The Living Word Series

Behold the Lamb of God

LESSON MANUAL
SUMMER 2019

The Living Word Series

Behold the Lamb of God
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CONTENTS

Editorial ................................................................. 3
Using Word Aflame Teaching Tools ................................ 4

June 2
Send Me, Lord ....................................................... 5

June 9
God Hears Our Prayers ........................................... 12

June 16
Our Sovereign God ............................................... 19

June 23
The Reason He Came. ........................................... 26

June 30
Made for a Purpose ............................................. 33

July 7
In the Potter’s Hands. ............................................. 40

July 14
Trusting God’s Plan ............................................... 47

July 21
The Importance of God’s Word. ............................... 54

July 28
God Is Full of Mercy ............................................. 61

August 4
The Gift of a Pastor ............................................... 68

August 11
A New Heart ......................................................... 75

August 18
Restoration in the Valley ....................................... 82

August 25
Behold the Lamb of God ......................................... 89

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As Israel prepared for what would be the final plague God would send upon the land of Egypt, lambs were being inspected by anxious fathers. Moses had relayed God’s message to His people, directing them to find a lamb without blemish, prepare it for dinner, and spread its blood upon the doorposts of their homes.

The coming plague was expected to be the harshest of all the plagues. God had declared that every family that had not sacrificed a lamb and spread its blood upon the posts of their doors would lose their firstborn to death.

In symbolic fashion, this lamb and its spilled blood would point to a day when the perfect Lamb of God would shed His blood for the covering and salvation of all humanity.

Approximately 1,500 years after the Exodus, a wilderness preacher began declaring the soon arrival of the Messiah. John the Baptist preached a passionate message of repentance, challenging the hearers to prepare their hearts for the coming of the Lord.

Then one hot, sunny morning, as John was closing out his latest sermon, his eye caught a glimpse of a lonely figure cresting the top of the hill. The preacher stopped in stunned silence as he recognized the man’s identity. Suddenly the words came bursting forth from John’s mouth, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

This was the Lamb the prophets had talked about. This was the Lamb Isaiah said would be “wounded for our transgressions” and “bruised for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5). This was the Lamb that would become the ultimate sacrifice for the salvation of all humanity.

The next three years would find this Lamb of God preaching to, healing, caring for, and loving those with whom He would come in contact. Every act of love brought humanity in closer connection with God manifest in flesh. But His path, which at times seemed destined for the throne, actually led Him to a cross. While many antagonists gathered around, only a handful of followers could be found near the cross. And there, suspended between Heaven and Earth, hung the Lamb of God.

It is difficult to understand the entirety of God’s plan. It is hard to comprehend why God chose the path He did to redeem us all. While Israel wandered through the wilderness, battled rebellion, lived in bondage, and witnessed miraculous deliverance, the prophets uttered things they did not fully understand; they foretold of Calvary and the spotless Lamb of God.

This quarter you are invited to journey through portions of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Ezekiel, and discover God’s plan of redemption for His people. No matter how dark the world around us may grow, there is hope because the Lamb of God has come.
USING WORD AFLAME TEACHING TOOLS

LESSON MANUAL
This Lesson Manual has been developed with the goal of providing teachers numerous options to assist in preparation and delivery of each lesson. In each lesson you will find a Focus Thought, Focus Verse, and Lesson Text that lay a foundation and give direction for the material that is to be presented. In addition, these features help the teacher connect with students and keep them engaged:

1. Questions are dispersed throughout the body of each lesson to provoke thought and spark discussion. We urge teachers to use these questions as a means of helping students apply each portion of the lesson.

   » How does God being “all knowing” bring you comfort?

2. Some paragraphs in each lesson will contain underlined words. These underlined words indicate some missing word students will use to fill in the blanks in their Student Workbook. This is another way for teachers to increase student engagement with each lesson.

   Job yearned for an audience with God to present his case. Job’s speeches in response to his friends contain his yearning for an audience with God. Job’s desire to present his case to God was rooted in his belief in God’s justice and Job’s innocence.

STUDENT WORKBOOK
The Student Workbook gives students the tools to not only follow the major points of each lesson but also further their personal discipleship and devotion throughout the week.

1. The Focus Thought, Focus Verse, and Culture Connection have been included in the Student Workbook.

2. The Approach section provides students important portions of the manuscript with and without fill-in-the-blank segments.

3. The Analyze section will allow the student to interact with the Lesson Text, reflecting on its message and meaning.

4. The Ask section gives the student thought-provoking questions to help them gain a further understanding of the Scripture Text and the lesson.

5. The Apply section will help the student consider how they can best apply what they have learned from the lesson.
Send Me, Lord

FOCUS THOUGHT
I will surrender to God and be used for His will.

FOCUS VERSE
Isaiah 6:8
Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.

LESSON TEXT
Isaiah 6:1–8
1 In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.
2 Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.
3 And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the L ORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.
4 And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.
5 Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the L ORD of hosts.
6 Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar:
7 And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.
8 Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.
Kings often appointed emissaries to travel to foreign lands and represent the interests of the kingdom. Every emissary recognized the possibility of failing to complete the mission because of thieves, roadside cutthroats, enemy armies, disease, and a whole host of other problems.

Every potential royal emissary knew the risks associated with traveling to a foreign kingdom. Yet many volunteered for these special missions out of a desire to serve king and country. When the king asked for volunteers, they stepped forward without hesitation. In spite of the dangers, they boldly proclaimed, “Send me!”

Trusting in the power and prestige of their lord, they pressed forward with an intrepid attitude. Faithful in the face of adversity, they took comfort in the fact that they possessed the king’s seal. This seal demonstrated the king’s confidence in them, his trust in their abilities, and his faith that they could overcome the obstacles set before them.

CULTURE CONNECTION
HOPE IS STILL ALIVE

It was the Christmas of 1972 on a tiny island in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Men hung from cranes and other heavy equipment just to get a good view of the visitor who would bolster their morale and give them a few hours of hilarity. Bob Hope, the icon of the USO (United Service Organizations) Tours at that time, received standing ovations from the moment he started his routine.

Starting his tours in 1941, Hope continued for nearly fifty years. He gained respect and recognition for his dedication to USO Tours, providing entertainment and encouragement to soldiers fighting for freedom (https://www.uso.org/stories/154-bob-hope-the-uso-s-one-man-morale-machine/, accessed October 2017).

Although Bob Hope was able to give soldiers a few hours of reprieve from the horrors of war, the reality was they were still in enemy territory and many would never come home or see their families again. Sadly, true hope was not on the program. Bob Hope died July 27, 2003.

Global and North American missionaries carry the hope-filled gospel to those who have not yet heard. We can offer true hope to the neighbor across the street or to a new friend we made at the gym. Whatever the scenario, we have the opportunity to offer true happiness and a life worth living through the hope of Jesus Christ. Without reservation we can say, “Hope is still alive.”
SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

In today’s world God is not asking most of us to embark on a journey fraught with perils. Certainly some may face challenges as they minister overseas or in tough areas. The majority, however, will be left to wrestle with their own inadequacies. Like some of the prophets of old, they will make excuses. Some will run from their calling. Others will take time to fully embrace it. Fear of failure and recognition of personal shortcomings will stop some dead in their tracks before they ever fully commit to be an emissary for the Lord.

The bold will rise to the challenge. They will proclaim, “Send me!” And the Lord will reach down and meet their needs, equipping them for ministry just as He equipped the prophet Isaiah. Today we must choose whether we will abandon the call out of fear and deficiency or rise to the challenge in boldness and faith. God is looking for individuals to represent His kingdom.

What is something in your life that may make you hesitant to answer the call of the Lord? How can you overcome it?

I. GOD REVEALS HIMSELF TO THOSE WHO LOOK FOR HIM

Several passages in the Bible fit the bill of a call narrative. These narratives often feature the Lord or His agent speaking to an individual in a miraculous way. The potential prophet will often refuse to accept the call, citing a personal problem or some other issue. God will then allay the person’s fears, and the individual will accept the call.

We see this pattern play out in the call narrative of Moses. He saw the burning bush and wondered why it was not consumed. The Lord spoke to Moses and told him that He would deliver the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. When Moses stated that he could not accept the call based on his poor speech, God solved this problem and addressed every issue Moses raised.

Isaiah saw a vision of the Lord in his call narrative. Despite the great sight before him, he hesitated to accept the call. He told God of his human weaknesses and the frailties of his people. God touched him in a special way, and the previously reluctant prophet fully embraced the call of God.

What is the story of your calling? Keep in mind that we are all ministers in the kingdom of God, even if we do not feel the call to pastor, evangelize, and so on.

