials and the people. He was sought after to speak to critical issues affecting communities of color. He did not live in the neighborhood of his new church, and so he met with church officials to get their input. The church leaders advised him to, of course, meet with the alderman, statehouse, and congressional representatives.

He personally called each and invited them to the church for a private luncheon with his church leaders. "I want to ensure a collaborative environment where we all work together for the good of the community," Dr. Sheldon said to the chair of his board of deacons. As the party came together, the elected officials said how honored they were to meet him because of his reputation to galvanize people.

Alderman Johnson was also new, and as a Christ-follower, he wanted to make sure he served the community with integrity. As he spoke to Dr. Sheldon, he expressed his desire to work with him to get the best resources for the people. "Dr. Sheldon, I grew up in this neighborhood. When I finished my law degree and passed the bar, I promised God that I would give back to those who invested in me. There are a lot of good people here, and I believe with God's guidance and your help, we can make a difference."

Dr. Sheldon was relieved to have an ally who aligned with his values. For him, it was the start of a God-ordained relationship.

How important is it for church and civic leaders to work together in partnership?

Keep in Mind

"Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates, which the LORD thy God giveth thee, throughout thy tribes: and they shall judge the people with just judgment."
(Deuteronomy 16:18, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV **Deuteronomy 16:18** Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates, which the LORD thy God giveth thee, throughout thy tribes: and they shall judge the people with just judgment.

19 Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous.

20 That which is altogether just shalt thou follow, that thou mayest live, and inherit the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

17:8 If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being matters of controversy within thy gates: then shalt thou arise, and get thee up into the place which the LORD thy God shall choose;

9 And thou shalt come unto the priests the Levites, and unto the judge that shall be in

those days, and enquire; and they shall shew thee the sentence of judgment:

10 And thou shalt do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the LORD shall choose shall shew thee; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they inform thee:

11 According to the sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do: thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall shew thee, to the right hand, nor to the left.

12 And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the LORD thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel.

13 And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously.

The People, Places, and Times

The Place the Lord Your God Will Choose.

This cumbersome phrase is found often throughout Deuteronomy. It refers to the location of God's holy shrine. The Tabernacle would be set up in several places throughout the period of the judges and kings until Solomon finally finished the Temple in Jerusalem. God did not want to limit His guidance to one shrine location and leave His people confused as to how to obey His laws when the shrine was moved to another location. God chose not to say "the Tabernacle" either, knowing He would later be worshiped in the Temple. This ambiguity later gave the Samaritans an excuse not to worship at Jerusalem as tensions between them and the Israelites rose. The Samaritans believed the place the Lord chose was their own local Mt. Gerizim, rather than the Israelites' Mt. Zion.

This was still an object of tension in Jesus' day (John 4:20–21).

Background

After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the children of Israel were ready to become a nation. God wanted Israel to be a theocracy, where His people would live in a manner that would reflect His government. In this transfer of power, Moses stood as the intermediary serving as prophet and judge. In the book of Deuteronomy, God restates and reaffirms to a new generation the decrees and ordinances given to Israel, starting in Exodus with the Ten Commandments to the laws written in the books of Leviticus and Numbers. The descendants of Israel are instructed throughout the book of Deuteronomy to be careful that they do as the Lord has commanded so that

they would live long and prosper in the land. They were to be an example to the other nations of God's power and blessing by administering justice as a civil society (Deuteronomy 5:32, 6:17–19, 7:12–22, 8:11). God, through His ordinances, decrees, and precepts, set the culture for Israel as the mark of His presence. His handprint makes Israel a peculiar nation that worshiped the true and living God.

What indicates God's presence in our culture?

At-A-Glance

1. Just Officials (Deuteronomy 16:18–20)
2. Civil Obedience
(Deuteronomy 17:8–13)

In Depth

1. Just Officials (Deuteronomy 16:18–20)

God, through His prophet Moses, instructs Israel as they become a nation to be governed by His standard of right and wrong. God is righteous, just, and upright in all His ways. He sets the expectation through His commands that those placed in civil authority among the tribes and towns be submitted to God as the highest authority. He directs that leaders be chosen from among the people to administer justice just as Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had advised him soon after escaping Egypt (Exodus 18:13–26). Those chosen were to be people who feared God, were considered trustworthy among the people, wise, impartial, had integrity, able to discern between right and wrong, and not subject to bribery. Justice is at the heart of God's character, and He hates imbalanced scales (Proverbs 11:1).

Moses implores the judges and officers among the tribes to have an unwavering commitment to justice and truth above all in representing the people and making decisions when upholding

the Law. God recognizes that when people accept bribes and partiality, it is unjust to the righteous. People living in community will have disputes and disagreements, but there must be a representative who can listen to the facts, review the rule of law, and with the wisdom of God administer fair judgment. Leaders must seek God's heart in mediating a peaceful resolution to conflicts and upholding the rights of all people, seeing them as God's creation.

What is the evidence of a godly leader?

2. Civil Obedience (Deuteronomy 17:8–13)

In establishing civil order for Israel, Moses further instructs the officials on how to handle difficult cases such as murder, assault, or lawsuits. They are told to seek the Lord and go to the Tabernacle to seek the counsel of the Levitical priest and the judge. The Levitical priests were to be in lockstep with God to hear His voice. The priests were to serve as spiritual advisors to judges to support their discernment in interpreting the Law. The judge was in charge of rendering a decision on the matter, like the Supreme Court in our time. The judge's decision under the auspices of godly wisdom was to be final, and once the decision was announced, it could not be overruled or overturned. Moses gives God's command that if the person should not abide by the judge's decision, they would be put to death. It was considered evil before the Lord to not adhere to godly authority, and God expected swift justice so that others would not follow that example.

Further, God expected the judges and priests to be fully submitted to His authority and display excellent moral character so that the people will view them as His representatives. When leaders fail in exhibiting godly character, people lose faith in authority and the result is social disorder.

How can those in authority change the narrative on leadership to reflect God's heart for justice?

Search the Scriptures

1. What roles did God through Moses command the people to establish to lead their communities (Deuteronomy 16:18)?

2. What was God's warning to those who failed to heed the priest or judge's decision (Deuteronomy 17:12–13)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What was the significance of God's command to appoint leaders in the land? Why was it important for these leaders to exhibit excellent moral character and sound judgment?

2. Why do you think God established an order to deal with difficult cases? Why was God stern on the consequences of disobedience to the judge's decision?

Libertarian Lesson

Our world needs authority in every realm, and there should be healthy respect and honor for those in leadership. However, when power is misused, it erodes trust and systems break. God provided instructions to safeguard against broken trust, and He also established that when those leaders are proven trustworthy, their word is bond. Leaders and the people under their authority must work as partners in progress; one should not oppress the other. A just society is when all are equal under the law, and people are judged fairly. The people have to be able to trust the integrity of leaders. People must receive due process and have their voices heard for the fair resolution of conflicts. Further, as citizens, we must hold leaders accountable to guide us under the protection of God's authority.

