

## Small Group Guide – Week 2

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### PART 1: REDEMPTION PROMISED TO A NEW COVENANT PEOPLE

#### Chapter 1: Believing God

*The Church at Brook Hills,*

*January 11-17, 2010*

*Genesis 12:1-9*

This guide is to help you facilitate discussion with your Small Group. Use it as a resource to lead your group in discovering and owning the truths of God's Word. There may be questions you do not want to use and there may be instances where you just want to focus on a particular point or truth. Some questions may bring out emotions and cause people to dwell on their relationship with God. Your role is to facilitate this experience not to complete the discussion guide. Use this as a flexible teaching tool not a rigid teaching task list.

### ***Connect . . .***

*Use one or both of the following options to introduce the discussion time to follow.*

#### **Option 1**

Invite learners to share about a time when they received a promise that was not fulfilled for a long time. Encourage them to describe their attitude during the time of waiting.

Explain that today we will talk about how Abraham's obedience was immediate even though God's promises were not fulfilled in his lifetime.

#### **Option 2**

Invite learners to discuss a situation in which they were forced to make an important decision without much information. Ask: **How did you feel trying to make this decision? How did you feel about the final decision?**

Explain that today we will talk about Abraham and how he took a risk to obey God.

### ***Review the Message . . .***

**In His holiness, God demonstrates grace to sinners.**

- **God's desire is for redemption.**
- **God's desire is for the nations.**
- **God's desire is to work through His people.**

#### **Discussion**

- Enlist a learner to read Genesis 12:1-9
- What great acts of judgment had God completed prior to Genesis 12? Why were His actions just?
- His most recent act of dispersing people throughout the world helped to accomplish His command to multiply and fill the earth. How is creating a nation for Himself from Abraham actually an act toward redemption of the judged world?
- Did God need Abram in order to build a people for Himself?
- Looking even further into Genesis (Chapter 13, for instance) how did God show grace in continuing to work through Abram?

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#### Application . . .

- Why do some of us see the God of the Old Testament solely as a judgmental God? Why is this view dangerous?
- Why is it important for us to see God's redemptive nature from the beginning?
- How can we align our lives with God's desires for the world?
- What responsibility do we have to be available for God to work through us? How can we make ourselves more available?

#### **God calls His people to Himself, that He may bless them.**

- **God's call demands complete dependence upon Him.**
- **God's call demands our obedience in the face of the unknown.**
- **God's call demands we trust in His promises.**
- **God's call is for a global purpose.**

#### Discussion

- How would God's call disrupt Abram's life?
- In what ways did God's call on Abram's life make him rely completely on God? What securities did Abram have to leave behind?
- Describe the directions that God gave to Abram. How much of the details did Abram know before he began to move?
- Read Genesis 11:29-30. How did Abram have to trust God to make a great nation of him if he had no children? If he did not trust this aspect of God's promise, how would the rest of the covenant be affected?
- What was God's ultimate purpose in blessing Abram and calling this nation to Himself as His chosen people?
- How is God's heart for the nations revealed in this covenant?

#### Application . . .

- Why is relying on God so difficult for us? Why is it scary?
- How can our fear to obey illustrate our distrust in God's ability and/or His character?
- How do we often ignore God's calling on our lives under the disguise of not having enough information?
- What things or people are we not willing to leave in order to be obedient to God?
- How do our actions demonstrate our belief or disbelief in God's ability to fulfill His promises?

#### **God's call requires a response to His invitation.**

- **Our obedience to God's call ensures we will live for His purpose.**
- **Our worship of God rightly gives Him glory.**

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*Genesis 12:1-9*

#### Discussion

- Enlist a learner to read Genesis 12:4-9 again.
- How did Abram demonstrate his trust in God?
- Remind learners that Jesus was ultimately born through the line of Abraham.
- By obeying God completely, how did Abram become a part of God's plan to redeem humanity?
- How did Abram respond to God's covenant as he journeyed through Canaan? How did this worship demonstrate his belief that God was the true God and worthy of the worship of all of the families of the earth?

#### Application . . .

- If God does not need us for His work, why should we want to be a part of it?
- How can we be encouraged that God uses sinners?
- Which areas of life are the most difficult to obey God?
- How does our obedience testify to our relationship with Him?
- Why do we do missions? When can missions become a means to our own glory?
- Why must obedience and worship go hand-in-hand?

## Small Group Guide – Week 8

### GOD WHO MAKES US HOLY

*The Church at Brook Hills*

*February 22-28, 2010*

*Leviticus 11-27; Numbers 1-5*

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### **Connect . . .**

*Use one or both of the following options to introduce the discussion time to follow.*

#### **Option 1**

Ask members of your group to share about a time when someone gave them something good that was unexpected and undeserved. What was it? How did it make them feel? How did it affect their view of the other person?

Explain that today we will be studying the Day of Atonement, how God mercifully provided for the forgiveness of sins before the time of Christ's arrival on earth.

#### **Option 2**

Ask members of your group to share about a time when someone stood up for them, or deflected criticism, or took some "heat" in their place. It could be a parent, a sibling, a spouse, a co-worker, etc. How did the experience make them feel? How did it affect their view of the other person? Why do they think the other person acted the way that they did? What were the consequences of their actions?

Explain that today we will be studying the Day of Atonement. At one point in the ceremony, the sins of the people were placed on a scapegoat that was then driven into the wilderness. This goat represented the removal of sin from the camp.

### **Review the Passage . . .**

**On the Day of Atonement the high priest (as the people's representative) came before the mercy seat of God.**

#### **Discussion**

- Read Leviticus 10:1-3 and Leviticus 16:1-5.
- What was the consequence for entering the presence of God in an inappropriate manner?
- Where did God appear? Is there significance in this location?
- How does God tell Aaron to prepare to enter the Holy Place? What is the emphasis of the preparation? How is purity or holiness represented? (see v. 4)
- In verses 3 and 5, what does Aaron bring with him? (offerings/sacrifices)

#### **Application**

- Read 1 Corinthians 3:16. Remember the "you" is plural. Since the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit, how should this affect our approach to corporate worship?
- How do we prepare or not prepare for corporate worship today?

## Small Group Guide – Week 8

### GOD WHO MAKES US HOLY

*The Church at Brook Hills*

*February 22-28, 2010*

*Leviticus 11-27; Numbers 1-5*

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- What should be the emphasis of our preparation (internal or external or both)?
- What sacrifice paves the way for us to have fellowship with God? (see Romans 3:25, which describes Christ in a way that references the Day of Atonement)
- What offerings can we bring to God in worship as a church and as individuals, not to earn forgiveness, but as a response to forgiveness?

**Aaron had to sacrifice offerings for himself and for the people.**

#### Discussion

- Read Leviticus 16:6-19.
- Who does Aaron sacrifice for first?
- Who does he sacrifice for next? (v. 15)
- What is the scope of the forgiveness offered? (v. 16)
- In verse 13, what is the purpose of the incense? Does Aaron get a full view of the glory of God?

#### Application

- Read Hebrews 7:27 and Hebrews 9:12. Did Jesus need to sacrifice for Himself? Why not? What did Jesus offer instead of the blood of goats and bulls? What is the scope of Jesus' sacrifice?
- Can anyone really atone for his or her sins apart from trusting in the work of Jesus Christ?
- How should Jesus' perfect sacrifice give us perfect assurance of our forgiveness?
- Is any sin beyond the scope of God's forgiveness? Explain.
- Read Hebrews 1:3. How do we see the glory of God? How is it unveiled? How should this focus our worship?
- Read 2 Corinthians 3:18. Who is being transformed into the image of God (reflecting his glory)? How? To what degree? How should this humble us? Encourage us?

**Symbolically, the scapegoat took on and then removed the sins of the people, along with the other sacrifices.**

#### Discussion

- Read Leviticus 16:20-28.
- How many sins does the live goat representatively take on itself?
- How does v. 22 represent the forgiveness and removal of sins? Read Psalm 103:12.
- Once forgiven, does God remember our sin? Explain. (See Isaiah 43:25.)