A. I Saw the Lord High and Lifted Up

God set Isaiah on the road to answering the calling by giving the prophet a heavenly vision: a vision of God Himself. This unique and special view of the Lord occurred at a very difficult time when the good king Uzziah had died. The Bible only lists a few good kings. All the rulers of the Northern Kingdom of Israel were deemed wicked. Very few leaders from the Davidic line in Judah were proclaimed to be good. Even the most promising could find themselves falling prey to pride and sin.
With Uzziah gone, some would say that uncertainty reigned. Isaiah’s vision told him something different: God still ruled Judah, no matter who sat on the earthly throne. Isaiah could have confidence in his God despite the circumstances.

» *What circumstances are preventing you from seeing the glory of the Lord and the work He desires to do in your life?*

**B. His Train Filled the Temple**

When Isaiah saw the Lord’s train, he received a special glimpse of the glory of God. Some biblical scholars have focused on the awesomeness of God’s train filling the Temple, noting that kings who triumphed in battle would add part of the losing king’s robe to their own royal garment. The extent of the Lord’s train revealed the victories the King of kings had won.

Other scholars focus on the robe as a symbol of God as the all-powerful Judge. The Lord not only rules over all nations, but He judges them as the champion of justice. Perhaps the images of king and judge both work because they reveal two aspects of the Lord that Isaiah saw. Although he could describe some of the details of his vision, the total experience defied description.

» *Think back to a time when you experienced the presence of the Lord. How did you feel? What did you feel the Lord was calling you to do?*

**C. Angels Cry, “Holy”**

Thankfully the Lord inspired the prophet to share his vision of a heavenly court scene where the attendants of the Lord proclaimed His glory. The angels cried, “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3). The description *LORD of hosts* reveals yet another aspect of Isaiah’s vision: God was not merely a judge and a king, but He was also a divine warrior with a large standing army ready to do His bidding. Isaiah likely viewed the angels not only as worshipers of the Lord, but also as divine soldiers under the command of the almighty God.

Today God is calling us to see His glory and accept His plan for us. We may not receive a vision like Isaiah, have a burning bush experience like Moses, or feel the anointed touch of Elijah’s mantle. However, we can search the Scripture to receive a vision of the Lord, and we can pray that the Lord will open our understanding.

» *Although we all serve the same God, we relate to Him in different ways. Isaiah could have seen him as a judge, a king, and a divine warrior. How do you see the Lord? Why?*

**II. GOD FORGIVES THE HUMBLE AND REPENTANT**

Isaiah could have felt very privileged to receive such an incredible vision of the Lord. Pride could have overwhelmed his heart as he thought about his place in history and in the kingdom of Judah. He might have considered proclaiming his special status to others based on his experience with God.
Isaiah, however, had a very different reaction. Instead of feeling haughty, he felt humbled. Instead of feeling superior, he felt subpar. Instead of feeling righteous, he felt repentant. Those who have truly experienced a divine call will feel this same humility. They may feel overwhelmed and completely inadequate to answer the great call of such a tremendous God.

> What is your attitude toward God right now? How can you strengthen a good vision of God or improve an unclear vision of God and His plan for you?

**A. Woe Is Me**

Isaiah’s first words were not a conceited rant, trumpeting his own glory. Instead he spoke of his own imperfections, proclaiming, “Woe is me! for I am undone” (Isaiah 6:5). Perhaps Isaiah was surprised he could even speak at all. He may have thought he was going to die, wondering whether he could see such an awesome God and live to tell about it.

Although he would later accept the call to tell of the greatness of the Lord, he may have felt that he could not survive the experience. Moses was only allowed to see a portion of the Lord’s glory. Perhaps Isaiah had seen too much. In fact, the word translated “undone” could also be rendered “ruined,” “cut off,” or “destroyed.” Isaiah realized he was in a very precarious position.

> How can we maintain reverence for God in a world that dismisses and often mocks the things of God?

**B. I Dwell among People with Unclean Lips**

Isaiah began confessing his inadequacies and the deficiencies of his people. He proclaimed, “I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5). Isaiah was flawed and his people were flawed. He had no other choice but to confess his sins. In the midst of greatness, he humbled himself. In the presence of the Great One, he could only do one thing: repent.

Those who are called will come to a place where they are stripped of all their accolades, gifts, and accomplishments. As the Book of Hebrews states, “Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Hebrews 4:13). For Isaiah to proclaim the word, he had to bare his soul before the Lord and recognize his insufficiency.

**C. Cleansed by the Fire from the Altar**

Instead of rebuking Isaiah for his sin and human flaws, the Lord met the prophet’s need. In Isaiah 6:6–7 the prophet offered a firsthand account of his miraculous cleansing, “Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin
purged.” Isaiah received a special touch from the altar of the Lord that cured his lips of their uncleanness and prepared the prophet to speak the word of the Lord.

The sight must have been awesome to behold. The literal translation of seraphim is “burning ones.” They were on fire for God, worshiping Him and proclaiming His holiness. They also did His bidding without question, touching Isaiah and cleansing him. Like the prophet, we can go from being undone and unclean to being purified and holy. We can be cleansed, be on fire for God, and worship the beauty of His holiness like the seraphim.

How does our worship reveal our relationship with God and our commitment to our calling?

III. GOD USES THOSE WHO SURRENDER TO HIM

Those who saw Isaiah, heard his vision, and watched his ministry likely viewed him with great respect. Because Isaiah was a court prophet who served kings, many of the people in Judah felt awed in his presence. While some recognized the power of his experience with the King of kings, others only saw his connection to earthly kings.

Isaiah, however, knew the lesson of surrendering to the Lord. He knew what it was like to come face-to-face with the power of an awesome God and live. In the modern world, we often forget that the word awesome is related to the word awful. People filled with awe often felt awful because they were afraid for their lives. Because Isaiah surrendered to the Lord, a potentially awful situation that could have meant his death became an awesome testimony of the power of God to raise us all up from our sins so we can declare God’s greatness.

A. Whom Shall I Send?

We must not simply acknowledge our iniquity. We must have willing hearts. For God is asking us the same question He asked Isaiah, “Whom shall I send?” (Isaiah 6:8). Many today claim they are ready to answer the call, but they have not humbled themselves. Others will state they have received a word from God, but the Lord has not cleansed their lips. They have not spoken with other tongues as the Spirit gave the utterance.

Isaiah prophesied about speaking in tongues. He proclaimed, “For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people. To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear” (Isaiah 28:11–12). The call requires us to repent of our sins like Isaiah did. We must proclaim, “Woe is me. I am undone.” We must be baptized in Jesus’ name to receive the cleansing of our sins. We must have our speech purified by receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost.

B. Send Me

Experiencing salvation will allow us to boldly proclaim, “Send me!” In the presence of the Lord, strange things like the vision of Isaiah happen. Things that seem impossible become possible. We might say Isaiah had a bold humility. Although the phrase seems like an oxymoron, the prophet expressed both boldness and humility.
He was humbled because of his sin, but he was so emboldened by his cleansing that he proclaimed, “Send me!”

Isaiah viewed the Lord as a king, judge, and warrior, but he may have also viewed Him as High Priest. The High Priest offered the cleansing for sin. Isaiah accepted it with humility, and then he proclaimed, “Send me!” May we have a bold humility—a humility that says, “I’ve sinned,” and a boldness that says, “I still want to be used by God.”

How can we be humble in the presence of God and at the same time be emboldened to accept the call of God?

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The call of the Lord can come to us at unexpected times. Isaiah received his calling during a time of sorrow when the good king Uzziah had died. Today we may find ourselves receiving the call of the Lord in unexpected seasons of life. One such unexpected occasion happened at a district Bible quiz tournament in the late nineties when the Lord anointed one of the coaches to speak to the quizzers. The presence of the Lord filled the sanctuary. What most intended as a day of competition became a day of calling. God’s desire to do something in the midst of the young people could not be denied.

One of the young men cried out. Feeling the strong presence of the Lord, he could only react like the prophet Isaiah. His cry seemed to say, “Woe is me!” Yet God had a plan for his life. Whether he received his initial call to ministry that day or the Lord confirmed something he had felt in his heart for a while, he accepted the call and proclaimed, “Send me!” He later became the pastor of his boyhood church and a presbyter in his district.

Another young man felt the presence of the Lord that day and left the sanctuary. He spoke to a friend of his inadequacies and talked about the problems his family was experiencing. He was saying, “Woe is me” because of the woes in his life, but not out of a repentant heart like Isaiah. His attitude prevented him from receiving something more from the Lord that day.