Application for Activation

Imagine what families, churches, communities, schools, businesses, and justice systems would be like with people who took

seriously God's mandate to lead with integrity? Imagine the impact if people were engaged, involved, and held leaders accountable in a respectful way. Imagine the exchange of ideas if people actively participated in the processes needed to make society just. An essential activity to start living in a just society is to listen with an empathetic ear, to reflect on how an individual can bring forth change, and then take action. Look for opportunities in your spheres of influence to attend town hall meetings or to even host one. These meetings should be places where people can speak with respectful candor, and leaders can give and receive feedback. The lively discussion can usher in a renewed level of engagement.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Say It Correctly

Sanhedrin. San–HEE–drin.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

True and False Witnesses
(Deuteronomy 19:15–21)

TUESDAY

Addressing Church Conflicts
(Matthew 18:15–20)

WEDNESDAY

The Duty to Forgive
(Matthew 18:21–35)

THURSDAY

Moses' Court of Appeal
(Exodus 18:13–26)

FRIDAY

Speak Truth and Act on It
(Ephesians 4:25–32)

SATURDAY

God Is an Impartial Judge
(Deuteronomy 10:14–22)

SUNDAY

Appoint Leaders to Administer Justice
(Deuteronomy 16:18–20, 17:8–13)

Notes

Justice and the Marginalized

Bible Background • DEUTERONOMY 24:10–21

Printed Text • DEUTERONOMY 24:10–21 | Devotional Reading • 3 JOHN 1:2–8

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXPLORE God's standards for justice, APPRECIATE how God loves those who are poor and marginalized, and SHARE love with those who are rejected by others.

In Focus

Melissa couldn't believe her bad luck. She had been laid off three times in the past two years. Every time she was financially stable, her company announced plans to downsize, or shut down. That evening, Melissa needed time alone, but then her phone rang.

"Brandy told me about the cutbacks," her brother Adam said sympathetically.

Melissa said, "That wasn't her news to tell. And you need to mind your own business!"

Adam quickly said, "Don't shut me out again! God has a purpose. He is your provider, not the company. He's always got your back!"

Melissa hated when her brother got all preachy. His religion was fine for him, but it wasn't her thing. "Adam, my dinner's getting cold. I've got to go."

"Sis, wait!" Adam said. "I know you don't care for Jesus, but He gave His church some very specific instructions about what to do when people hit hard times. I want to help, and my church has a program that might be just right for your current situation."

"I'm not some charity case, Adam," Melissa said.

"I know, Sis," Adam said. "Just give this a bit of a chance. It can't hurt. Can I come by and talk with you about it tomorrow?"

Melissa hated that her brother wouldn't take no for an answer. She hated her situation. But she also hated feeling so much hate at it all. "Tomorrow, then." Melissa hung up the phone as tears ran down her face.

What programs does your church support to help the disenfranchised and marginalized in your community?

Keep in Mind

"But thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee thence: therefore I command thee to do this thing."

(Deuteronomy 24:18, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV Deuteronomy 24:10 When thou dost lend thy brother any thing, thou shalt not go into his house to fetch his pledge.

11 Thou shalt stand abroad, and the man to whom thou dost lend shall bring out the pledge abroad unto thee.

12 And if the man be poor, thou shalt not sleep with his pledge:

13 In any case thou shalt deliver him the pledge again when the sun goeth down, that he may sleep in his own raiment, and bless thee: and it shall be righteousness unto thee before the LORD thy God.

14 Thou shalt not oppress an hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of thy brethren, or of thy strangers that are in thy land within thy gates:

15 At his day thou shalt give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and setteth his heart upon it: lest he cry against thee unto the LORD, and it be sin unto thee.

16 The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put

to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.

17 Thou shalt not pervert the judgment of the stranger, nor of the fatherless; nor take a widow's raiment to pledge:

18 But thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee thence: therefore I command thee to do this thing.

19 When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands.

20 When thou beatest thine olive tree, thou shalt not go over the boughs again: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.

21 When thou gatherest the grapes of thy vineyard, thou shalt not glean it afterward: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.

The People, Places, and Times

Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is one of the most significant books in the Old Testament. It is directly quoted over 40 times in the New Testament, exceeded only by Psalms (quoted 68 times), and Isaiah (quoted 55 times). In fact, Jesus Himself quoted from Deuteronomy each time He was tempted by Satan during His forty days and nights in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 6:13, 16; 8:3). When a lawyer asked Jesus which is the greatest commandment in the Law (Matthew 22:36), Deuteronomy again provided the answer, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (6:5). Verse 6 goes on to say, "These

words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart." It was obvious Jesus had obeyed the command and hidden the Word in His heart so that He would not sin against God (Psalm 119:11). We can do the same if we memorize the Word, meditating on it day and night in order to obey it and be blessed by it (Joshua 1:8).

Are you able to follow Jesus' example to use the power of God's Word to defend yourself against the attacks of the enemy?

Background

In chapter 24, the Israelites are introduced to a set of miscellaneous laws. It speaks to the understanding of marital commitments

for grounds for divorce and remarrying after divorce (vv. 1–4). Verse 5 explains why newly married men are absolved of military duty for one year. The understanding of loan and collateral is interpreted in verse 6. If a person borrows anything, he is expected to provide collateral of his choosing, as a sign of good faith for the loan. Kidnapping to sell someone as a slave was forbidden (v. 7). Verses 8–9 are not laws, but reminders of the priestly directives on how to deal with those who have leprosy (Leviticus 13–14). This assortment of laws for the Israelites is presented in concert with previous laws framing a clear expectation of how to govern themselves. Their understanding and their ability, or inability, to appropriately practice these laws would have societal and divine consequences (Deuteronomy 24:15). These laws are not directed only to those who were wealthy, but are equally important for those who were poor. The remaining portion of chapter 24 is fixed on the dignity of the poor.

Why was there such an emphasis on the dignity of the marginalized?

At-A-Glance

1. The Debtors (Deuteronomy 24:10–15)
2. The Disassociation (v. 16)
3. The Destitute (vv. 17–21)

In Depth

1. The Debtors (Deuteronomy 24:10–15)

The theme of loans and collateral, initially sketched in verse 6, resurfaces in more detail in verse 10. Most often, debtors are viewed as being at the disadvantage of the loaner. Although in debt, the debtor should not lose their dignity or self-respect. The loaner oppressing the debtor or ignoring the debtor's family's needs is outlawed. God cares just as much for the well being of

the debtor as He cares for the creditor's. Each person, regardless of status, is viewed equally in the sight of God. The loaner's job was not to intimidate or humiliate because someone owed a debt. As a symbol of good faith, the debtor was to initiate their repayment methods. Conversely, the loaner could not dictate what was to be used as collateral or payment. Further, he was not permitted to enter the debtor's home to demand his preferred method of payment.

If the only thing the debtor could afford to render were his sleeping clothes, then that should be deemed to be an acceptable form of payment. However, those were to be returned to the debtor by evening. The same courtesy is to be given to workers who live hand to mouth. They cannot wait overnight to receive their day's wages, so the employer must not force them to do so.

This was all enveloped with respect. Mutual respect was to be provided by both parties. The debtor knows he owes the debt and shows his willingness to pay. The creditor recognizes he is owed funds but trusts the fidelity of the debtor. It creates loving-kindness to treat your neighbor as you would also want to be treated (Mark 12:31).

Should acts of kindness reciprocate kindness?

2. The Disassociation (v. 16)

Moses reiterates that each person is to be treated individually. This means there is no generational penalty, where the children pay for the crimes of the parent or vice versa (Jeremiah 31:29; Ezekiel 18). Imposing a cumulative punishment would present unjust repercussions and unfair retaliation for offenses not committed by the person receiving the punishment. If this were to be allowed, families or villages could potentially be obliterated, all because of the offenses of another. Verse 16 seeks to eliminate such retaliatory actions.