#### Application

- As forgiven saints, how should we view our past sins?
- Read Hebrews 13:11-13. How does the writer of Hebrews connect Jesus to the burning of the bodies outside the camp?

## Small Group Guide – Week 8

### GOD WHO MAKES US HOLY

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*The Church at Brook Hills*

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- Since Christ bore our shame is there any reason we should be ashamed of Him? Nevertheless, in what ways or situations are we sometimes ashamed to identify with Him?
- Read Hebrews 13:14-16. How should we now live in response to Christ's sacrifice? In relation to God? In relation to others?

**The Day of Atonement occurred yearly and was marked by rest and repentance. Christ offers something much better; He sacrificed Himself once for all. Our response is to rest in His work and repent of our sins.**

#### **Discussion**

- Read Leviticus 16:29-34.
- How often did the Day of Atonement occur?
- How many people were involved? Who was the one person who could enter the Tabernacle before the mercy seat? How is Jesus our High Priest? How is Jesus our Perfect Sacrifice?
- How were the people supposed to observe the Day of Atonement? (v. 31)
- How are repentance and rest connected? In whom were the Israelites to put their faith?

#### **Application**

- Read Hebrews 9:25-26 and 10:11-14. How is Christ's sacrifice better than all others?
- Is there any way to God except through Christ and His death on our behalf?
- How should we mourn our sin?
- How can we rest in Christ's sacrifice on our behalf?

## Small Group Guide – Week 25 Exaltation and Judgment on Mount Carmel

*The Church at Brook Hills*

*June 21-27, 2010*

*1 Kings 18*

This guide is to help you facilitate discussion with your Small Group. Use it as a resource to lead your group in discovering and owning the truths of God's Word. There may be questions you do not want to use and there may be instances where you just want to focus on a particular point or truth. Some questions may bring out emotions and cause people to dwell on their relationship with God. Your role is to facilitate this experience not to complete the discussion guide. Use this as a flexible teaching tool not a rigid teaching task list.

### **1 Kings 18**

The kingdom of Israel was divided into two nations following a foolish decision by Solomon's son, Rehoboam (1 Kings 12). Judah, the Southern Kingdom, was ruled by Rehoboam while Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was ruled by Jeroboam. All of the Northern Kingdom's kings were wicked, but Ahab had the distinction of being the most wicked king of all (1 Kings 16:30, 33; 21:25-26). Together with his wife Jezebel, Ahab re-introduces the worship of Baal and the Asherah to Israel (1 Kings 16:31-33; also 1 Kings 11:1-8). She then begins to systematically kill off the prophets in hopes of eliminating completely the worship of Yahweh in favor of Baal. It's at this time that God intervenes through a prophet named Elijah.

### **Study the Text...**

#### ***Elijah Confronts Ahab (1 Kings 18:1-24)***

During the third and final year of the famine in the land God directed Elijah to present himself to King Ahab. As Elijah confronts Ahab he commands him to gather all of Israel at Mount Carmel, along with the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah. Upon arrival Elijah challenges the people to make a decision about whom they will serve. He urges them to serve the one who truly is God. If Baal is God then the people should follow him. However, if the LORD ("Yahweh") is God then they should follow him. Apparently, the people of Israel were seeking to worship both Yahweh and Baal, therefore Elijah's initial challenge is answered with silence. No one says a word. The people are not about to commit themselves to one God or the other. Elijah then proposes a contest between the God of Israel and Baal. He purposely arranges the contest in such a way that the odds are completely against him. Not only is Mount Carmel regarded by the people as the sacred dwelling place of Baal but Elijah is outnumbered 450 to 1. From the perspective of the people of Israel it would be impossible to lose this contest! The rules are laid down. Each side is to prepare an altar and a sacrifice, without lighting the fire under it. Each side will call on its God (god) to consume the sacrifice with fire. The side whose God (god) answers by igniting the sacrifice is the one true God.

- What is the setting for Elijah's confrontation with Ahab? Why is this significant?
- Why does Ahab call Elijah the "troubler of Israel" in verse 17?
- What is the real reason for the trouble in the land?
- What do we learn about Jezebel in this passage of Scripture? How is she portrayed?

## **Small Group Guide**

### **Exaltation and Judgment on Mount Carmel**

*The Church at Brook Hills*

*June 21, 2010*

*1 King 18*

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- Where did Elijah command Ahab's prophets and the people of Israel to meet him? Why did Elijah want to meet at this particular location?
- What accusation does Elijah bring against the people of Israel? How do the people respond?
- How many prophets opposed Elijah on Mount Carmel? Why is this significant? What was Elijah wanting to prove to the people?
- How will the prophets of Baal know who the one true God is? Why is this particularly significant? (extrabiblical sources give evidence that Baal was thought of as a god who controls fire and lightning) Where else in Scripture have we seen the Lord associated with fire? (cf. Lev. 9:24, 10:2; Num. 16:35)

### ***Group Discussion...***

- It's easy to criticize the people of Israel for their idolatry and following Baal. However, the reality is that in many ways we are just as guilty as they. What current day "idols" do you often find yourself following?
- What's so appealing to you about those "idols"? What do they promise you? How do they offer you hope?
- What does this passage reveal about God and His character? Why is this important?

### ***Study the Text***

#### ***The Prophets' Failure (1 Kings 18:25-29)***

All morning Baal's prophets call on their god and dance around his altar to arouse him to action. At noon Elijah begins to taunt them and sarcastically suggest that Baal is thinking about other things, or away on a trip, or even sleeping. When it was time for the evening sacrifice there was still no response.

- How long did the prophets call on their god?
- In what specific ways did the prophets attempt to gain the attention of their god? Were they successful? Which of their attempts do you find the most curious?
- How did Elijah respond to the prophets attempts to arouse their god to action?
- What does this passage reveal about the god these prophets served?

### ***Group Discussion. . .***

- Today there are also millions upon millions of people crying out to false gods who are unable to respond. Share a time when you witnessed man attempting to gain the attention of his god? How do people try to get the attention of their gods? What do they give their gods? What does what they give to their god say about what they value as most important?

## Small Group Guide – Week 25

### Exaltation and Judgment on Mount Carmel

*The Church at Brook Hills*

*June 21-27, 2010*

*1 Kings 18*

- What does this scene reveal about the condition of all mankind?
- How does the God we serve (“Yahweh”) differ from the god of the prophets in this passage? What difference should this make in our lives?

### ***Study the Text...***

#### ***The Lord’s Victory (1 Kings 18:30-40)***

At the time of the Israelites’ evening sacrifice, Elijah steps forward and prays. He doesn’t cry out with a loud voice or leap on the altar as the prophets of Baal did earlier, instead he addresses God with a simple prayer. He prays that God will hear his prayer so that the people will know that Yahweh alone is God, and so that His people will worship Him alone. He prays that the people will see that he has done all these things at the Lord’s command. He prays that they will know that it is God who has turned their hearts toward Him. Almost immediately, it would seem, God responds. He sends fire from heaven that consumes the bull and the wood, and the stones, the dust, and the water. The fire consumes absolutely everything! Yahweh wins the contest hands down. He demonstrates that He alone is the one true God. As the people recognize this reality they respond accordingly by falling on their faces and crying out “The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God.”

- What was the Lord’s motivation for answering Elijah’s prayer? Where else have we seen this truth in Scripture?
- Why did Elijah go to such extremes to make sure the entire area was saturated with water?
- How did the Lord answer Elijah’s prayer? What was remaining after the fire of the Lord fell?

### ***Group Discussion...***

- Contrast how Elijah approached the Lord with the prophets’ approach to their god? What does this teach us about the God we serve and how we should or should not approach Him? What does this teach about the character of the God we serve? What other passages in the New Testament address this issue? (see Matthew 6:7-13)
- What was the ultimate outcome of the prophets? Was this a just penalty or too severe?
- In what ways does Elijah foreshadow the role of Christ?
- At this point in redemptive history why is this event of Elijah and the prophets of Baal so significant?