We also have the choice of how we will respond. If we give in to the spirit of conviction, we will feel undone in the presence of God. However, some will stop at this point. Their sin and iniquity will overwhelm them. They will not accept the coal from the altar, repent, be baptized in Jesus’ name, and speak in other tongues. Some, however, will humbly receive the plan of salvation. They will boldly proclaim, “Send me!” while others walk away from the presence of God.

Today God desires to give us a greater vision of Himself. He wants us to see His glory. He wants us to recognize our weakness so we might be made strong in Him. He wants us to have a bold humility that says, “Yes, I have sinned, but I will receive cleansing and accept my calling.”

What steps will you take to ensure you keep a willing heart concerning God’s calling in your life?
FOCUS VERSE

Isaiah 37:17

Incline thine ear, O Lord, and hear; open thine eyes, O Lord, and see: and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent to reproach the living God.

FOCUS TEXT

Isaiah 37:9–20

9 And he heard say concerning Tirhakah king of Ethiopia, He is come forth to make war with thee. And when he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying,

10 Thus shall ye speak to Hezekiah king of Judah, saying, Let not thy God, in whom thou trustest, deceive thee, saying, Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.

11 Behold, thou hast heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands by destroying them utterly; and shalt thou be delivered?

12 Have the gods of the nations delivered them which my fathers have destroyed, as Gozan, and Haran, and Rezeph, and the children of Eden which were in Telassar?

13 Where is the king of Hamath, and the king of Arphad, and the king of the city of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivah?

14 And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it: and Hezekiah went up unto the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord.

15 And Hezekiah prayed unto the Lord, saying,

16 O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth: thou hast made heaven and earth.

17 Incline thine ear, O Lord, and hear; open thine eyes, O Lord, and see: and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent to reproach the living God.

18 Of a truth, Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations, and their countries,

19 And have cast their gods into the fire: for they were no gods, but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone: therefore they have destroyed them.

20 Now therefore, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou art the Lord, even thou only.
CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

We live in a world where threats, both real and imagined, can cause great trepidation. Some threats prove to be false and may be the product of a hyped-up media ready to exploit fears. Other threats, however, can be very real. They are not merely talk; they represent actual peril that could befall individuals and nations. In today’s world it can be difficult to distinguish between real and perceived threats. When the news cycle constantly reports on wars, rumors of wars, political taunts, and natural disasters, we may become immune to the potential catastrophes on the horizon.

CULTURE CONNECTION

IT’S NOT OVER

Ricardo Sanchez is a Christian singer and songwriter. His nine-year-old son, Josiah, dived into the shallow end of a friend’s pool. He dived headfirst, mimicking the sea lions he was fascinated with on vacation. Hitting his head on the bottom of the pool, Josiah had multiple fractures along his spine near the base of his neck. As Ricardo helplessly waited for a report on his son, the words to his new song, “It’s Not Over,” played over and over in his mind. He tried to believe the words were from God.

To the amazement of the doctors, the miracle of healing in Josiah’s back was astounding. While his neck was broken, his spine was not damaged. His healing was remarkable.

Two of Ricardo’s friends had dreams of the accident. Both of them saw an angel rescuing Josiah; the angel assured them, “It’s not over.” The song Ricardo had written was released after Josiah’s accident and miraculous recovery (Ricardo Sanchez, “Ricardo Sanchez: Did Prayers Heal His Son?” Guideposts, November 2017).

Perhaps God speaks to all of those who are facing incredible odds. Whether it is through a song, a dream, or a message from a pastor, God makes His message of hope clear. In the midst of the trial, He assures us, “It’s not over.” We can take great comfort knowing that it is never over until God says it is.

OUTLINE

I. THE ENEMY WILL TRY TO DECEIVE AND DISCOURAGE US
   A. The King of Assyria Attempted to Deceive the People
   B. Hezekiah Received Discouraging News

II. IT IS IMPORTANT TO SEEK GOD’S DIRECTION
   A. Hezekiah Went to the Temple
   B. Hezekiah Sent Messengers to the Prophet Isaiah

III. WE CAN CARRY OUR BURDENS TO THE LORD IN PRAYER
   A. Hezekiah Went to the Temple Again
   B. He Laid the Letter before the Lord and Prayed for Deliverance

IV. GOD HEARS OUR PRAYER
   A. God Answered Hezekiah through Isaiah
   B. The King of Assyria and 185,000 Assyrians Were Killed

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

We live in a world where threats, both real and imagined, can cause great trepidation. Some threats prove to be false and may be the product of a hyped-up media ready to exploit fears. Other threats, however, can be very real. They are not merely talk; they represent actual peril that could befall individuals and nations. In today’s world it can be difficult to distinguish between real and perceived threats. When the news cycle constantly reports on wars, rumors of wars, political taunts, and natural disasters, we may become immune to the potential catastrophes on the horizon.
SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

People living during the Cold War in the 1960s came face-to-face with a threat that could have proven very real. The United States and the Soviet Union lived under the dark cloud of a potential nuclear war. Each side fought in the shadows, playing an intelligence game of spy versus spy as they tried to outwit each other. At times the Cold War emerged from the shadows and became center stage.

Such was the case in 1960 during a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly. Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union, responded angrily to a delegate who criticized the U.S.S.R. for actively inhibiting freedom for peoples around the world. An incensed Khrushchev walked to the podium. Some reports state that he took off his shoe and banged it on the podium, while others claim he merely waved the shoe around violently. He beat the podium and denounced the delegate, declaring him to be a lackey for the American government.

Many in the audience, as well as those who later heard the report, may have feared the Cold War would boil over into full-blown war between Russia and the United States. The threat was very real. Both nations had stockpiled enough nuclear arsenal to annihilate each other and the planet. Thankfully, the Cold War cooled off once again.

We may worry about the threats we could face. Sometimes our imagination runs wild with fear. Sleep becomes difficult to find. In the morning we blame our fears on a late-night snack. Some fears, however, prove very real. During these times we must seek the Lord in prayer and trust in Him, just as Hezekiah did in the Book of Isaiah.

Whether we are worrying about something very real or something that is less likely to happen, what steps can we take to ensure we are putting our trust in God?

I. THE ENEMY WILL TRY TO DECEIVE AND DISCOURAGE US

When threats have the potential to become more than just taunts and bluster by the enemy, we must put our trust in God. Hezekiah faced a difficult situation, and he likely felt very afraid. The Assyrian war machine had destroyed many nations. The seemingly unstoppable juggernaut had rolled through countries, eliminating resistance and punishing those who opposed Assyrian rule.

Such was the fate of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. The Assyrians defeated the coalition of the Israelites and the Arameans. The Israelites were sent to a new land. Some scholars have suggested they wound up in what is present-day Afghanistan. Whatever the case, ten tribes were lost in Israel.

Only the kingdom of Judah remained. Hezekiah was a good king, ruling over a small kingdom with no earthly hope of defeating the Assyrians. Hezekiah’s strong faith in God faced its ultimate test: could he continue trusting the Lord in the midst of a very real crisis that could prove not only deadly, but also extremely devastating to the nation?

Think about a crisis you have faced. How did you react? How do you hope to react if you experience another time of difficulty?
A. The King of Assyria Attempted to Deceive the People

Through his emissary, the king of Assyria did not simply taunt Hezekiah. He felt so emboldened and mighty that he went after Hezekiah’s God. The messenger brazenly mocked Hezekiah for trusting in his God (Isaiah 36:7). He even proclaimed that the Lord had told him to come to Judah and destroy it (Isaiah 36:10). Even worse than putting words in the Lord’s mouth, the Assyrians tried to claim the one true God was a liar.

Since the Lord had allowed the northern kingdom of Israel to fall prey to the Assyrians, maybe Judah’s time was up. God had granted a reprieve to Judah, but Hezekiah may have worried they could not survive a second invasion of the Assyrians. He also feared for his people because they were hearing the taunts of the enemy. As king he wanted to keep them safe.

Hezekiah faced a great challenge. Should he trust in the Lord, or should he seek help from Egypt. The Assyrians had told him Egypt would be no help. But should not a king act to save his people? Hezekiah felt perplexed. He knew the power of his God to deliver. He had heard the miraculous stories, but he also knew the reputation of the Assyrians, a reputation that was well-earned.

B. Hezekiah Received Discouraging News

Hezekiah heard the discouraging news and the enemy’s taunts. For Hezekiah, a comfortable throne suddenly became very uncomfortable. Royal robes that once flowed freely in majesty felt a bit heavier. A heart that trusted in God likely quaked with fear. What was Hezekiah to do? He tore off his kingly garments, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went to the Temple of the Lord to seek the face of God.