What would happen if families had to pay for previous family members' delinquencies?

3. The Destitute (vv. 17–21)

Moses continues his dissection of the have and the have nots. He goes into further detail on how one must handle the disadvantaged. Regardless of one's social or economic class, each person must be treated the same. The imagery and remembrance of Israel being slaves are brought into focus. In Moses' use of the word slave, he does not want Israel to ever forget how they too were disenfranchised in Egypt, classless and poor. Still, God chose to redeem them. Now freed, Israel is supposed to see the powerful and powerless as equal. They are so similar, we should consider the lowly as our neighbors. Taking care of your neighbors is something we should all do, especially the privileged. Gleaning—the process of sharing with the poor—is not only appropriate, but showcases true love for humanity. Their surplus is to serve as manna from heaven for the needy. Everyone has something to give.

Do you think the poor have anything to give?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why is God concerned about protecting people's dignity (Deuteronomy 24:10–13)?
2. Why don't we have to pay for the sins of our ancestors (v. 16)?
3. By calling them slaves, what did Moses want the Israelites to remember (v.18)?

Discuss the Meaning

It is easy to think that if we have money or status that we are more important than others. In God's eyes, each of us is considered the same and we should believe we are equal. How does God seek to deal with our ego and classism? How does Jesus' bodily sacrifice coincide with an unredeemable debt?

Liberating Lesson

The Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey found that nearly 40 percent of

non-elderly adults report difficulty meeting basic needs such as food, healthcare, housing, and utilities. We are one of the wealthiest nations in the world, so why is this statistic still true? God blesses us so that we can be blessings to our neighbors. It is not a matter of the privileged and the underprivileged in the sight of God. It is never about lauding privilege, but being generous enough to share it knowing that we should love our neighbors as ourselves.

Application for Activation

Daily, we have seen people on streets or near freeways holding signs that in essence say, "I need help." Often we ignore their concern or don't think we have enough to help them in their time of need. Yet our help, regardless of the increment, could be the assistance they need. Many of us have the privilege of going to a home, changing clothes, and having a meal. It may not be exactly what we want, but we have something. Maybe enough to share. Let's do something! Look for ways to assist the underprivileged, whether providing for their needs, or advocating for their rights.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Say It Correctly

Pentateuch. PEN–tuh–took.
Hammurabi. hah–muh–RAW–bee.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

God Executes Justice for the Poor
(Psalm 140)

TUESDAY

Remembering Our
Marginalized Ancestors
(Deuteronomy 26:1–11)

WEDNESDAY

Woe to Those Who Mistreat Workers
(James 5:1–11)

THURSDAY

Justice for the Weak and Orphaned
(Psalm 82)

FRIDAY

Jesus' Compassion for the Helpless
(Matthew 9:27–38)

SATURDAY

Do Not Oppress the Alien
(Leviticus 19:32–37)

SUNDAY

Justice for the Poor
(Deuteronomy 24:10–21)

Notes

Nathan Condemns David

Bible Background • 2 SAMUEL 12

Printed Text • 2 SAMUEL 12:1–9, 13–15 | Devotional Reading • JOHN 7:40–47

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXPLORE how sin's consequences extend beyond the individual and bring hurt to God and others; ADDRESS sin and the injustices that occur as a result; and ADMIT our sins, ask God's forgiveness, and make godly choices.

In Focus

Carlton was a proud eight-and-a-half year old boy. He was his mother's pride and joy. He was a capable student with good grades, good behavior, and he often was known as the center of activity at his school. Though he was surrounded by friends at school, he was the youngest child in the family, and his older siblings had moved out on their own. Yes, Carlton was clearly a special kid, but he was still a kid.

One evening while goofing around in his mother's living room—an area that had always been off limits to kids—he realized his jumping and bouncing had gone too far when he heard a crash. After searching for something large to be broken, he realized he had actually caused a tiny, delicate glass vase to topple over. It was one of his mom's newest decorations, and she had chosen it because it was so uniquely designed. As it happened, Carlton was able to put the pieces together and prop them up against a lamp so that it appeared to still be in one piece. Oddly, Mom never heard the crash and never came running.

After going to bed, Carlton soon forgot about his little incident. Months later, Carlton was in his room doing homework. He'd had a good day at school and even made an A on a test. Suddenly his great day was ruined when he heard his mother yell in that unmistakable tone of voice:

"CARLTON!" Right then, he remembered the vase, put down his pen, took a deep breath, and went to answer his mom's call. It was now time to face the truth.

We try to teach the younger generation that sometimes even though people are allowed grace, they still have to face the consequences. Where have you seen this in your life?

Keep in Mind

"And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man." (from 2 Samuel 12:7, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV 2 Samuel 12:1 And the LORD sent Nathan unto David. And he came unto him, and said unto him, There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor.

2 The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds:

3 But the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter.

4 And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him.

5 And David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, As the LORD liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die:

6 And he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.

7 And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man. Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, I

anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul;

8 And I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things.

9 Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in his sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon.

13 And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said unto David, The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die.

14 Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die.

15 And Nathan departed unto his house. And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bare unto David, and it was very sick.

The People, Places, and Times

David. David is one of the Bible's great heroes, in part because his story covers such a wide range of human experience. Born the youngest of eight sons, David had few, if any, expectations on his life, beyond shepherding and following the orders of others. David would rise quickly from the moment of his anointing, through great victories in battle, and ultimately succeed Saul as king. Like many who rise to power, David was not exempt from temptation, nor was he innocent of yielding, particularly as his life changed upon encountering Bathsheba.

Just like the rest of us, David was not exempt from the consequences of his actions, nor was he able to sin outside of God's omniscient view.

Nathan. Nathan was a faithful prophet and a trusted advisor. Unlike others who hover close to the seat of power, he maintained his faithfulness to God first, and the king next. While many people fear losing their place if they do not enable a misguided leader, Nathan shows that it is more important to trust and obey God. Nathan utilized his creativity to instruct and correct David, retaining respect as a man of God. Nathan was aware of many

of David's sins, but he intervened before David made the mistake of thinking he was invincible. Many of us need genuine friends who will tell us the truth, versus what we want to hear.

What friend or mentor do you have in your life who will hold you accountable?

Background

The imagery of the innocent lamb should resonate with Christians. David is now king, but many years ago, he had been a shepherd. No doubt, Nathan was able to relate to David at this core place in his personal history. While most are quite separate from our agricultural origins today, we do not have to look far to see how God has brought us from humility to glory, all because of His grace and mercy.

Nathan's story of the beloved sheep may be expanded to represent God's love for His people. The enemy is certainly seeking to devour and destroy us, while God loves us to the point He holds us close to His bosom. While Nathan's story holds a tragic end for the lamb, our truth is that God promises nothing and no one can pluck us from God's hand. Although David was guilty of taking Bathsheba wrongly, God's grace and mercy spared David's life and allowed him to continue to fulfill the call upon his life. There were still consequences, but Nathan's intervention on God's instructions saved David from utter catastrophe.

At-A-Glance

1. God Reveals (2 Samuel 12:1-7)
2. God Reforms (vv. 7-9)
3. God Redeems (vv. 13-15)

In Depth

1. God Reveals (2 Samuel 12:1-7)

God used Nathan to reveal to David the truth of his own actions. Similarly, Christ would use

many parables during His ministry. Preaching and teaching by illustration can actually lead to greater revelation in some cases.