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## **1 Kings 8**

The dedication of Solomon's Temple was a major event in the nation of Israel. The ark of the covenant was brought into the Temple and the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord. Here the unapproachable Lord becomes approachable and ready to help those who worship, sacrifice and pray. Few moments in biblical history surpass this scene in hope, gladness and glory as God reveals his presence and the people worship him with praise and thousands of sacrifices. The entire event served to unify Israel as one people, under one king, serving the one true God.

### ***Study the Text . . .***

**1 Kings 8:1-11: The ark of the covenant is transported with the support of the leaders of Israel into the Temple.**

- Who supports moving the ark from the city of David into the Temple?
  - Elders (older, respected leaders who advised the king of various national matters)
  - Heads of tribes (mature, older men who were to clans and villages what the elders were to the nation as a whole)
  - Common men (v. 2)
- Describe the ceremony that preceded the ark as it was transferred from the city of David into the Temple (Compare to 2 Samuel 6).
- What does the cloud represent in verse 11? Where have we already seen this cloud in Scripture? Is it possible that the cloud demonstrates divine approval of Solomon's Temple?

### ***Group Discussion . . .***

Approaching the presence of God is not to be done lightly. In 2 Samuel 6, Uzzah touched the ark and was immediately killed. As the priests carried the ark to the Temple, Solomon and all the congregation sacrificed many sheep and oxen. Sacrifices were offered in recognition of national sin and individual sin, as well as praise to God.

- Begin by asking people to share about how they approach God. God dwells in all of his children. Do we approach Him with a repentant heart that is lifted in praise to God?
- Discuss how we today should approach the presence of God in worship as a small group or a church gathering. What can we learn from 1 Kings 8:1-11?

### ***Study the Text . . .***

#### **1 Kings 8:12-21: Solomon praises God for his covenant faithfulness to Israel.**

Solomon begins by reminding the people of God's faithfulness to David and the whole nation. He starts with their deliverance from Egypt (v. 16) and ends with their deliverance from Egypt (v. 21).

- List how God has been faithful to Israel (according to Solomon's praise).

### ***Group Discussion . . .***

How often do we look back and remember the faithfulness of God in our lives, in the life of our small group, and in the life of our faith family? As we remember God's faithfulness, we praise Him, and we trust that He will always be faithful.

- As a group review God's faithfulness to His people, to our faith family, to our small group, and to each of us as individuals.
  - What are some examples of God's faithfulness in the Old Testament?
  - What are some examples of God's faithfulness in the New Testament?
  - What are some examples in our faith family of how God has been faithful to His promises?
  - What are some examples in our small group of how God has been faithful to His promises?
  - What are some examples in your life of how God has been faithful to His promises?

### ***Study the Text . . .***

#### **1 Kings 8:22-53: Solomon dedicates the Temple as a house of prayer.**

The prayer begins with a confession of who God is similar to Deuteronomy 7:7-9. Then Solomon turns to ask the Lord to bless certain kinds of people and to judge others. This prayer is grounded in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27-28. Solomon understands the greatness of God as well as how small this magnificent temple is in the eyes of God. He also realizes that God alone is judge and that all nations will be judged. He prays for the foreigners and prays that Israel will teach the nations God's will.

- List the different requests that Solomon makes of God (separate the blessings and curses or judgment).
- What does Solomon ask God to do for the foreigners?
- According to this prayer, what is the purpose of the temple?
- Read Mark 11:15-19. Does 1 Kings 8 provide clarity for why Jesus was so upset about how the Temple was being misused?

### ***Group Discussion . . .***

Solomon calls on God to hear from heaven the prayers of his people.

- Do we believe God hears our prayers (all of them)?
- Do we take all of our requests and concerns to God? When the land is dry, do we pray for rain? Do we confess our sins?
- How can Solomon's prayer guide how we pray?

### ***Study the Text . . .***

#### **1 Kings 8:54-61: Solomon concludes by turning and blessing the people.**

This blessing is prefaced with an expression of God's faithfulness, and there are three parts to the blessing. Solomon encourages the people to recognize the importance of God's presence in their lives. He hopes that God will turn their hearts to him, and he desires for God to uphold the cause of Israel so that all the people may know that the Lord is God and there is no other.

- Verse 58 calls on the Lord to incline the hearts of His people to Him? Is it possible for the people to turn their hearts to God? (Deut. 6:4-9, 30:6, 14, 32:46)
- Why does Solomon ask God to maintain the cause of Israel? Is it for the sake of Israel alone? (vv. 59-60)

### ***Group Discussion . . .***

- How are the hearts of God's people turned to him? How are God's people enabled to obey God's statutes and laws? See Romans 3:21-31.
- Why has God provided salvation to His children? Is it for their sake alone?
- When we pray for God to bless us and to maintain our cause, what should be our ultimate purpose in making this request? (v. 60)

### ***Study the Text . . .***

#### **1 Kings 8:62-66: The nation of Israel celebrated the dedication of the Temple by worshipping the Lord with sacrifices.**

Solomon spared no expense when it came to dedicating the temple. These sacrifices were fellowship offerings or peace offerings. The goal of this offering was to unite the people with their leaders and their God. This scene concludes with the people going to their homes with joyful and glad hearts.

- How rich must God have made Israel for them to be able to offer such extravagant numbers of animals in sacrifice to God?
- What was the mood of the people because of the feast? What was their view of God?

### ***Group Discussion . . .***

- When is the last time you have given generous free will offerings to God out of praise and thanksgiving to God because of His faithfulness?
- Can we imagine being joyful and glad of heart after watching our country sacrifice so much of our resources in worship to God? What about possible famine, pestilence or war? Is it not necessary to keep reserves?
- Can we imagine being joyful and glad of heart if our church sacrifices a large part of our resources in worship to God?
- How can we today worship God in a way that is similar to 1 Kings 8? Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-5. Did the Macedonians give out of joy like Israel?

## Small Group Guide – Week 39

### ***The Providence of God in the Deliverance of His People***

*The Church at Brook Hills*

*September 27-October 3, 2010*

*Esther, Ezra 7-10 & Nehemiah*

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This guide is to help you facilitate discussion with your Small Group. Use it as a resource to lead your group in discovering and owning the truths of God's Word. There may be questions you do not want to use and there may be instances where you just want to focus on a particular point or truth. Some questions may bring out emotions and cause people to dwell on their relationship with God. Your role is to facilitate this experience not to complete the discussion guide. Use this as a flexible teaching tool not a rigid teaching task list.

### ***Esther, Ezra 7-10 & Nehemiah***

The three historical books that we will consider this week recount three instances of God's deliverance of His people. However, with each successive deliverance we find that the people still do not receive final rest from their enemies. They are still oppressed by foreign powers and the glorious presence of the LORD is still not dwelling in their midst. They are left longing for a final Deliverer who will give them rest from their enemies and bring the very presence of God to them.

Esther delivers the Jews from an insidious enemy, but more enemies continue to oppress them. Ezra leads the rebuilding of the temple, but the visible presence of the LORD does not return nor does the temple attain to its former glory. Nehemiah builds a wall around Jerusalem, but it will not ultimately keep invaders out, as the subsequent history of Israel will demonstrate.

All of these deliverances are incomplete. They point us to the great Deliverance that is yet to come. God's people need a final Deliverer to deliver them from all of their enemies. They need the true Temple (Jn. 2:21) who brings the very presence of God to earth (Jn. 1:14). They need a new Jerusalem, a city coming down out of heaven with an impenetrable wall where nothing unclean will ever enter, a city that has no need of a temple, for God Himself and the Lamb are its Temple (Rev. 21:9-27).

The events recorded in the book of Esther take place during the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) king of Persia, after the return of the first group of Jewish exiles under Zerubbabel ca. 538 B.C (Ezra 1-6) and before the second return led by Ezra ca. 458 B.C (Ezra 7-10). Nehemiah's journey occurred later (ca. 445 B.C.). Historically, the book of Ezra provides the background for the Jewish feast of Purim (Esther 9:20ff.). Theologically, the book displays God's faithfulness to His promises and His meticulous providence over historical events.