> Why is it important to find times of prayer in the house of God?

II. IT IS IMPORTANT TO SEEK GOD’S DIRECTION

In times of discouragement and fear, we may find it difficult to pray. We have a real need before us, but we may feel frozen in space and time, unable to act at such a critical point. During these situations, we must summon faith and courage to seek God’s direction for our lives. We must press past fear and logic and see the power of a faithful God to deliver.

Logic was not on Hezekiah’s side. The threat was dire. The Assyrians had the ability to back up their taunts, unless God intervened. We often face enemies that are more real than we would like. When the doctor proclaims cancer has invaded the body, we know that enemy’s potential to do harm. When the government threatens us with legal action, we may feel weak and unequipped to respond. During these times we must pray.

> We all have family histories that are connected to disease and/or sin. How can we address these situations to the Lord in prayer?

15
A. Hezekiah Went to the Temple

Hezekiah recognized the dire situation facing Judah. He said, “This day is a day of trouble, and of rebuke, and of blasphemy: for the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth” (Isaiah 37:3). Hezekiah knew the trouble facing Judah. Even as he tried to have faith, he likely kept thinking about the rebuke and blasphemy of the enemy.

Hezekiah hoped the enemy had gone too far. Even if God was upset with Judah, perhaps He would punish the Assyrians for their defiance. Hezekiah said, “It may be the LORD thy God will hear the words of Rabshakeh, whom the king of Assyria his master hath sent to reproach the living God, and will reprove the words which the LORD thy God hath heard: wherefore lift up thy prayer for the remnant that is left” (Isaiah 37:4). Hezekiah not only wanted God to hear his prayer, but he wanted the Lord to hear the words of the enemy.

B. Hezekiah Sent Messengers to the Prophet Isaiah

In difficult situations it is important to seek the counsel of the man of God. Hezekiah knew he needed a word from the Lord. Therefore, he sent messengers to the prophet Isaiah to share the king’s words about the time of trouble, in the hope that God would act.

Isaiah was the right man to call. The prophet had served in the court of the kings of Judah, offering his prophecies and his advice. Now more than ever, his godly wisdom and prophetic spirit were needed. God spoke to Hezekiah through the prophet Isaiah, “Thus saith the LORD, Be not afraid of the words that thou hast heard, wherewith the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. Behold, I will send a blast upon him, and he shall hear a rumour, and return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land” (Isaiah 37:6–7). The word brought some relief to Hezekiah, but the situation was not completely over yet. The enemy still had some more taunts and threats to make.

» How important is it to both pray and seek the advice of the man of God during our times of trouble?

III. WE CAN CARRY OUR BURDENS TO THE LORD IN PRAYER

The enemy sent a letter, once again blaspheming God and calling Him a deceiver. As if the taunts were not enough, the Assyrians listed several real examples of their conquests. “Have the gods of the nations delivered them which my fathers have destroyed, as Gozan, and Haran, and Rezeph, and the children of Eden which were in Telassar? Where is the king of Hamath, and the king of Arphad, and the king of the city of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivah?” (Isaiah 37:12–13). The Assyrians revealed the powerlessness of other gods to stop them.

In ancient battles the victors not only spoiled the city, but they also took images of false gods from temples. They paraded them around in their home countries to show the superiority of their god over the deities of their enemies. The Assyrian king likely
envisioned displaying treasures and sacred objects from the Temple of God as proof of Assyrian domination.

**A. Hezekiah Went to the Temple Again**

Hezekiah would not give up. The king once again made his way to the Temple to talk to the Lord. Sometimes God will give us a word of deliverance. We will receive it in faith, only to see the enemy rise up against us once more. Instead of allowing himself to doubt God, Hezekiah went to the Temple a second time. We must have the faith and courage to accept the word of the Lord and continuously give ourselves to prayer in the midst of our trials.

**B. He Laid the Letter before the Lord and Prayed for Deliverance**

Hezekiah brought the Assyrian letter and spread it out before the Lord. The king appealed to the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. He proclaimed the oneness of God in his prayer (Isaiah 37:16). Hezekiah pleaded with God to bend down His ear, to see the situation, and to hear all the words of the Assyrian king Sennacherib—words designed to reproach the living God (Isaiah 37:17).

Hezekiah knew the power of the Assyrians, but he also knew they had only won previous battles because they had faced false gods. Sadly, the northern kingdom of Israel had turned away from the one true God and had worshiped idols. If they had remained steadfast in their commitment to the Lord, the ten tribes could have survived.

God answered Hezekiah’s praying by speaking to the prophet Isaiah. This time the king did not even need to send messengers to Isaiah. God was proactively addressing the situation. Isaiah sent word to the king, reconfirming the fact that the Lord would deliver Judah.

» What bill, letter, text, or email do you need to put before the Lord?

**IV. GOD HEARS OUR PRAYER**

The story of Hezekiah is powerful because it lets us know God hears our prayers. Oftentimes we can become caught up in the cacophonous taunts of the enemy. The words linger in our ears and threaten the faith in our hearts. Thankfully, we can pray to the Lord for deliverance. We can also be thankful because we have men and women of God who will speak to us prophetically in our time of trouble.

Think about a time in your life when a man or woman of God ministered to you. How did you feel after this person spoke to you? Did you receive the word from the Lord and follow the advice?

**A. God Answered Hezekiah through Isaiah**

When the Lord called on the prophet Isaiah to speak to King Hezekiah, the prophet also had a word for the King of Assyria. The monarch had made a terrible mistake by taunting the God of Israel. The Lord shared some of His history with the king, “Hast thou not heard long ago, how I have done it; and of ancient times, that I have formed it?
now have I brought it to pass, that thou shouldest be to lay waste defenced cities into ruinous heaps. Therefore their inhabitants were of small power, they were dismayed and confounded: they were as the grass of the field, and as the green herb, as the grass on the housetops, and as corn blasted before it be grown up” (Isaiah 37:26–27). God had won many battles, and now He had entered the battle on behalf of the kingdom of Judah.

B. The King of Assyria and 185,000 Assyrians Were Killed

God sent His angel to intervene, and the boastful and mighty Assyrians found themselves defeated. Isaiah 37:36 states, “Then the angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.” What the Assyrians planned to do to the people of Judah happened to them.

As the Lord had said, the Assyrians went back the way they came. The mighty superpower was unable to defeat a tiny kingdom that served the almighty God. The situation became fatal for Sennacherib when his two sons killed him. Meanwhile Hezekiah dwelt safely in his palace, having learned a lesson about the power of prayer, trusting in God, and being willing to hear the word of the Lord from the prophet of God.

» How can you partner in prayer with a friend or fellow saint who you know is facing a dire circumstance?

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Sometimes our problems overwhelm us so much that we enter a state of denial. Hezekiah did not fall prey to denial, and neither should we. When we hear the taunt of the enemy or receive a letter that expresses a very real problem, we should read it before the Lord. Our honesty does not mean we lack faith. In fact, expressing our problem before the Lord prevents us from entering an even worse state of denial, a place where we deny God the opportunity to act on our behalf.

The story of Hezekiah is also instructive because he likely breathed a sigh of relief after receiving the first word from Isaiah. He felt like he could finally relax. Everything was in God’s hands. God had taken care of it all. Then the Assyrians sent him a letter, attempting to reignite his fears.

Sometimes in life we experience situations where we feel God has answered. Then the enemy tries to throw one last monkey wrench into the situation. We should realize the enemy is simply acting out of desperation. We must be steadfast and do what worked the first time. There will be times when a situation will require two trips to the altar for prayer. There will be times when we need a second word from the Lord. We can rest in the confidence that God’s word remained the same to Hezekiah in both cases. In contrast, the enemy faced even greater judgment. Therefore, we should always be ready to take our needs to the Lord in prayer.

» Think of a situation where you feel you received an answer from the Lord, but you are still waiting for complete victory. How should you handle it?
Our Sovereign God

FOCUS THOUGHT
I will trust that God is sovereign and has all power in the heavens and the earth.

FOCUS VERSE
Isaiah 45:12
I have made the earth, and created man upon it: I, even my hands, have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded.