In verse 5, David's anger reached its highest point, as he was insulted on behalf of the poor man and his beloved lamb. Sin causes us to be arrogant and to become blind to the reality that we have caused damage by our actions. David had not just damaged Uriah, he had taken his life in order to take his wife. This extremity was no secret—yet God used Nathan to reveal the horror of this behavior to David so that he could see himself from another perspective.

In this moment of revelation, David went from being royal to wrong, and the anger he demonstrated would soon be turned toward himself. God reveals our wrongs to us so that we can take corrective action. David was no stranger to repentance, but he had let this practice lapse. Revelation has a way of rerouting us from disaster.

If God were to reveal your sins to the public, what could you stand to lose? Friendships? Respect? Livelihood?

2. God Reforms (vv. 7-9)

"Thou art the man!" These words ring from the voice of Nathan, and David stands accused in his own royal chamber. His guilt is inescapable, and his accuser is not the prophet, but Almighty God Himself. Truly there can be no remission of sin without repentance, and there can be no repentance without an acknowledgment of guilt.

God's reform is thorough. God is not interested in temporary remedies that will spare our feelings or compromise right and wrong. Instead, God can only reform us when we yield to Him, acknowledge His righteousness and admit our wrong.

After the initial shock of the revelation of David's guilt, Nathan continues by prophetically declaring all the many reasons David had no

excuse for what he had done. Again, revelation leads to reformation, as we all must account for our wrongdoings, and evaluate how to make better choices in the future. David had been blessed to accomplish great things. He had absolutely no reason to take his soldier's life and seduce his wife. He did so simply because he could.

What privileges have we abused, knowing that it would displease God and harm ourselves in the long run?

3. God Redeems (vv. 13–15)

The beauty of the grace of God is that it covers a multitude of sins. David's confession is refreshing, considering our political climate which finds many powerful leaders quite unrepentant and indignant at the notion that they may be wrong. In David's case, he had the power as a king to command right and wrong to be precisely what he chose. Yet, by recognizing God's revelation and accepting God's reformation, he could now fully receive God's redemption.

"I have sinned against the LORD." These simple words are very difficult to say sometimes, but they are no less vital to the quality of our Christian life. We are not capable of living a sin-free life. However, we are entirely free from sin because of God's redeeming grace.

In yet another parallel similar to the poor man's lamb, God used Bathsheba's child as an example for our faith. While the child had committed no sin in being conceived, it was still conceived in sin, and would no doubt have lived a life of scorn, shame, and mistreatment. While the loss of the child was incredibly painful, it is a reminder that God Himself sacrificed His own Son so that the sins of the entire world may be forgiven. David and Bathsheba's child died as punishment for sin, but he was still not to be the propitiation for all sin. David is a perfect example of God's

ability to expose, admonish, and forgive those He loves.

Has God ever taken something from you, then provided something even better than what you lost?

Search the Scriptures

1. What was Nathan risking when he went to speak to David (2 Samuel 12:1)?
2. How do we know David was truly repentant for his sin (v. 13)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Why did Nathan risk his own safety by confronting David?
2. Although David had been warned that this son would die, he begged God to spare the child's life. Why did God allow the child to die anyway?

Liberating Lesson

Although David eventually was restored to favor with God, he had to endure the consequences of his sin. Here, we have an example of what it means to be humble before God, even as we retain prominence in other areas. The fact is that no one is exempt from the truth. Right is right and wrong is wrong, regardless of our station in life. Fortunately, God so loved the entire world that He gave His Son, so that those who believe shall not perish in their sin, but shall have everlasting life.

Application for Activation

In our litigious society, there is often a price tag placed on forgiveness. While we can perhaps repay some debts with money or time, true repentance requires humility, admission, and acceptance of our need for God's redeeming power. How should this understanding of forgiveness be applied to the questions of reparations or restorative justice?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Say It Correctly

Uriah. yur-EYE-uh
Bathsheba. bath-SHEE-buh

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

David's Sin with Bathsheba
(2 Samuel 11:1-13)

TUESDAY

David Murders Bathsheba's Husband
(2 Samuel 11:14-27)

WEDNESDAY

Walk in the Light
(1 John 1:5-10)

THURSDAY

Create in Me a Clean Heart
(Psalm 51:1-14)

FRIDAY

Redemption Through Repentance
(Psalm 32)

SATURDAY

Christ, the Sacrifice for Our Sins
(1 John 2:1-11)

SUNDAY

Nathan Tells a Pointed Parable
(2 Samuel 12:1-9, 13-15)

Ezra Seeks God's Law

Bible Background • EZRA 7:1–26

Printed Text • EZRA 7:1–10, 23–26 | Devotional Reading • 2 TIMOTHY 3:14–17

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will UNDERSTAND the historical and spiritual significance of Ezra's return to Jerusalem, VALUE how God works through various types of people to bring His plan to fruition, and THANK local leaders and teachers of God's Word.

In Focus

"Pastor, our church is gone," cried Deacon Jenkins. "The hurricane swept everything away; there's nothing left but the foundation."

Pastor Joel looked around. He saw what Deacon Jenkins saw: piles of rubble to the south of the building, furniture soaked by hammering rains, and plans for the church's 100th anniversary celebration put on an indefinite pause.

"Then, Deacon, let's get ready to rebuild. And I'm not talking about the building," said Pastor Joel. "I'm talking about rebuilding the faith of our community. We've got to build up everyone's faith in the goodness of God, despite what we see around us."

Deacon Jenkins could hardly see how. "Well, the school on Pine Hill was hardly touched," began Pastor Joel. "Let's see if we can have services there. We'll use the classrooms for Sunday School and have Wednesday Bible class and Friday prayer meeting there, too. But first, let's see if we can organize a community-wide prayer of thanksgiving in the school's auditorium soon. We must thank God that no lives were lost. One day, Deacon Jenkins, we'll not only have a church on this site, but a school where we can study God's Word and learn how to live it out in our lives."

"That's a pretty big vision," Deacon Jenkins observed.

"Yes, and we worship a pretty big God," Pastor Joel proclaimed.

Churches, communities, and families can experience losses that seem insurmountable to overcome. Name a Bible verse, spiritual song, or a sermon that offered encouragement, strength, and hope during a difficult life experience.

Keep in Mind

"For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments." (Ezra 7:10, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV **Ezra 7:1** Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah,

2 The son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub,

3 The son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth,

4 The son of Zeremiah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki,

5 The son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest:

6 This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.

7 And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king.

8 And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.

9 For upon the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon, and on the first

day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.

10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

23 Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven: for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?

24 Also we certify you, that touching any of the priests and Levites, singers, porters, Nethinims, or ministers of this house of God, it shall not be lawful to impose toll, tribute, or custom, upon them.

25 And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not.

26 And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment.

The People, Places, and Times

Rebuilding Jerusalem. Ezra and Nehemiah both chronicle the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the return from exile. The book of Ezra starts with those returning under the leadership of Zerubbabel with the patronage of King Cyrus the Great (Ezra 1:5–7). Their first order of business was to rebuild the altar at the site of the ruined Temple (3:3). Soon after, they began rebuilding the Temple itself (3:8). Outside agitators, however, kept them from this work for the rest of Cyrus' reign (4:5). During the reign of the next king, Darius, the prophets Haggai and

Zachariah (whose books contain their calls to work) encouraged the people to work on the Temple again (5:1–2). Agitators again tried to stop them, but Zerubbabel insisted Cyrus had sanctioned the rebuilding efforts (5:17). Darius was convinced and again put imperial funds and patronage behind rebuilding the Temple (6:14). It was completed in time to celebrate the Passover that year (6:15, 19).