### ***Study the Text . . .***

The book of Esther never mentions the name of God, and yet to the eyes of faith it is strikingly evident that God is providentially writing the plot of this story.

Haman the Agagite (3:1) sought to destroy Mordecai the Benjamite (2:5) and all the Jews (3:6). This conflict goes back a thousand years to the battle that Israel fought with the Amalekites immediately after the Exodus. The LORD even swore that He would make war against Amalek "from generation to generation" (Ex. 17:16). In First Samuel,

## Small Group Guide – Week 39

### *The Providence of God in the Deliverance of His People*

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God commanded Saul to utterly destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15). However, Saul disobeyed and preserved the life of Agag the king of the Amalekites. Because of this disobedience, God took the kingdom from Saul and gave it to David (1 Sam. 15:28). Here in the book of Esther we see Agag again seeking to oppress the people of God, but once again God shows Himself faithful to His covenant promises.

Neither Esther nor Mordecai seem to be particularly godly people. In fact, they engage in some rather questionable practices (see for example 2:13-16). Yet God uses them to fulfill His purposes and preserve His people.

Note Mordecai's confidence in God's faithfulness to His people (4:14). Therefore, he implores Esther to use her providential position for the preservation of the people.

Ahasuerus (Xerxes) was a pagan king. Yet Esther "found favor in his sight" at pivotal points throughout the book.

Ahasuerus' decree allowed the Jews to plunder their enemies (8:11). Yet the author emphasizes that they did not touch the plunder (9:8, 15). This stands in stark contrast to the first time Israel defeated Agag (1 Sam. 15). This victory is a reversal of Saul's disobedience.

Mordecai escaped a sinister plot and became second in command of a great empire, like Joseph and Daniel before him (Gen. 41:40ff; Dan. 6).

Esther 9:1 states that what appeared to be a day of impending doom for God's people turned out to be a day of great victory. This is the pattern by which God works to bring salvation to His people. How do we see this played out in the Cross of Christ and the history of the church (see for examples Acts. 4:27-28; 8:4)? How have you seen this in your own life and the lives of other?

### ***Group Discussion . . .***

- What are some ways that you see God working "behind the scenes" in the story of Esther? What does this tell you about how God works in our lives and in the world? Are His actions always overt or are they sometimes covert? Can you look back on times in your life and see how God was working like that?
- In light of the observation that neither Mordecai nor Esther seem to be "super-believers," who is the true hero of the story?
- What do Mordecai's instructions to Esther in chapter 4 tell you about the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility? Where has God providentially placed you to fulfill His purposes?
- What does the book of Esther teach you about how government rulers, even ungodly government rulers, fit into God's plan (cf. Prov. 21:1). How does this reflect the way that you view and respond to political events?

- How does the book of Esther point us to the final great deliverance of God's people in Christ?

## **Ezra 7-10**

Although the book never mentions Ezra himself as the human author, it is probable that he wrote this record that bears his name. Ezra was a scribe who had access to a myriad of administrative documents, hence the detailed recording of the royal decrees contained in this book. The first six chapters of Ezra, which we read last week, recount the first return under Zerubbabel in 538 B.C. Chapters 7-10 give the account of the second return, led by Ezra in 458 B.C. The Jews' return from exile in Babylon is presented as a second Exodus and the primary theological message of the book is that God is faithful to His covenant promises. God orchestrated the exile into Babylon and God has orchestrated the return from exile. God displays His sovereignty by using a pagan king (Cyrus) to deliver His people and return them to the Promised Land. Amazingly, God had foretold this deliverance over a hundred years earlier through the prophet Isaiah when He declared that Cyrus should command the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple (Is. 44:28). As Pastor David often says, "God has this thing rigged!"

### ***Study the Text . . .***

The key to Ezra's effectiveness in ministry is found in Ezra 7:10. He set his heart to study and to practice and to teach the law of the LORD.

As in the books of Esther and Nehemiah, we see the LORD directing the hearts of pagan kings in order to accomplish His perfect purposes. Ezra's benediction in Ezra 7:27 demonstrates that God is sovereign even over hearts that do not recognize His sovereignty (cf. Prov. 21:1).

Note how seriously Ezra takes sin (Ezra 9:3ff.!) He is ashamed and embarrassed to lift his face to God (9:6). Contrast that with how flippantly we often waltz into the presence of God while living in sin.

Note also that Ezra does not separate himself from the rest of the people. He does not say, "They have sinned." He says, "We have sinned (see for example 9:7)." As fellow members of the covenant community, we share in one another's iniquity. Sin in one part of the body affects the whole body.

Note the response of the people (10:9). They tremble when they are confronted with their sin and this fear leads them to separate themselves from their pagan wives.

The revival under Ezra was short-lived. When we get to the book of Malachi, we will see that the people are still in rebellion against the LORD. They still need Him to remove their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh (Ezk. 36:26).

The second Temple never attains to the glory of the first Temple and the glory of the Lord never again fills the Temple...at least not until nearly 500 years later when a twelve year old boy from Galilee enters it and amazes the teachers of the Law (Lk. 2:47). The Jews were left waiting for a greater Temple, the True Temple, which would be torn down and rebuilt in 3 days (Jn. 2:21).

### ***Group Discussion . . .***

- How do you respond to your own sin and the sins of others in your faith family? Do you grieve over it or do you take it lightly? Have you ever felt embarrassed to enter the presence of God? What is the solution to this problem?
- How did the reality of God's sovereignty affect Ezra and Nehemiah? Did it produce negligence or obedience in them?
- How does the book of Ezra point us to Christ?

## **Nehemiah**

The book of Nehemiah begins in 446 B.C. and details the return from exile that Nehemiah led in 445 B.C. Historically, the book gives an account of the rebuilding of the wall in Jerusalem and Nehemiah's reign as governor.

The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) and the Latin Vulgate refer to the book of Nehemiah as "Second Ezra" and both Jewish and Christian tradition recognize Ezra as the author of the book. Although Ezra the scribe likely recorded the account, Nehemiah himself likely dictated it to him (1:1).

The phrase "the hand of the Lord" is prevalent in both Ezra and Nehemiah. This phrase underscores the fact that God is sovereignly working to rebuild Jerusalem and to restore His people. God uses faithful servants like Nehemiah, pagan kings like Artaxerxes, and even enemies like Sanballat to accomplish His perfect purposes.

### ***Study the Text . . .***

Nehemiah, like Ezra, is moved to fast, pray, and confess the sins of his people (1:4-11). He is not merely grieved because of the troubles in Jerusalem (1:3). Rather, the troubles in Jerusalem lead him to mourn for the way that his people have sinned against the LORD.

Note also that Nehemiah, like Ezra, identifies with the sins of his people. He does not separate himself from the people but acknowledges that he himself has been implicit in this rebellion (1:6).

## **Small Group Guide – Week 39**

### ***The Providence of God in the Deliverance of His People***

*The Church at Brook Hills*

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*Esther, Ezra 7-10 & Nehemiah*

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God had placed Nehemiah, like Ezra and Esther, in a strategic position in a pagan kingdom (1:11). These three, like Joseph and Daniel before them, used their positions of influence for the glory of God and the good of His people.

Nehemiah did not attribute his success to his strategic leadership or the kindness of the king but to the fact that “the good hand of my God was upon me.” (2:8)

Opposition from outside forces arises in chapter 4, but God frustrates their plans (4:1). God will not allow his enemies to thwart His purposes.

Nehemiah addresses the sin of oppression in chapter 5. It is instructive that Nehemiah does not merely concern himself with the enemy without, but also the enemy within. He takes sin seriously because he knows that sin in the covenant community is just as dangerous, if not more dangerous than oppression from outside the covenant community.