LESSON TEXT
Isaiah 45:5–13
5 I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me:
6 That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside me. I am the Lord, and there is none else.
7 I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.
8 Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness: let the earth open, and let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together; I the Lord have created it.
9 Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherd of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands?
10 Woe unto him that saith unto his father, What begettest thou? or to the woman, What hast thou brought forth?
11 Thus saith the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker, Ask me of things to come concerning my sons, and concerning the work of my hands command ye me.
12 I have made the earth, and created man upon it: I, even my hands, have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded.
13 I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways: he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward, saith the Lord of hosts.
CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

We live in a world where many people question the sovereignty of God. Rather than bowing down in worship, they raise objections in doubt. Rather than raising hands of praise, they raise fists of anger in defiance of God. Rather than deferring to the will of God, they assert their own will. Many not only fail to understand the sovereignty of the Lord, but they also fail to understand the nature of God. The majority of non-Apostolic Christians also hold a trinitarian view of God. Many of them criticize Oneness believers. They claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is foundational to the Christian faith, and that Apostolics are part of a young movement that only began in the early 1900s.

Apostolics counter this argument by pointing out that we have gone back to the teaching of the apostles. However, it is important for us to develop new ways of showing why the Lord has called us to the revelation of the Oneness. By doing so, we can help others to understand the power of the one sovereign Lord.

CULTURE CONNECTION

CREATING YOUR OWN DESTINY

“How Success Happens” is a self-improvement podcast produced by the popular magazine Entrepreneur. This podcast features individuals who have learned to reach their goals and then step even further beyond their initial goals; defying all rules and predetermined conceptions. Those interviewed and featured on the podcast help the listeners realize how to convert dreams into reality.

In podcast #27, Joy Mangano, an established inventor of our day, was interviewed about how she took charge of her life and created her own destiny. She explained how it all started with her thinking and realizing how she could do or be anything. Mangano realized there were no limits to the things an individual could create as a product. Her creativity and determination has enabled her to sell over three million dollars of her products, and help people all over the world solve their problems.

The most interesting part in Mangano’s interview, is not the physical creations for which she now owns the copyrights. It is the application she makes to individual’s personal lives. Mangano says everyone’s life is a product, and we are in control of what we create our lives to be.

Just as Mangano feels she is able to control and create something new, so our God is in control of the whole universe. He has the power to create something out of nothing. God is in control of this world and all the happenings therein. He alone has all power and authority.

OUTLINE

I. THERE IS NO GOD OTHER THAN OUR GOD
   A. Recognizing God’s Sovereignty
   B. Eliminating Any Possible Idol

II. GOD IS THE CREATOR
   A. The Splendor of Creation
   B. The Power of the Creator

III. IT IS NOT WISE TO QUESTION GOD’S INTENTIONS
   A. Yielding to God’s Sovereign Will
   B. Trusting in the Face of Questions

IV. GOD IS IN CHARGE

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

We live in a world where many people question the sovereignty of God. Rather than bowing down in worship, they raise objections in doubt. Rather than raising hands of praise, they raise fists of anger in defiance of God. Rather than deferring to the will of God, they assert their own will.

Many not only fail to understand the sovereignty of the Lord, but they also fail to understand the nature of God. The majority of non-Apostolic Christians also hold a trinitarian view of God. Many of them criticize Oneness believers. They claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is foundational to the Christian faith, and that Apostolics are part of a young movement that only began in the early 1900s.

Apostolics counter this argument by pointing out that we have gone back to the teaching of the apostles. However, it is important for us to develop new ways of showing why the Lord has called us to the revelation of the Oneness. By doing so, we can help others to understand the power of the one sovereign Lord.
SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Damascus steel was much sought after in the ancient world. Generals desired to equip their soldiers with powerful swords and knives made from this special metal. Despite the fame of Damascus steel, the recipe for creating it was lost in the sands of time. Perhaps someone will figure out how to reverse engineer it or find text describing the techniques for making it. For now, the world only has relics of this magnificent steel.

Just as the recipe for Damascus steel was lost, so too Christianity lost the teachings of the absolute oneness of God. The Bible certainly presented this teaching. However, Greek philosophy triumphed over Scripture, and trinitarian thought held sway over the minds and hearts of believers for centuries. The Apostolic revival of the early twentieth century restored the belief in baptism in Jesus’ name and the oneness of God.

In the Old Testament the people of God received the revelation of the oneness of God; however, they often lost sight of it. They worshiped idols and became enamored with the false gods of other nations. Prophets like Isaiah had to remind them to put away their idols and trust in the one sovereign Lord.

Today we must beware lest we fall into the same trap. We must proclaim the message of God’s sovereignty and oneness. We must put our trust in the Lord who made the heavens and the earth. Just as the clay could not question the potter who made it and Damascus steel could not criticize the blacksmith who forged it, we must not fall prey to questioning the sovereignty of God. We must submit to our maker and receive all He has for us.

» How do you know God is sovereign? What are some ways you have seen the sovereignty of God in your life?

I. THERE IS NO GOD OTHER THAN OUR GOD

The children of Abraham struggled to maintain their belief in one God. Israel’s and Judah’s constant problems with idols led the Lord to inspire Isaiah to once again proclaim the oneness of God. The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen into the trap of idolatry, and the Assyrians defeated them and deported them in 722 BC. Isaiah wanted the southern kingdom of Judah to avoid the same fate.

Isaiah proclaimed the message of the Lord, “I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me: that they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside me. I am the LORD, and there is none else” (Isaiah 45:5–6). Perhaps the Lord mentioned the sun just in case some in Judah believed they should worship the sun god. The Lord let the people know He was the only God. They may have wavered in their commitment to monotheism by flirting with idolatry, so God felt the need to set them back on the right track.

» Why do you think God’s people fell into idolatry? How can you avoid allowing other things to compete with your affection for the Lord?
A. Recognizing God's Sovereignty

The people of Judah needed to understand the oneness of God in order to recognize God's sovereignty. If they thought Jehovah was not in control, they might have appealed to other gods to save them. They might have thought Jehovah was only the Lord of a particular area or of a particular thing. In the ancient world, there were gods of rain, harvest, death, and so on. A farmer in Judah who did not understand the oneness of God might erroneously appeal to the storm deity Baal for rain.

B. Eliminating Any Possible Idol

Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord hoped to recultivate a strict monotheism in Judah. Every idol needed to be eliminated. The people not only needed to destroy physical idols, but they also needed to remove the idolatry from their hearts.

In today's world we may feel we understand the message of God and would never fall prey to idolatry. Yet we all can be tempted to worship something other than the one true God. We can find our affections set on earthly things instead of on the Lord.

What idols do you need to eliminate in your life? In other words, what are some things you have made more important than God?

II. GOD IS THE CREATOR

To help us return our focus to the Lord and recognize His sovereignty, we need only look at creation. God existed before the advent of the world and showed His majesty by bringing life to that which was without form and void. Without God, we lack purpose. Creation reveals that we serve a sovereign Lord who believes in order and has a plan for our lives.

We see this sovereignty in the fact that God did not create the sun and the moon until the fourth day of Creation. In the ancient Near East and even in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, people may have felt tempted to worship the sun and the moon because they governed the day and the night. In the ordering of Creation, God revealed that the sun and moon were not deities. They were objects He created for a specific purpose.

Isaiah took readers back to the beginning of the Bible, calling to mind the words of the Lord, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). In Isaiah 45:7 the Lord stated, “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things.” We cannot have light and peace without God. If we understand the sovereignty of God, we can take comfort in knowing He is in control of the light and darkness, good and evil.

The Lord also controls the rain. However, God is not simply interested in providing water for crops. He desires for His people to be righteous. In Isaiah 45:8 He commands, “Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness: let the earth open, and let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together; I the LORD have created it.” The Lord desires to saturate the earth with righteousness and salvation.
Since Isaiah went back to the beginning of Creation, maybe we need to go back to our first experience with God. Why did you trust in the sovereignty of God as a new believer?

A. The Splendor of Creation

Those looking for salvation can learn about God through the splendor of His creation. Isaiah 45 calls to mind the way Psalm 19:1–3 uses the heavens and day and night to reveal the glory of God: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.” The sun and the moon represent day and night. They continually declare the glory of God, but some decided to ignore their message and worship them instead. They fell prey to preferring the creation over the Creator. They saw the majesty of the sun and moon while failing to see the sovereign Lord who created them.

What impresses you the most about God’s creation? Why?

B. The Power of the Creator

The nation of Judah needed to be reminded of the power of the Creator. Although the sun brought heat and helped crops to grow, the fiery star was just the instrument of a faithful God providing for His people. Although the moon controlled the tides and brought lesser light during the night, it was also the instrument of God, bringing order even in the midst of darkness.