Having completed the altar and the Temple, the work in Jerusalem turned to the walls. In reign of Darius' successor, Xerxes, little could be accomplished again because of Israel's enemies

(Ezra 4:6). When Artaxerxes succeeded Xerxes, however, they began to build the walls again. Leaders in the other people groups surrounding Israel warned Artaxerxes that if Jerusalem's walls were restored, there would surely be rebellion (vv. 12–16). Artaxerxes did not want to take that chance, and the half-built walls were destroyed (v. 23). This is where Nehemiah's account begins. He is distraught about Jerusalem's lack of walls and convinces the king to send him with men and money to see to the protection of the Israelite's renewed capital city (Nehemiah 2:2–8). Through many setbacks and much opposition, Nehemiah leads the people to finish rebuilding Jerusalem's walls. Once that is accomplished, Ezra himself reads the Law to the assembled people, and they rededicate themselves to honoring the full commands of God (Nehemiah 8:2–3).

Background

The Babylonian captivity of the people of Israel ended with the defeat of the Babylonian Empire by King Cyrus of Persia in 539 B.C. Cyrus allowed many conquered people to return to their homelands and to their forms of worship. This was a strategic move by the Persian Empire meant to gain loyalty from formerly exiled peoples, and it established imperial outposts that buffered the empire's capital from invaders. In 538 B.C., a group of exiles, led by Zerubbabel, returned to Jerusalem. They entered a demolished city and started to put the pieces of their city and their heritage back together. This group rebuilt the Temple. A second major group arrived from Babylon in 458 B.C., led by Ezra. With the backing of the next Persian king, Artaxerxes, Ezra set out to return the people to the laws found in the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. Ezra was a contemporary of Nehemiah who led the rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem. Ezra's focus was on establishing the Torah as

the governing laws that would inform how this re-emerging city would conduct their daily lives.

What are some reasons people give for returning to places of devastation and loss and deciding to rebuild?

At-A-Glance

1. Godly Heritage (Ezra 7:1–5)
2. Personal Commitment (vv. 6–10)
3. The Favor of God and Man (vv. 23–26)

In Depth

1. Godly Heritage (Ezra 7:1–5)

Ezra had a priestly pedigree. He could fill in the names on his family tree all the way down to its roots in Aaron, the first high priest. Handed down to him would have been the history, religious instructions, and cultural practices of his people. He learned of the Promised Land and of God's promise to return the exiled to that land.

His heritage inspired him, and his occupation as a scribe educated him. He could reproduce texts, those of the Babylonians as well as the narratives of his own people. Being a scribe called for more than merely copying words. A scribe also had to have a profound understanding of the words he copied and become qualified to interpret and teach what was written. Ezra was just such a scribe and became an important link in the long line of individuals who preserved the history and religious life of a people and the works and ways of their God.

What are the benefits and responsibilities of having a godly heritage?

2. Personal Commitment (vv. 6–10)

Though Ezra came from an impressive lineage and had a noteworthy occupation, he possessed something that was far more significant. Ezra

had an abiding love for God's Word. He was an ardent student of the Torah and wanted to bring to his people a greater understanding of and obedience to the teachings of God's Law. It wasn't enough that the Temple had been rebuilt. From his studies, Ezra realized that the hearts of his people needed to return to God's Word.

Ezra's passion for God's Word rallied the support of others to join him in the journey. These individuals would be part of the leadership team that would conduct worship and praise to God. The risks inherent in the four-month journey did not deter the travelers, especially Ezra. Ezra desired that the Word of God would once again flow from the Temple and into the lives of God's people so they would love, know, and follow the ways of God.

In what ways could your occupation be used to spread God's Word?

3. The Favor of God and Man (vv. 23–26)

God honored the desire of Ezra's heart, giving him favor with Artaxerxes, the king. A royal decree helped to secure safe passage. It also ordered the leaders of the provinces that Ezra would travel through to supply all of Ezra's material needs. The king exhibited a holy reverence for the laws of God and the person who taught them, Ezra. The king also noticed that God's laws gave Ezra wisdom, making him a person of integrity. Such a leader would govern well and make just laws. Ezra's devotion to studying, obeying, and teaching God's Word made him a person with godly influence.

How might your knowledge of Scripture influence your community, nation, or the world?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why did the king show such generous favor to Ezra (Ezra 7:6)?
2. Name the individuals who would work in the Temple. Why did the king exempt them from paying taxes (Ezra 7:24)?

Discuss the Meaning

Before the people of Israel were exiled to Babylon, their nation was a sovereign theocracy, the Law of God was the law of the land. On Ezra's return to his homeland, it was a small portion of the Persian Empire. While Ezra was charged with restoring the laws of the forebearers in his ancestral home, he also had a mandate to institute the rules of the Persian Empire (Ezra 7:26).

1. Did Ezra face any conflicts because of this dual responsibility? Explain.
2. What are some challenges that people of faith can face if their faith and the laws of the land are in conflict?

Liberating Lesson

The First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia, was one of the first congregations formed by the enslaved people brought to America from Africa. This church dates back to 1773, its members witnessed the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, it was a stop on the Underground Railroad, and it organized the first Sunday School for African Americans in 1826. In 1930, it had more than 2,000 members. Its commitment to its location and its people has been an inspiration to all who have visited this National Historic Landmark.

How is your family or church recording its history and its godly legacy in your community? In what ways can the history of your family or church be an inspiration to your community and nation?

Application for Activation

Having a working knowledge of biblical themes, narratives, and history is crucial to understanding world history, and more specifically an understanding of the people who founded our country. The American countryside is dotted with the names of places pulled from the Bible. The motivations of early

European and African American settlers were often based on whom they identified with in biblical stories. What are some ways a church can help to enhance the biblical literacy of the children and adults in its congregation? How can congregations make biblical literacy available outside the doors of their churches?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Say It Correctly

Artaxerxes. ARE-tah-ZERK-zees.
Zerubbabel. zeh-ROO-bah-bell.
Nethinims. NEH-thin-eems.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

God's Law Is Perfect
(Psalm 19)

TUESDAY

Meditate Continuously on the Law
(Joshua 1:1–9)

WEDNESDAY

Obey God's Commandments
(1 John 3:18–24)

THURSDAY

Teach Me Your Statues
(Psalm 119:1–16)

FRIDAY

How I Love Your Law!
(Psalm 119:97–112)

SATURDAY

The King's Letter to Ezra
(Ezra 7:11–22)

SUNDAY

Ezra Leads the Exiles Home
(Ezra 7:1–10, 23–26)

Bildad Misunderstands God's Justice

Bible Background • JOB 8

Printed Text • JOB 8:1–10, 20–22 | Devotional Reading • JOB 37:5–7

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will UNDERSTAND Bildad's response to Job's suffering, DISCERN carefully when others misinterpret God's ways, and GROW closer to God and live faithfully in God's just ways.