Note the attention that the people paid to the law of the LORD. They stood on their feet and listened to Ezra read it for hours (8:3). The reading of the law led them to weep over their sin (8:9) and yet Ezra commanded them to rejoice, for the LORD had restored them (8:10).

The people “confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers (9:2).” Throughout the history of God’s people, confession of sin has been a sign of true revival.

Nehemiah 9:28 summarizes the history of Israel (9:28). Over and over throughout the OT, we have seen the people sin against the Lord, fall under oppression, repent, and be restored, only to fall back into sin. It is obvious that the problem will not finally be solved until God changes His people from within, until He writes His law on their hearts (Jer. 31:33).

The people recognize that although they are living in the Promised Land, they are still slaves, just as they were in Egypt (9:36). Over the next 500 years the Jews will be oppressed by empire after empire, even though they are living in the Promised Land. The point is that the exile is not really over. They are still oppressed by foreign powers and they still await a final deliverance.

The rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple can be seen as an initial fulfillment of God’s promise to rebuild Jerusalem after the exile (see Jer. 31:38-40). However, this was not the ultimate fulfillment. God had promised that after Jerusalem was rebuilt it would never again be uprooted or destroyed (Jer. 31:40). But in 167 B.C., the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes sacked Jerusalem and desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar and turning it into a temple to the Greek god Zeus. Jerusalem was later conquered by the Roman general Pompey and it remained under gentile control until it was razed to the ground in A.D. 70. All of this leaves us waiting for the final fulfillment of God’s promise to rebuild His holy city. It points us to a better city, whose

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builder and foundation is God (Heb. 11:10), the true Mount Zion that we enter through Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant (Heb. 12:22-24). The writer of Hebrews tells us that in Christ we **have come** to this city of the living God even while we anticipate its consummation, when the New Jerusalem will come down out of heaven as a bride adorned for her Husband (Rev. 21:22).

### ***Group Discussion . . .***

- Why do we offer so little attention to the Word of God? What are some of the things that distract you from reading and listening to the Word? How can we become a people who pay careful attention to the Word of God?
- What is the initial response that the people have to the Word of God (8:9)? Do you experience this kind of contrition when you see how your life does not line up with God's Word?
- What are some barriers that we put up against confession of sin? Are these barriers legitimate or are they excuses to ignore our sin?
- How does the book of Nehemiah point to the need for Christ?

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## **Ezekiel**

The book of Ezekiel was written during the time of Judah's exile in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem and most of Jerusalem's prominent people, including Ezekiel's family, were taken into exile (see Jeremiah 29:2) and placed in a refugee settlement. Apparently many believed this exile was only a temporary blip on the screen of their glorious history as God's people (see Jeremiah 28). However, Jeremiah had already informed the people (Jeremiah 29:1-23) that they were going to be in exile for quite sometime. Five years later Yahweh called Ezekiel to be a prophet who would announce God's judgment against Jerusalem, addressing his words primarily to the exiles in Babylon (Ezekiel 3:1, 11). The book contains a variety of prophetic visions and oracles, which Ezekiel presented over a twenty-two year period (593-571 B.C.). The structure of the book has three clear parts:

- Ezekiel 1-24 contains oracles from the five-year period preceding the siege of Jerusalem (588 B.C.). Yahweh's holy wrath against His people's idolatries would cause Jerusalem to be destroyed, including her temple, despite the people's disbelief and protest.
- Ezekiel 25-32 contains a series of oracles against surrounding nations. Yahweh is the sovereign God over all the nations, so they, too, will experience judgment because of their idolatries and sins.
- Ezekiel 33-48 features oracles which cover a sixteen-year period after the fall of Jerusalem. Here we see that Yahweh is a God of great mercy and compassion, who intends to restore His people for the sake of His name and glory among the nations.

The focus of this study guide will be on Ezekiel 34. God has allowed Babylon to destroy Judah and scatter the people in exile because the shepherd kings of Judah ignored the people, destroyed them, and did not protect them from predators (34:1-10; see Jeremiah 23:1-8). To encourage his listeners, Ezekiel assured them that the scattered people were God's people, sheep in His flock. Jerusalem's destruction allowed Him to remove these evil leaders. One day God will care for the sheep, bring them back from foreign nations into the pleasant and peaceful land, feed them, and nurse the sick (34:11-16). God will judge between the good and the evil who treat others unjustly (34:17-22). Then God will set one king over them, the messianic seed of David who will serve God. His eternal covenant of peace will bring fruitfulness to the land, security, and a heartfelt acknowledgement of God's relationship to them (34:23-31; compare Lev. 26:4-13; Hos. 2:17-23; Jer. 30-31). With this vision of the future Ezekiel was trying to convince the exiles to believe in what God would do, in spite of their discouraging situation in exile.

## ***Study the Text...***

### ***Prophecy against the Shepherds of Israel (Ezekiel 34:1-10)***

God charges Ezekiel to prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. The rulers of the people were often called shepherds (cf. Ps. 78:71-72; Isa. 44:28; 63:11; Jer. 23:1-4; 25:34-38). They were to be strong, caring leaders who guarded their nation like a flock. The image of the people of God as a flock of sheep occurs several times throughout the Bible. In this oracle, the current shepherds - i.e. the rulers of Israel - are rebuked for their self-interest and lack of care for the people. In this section Ezekiel first explained the sins of the shepherds (Ezek. 34:1-6), then pronounced judgment on them (Ezek. 34:7-10). Read Ezekiel 34:1-10.

- Who are the shepherds of Israel? (also note Psalm 78:7-72; Isaiah 44:28; 63:11; Jeremiah 23:1-4; 25:34-38)
- What were the specific sins God held against the shepherds of Israel? (also note Jeremiah 23:1-4; Ezekiel 22:25; Micah 3:1-3)
- What were the consequences of the shepherds sin and failure to shepherd the people of Israel (34:5-10)?
- Verse 5 says that the people “were scattered” and “became food for all the wild beasts.” What does this mean? (also note Leviticus 26:33; Deuteronomy 28:64)
- Why does God say the people were scattered?

## ***Group Discussion...***

- It's easy to look down on the people of Israel as if we ourselves are above such sins. In what ways does your own life reflect the sins of the people as described in 34:1-4?
- What do these verses teach us about the responsibility held by those who lead others spiritually?
- What aspects of God's character shine through in these verses?

## ***Study the Text***

### ***God, the Shepherd, gathers His flock (Ezekiel 34:11-31)***

What the people's shepherds failed to accomplish because of their selfish greed (34:1-10), God would bring to pass. He would be the people's shepherd by personally intervening and caring for His flock (34:11-16), judging between His sheep (34:17-24), and establishing a covenant of peace (34:25-31). This covenant of peace is directly tied to the appointment of His servant David as the new shepherd over the people. As in other oracles, the name is symbolic. The reference to David does not mean that the

ancient king David will be literally resurrected and set up as ruler. Its primary force is that the coming ruler will have the exemplary attributes of David—someone in whom the

Lord delighted and who triumphed over the foes of Israel. David is also referred to in 37:24–26, where his rule is described as lasting forever. The same passage also refers to the everlasting covenant of peace which the Lord will make with his people, a theme almost identical to that in 34:25–30. Both passages are clearly looking forward not just to Israel's immediate future but also to her long term future. God would make peace with the people, and he would appoint a shepherd prince to rule them.