III. IT IS NOT WISE TO QUESTION GOD’S INTENTIONS

Those who misunderstood the purposes of the sun and the moon might have misunderstood God’s purpose for them. They might have denied the Creator or questioned God’s intentions. While it is not wrong to seek answers in our desire to learn more about God, we should not question God’s sovereignty. Any questions we ask should come from a humble heart, not a prideful spirit that challenges the will of the Lord.

Isaiah 45:9 proclaims, “Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands?” Human hands could shape clay and design it for specific uses. Despite this reality, some denied the power of divine hands to shape the lives of humans and create a design.

Isaiah tried to bring the message even closer to home by writing, “Woe unto him that saith unto his father, What begettest thou? or to the woman, What hast thou brought forth?” (Isaiah 45:10). Just as some children try to blame their parents for their troubles, some people choose to blame their heavenly Father instead of allowing Him to do a great work in their lives.

Those who are confused about the Lord’s plan are cautioned to avoid questioning God concerning why He made them a certain way. In Isaiah 45:11, God poses a rhetorical question through His prophet. Though the rhetorical nature of the
question is unclear in some translations, it is important to recognize what is being communicated. Since God is in control and He knows what He is doing, why would we question Him, His purpose, and His intentions? Instead, we must simply trust Him with our whole hearts.

Sometimes we will wonder about the actions of the Lord. How can we seek understanding in a way that respects the Lord’s sovereignty?

A. Yielding to God’s Sovereign Will

One of the reasons we ask questions is because we allow our own human will to fight with the sovereign will of God. This is a fight we cannot win; therefore, we must yield to God, even when it seems like the will of God does not make sense. We must give up our own claims to the throne of our lives and allow the Lord to sit on the throne.

Romans 12 guides us in submitting to the will of God. “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service” (Romans 12:1). We must sacrifice ourselves to prove the will of God. We must avoid sin and allow the Lord to transform us (Romans 12:2). We must prove the will of God by letting go of our own desires.

While praying, think on these verses (Romans 12:1–2). What do you need to do to be a living sacrifice? What are you conforming to in the world that you should avoid?

B. Trusting in the Face of Questions

Even if we desire to be fully committed to the Lord, we may have occasions when we question God. We will wonder if we are truly on the right path. Sometimes God may lead us to odd places. God had promised the Promised Land to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Sometimes, however, they found themselves living in the land of the Philistines or with the Egyptians. God always intended to bring them back to Israel, but He needed to preserve their lives during famine. In our own tough times, we must put aside our questions and trust in the Lord.

Think about a time when you did not understand the will of God at first. How did the Lord ultimately reveal His plan to you?

IV. GOD IS IN CHARGE

In a world filled with confusion and multiple questions, we must recognize God is in charge. Isaiah once again connected the sovereignty of God to creation: “I have made the earth, and created man upon it: I, even my hands, have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded” (Isaiah 45:12).

Since the Lord controlled the cosmos, the people of God needed to submit to Him. They needed to put their supreme trust in the Lord because a time of great trouble
was coming. The people of Judah would see Jerusalem sacked and the Temple destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Many of the people would be exiled to Babylon. The Jews would likely think God had abandoned them.

In the midst of this trouble, God would raise up an unlikely deliverer. The Persians would defeat the Babylonians and end the captivity of the Jews. The Persian King Cyrus would allow the Jews to return to Judah, restore the city of Jerusalem, and rebuild the Temple. Isaiah prophesied of Cyrus in Isaiah 45:13, “I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways: he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward, saith the LORD of hosts.” Although the prophecy would not come to pass for many years, the people would have to trust that God was sovereign and completely in control.

What has God prophesied for you, your family, or your church? What do you need to do to see these promises fulfilled?

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Some people doubt God created the heavens and the earth. They raise questions about whether a Creator even exists. Some state their objections are scientific. Others claim a Creator does not fit into their philosophy. No matter the reason, the true issue may be they are denying the power of God because they do not want someone else to be in control of their lives. They prefer randomness to order. They like to believe everything happened by accident.

Many others are unwilling to accept the sovereignty of God in the midst of difficult questions. The most devoted believers and the most devoted doubters, as well as everyone in between, will have questions about God. Humanity will question why God allows atrocities, sin, and death. Why does He not step in and change situations?

Yet these same individuals will desire to have free will. Even though we have a mighty Savior who rules the entire universe, our God does not always intervene in every situation. God respects our right to make choices because He wants us to choose Him. Sometimes that may lead to situations in which terrible things happen, but Isaiah 45 tells us God is in charge of both the light and the dark, the good and the evil.

We must trust that God has control over the heavens and the earth. We must trust in the sovereign will of God even when we have difficulty explaining it. While it is not wrong to seek explanations, the quest for answers should not prevent us from seeing the one who is truly the answer to all our problems, whether He chooses to solve them in this world or in the next.

How could you help someone who is questioning the Lord to trust in His sovereignty?
The Reason He Came

FOCUS THOUGHT
I will praise God for coming to save me.

FOCUS VERSE
Isaiah 9:6
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.

LESSON TEXT
Isaiah 7:14
14 Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Isaiah 9:1–7
1 Nevertheless the dimness shall not be such as was in her vexation, when at the first he lightly afflicted the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward did more grievously afflict her by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, in Galilee of the nations.
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.
CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

In August 1741 the great composer George Frederic Handel started on what many would consider his most famous work. Handel’s “Messiah” tells the story of Christ, beginning with the Old Testament prophecies, moving to His birth, ministry, death, and resurrection, and concluding with a musical picture of the end times and Christ’s final victory as found in the Revelation. The lyrics for Handel’s famous piece had been previously written by Charles Jennens, who drew together direct quotes from Scripture to tell the magnificent story. Jennens, while writing to a friend about his desire for Handel to compose the music that would accompany his lyrics, expressed that he hoped the great composer would “lay out his whole genius and skill upon it, as the Subject excels every other subject.”

It has been said that upon completion of the music of “Messiah” Handel fell back upon his couch and stated, “I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself.” The beauty and magnificence of the story overwhelmed Handel as he worked to comprehend and musically express the story of the one who would save humanity from the darkness of sin.

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OUTLINE

I. THE PROPHETS FORETOLD OF THE MESSIAH

II. THE MESSIAH WOULD BE CALLED BY MANY NAMES
   A. Wonderful
   B. Counselor
   C. Mighty God
   D. Everlasting Father
   E. Prince of Peace

III. THE ANGEL ANNOUNCED HIS SAVING NAME
   A. Jesus—Jehovah Is Salvation
   B. Jesus Came to Save Us

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CULTURE CONNECTION

FULFILLING YOUR PURPOSE IN LIFE

In 2014 Mo Seetubtim wrote an entry on the Huffington Post’s Blog, Huffpost. According to Seetubtim, “In order to feel more fulfilled and find the path to sustainable happiness, we follow our passions and purpose. But what is your purpose in life? I believe this is the question we ask over and over within ourselves.”

To answer this question and resolve the reader’s curiosity, Seetubtim explains there are two basic ways in achieving true happiness, from “the outside in” or “the inside out.” He arrives at the conclusion that it is best to be fulfilled from the inside out as opposed to the outside in. Basically, Seetubtim has sought to explain how true happiness cannot come from some external source, but instead resides inside each of us.

Though Seetubtim may be humanistic in his findings, the truth is, we can find peace and joy within because of the power of the Holy Ghost. The inner working of the Spirit is much more transformational than surrounding ourselves with noise and the pursuit of happiness without.

When the Spirit takes up residence in our hearts, we are able to experience the lasting hope and peace we searched so hard for in the sinful lifestyle we once lived. No external source can bring us true purpose like the Spirit of God living within us.

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SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Much like Handel, the prophet Isaiah stood equally in awe and wonder as he tried to comprehend the Messiah, the Savior he so longed for. With the judgment of God looming due to Israel’s sins and the military might of the Assyrian army bearing down on the people, Isaiah envisioned the Redeemer who would “feed his flock like a shepherd” (Isaiah 40:11). What a stark contrast to the invading army who would destroy Jerusalem and scatter God’s people far and wide. In a wonderful, descriptive flourish, Isaiah described this great Shepherd and Redeemer as “Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). He would be everything to His people, redeeming them and loving them in all the capacities Isaiah listed. The “Subject” who “excels every other subject” still inspires humanity to bow in awe and wonder before the Savior who came just as the prophets foretold. Perhaps even more wondrously, He continues to come to those who cry out to Him, to save and to redeem.

In your walk with the Lord, how have you felt Him “come” to you on a daily basis?

In what unique ways has He continued His saving and redeeming work in your life as you have learned to walk with Him?