In Focus

Angela had been battling cancer for over six months. After so many sessions of chemotherapy, she was a shell of her former self. Her husband, Tim, could barely hold himself together as he watched his wife suffer. He often looked at her and wondered how she continued to be optimistic and keep her faith in God. She still prayed and thanked God every day. Since the diagnosis, they had not missed one Sunday morning church service. Tim endured it, although the hope and optimism that he experienced from Angela and the people at church grated on him. How could God do this to my wife? he asked himself.

One day while driving home, Angela began quietly humming a praise and worship song they had heard in church. Tim couldn't take it anymore. Frustrated, he asked her, "How can you sing a song like that in a time like this? Why praise a God who does this to you?"

Angela was shocked by his question but then calmly collected herself. "Songs like that were made for times like this," she responded. "I know I've followed the Lord as best I can. I know I've seen His blessings in my life. I'm not fond of this cancer, but if that's how God chooses to take me home, so be it. I've still seen Him do plenty of good, and I'm still going to praise Him for it."

How do you respond when you don't understand God's plan?

Keep in Mind

"Then answered Bildad the Shuhite, and said, How long wilt thou speak these things? and how long shall the words of thy mouth be like a strong wind?" (Job 8:1–2, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV Job 8:1 Then answered Bildad the Shuhite, and said,

2 How long wilt thou speak these things? and how long shall the words of thy mouth be like a strong wind?

3 Doth God pervert judgment? or doth the Almighty pervert justice?

4 If thy children have sinned against him, and he have cast them away for their transgression;

5 If thou wouldest seek unto God betimes, and make thy supplication to the Almighty;

6 If thou wert pure and upright; surely now he would awake for thee, and make the habitation of thy righteousness prosperous.

7 Though thy beginning was small, yet thy latter end should greatly increase.

8 For enquire, I pray thee, of the former age, and prepare thyself to the search of their fathers:

9 (For we are but of yesterday, and know nothing, because our days upon earth are a shadow:)

10 Shall not they teach thee, and tell thee, and utter words out of their heart?

20 Behold, God will not cast away a perfect man, neither will he help the evil doers:

21 Till he fill thy mouth with laughing, and thy lips with rejoicing.

22 They that hate thee shall be clothed with shame; and the dwelling place of the wicked shall come to nought.

The People, Places, and Times

Theodicy. Why do bad things happen to good people? Does God not care enough to help people? If He cares, why can't He stop the bad things? Is God not just? Does He not have enough power to uphold His justice? These questions have long plagued humanity. When discussed in philosophical or theological circles, the topic is called theodicy (from Greek *theos*, God and *dike*, justice).

Some cultures in Job's time believed their gods simply did not care about the doings of lowly mortals. Others held that people would often anger a god without knowing it, but the proper catchall atonement sacrifice would appease them. Job insists that Yahweh cares for His people and has revealed Himself to His people. We can honestly examine our minds and our actions and know for certain if we have

sinned against God. Job is confident that his friend is wrong, but he still does not understand God's actions fully.

Background

Job was a man of great wealth who suddenly found himself losing everything, even his children. This sudden loss was perplexing to Job because he had always been upright and blameless, a God-fearing man (Job 1:1). He continued to worship and praise God even after such a great loss (Job 1:20–22). Rather than blame God for his suffering, Job simply mourns and seeks the council of friends. But his friends just couldn't figure out what Job might have done that was so terrible that God had brought all this suffering down on him.

At-A-Glance

1. God Is Perfectly Just
(Job 8:1–3)
2. A Just God Will Punish Sin (v. 4)
3. A Just God Will Bless the Obedient
(vv. 5–10)
4. A Just God Will Restore the Repentant
(vv. 20–22)

In Depth

1. God Is Perfectly Just (Job 8:1–3)

Chapter 8 opens with Job's friend Bildad expressing exasperation at Job's insistence of his innocence (Job 6:24) and questioning God's justice (Job 6:29). Bildad pleads with Job to acknowledge that God is perfectly just and would never do anything that is unjust (v. 1–3). To this point Bildad is absolutely correct in his arguments. God is perfectly just in all He does.

This truth is affirmed dozens of times in Scripture. Although Job did not have a Bible, he apparently had been taught by his forefathers that this just God rewarded those who are faithful and obedient with many blessings, large families, land, and wealth. Since Job had all those things, he thought he had favor with God. We can empathize with Job for questioning how a just God could have taken all those blessings away! God's justice is difficult to see or comprehend when we feel that we have been wronged and when we suffer loss. Job turned to his friends at this difficult time.

Where do you turn when things go wrong?

2. A Just God Will Punish Sin (v. 4)

As was common in Old Testament times, Job's friends all seemed to firmly believe a certain theology which we now call retribution theology. This theology, which is partially upheld in Scripture (Deuteronomy 30:16–18;

Proverbs 3:33, 13:25; Psalm 35:17), holds that God deals with people immediately based on their behaviors. If you obey God, you will be blessed. If you sin, you will suffer. Sin was the only logical explanation for all suffering. Job agonized over what he had done to deserve his suffering. His friends weren't much help. They insisted he must have done something really terrible. Bildad didn't stop there. In verse 4 he says that even Job's children must have sinned and got what they deserved! Imagine how Job must have felt hearing that!

Was Bildad being helpful to his hurting friend? Was Job right in thinking that God was punishing him and his children for their sin?

3. A Just God Will Bless the Obedient (vv. 5–10)

Bildad reminds Job that God will restore Job to his former blessed state if he will return to his life of integrity and purity. Retributive theology says that God's justice is immediate, and goes both ways. If you are suffering, you must have sinned. If you stop sinning and return to God, you will be blessed again. For Bildad, the explanation of Job's suffering was simple, and the solution was just as simple. Job must have sinned, and Job needed to turn away from his sin and turn back to God.

Do you understand from Scripture that God's justice is immediate yet reversible?

4. A Just God Will Restore the Repentant (vv. 20–22)

Bildad continues his argument that Job just needs to repent and return to God, and God will immediately restore his good fortunes. By reading the rest of the book of Job, we find that this is exactly what happened! Even though Job's initial suffering is not from sin, Job does eventually sin by haughtily demanding an explanation from God. When he repents of this and submits himself to God's wisdom, he

is blessed. Does this story teach us that God is truly a God of retributive and immediate justice? This is the challenge of Job. From Job we learn that God means what He says, that the wages of sin is death, but obedience leads to blessings. But it does not explain all suffering. Sometimes bad things happen to good people and we never learn why. God never told Job why He had allowed him to suffer.

How often do we cry out, "Why me, Lord?" How should we respond to suffering or what we perceive as injustice?

Search the Scriptures

Read Job 8:4, John 9:1–3, and Romans 6:23. What singular message do we take away from these verses? Discuss how the penalty of sin has not changed, but the way God deals with the sinner has. Read Job 8:20–21 and Romans 3:21–26. How does the promise of Job's restoration, and the gift of salvation by faith demonstrate God's justice?

Discuss the Meaning

It is easy to fall into thinking that God blesses us because we're good and punishment comes for some specific sin. However, this understanding does not allow for God's grace. Because of Jesus' completed work of redemption, namely His paying the price for our sins (death), we now live in the age of grace. The wages of sin is still death, but by grace through faith, we can all receive the gift of eternal life. How does this knowledge affect your attitude toward sin?

Liberating Lesson

The book of Job does not explain the reason for all suffering. Nor does Jesus' explanation of why the man was born blind in John 9:3. What Jesus seems to be telling us is that sometimes we just won't understand, yet we have to trust that all things will somehow work to His glory and our good. While we are tempted to seek answers

for the reason for suffering, what things should we ask of God instead when faced with suffering or injustice?