The oracle brings a promise of hope. Even if God's people were scattered and oppressed they would one day receive justice. Readers of the NT will see that day as the time of the return of Jesus Christ, a promise sealed by his first coming, death and resurrection. Read Ezekiel 34:11-31

- How does God respond to the shepherd's failure of leading the people of Israel? What are His logical steps of action as outlined in the text? (also note Ezekiel 11:17, 20:41; Jeremiah 23:3; Psalm 23; Micah 2:12, 4:6-8)
- How does Yahweh's shepherding style differ from that of the people's shepherds?
- What is God's first course of action after gathering His scattered sheep (34:13-14)? Why is this important, particularly when the historical setting of the book is taken into account?
- How does God say He will exercise justice?
- How will God differentiate between the sheep? (34:17, 20, 22; also Ezekiel 20:38)
- What will God do after judging the individual sheep? (34:23-24)
- Who is the new shepherd that God will appoint over His people? (also note Ezekiel 37:24-26; Jeremiah 23:5-6)
- How is this new shepherd described? What is the title given to this new shepherd? (34:24)
- What is the significance of this title given to David? Do you believe this new shepherd is a reference to Christ? Why or why not?
- What will come as a result of the new shepherd being appointed? (34:25-31)
- How is this new covenant of peace described? What are the results of this new covenant of peace that God establishes with His people?
- What is the covenant of peace a specific reference to? Where else in Scripture have we seen this covenant mentioned? (note Jeremiah 31:31-34)

### ***Group Discussion. . .***

- The imagery of the Lord as our shepherd is found throughout Scripture. What are the implications of the Lord being the shepherd of your life? How have you seen the Lord as the shepherd of your life?
- Elsewhere in Scripture God differentiates between the sheep and the goats (see Matthew 25:31-46). His sheep are primarily characterized by what qualities?
- What New Testament passages does this text (Ezekiel 34:11-24) bring to mind? (Luke 15:4-7, 19:10)

- Spend some time sharing how God the shepherd gathered you to Himself when you had been scattered from Him because of your sin. In other words, if you have yet to do so have everyone in your group briefly share their conversion testimony.

## ***Study the Text...***

### ***Jesus, Our great shepherd (John 10:1-18)***

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God rebuked the evil shepherds (or leaders) of the nation Israel. He spoke of a coming day when they will be judged, and when God Himself will gather His scattered flock by means of a new shepherd, namely the Messiah (“My servant David”, Ezekiel 34:24). In John 10, Jesus boldly claims to be this promised “Good Shepherd,” and in contrast to His shepherding, He exposes and indicts the Jewish religious leaders (especially the Pharisees) as wicked shepherds, who care not for the hurting and troubled sheep and who use and abuse the sheep of God’s flock for their own personal gain.

It is not difficult to see that Jesus looks upon the Pharisees before Him as the kind of shepherds Ezekiel’s condemned. Like Ezekiel 34, Jesus contrasts the bad shepherding of the Pharisees (as seen in their attitude towards the blind man in John 9) with the manner of His shepherding. Three common shepherding images are given to differentiate Jesus, the good shepherd, from the Jewish religious leaders.

- The Shepherd and the Stranger (John 10:1-6)
- The Shepherd and Thieves and Robbers (John 10:7-10)
- The Shepherd and the Hired Hand (John 10:11-18)

Jesus uses these contrasts to reveal in great detail what it means for Him to be our Good Shepherd.

- What are the major differences between how the sheep relate to the shepherd as opposed to the stranger? (John 10:1-6)
- Who is the shepherd and stranger referring to within the context of the passage? (also note John 9)
- What does it mean that the sheep “know his voice”? (John 10:4)
- What is the overall point or meaning of the parable of the shepherd and stranger? (John 10:1-6) What does it teach us about Jesus, our good shepherd?
- What are the major differences between how the shepherd relates to the sheep as compared to the thieves and robbers? (John 10:7-10)
- Who are the thieves and robbers a reference to within the context of the passage? (also note John 9)
- What does it mean that Jesus came that we might “have life and have it abundantly”? (John 10:10)
- What does the parable of the shepherd and thieves and robbers teach us about Jesus’ character? (John 10:7-10)

- What are the major differences between how the shepherd and hired hand relate to the sheep? (John 10:11-18)
- How is Jesus' care for His sheep demonstrated within the passage?
- What do verses 14 and 15 teach us about Jesus' relationship to His sheep?

### ***Group Discussion...***

- What does the parable of the shepherd and thieves and robbers teach us about Jesus' relationship toward us? (John 10:7-10)
- In what other ways, other than Jesus, do you seek to find an "abundant life"? (John 10:10)
- How well does God the Father know Jesus and Jesus know God the Father? (John 10:15) Jesus says this is a picture of how well Jesus knows us and we are to know Him. (John 10:14) How well do you really know Jesus? How can you continue to grow in your intimacy and knowledge of Christ?
- As the Good Shepherd, Jesus is the ultimate standard for how we shepherd others (note Hebrews 13:20-21; 1 Peter 5:1-4). How does this passage challenge you as you seek to shepherd those God has entrusted to your care?
- In what ways does the shepherd imagery found in John 10 give you a new appreciation or even understanding of the cross?

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## ***Jeremiah 31***

Jeremiah 31 is a pivotal chapter in the redemptive history of God's people as God provides further insight into how He will redeem a disobedient people. Jeremiah introduces us to the new covenant, and the reality that the old covenant is only a pattern of the covenant that Christ will initiate. The old covenant is dependent on man circumcising and transforming his or her own heart to follow God alone, and man is responsible for offering yearly animal sacrifices for sin. With the new covenant, God will circumcise the hearts of His children, and God will offer His son as a substitutionary sacrifice that covers all the sins of His children.

In this guide, we will walk through several different texts to see how Jeremiah 31 connects Deuteronomy with Acts and Hebrews. This text clearly reveals that the Bible contains one overarching story of God's perfect plan in salvation history.

Read through and study all the texts and then decide how to structure your small group discussion. If you have time, you may want to walk through each of the texts together. If you don't, focus on Jeremiah 31 and provide a short summary of the connections in the other texts.

## ***Study the Text . . .***

**Deuteronomy 4:1-14: Listen and obey the law of God and teach the rules to your children.**

- Why are they to obey the rules of the LORD?
- To whom are they to teach the rules?

**Deuteronomy 6:1-9: Fear the LORD by keeping his statutes and writing them on your heart.**

- What kind of fear is Moses writing about?
- Why does Moses tell them to be careful to obey the commandments?
- How are they to write the commandments on their hearts?

**Deuteronomy 10:12-22: Circumcise your heart because our God is God of gods and Lord of lords.**

- Describe God.
- How are they to circumcise their hearts?

**Deuteronomy 28:45-47: God will punish the people because they did not obey Him.**

Moses foretells the disobedience of the nation. Why according to verse 47 will they be punished and cursed?

**Deuteronomy 30:1-10: God will circumcise the hearts of His people so that they will love Him with all their hearts and souls.**

- Why does God circumcise their hearts?
- Are we able to circumcise our own hearts?
- What does it mean to circumcise your heart?

**Jeremiah 9:25-26: The LORD promises punishment on all those who are merely circumcised in the flesh.**

As you read through Jeremiah, you will notice the attention Jeremiah gives to showing and explaining how both Judah and Israel have been unfaithful and broken the covenant. God is reminding them of His words in Deuteronomy, and He is clearly proclaiming to them that outward circumcision is not enough. He expects and demands inward circumcision. Since the people do not worship Him alone with all their hearts and souls, He will punish them.

- Who will God punish? Just Israelites? Or all nations who are not circumcised of the heart?

**Jeremiah 31:31-40: God promises a new covenant that He will write on the hearts of His children.**

- How is this covenant different?
- How do you think He will put His law in His children?

**Hebrews 8, Hebrews 10:1-25: Jesus Christ is the new and better covenant.**

The writer of Hebrews is making the point that what Moses set up (tabernacle and sacrificial system) was according to the pattern Moses saw on Mount Sinai. God gave Moses a glimpse of heaven and then instructed Him how to do everything according to what He saw. Jesus did not follow a pattern when He came. He is what Moses was foreshadowing in the Old Testament. Jesus died on the cross, and he offered atonement for all mankind before the throne of God. Jesus' substitutionary atonement replaced the old covenant with a new and better covenant.

- Why is the new covenant better than the old covenant?
- Why is the blood of Jesus better than the blood of bulls and goats?
- Does the new covenant mean that the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments should be ignored? How does the new covenant impact the way we read, understand and apply the truths in the Old Testament?
- Does the blood of Christ circumcise the hearts of Christ-followers? How is the law put on our hearts and written on our minds?