I. THE PROPHETS FORETOLD OF THE MESSIAH

The opening chapters of Isaiah describe the sinful conditions in Israel and God’s warnings of divine judgment if the people did not repent and turn their hearts back to God. God described the people as “laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers” (Isaiah 1:4), and He lamented later in the chapter that their burnt offerings and incense were not only displeasing, but an “abomination” to him (Isaiah 1:13). Though Israel was going through the motions of worship, their hearts were a million miles away, sinful and corrupt. The depth of Israel’s sin and the severity of God’s promised judgment combined to forecast a bleak future for the nation: the invasion of the Assyrian army, the loss of their possessions, and exile from Jerusalem, the city they loved. Isaiah’s book opens on a clearly somber note.

Despite the bleakness of the prophecy, however, Isaiah wove throughout the book a surprising countersubject: God, the Holy One of Israel, would not only judge the people for their sin, but would also restore them to their homeland. God’s holiness not only guaranteed punishment for Israel’s sin and the breaking of the covenant, but it also guaranteed that in His faithfulness He would redeem them. Old Testament scholar Tremper Longmann III notes that Isaiah’s name, which means “Yahweh will save” or “Yahweh is salvation,” mirrors and reinforces this aspect of God’s character. Just as He had redeemed Israel from bondage in Egypt, He would keep His covenant promise to be their Savior from the oppression of Babylon and restore them to the promise of Canaan.

God’s promised restoration of Israel following their exile included the promise in which the LORD Himself pledged to give a sign to the people: a child would be born of a virgin, and His name, Immanuel, meaning “God with us,” would designate Him
as the sign of God’s faithfulness to His promises to redeem, restore, and save His people from their sins (Isaiah 7:14). Although this prophecy was seemingly buried in the narrative of God’s judgment and exile of ancient Israel, it was not forgotten by God. Nearly eight hundred years later, Matthew and Luke would pick up on this thread of God’s promise as they penned the account of its fulfillment in the coming of Christ.

Isaiah prophesied that Mary’s child would be called Immanuel meaning “God with us.” What are the unique ways you have felt this prophecy impact your life or the lives of your loved ones?

» How has God been “with you”?

II. THE MESSIAH WOULD BE CALLED MANY NAMES

Isaiah prophesied that the child born of a virgin would be called Immanuel, which means “God with us.” That God would come to His people—that He would be with us—is a beautiful truth that is layered with meaning. Isaiah’s prophecy captured these layers of meaning when he described the child as “Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). In all these ways, God would be with us and would save us.

» In addition to the titles used by Isaiah, are there any names or titles you would use to describe God?

A. Wonderful

As humans, it is difficult to comprehend how the perfect, holy God of Scripture could be manifested in the flesh and would offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of all humanity. The depth of love that would compel Him to go to such lengths to redeem all humanity is a mystery beyond our comprehension (I Timothy 3:16), and it leaves us filled with wonder. Author Kelly Kapic captured this sense of mystery and wonder when he wrote, “God concerns himself for us in our sin and pain, neither because it was required of him nor because he had personally done anything wrong, but because he loves us and is the only one who could restore what was lost, repay the debt, free the slave, and heal the sick. He alone could save us from the mess we had made of ourselves” (Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering).

B. Counselor

Not only is God wonderful and beyond our comprehension, but He is also the embodiment of wisdom and the ultimate counselor. God understands that we as broken and fallen human beings need counselors, so He has gifted individuals who can understand and show compassion while giving sound advice and direction. Because of His infinite wisdom coupled with His boundless compassion, God Himself has also promised to be our Counselor. He can see the end from the beginning, and He will walk beside us and uphold us along the journey of life. Jesus Christ
demonstrated this in His earthly ministry through His varied acts of vulnerability and compassion, including healing (Matthew 4:23), teaching (Luke 6:27), and weeping with the broken (John 11:35).

Not only is God filled with all wisdom (Colossians 2:3), but He is also able to identify with our suffering because He, Himself, experienced the most intense suffering ever known to humanity in His crucifixion. Hebrews 4:15–16 reminds believers that we serve a God who is able to identify with us in our pain; He “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” Because He has known suffering, we can “come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” Author Gregory Boyle has defined compassion, not as a “relationship between healer and wounded,” but as a “covenant between equals” (Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion). Because Christ suffered, He is “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (Hebrews 4:15). He is uniquely qualified not only to understand our suffering, but also to guide us through our suffering, enable us to grow as a result of it, and ultimately cause us to become more like Him.

» Often God in His wisdom acts contrary to what we think is best. How can we as believers remind ourselves that God sees a bigger picture, and as a result, He often directs our paths much differently than we desire or can imagine?

C. Mighty God

Within the Old Testament record of the history of ancient Israel, one can find accounts of various battles fought by God’s people against enemy nations. The majority of Israel’s battles were won because God gave them favor, routing the enemy and ensuring victory. In Numbers 21 God told Moses the battle against Bashan would be won because God Himself ensured the victory, delivering the enemy into Israel’s hand. Psalms often describes God as a shield, a fortress, and the one who “teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight” (Psalm 144:1). Without doubt, ancient Israel knew God as a mighty warrior, the King who was always triumphant in battle.

» What comes to mind when you think of the title “The mighty God”?

» How does this assurance that God is always victorious shape and direct your daily life?

D. Everlasting Father

The Hebrew phrase that means “everlasting Father” is literally translated “Father of eternity.” This phrase implies that God is Father without end, for all eternity. Not only was He the Father of Israel and the New Testament church, but He continues to function as Father to believers everywhere.

In the sense that Isaiah labeled God as “Father,” he was applying all the facets of meaning the word could contain: provider, protector, teacher, wise counselor, and one who lovingly disciplines. The term is also used to imply one who creates or originates, as in God’s creation of the world and time itself. These uses of the
term *father* all carry with them the element of goodness that is central to God’s character. Although the term father can carry a negative connotation—such as when Satan is called the *father of lies*—when used to describe God, the term implies a faithful provider who lovingly cares for his children. Through repentance, baptism, and receiving the Holy Spirit, we become His children and God becomes our Father (Romans 8:14) in the truest sense of the word.

» *What comes to mind when you think of God as a father?*

» *In your life or the life of a loved one, how has God helped to redefine what it means to be a good father?*

### E. Prince of Peace

In Isaiah’s prophecy the Messiah was identified as a “Prince,” a term with which the people were likely familiar (Isaiah 9:6). Ideally, a prince would be a leader, someone the people could look to for guidance, and who would serve as an example of a life of integrity. The people of Israel hoped the coming prince, their Messiah, would be an earthly conqueror, bringing an end to the oppression of enemy nations such as Babylon and Rome, restoring peace and prosperity, and ending wars. When Christ came, He did not bring peace as expected, and the people largely refused to accept Him as their Messiah.

Though the people hoped for political peace, Jesus Christ came to give a truer kind of peace that would restore them to God and to each other and would remain through the political unrest. Paul captured this theme in Romans 5:1: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” In the previous chapter, Paul recounted that we were made righteous because of the sinless sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And because Christ’s sacrifice paid the debt of sin, raising believers to newness of life, we not only have peace with God, but also “access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:2).

» *Consider how Paul defined peace in Romans 5:1 as a gift given through Christ’s atoning sacrifice which reconciles us to God. How does this explanation of peace affect our daily lives given that the world is filled with war, turmoil, and fear?*

» *What comes to mind when you consider each of the five names Isaiah used to describe the Messiah? Which of the five is most significant to you, and why?*

### III. THE ANGEL ANNOUNCED HIS SAVING NAME

#### A. Jesus—Jehovah Is Salvation

Isaiah’s prophecy gave a glimpse into the many roles of Messiah: a counselor, mighty warrior, father, and one who would bring peace. In what had to be the most awe-inspiring event of all time, the angel announced the name of the Messiah would be Jesus, meaning “Jehovah is salvation.” God Himself would come to His people and in His coming would fulfill all the roles in Isaiah’s prophecy spoken some eight
hundred years earlier. He would not come as the people expected. Instead of leading an army, He would lead a group of common, unknown men and would spread a message that would change the world forever.

B. Jesus Came to Save Us

When Christ came in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, He came as a lamb to be slain. His death would signal the ultimate defeat from the human perspective. Instead of a mighty warrior arrayed in armor riding into Jerusalem on a white horse with a vast army trailing behind, Christ came in the lowliest and strangest of circumstances. There was no horse and no army. He was not wealthy, nor did He hold a high earthly position. From the human perspective, Christ was a nobody who would die in disgrace and be forgotten, the complete antithesis of a mighty warrior king.