Application for Activation

While reading the book of Job, we immediately feel empathy for Job. When we see someone sick or hurting, as Christians we want to comfort them and help them. But we don't always know what to say or do. We can learn a lot from Job's three friends. They started out doing the thing that is often needed most. They spent seven days with him, not saying a word (Job 2:11–13). This may be the greatest lesson we can learn from this wisdom book of Job. Often this is what is needed most by those who are suffering. They just need a friend who will sit with them, mourn with them, comfort them. This week look for a chance to just give love, consolation, and physical comfort such as a warm meal, rather than unwelcomed advice, judgment, and opinions.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Say It Correctly

Theodicy. thee-ODD-ih-see.
Bildad. BILL-dad.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Job Suffers Sinlessly
(Job 1:8–11, 13–22)

TUESDAY

Habakkuk Struggles to See Justice
(Habakkuk 1:12–17)

WEDNESDAY

Suffering for Doing Right
(1 Peter 2:20–25)

THURSDAY

God Is in the Storm
(Psalm 29)

FRIDAY

Remove This Cup from Me
(Mark 14:32–42)

SATURDAY

God Speaks from the Whirlwind
(Job 38:1–11)

SUNDAY

God’s Justice Is Unfathomable
(Job 8:1–10, 20–22)

Notes

Serving a Just God

Bible Background • JOB 42

Printed Text • JOB 42:1–6, 10–17 | Devotional Reading • JOB 37:14–24

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will UNDERSTAND the necessity of being humble before God, APPRECIATE how God listens to our thoughts and responds with justice, and HELP others see the justice of God in difficult situations.

In Focus

Carrie had finally been released from jail. She was happy to get out, but Carrie was also fearful and anxious about returning to society. How would she take care of herself? How would she be able to get hired with a felony on her record? The odds were stacked against her.

On top of that, she still felt anger and frustration at the events of that one night long ago. Carrie had not done anything wrong except be in the wrong place at the wrong time. While she and her friends were hanging out in front of their apartment building, police officers came by and frisked them for drugs. One of the officers planted drugs in Carrie's jacket. She had no record or any history of being affiliated with drugs or dealers, but she had no voice in the courtroom. She ended up spending six years in prison for a crime she did not commit.

Carrie happened to walk past her old church while a Wednesday night Bible Study was going on. She went in without really knowing why. The pastor immediately recognized and embraced Carrie. In the weeks that followed, Pastor Jackson helped Carrie find a job and a place to stay. Carrie also began to go back to school to be a lawyer so she could be an advocate for those who needed a voice against injustice.

Where do you find hope, and how do you share it when you have it?

Keep in Mind

“Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not.” (Job 42:3, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV Job 42:1 Then Job answered the LORD, and said,

2 I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee.

3 Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not.

4 Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me.

5 I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee.

6 Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

10 And the LORD turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.

11 Then came there unto him all his brethren, and all his sisters, and all they that had been of his acquaintance before, and did eat bread with him in his house: and they bemoaned him, and

comforted him over all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him: every man also gave him a piece of money, and every one an earring of gold.

12 So the LORD blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses.

13 He had also seven sons and three daughters.

14 And he called the name of the first, Jemima; and the name of the second, Kezia; and the name of the third, Kerenhappuch.

15 And in all the land were no women found so fair as the daughters of Job: and their father gave them inheritance among their brethren.

16 After this lived Job an hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, even four generations.

17 So Job died, being old and full of days.

The People, Places, and Times

The Book of Job. This book was written late compared to other Scriptures. Its Hebrew is oddly archaic, but its theological questions ring throughout the ages. The setup of Job's misfortunes provides a reason for a lengthy discussion of theology. The poetry of the book is organized into cycles, with a narrative, prologue, and epilogue. First Job sets out the scope of his misery (Job 3), then his friends try to convince him what he needs to do to appease God and have his blessings restored. Three times, Eliphaz speaks, then Bildad, then Zophar, with Job answering after each (Job 4–31), although in the last cycle, Job is so frustrated that he preempts anything Zophar wanted to say and speaks for much longer than usual. In chapters 32–37, another of Job's friends, Elihu,

tries to offer a more nuanced answer to both Job and the other friends, but this is ultimately rejected as well. Finally, God answers them all from out of a storm (Job 38–41), overwhelming Job into awe at God's amazing breadth of insight and control. Job is humble in his reply, and God blesses him again (Job 42).

Background

Job is the first poetic book of the Old Testament. Job is a book of wisdom, it answers the soul-aching questions of godly sufferers. Job grapples with the question, "If God is loving and just, why did he allow such pain and degradation in the life of a righteous man?" Job essentially exposes three distinct scriptural truths. First, God allowed Job to be tested as he was perfect and upright, feared God, and eschewed evil.

God's omniscience is evident. Satan was granted permission to test Job. Secondly, human frailty and limited thinking stumbles to understand the counsel of God. The awesomeness of God is too wide for human understanding and comprehension without the illumination of God's grace. Finally, the reality of faith is not in blessing, favor, humanistic understanding and answers, but in the revelation of God Himself. Faith is God being revealed to us, in us, and through us. Job conveys that testing purifies character and integrity. God never initiates pain and suffering without benevolence and grace. God makes full restitution and can be fully trusted.

At-A-Glance

1. God's Wisdom and Counsel
(Job 42:1-3)
2. Job's Humanity (vv. 4-6)
3. God's Justice (vv. 10-11)
4. God's Faithfulness in Adversity
(vv. 12-17)

In Depth

1. God's Wisdom and Counsel (Job 42:1-3)

God is wisdom and His understanding is infinite (Romans 16:27; Psalm 147:5). Job tried rationalizing God's counsel and wisdom through his own understanding, and it was fruitless. It is foolish to believe we understand God's counsel and wisdom at work in our lives. God's wisdom annihilates humanistic wisdom, and knowledge falters in gaining access to the mind and counsel of God. God's wisdom and counsel exposes secret and hidden things, even thoughts. Job confesses that God can do anything, including discern thoughts (v. 2). God is revealed as omniscient and His counsel powerful (v. 3). God's counsel is great, mighty

in works, and stands forever. Our purposes are worked out through the counsel of God's will. God's wisdom and counsel will cause human utterings that are too wonderful to understand. Job recognizes the abundance of God's wisdom and his own frailty and fragility in the illumination of God's counsel.

How does interpreting God's wisdom and counsel impact how we see God's wisdom and counsel at work in the adversity of your own life?

2. Job's Humanity (vv. 4-6)

Job has a head knowledge of God, but a limited understanding of the operation of God's involvement in our suffering and adversity (v. 5). Job proclaims that the personal revelation of God is far more excellent than the perception of God.

Thoughts are personal, yet never hidden from God. The revelation of God in Job's anguish and calamity produced disgust within Job, and he relegated himself to dust, ashes, and repentance. As our eyes see God's wisdom and counsel in suffering and adversity, rejection of personal wisdom and repentance is the only response (v. 6). When humans are absent from the presence and reality of God, they grow in pride toward Him, which hinders them from seeing the justice and faithfulness of God in suffering.

What hinders us so that we do not see the reality of God in our deepest pain and misfortunes?