**Acts 2:1-37: The Holy Spirit filled the Apostles who proclaimed the Word of God so that those who heard the Word would be cut to the heart.**

God works in indescribable ways. He gives us Moses' covenant to show us what is required to follow Him, but God knows all along that we are too sinful to be able to faithfully obey it. He calls us to write His law on our heart and obey Him. But, we are unable.

## Small Group Guide – Week 33

### The New Covenant

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*The Church at Brook Hills*

*August 16- 22, 2010*

*Jeremiah 31*

Abraham, Moses, Elijah, David – they all sinned. God not only provides redemption through Christ, but He sends His Spirit to open our eyes to see and our ears to hear. The Spirit cuts us to the heart and calls us to repent. He enables us to repent and turn to Christ, and when we do He fills us and begins to make us more and more like Christ. The Holy Spirit writes the law on our hearts.

- What do you think God means when He says, “Write the law on your heart”?
- What role does the Spirit play in the proclamation of the Word?
- What role does the Spirit play in the reception of the Word?
- What role does the Spirit play in the transformation (sanctification) of a Christ-follower?

### ***Group Discussion . . .***

Jeremiah 31 is rich with meaning, and the truths found here should impact our understanding of God and our response to Him. As a group think through many of the questions above together and focus on a few specific questions.

- Is it possible for us to turn our hearts to God and live for God alone (circumcise our hearts)?
- How are our hearts circumcised? What does that mean exactly? Does it mean we are sinless?
- What role does the old covenant play in our life as Christians? Are the 10 commandments important to us? How do we read the Old Testament?
- How do we seek the power of the Holy Spirit? Can we? Is repentance important?
- What is the evidence in a person’s life that they have a circumcised heart?
- How should this entire discussion cause true Christians to view the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives on a daily basis?
- When Christ died, was buried, was raised, and then ascended into heaven, what did He promise to send to His followers (Jn. 16:7-7)?

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## ***Connect . . .***

*Use one or both of the following options to introduce the discussion time to follow.*

### **Option 1**

Ask: **Is suffering always a negative event in people's lives?** Allow several learners to share their answers. Encourage learners to try to list reasons why suffering or difficulties can be beneficial and to share any personal examples that they would.

Explain that today we will look at Job's life and how suffering brought about great gain in his life.

### **Option 2**

Invite willing learners to share a time when they experienced suffering. Ask: **What questions did you ask? What was your attitude toward God? Was there any long-term benefit to you through your suffering?**

Explain that today we will look at how Job responded to suffering in his life.

## ***Review the Message . . .***

**Suffering is often unexplainable.**

- **Job followed God's commands faithfully.**
- **Job's attention came from his integrity.**
- **Job was unaware of spiritual conflict.**

### **Discussion**

- Enlist a learner to read Job 1:1-12.
- Describe Job's service to God. How did God describe Job?
- Why did Satan notice Job? Why was God pointing him out to Satan?
- Was Job ever made aware of the spiritual conflict that arose in heaven?

### **Application . . .**

- What is our first reaction to seeing that God pointed Job out to Satan? What does our answer indicate about our belief in God's sovereignty and goodness?
- Why does our culture often feel that believers who are faithful do not deserve to suffer? Is that a biblical perspective?

- What is the point in serving God faithfully if we may encounter the same, if not greater, hardships as everyone else?
- Would suffering actually be easier if we understood the reason? Why does it matter?

### **God is always worthy of worship**

- **God remains in control of all situations.**
- **God's worth is not dependent on circumstances.**

### **Discussion**

- Enlist several learners to read Job 1:13-2:13.
- List the categories of loss that Job experienced.
- Looking at Job 2:3, 5-6, who was actually in control of Job's suffering?
- In Job 2:3 God asserts responsibility for Job's first round of sufferings. What does this indicate about God's supreme control in the world?
- In Job 1:12 and 2:5-6, Satan basically asks God for permission to cause harm to Job. What does this indicate about God's control over Satan?
- How did Job respond to these disasters?
- Why did Job praise God?

### **Application . . .**

- Why can it make us feel uneasy to know that God gave permission to harm Job?
- What kind of God would He be if He were not in control? Would we rather He be helpless to Satan's desires or in control of His plan? Why?
- How is there comfort in knowing that He is control in the midst of our suffering?
- Why is it often difficult to praise God in our suffering?
- What are we saying about God if we believe that His worth is determined by our circumstances? Would He truly be God if He were dependent upon our lives?

### **Suffering is not partial.**

- **Job's suffering was not a product of discipline, sin, or disbelief.**
- **Followers of God are not immune to suffering.**

### **Discussion**

- Invite a learner to summarize the basic gist of the interactions between Job and his "friends." (The ESV Study Bible outline in the introduction to the book of Job is thorough in summarizing the content if you wish to go further in depth.) Read Job 5:17-18. What did Job's friends assert about Job?
- What did their assertion assume about God?
- Enlist a learner to read Job 42:7. Why did God rebuke Job's friends? What did God's rebuke of the friends indicate about their beliefs?

**Application . . .**

- How can we be true friends to those who are suffering?
- Why do we often say things contrary to God's word in an effort to comfort or give advice? Why is this so dangerous?
- Why does it scare us to think that believers should be immune from suffering?
- How can suffering in the life of a believer bring glory to God?

**God often reveals Himself during suffering.**

- **God remains supreme at all times.**
- **True understanding of God demands submission.**

**Discussion**

- Enlist several learners to read Job 38-39.
- How did God respond to Job's request for vindication from God?
- Describe the picture that God painted of Himself to Job.
- Enlist a learner to read Job 42:1-6.
- How did Job respond to God's conversation?
- What does Job admit about his knowledge of God's ways?
- How did Job indicate that he had grown in his knowledge of God?
- What role did Job's suffering play in revealing God more deeply to Job more than prosperity could have?

**Application . . .**

- How can it be comforting to rest in the truth that we do not understand God's ways? How can it be scary or unsettling? Why?
- Why should we trust and take comfort in the God who is supreme in all matters?
- Why does suffering often help us to know God more deeply than times of non-suffering?
- What are questions that we often ask during times of suffering? What are questions that we should ask during times of suffering?

This guide is to help you facilitate discussion with your Small Group. Use it as a resource to lead your group in discovering and owning the truths of God's Word. There may be questions you do not want to use and there may be instances where you just want to focus on a particular point or truth. Some questions may bring out emotions and cause people to dwell on their relationship with God. Your role is to facilitate this experience not to complete the discussion guide. Use this as a flexible teaching tool not a rigid teaching task list.

## ***Lamentations***

The book of Lamentations is aptly titled due to its sorrowful tone. To "lament" means to express deep sorrow and grief. The book, then, consists of five dirges written to capture and to console those mourning over the just destruction of Jerusalem in 587/6 B.C. The prophet Jeremiah had issued multiple warnings to the people of Judah that God would judge Jerusalem due to their wickedness (i.e. Jeremiah 25:1-11). He pleaded with the people to repent and return to the LORD, yet they refused. The people did not heed the word of the Lord, and all that Jeremiah prophesied came to pass. Now that judgment has come in the form of a ruthless Babylonian siege, the city and its inhabitants lie in utter ruin and many are wondering if restoration is even possible. Without presuming upon the LORD's mercy (5:21), Lamentations assures God's people that restoration is possible if they simply remember and seek refuge in His compassionate character (3:21-33).

## ***The LORD is in the right.***

### ***Study the Text . . .***

Lamentations is divided into five chapters reflecting the five distinct poems found therein. Four of the poems are single acrostics structured on the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The first word of each stanza begins with a different letter of the alphabet; hence why chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5 contain 22 verses. Since English translations cannot capture fully the acrostic structure of the book, it is important to point this out because the book's design highlights chapter 3 as the crux of the matter. The third chapter is a triple acrostic containing 66 verses and the climactic appeal of the book. All in all, Lamentations is a literary masterpiece.

Chapter 1 portrays Jerusalem as a weeping widow who has digressed from royalty to slavery. Affliction, suffering, and sorrow have turned her life upside down. Her "majesty has departed" (v. 6). Memories of better days add to the bitterness of her tears (v. 7). Yet, while she mourns her destruction, she recognizes the justice of God in her demise. She "sinned grievously" (v. 8). In verse 9, her frequent rendezvous with idolatry are described by the phrase: "her uncleanness was in her skirts" (v. 9) Often, in the prophets adultery is used as a metaphor for idolatry. All the while, she "took no thought of her future," meaning that the people of Jerusalem did not believe God would judge their sin (v. 9).

The destruction of Jerusalem and the depression of the narrator are intertwined. Thus, the first poem seamlessly shifts back and forth between describing Jerusalem to discussing the narrator's inner turmoil. As goes Jerusalem so goes the poet. Jerusalem sinned grievously and was judged. The poet was part of the problem. In verse 20, He states, "I have been

very rebellious” (20). The writer is very careful to root the suffering and sorrow of Jerusalem as a just consequence of the people’s sin. In verse 18, he states clearly, “The LORD is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word.” By recognizing the justice of God, he rightly confessed his and everyone else’s sinfulness in response to the LORD’s judgment. He did not try to defend himself or anyone else.

- Identify all the points where the writer identifies Jerusalem’s sinfulness.
- Identify all the points where the writer identifies his own sinfulness.
- How does the writer describe Jerusalem’s struggle? What metaphors and images does he use?
- How does the writer describe his own struggle? What metaphors and images does he use?
- List some of the consequences of Jerusalem’s sinfulness? (i.e. in verse 7, the Babylonians gloated over the city’s downfall).
- What does it mean for the LORD to “be in the right”?

### ***Group Discussion . . .***

- Do you ever feel like the punishment for sin outweighs the offense?
- Why is this never the case?
- Have you ever been tempted to accuse God of wrong doing?
- Is God ever guilty of sin? Why or why not?
- Is our first instinct to defend ourselves or to confess our sins in the midst of suffering and sorrow?
- Why do you think our first instinct is to defend ourselves rather than to confess our sins?
- How might we foster the humble discipline of confessing our sins when suffering?

### **The LORD will do as He says.**

#### ***Study the Text...***

In the second and fourth chapters, the writer focuses mainly on God’s role in judging Jerusalem. God is the subject of most verbs in these chapters, and His severe sovereignty is portrayed with graphic clarity. He “swallowed up Israel” and “multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation” (2:5). God “gave full vent to his wrath” and “poured out his hot anger” (4:10).

Yet, once again, the writer justifies God’s actions by identifying the transgressions of Israel. In particular, the people chose to follow ungodly leadership. They gathered to themselves leaders who delivered false and deceptive visions and failed to identify sin as sin (v. 14). This too harkened back to Jeremiah’s warnings (i.e. Jeremiah 23:9-15). God held Judah responsible for who they chose to follow. If given a choice between following a likeable leader who is not faithful to speak God’s word or an unlikeable leader because he speaks God’s word, the people were to choose the latter (i.e. Jeremiah rather than the false

prophets). God judges both ungodly leaders and their followers severely. God's people must only follow leaders who are faithful to preach God's word even when they are commissioned with a hard message.

The ungodly leaders had set a pace of ungodly living before the people. They were faithless, proud and violent (4:12-13). God's people need godly leaders who speak the truth even if the truth hurts initially and strive to live their lives accordingly because God will always do as He says. "The LORD has done what He purposed; He has carried out His word, which He commanded long ago" (2:17) Israel's problem with ungodly leadership anticipated what Paul would warn Timothy about in 2 Timothy 4:3-4 and always reflects the spirit of the times prior to Day of the LORD (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11).

- Circle/list all the verbs that have God as subject in chapter 2.
- What did the false prophets fail to do (vv. 9, 14)?
- In what ways did the people fail to believe that God would do as He said? (i.e. 4:12)
- Read and examine Jeremiah 23:9-15 and 2 Timothy 4:1-5.

### ***Group Discussion...***

- In light of chapters 2 and 3, why is following godly leadership important?
- Why does God hold people accountable for who they choose to follow?
- Discuss nonnegotiable markers of godly leadership and teaching?
- Do Paul's words to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:1-5) ring true today? Why or why not?
- How can we be responsible to hear and to heed the word of God?
- How might our lives better reflect that we believe God will do as he says?

## **The LORD will hear our contrite requests for restoration.**

### ***Study the Text . . .***

Chapter 5 presents a corporate prayer of contrition and restoration. The passage reminds God's people to pray forward into the future. The implication is that with God, there is always hope for restoration even if all the evidence of the present situation points to the contrary. However, this does not mean God's people can presume upon the kindness of the LORD.

The truth of God's kindness is meant to lead people to repentance (Romans 2:4). Unfortunately, however, people tend to mistake God's kindness with indifference. Some assume that because God is kind, he will tolerate their disregard for His word and ways. Yet, this is exactly what Paul warns against in Romans 2:4-5, "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteousness will be revealed." Confusing God's kindness with indifference renders repentance unnecessary and thus restoration unattainable.

Perhaps the most devastating, yet common, errors of our culture is widespread presumption upon the LORD's kindness. Such an assumption leads many to think that repentance is unnecessary to enjoy God's grace and favor. This was certainly the climate in Jerusalem for years leading up to the Babylonian siege. No one believed God would judge them for their sin. They presumed upon His kindness and as a result they experienced a foreshadowing of the final Day of the LORD. The closing verses of Lamentations, however, reveal that that changed. The people are now contrite and humble in their request for restoration.

- Read and reflect on Romans 2:14
- Why does Lamentations end with a corporate confession and appeal for restoration?

### ***Group Discussion...***

- What does "presumption" mean?
- What does it look like to presume upon the LORD?
- Why might the sin of presumption be so common?
- What does "contrition" mean?
- What does a prayer of contrition sound like?
- Why is contrition necessary for restoration?
- How can we further guard ourselves from the sin of presumption?

## **God's Mercies are New Every Morning**

### ***Study the Text...***

Nestled in the middle of Lamentations is perhaps one of the more famous and beloved passages about the mercy of God found in the Old Testament. 3:21-33 represents the crescendo of the book and the source of the people's hope and grace. These verses shine forth much promise for the people's restoration despite the devastation that surrounds them.

The writer calls to mind the character of God, which is the source of his hope (v. 21). He emphasized the steadfast love, unending mercies, and faithfulness of the LORD (v. 22). The wonder of God's grace is highlighted by the fact that the judgment the people are enduring is just. He does not "willingly afflict or grieve the children of men" (v. 33). In other words, God does not exercise wrath flippantly or sadistically. All that He does is right and just, including the punishment He brings about in response to human sin. Moreover, God does not have to restore His people, but He chooses to do so because of His remarkable character. His willingness to be the only source of hope for His hurting people induces humble contrition within them.

Verse 23 captures that memorable phrase about God's mercies being "new every morning." The writer's experience with the Babylonian siege has reminded him that he is not promised tomorrow. Each day he lives is a testimony to the merciful restraint of the

## Small Group Guide – Week 35

### Lamentations

*The Church at Brook Hills*

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*Lamentations*

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LORD. Therefore, each day is a day graciously given by God to exercise repentance and faithful obedience to His glory.

- List the attributes of God peppered throughout this passage.
- Define those attributes (i.e. what is steadfast love?).
- What does it mean to “wait for the LORD” (v. 25-26)?
- What does it mean that God “does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men” (v. 33)?

### ***Group Discussion...***

- What does it mean to be hopeful?
- What do people put their hope in?
- Why is it important that God be the object and source of one’s hope?
- What does it mean for God’s mercies to be new every morning?
- How does being mindful of the merciful restraint of God affect our day to day lives?
- What aspects of our character does being mindful of the merciful restraint of God change?
- What does waiting on the LORD look like?
- Why does God willingly restore His people?
- What does restoration look like?
- Share testimonies of how you have experienced Divine restoration.