3. God's Justice (vv. 10-11)

God's justice is evident in Job's life. As Job vindicated his friends, God vindicated Job (v. 10). Earnest prayers of forgiveness for those who hurt and abandon us demonstrates God's justice in us. The turning of Job's captivity just as he prayed for his friends indicates God's expectation of us when we are wronged by loved ones. God expects us to see through His eyes in

their failure, just as God sees us when we fail. All who abandoned Job returned, comforted, and blessed him. Job received them without reservation and celebrated with them (v.11). Job was blessed with words of comfort and the restoration of relationships. God's justice always prevails.

How might restoration of personal suffering and adversity reside within your power? How can you reconcile in your mind that God's justice might be dependent on us?

4. God's Faithfulness in Adversity (vv. 12–17)

God is faithful in not tempting us beyond our capacity (1 Corinthians 10:13). Despite the trouble we walk through, God preserves us (Job 42:16). Our life's preservation is God's demonstrated faithfulness in adversity. Job suffered a while, then God restored, confirmed, strengthen, and established him (v. 17). Adversity tests faith and commitment to God, but as faith is fortified and commitment solidified, our blessings are verified. Surviving adversity is an indication that God's faithfulness is operating in your life. God always blesses us with more than we had as we remain faithful (v. 12). With God, the ending of a thing is always better than the beginning (v. 12). God's faithfulness can always be fully trusted in adversity.

During adverse circumstances of your life, how did you show your faithfulness to God? Where has God demonstrated faithfulness toward you?

Search the Scriptures

1. What does knowing that "no thought can be withholden from thee" cause you to think? Why? How can you adjust what you think about God and His ways (Job 42:2)?

2. Reread Job 42:11. What does this passage suggest about the heart of Job concerning his brethren, sisters, and his acquaintances? Should boundaries be given in these relationships

because they abandoned and rejected him in his most vulnerable state? How do you handle relationships when people hurt you?

3. Read Job 42:1–6 (for more details read the entire passage). What does this passage suggest about Job's relationship with God? What can you infer about the faithfulness of God in adversity? How should we respond when we experience Job-like circumstances?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What are the attributes of God that can be seen in Job? What character traits does Job possess? Are there any adjustments that you need to make to your character?

2. Job repented for not understanding or respecting the counsel and wisdom of God. Is there any place where you have discounted the wisdom and counsel of God? Why? How can we ensure that we always embrace the counsel and wisdom of God especially in adversity?

Liberating Lesson

Adversity comes to all of us, but many of us view adversity as punishment. How could a loving and just God allow devastation? Like Job, these questions are too wonderful for us. In our humanity, we struggle with the realities of adversity and God's allowing of the adversity. The outcomes of adversity are up to God; we are responsible for our responses. God allows specific circumstances because He desires specific outcomes. God's justice always prevails. From slavery to "Black Lives Matter" the circumstances have been adverse, yet God is faithful. God executes justice in His faithfulness. God selected Job, and He may select you as an active part of His justice. Like Job, we must pray purely and forgive simultaneously.

Application for Activation

Consider your own life. How might things have worked out differently had you showed

faithfulness to God in the area instead of rejecting His counsel and wisdom? We know that “If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself” (2 Timothy 2:13). Has God been faithful in your life, when you were not? We see the faithfulness of both Job and God. Can we see your faithfulness to God in personal adversity? Ask God to bring to mind those you need restoration with during your times of adversity. Seek forgiveness for rejecting God’s counsel and wisdom in your life.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Say It Correctly

Eliphaz. ELL–uh–fazz.
Zophar. ZOH–far.
Elihu. ee–LIE–who.
Jemimah. jeh–MY–muh.
Keziah. keh–ZIE–uh.
Keren–happuch. KER–en–HA–pook.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Abraham Pleads for Justice
(Genesis 18:20–33)

TUESDAY

Trust in God’s Coming Justice
(Psalm 37:1–11)

WEDNESDAY

The Lord Loves Justice
(Psalm 37:21–28, 34–40)

THURSDAY

Righteousness, Peace, and Joy
(Romans 14:13–23)

FRIDAY

Jesus Demonstrates God’s Justice
(Matthew 12:1–13)

SATURDAY

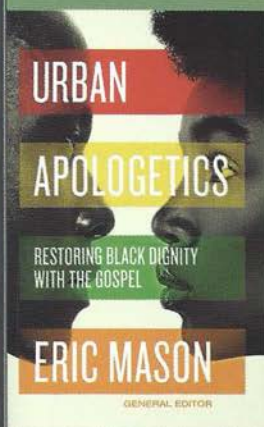
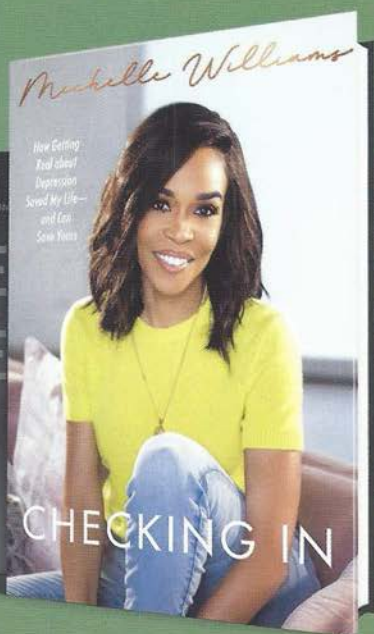
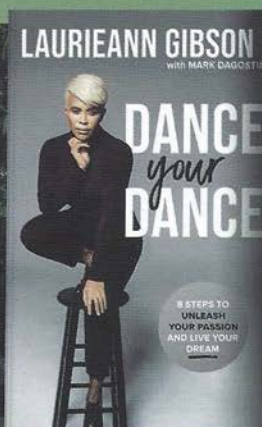
Job Cries Out for a Redeemer
(Job 19:23–29)

SUNDAY

Job’s Fortunes Are Restored
(Job 42:1–11)

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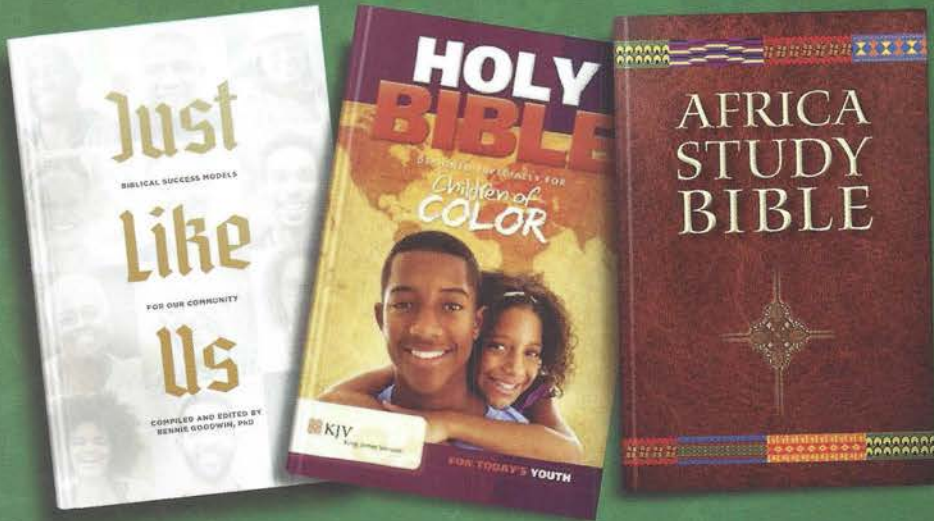
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