Christ’s coming and the battle He would wage would be against a much different enemy. Instead of battling a physical enemy, Christ battled against death itself and all the implications it would have for humanity. In conquering death, Christ rose again and thwarted the plans of Rome, extending to His followers for all time an incomparable gift: hope.

Christ came to bring salvation to all humanity, to ensure that no soul should be lost. Yet His crucifixion and resurrection also ensured His saving work would be present with believers on a daily basis, saving them from their brokenness and conforming them to His image.

» In addition to salvation from sin, in what ways do you personally know Jesus Christ’s saving power in your daily living?

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

As George Frederic Handel worked through the marvelous song lyrics of Charles Jennens that told the story of the Messiah, he lingered over the portion taken from Isaiah 53:5: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities.” In one of the most beautiful sections of Handel’s masterpiece, he lingered over each phrase in this familiar verse, repeating each one several times before moving on. It seems the great composer was captivated by the Savior who, though innocent, would suffer so deeply.

Isaiah’s prophecy looked forward to the Savior who would be everything to His people: a counselor, victorious warrior, father, and one who would bring real and lasting peace. Instead of a mighty military warrior, the world was given the suffering Savior, the Redeemer who would bear the sins of His people and would send the priceless gift of His Holy Spirit to live inside them. Indeed, He is the “Subject” which excels every other subject. He is wonderful and holy, the one who gave His life for the salvation of humanity. He is the one who continues to save from brokenness and sin, lovingly conforming His people into His image. One day He will return to save us one last time from the brokenness of our sinful world, that we may spend eternity with Him, Jesus Christ, the Messiah.
Made for a Purpose

FOCUS THOUGHT
I will serve God faithfully, honoring the purpose for which He created me.

FOCUS VERSE
Jeremiah 1:5
Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.

LESSON TEXT
Jeremiah 1:4–9
4 Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,
5 Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.
6 Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.
7 But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak.
8 Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord.
9 Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth.
CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Teacher. Police Officer. Nurse. What initial images do these words conjure in your mind? Perhaps your first thought was of a favorite elementary school teacher or of a particularly kind nurse you encountered during a family member’s hospital stay. Perhaps some of us thought of that one time an officer mercifully let us go with a warning rather than writing a ticket. However, no one would dispute that each of these jobs, in its own special way, makes a vital contribution to the overall prosperity and stability of a society.

Yet there are other factors that unite these three vocations: long hours, high stress, and relatively low pay. The unique and generous people who take these jobs and the dozens of other jobs like them will claim they chose their career out of a sense of “calling” to that vocation. In a world where college students pick career paths based on starting salary figures (that will enable them to repay their student loans), the importance of calling in career decisions has been sidelined.

OUTLINE

I. GOD SPEAKS

II. GOD CALLS
   A. Jeremiah’s Calling
   B. Jeremiah’s Resistance
   C. God’s Response

III. GOD MADE US FOR A PURPOSE
   A. God Still Calls Us Today
   B. Avenues of Serving His Purposes
   C. The Value of Faithfulness

CULTURE CONNECTION

ONCE UPON A DNA

We may never fully understand the complexity of DNA. Researchers are consistently finding qualities in science that point to a creator rather than random evolution. An article on DNA repair by Frank Sherwin, M.A., states that when DNA has been damaged by time, environment, carcinogens, and cytotoxic compounds, there are specific molecules and systems to repair the genetic damage. He goes on to say that these repair systems are God-designed. The interesting conclusion is that the very systems that repair DNA are the same changes evolution calls mutations that they say lead to new structures and functions (Frank Sherwin, M.A., “Mending Mistakes—The Amazing Ability of Repair,” Acts & Facts, 2004).

Before God scooped up dirt and molded the first man, His DNA plan was already set. When God spoke the complexity of science into existence, He wove the thread of truth into the network. Today we discover things that have been in place for eternity. As believers it is amazing to hear of the scientific discoveries that point to God. It bolsters our faith to learn that through science God has shown humanity His innate desire for us to know Him. He created everything to draw our focus back to Him. As more discoveries are made in medicine, space, biology, and other scientific research, we can be assured of one thing: the more we learn from science, the more we discover that it points to a creator, our Creator!
SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

The lesson today is designed to explore the biblical role and meaning of *calling* and its importance to the Apostolic meaning of a successful life through the story of Jeremiah. Jeremiah 1 contains one of the most vivid recounts of a call-encounter between a human being and God and gives us important insights into the importance of the divine calling in our own lives today.

» What was your very first job? Did you enjoy it or hate it? Why?
» Would you describe your current career as your “calling”? Why or why not?

I. GOD SPEAKS

As Apostolics who are used to continuous manifestations of the work of the Spirit, it is easy to forget that, for many of our contemporaries, the idea that God speaks to people is shocking and utterly inconceivable. Most of the people you encounter in an average day have never heard the voice of God or, at least, have not recognized it as the voice of God when they heard it.

What makes this even sadder is humans were especially and specifically designed to hear God’s voice. More precisely, humanity was designed to live in fellowship with God and to converse with Him. From the earliest chapters of Genesis, we find that God was accustomed to meeting with Adam and Eve daily for fellowship (Genesis 3:8). Unfortunately, by the time the reader is made aware of the divine habit, human rebellion has already disrupted that close relationship. God is still speaking, but because of the Fall, humanity has consistently refused to listen to God’s voice.

Throughout Scripture, listening is used to describe the human posture of submission, worship, and obedience before God. This is no more obvious than in Deuteronomy 6:4–5, where Moses commanded the people of Israel to hear and to love the Lord: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.”

» Describe an experience when you felt you clearly heard the voice of God. How would you describe “hearing the voice of God” to an unbeliever or a new convert?

II. GOD CALLS

A. Jeremiah’s Calling

Jeremiah the prophet lived during a time of tremendous upheaval in the religious and national life of ancient Judah, at the beginning of Babylonian exile. The events of Jeremiah’s lifetime are a study in contrast. As a young boy, Jeremiah witnessed the tremendous national revival led by the good king Josiah (II Kings 22–23). As an adult, however, Jeremiah witnessed the city of Jerusalem besieged and the Temple looted and burned. The prophetic message of Jeremiah traced that steep downward slide from revival to oblivion.
Jeremiah was called to be a prophet at essentially the midpoint of these two events, right at the moment the nation began to turn back to her old idolatrous habits and abandon the reforms Josiah had made. Jeremiah’s ministry was to be the last divine word of warning before judgment finally fell. The urgency of the moment made Judah’s ridicule and rejection of Jeremiah all the more poignant.

Jeremiah’s call is distinguished from all the other call narratives in Scripture by its prenatal status: “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee” (Jeremiah 1:5).

However, Jeremiah’s purpose was not simply to do a work for God or to perform a specific task. More importantly, Jeremiah was called to be in relationship to God: “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee.” Jeremiah’s call as a “prophet unto the nations” was predicated on his first “being known” by God (Jeremiah 1:5).

Another distinguishing feature of Jeremiah’s call is that he was called as a prophet “unto the [foreign] nations.” Though many prophets did speak oracles against foreign nations (see, for example, Isaiah 13–23 and Ezekiel 25–32), Jeremiah was the only prophet explicitly designated as a prophet to them. What makes this designation even more intriguing is that, as near as we can tell from the book, Jeremiah only ever preached to the Judeans living in and around Jerusalem. He was a far cry from a modern “international evangelist.” Clearly, this designation had more to do with the substance of Jeremiah’s message than it did with the location of his preaching. That is, if Jeremiah would faithfully fulfill his calling, God declared he would deliver a message that all the world would hear.

B. Jeremiah’s Resistance

However, Jeremiah’s response is the opposite of the classic reply of his predecessor Isaiah, “Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6:8). Instead of expressing willing submissiveness, Jeremiah protested: “Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child” (Jeremiah 1:6). This verse has engendered endless speculation about Jeremiah’s precise age when he received his divine calling. While it is quite probable that Jeremiah was young—perhaps even still a boy—when he received his calling, it seems clear the term child here was indicative of more than just his age. It was an emotive term, depicting Jeremiah’s perceived state of vulnerability and fear of the repercussions of accepting the divine calling.

Jeremiah was not alone in this emotional reaction. In fact, Jeremiah’s outburst was a clear echo of another deeply human response to the divine words: “And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue” (Exodus 4:10). Even Moses was reluctant to pursue God’s purpose in his life. In fact, Moses ended up angering God with his persistent resistance to the divine will (Exodus 4:14). There was, in both instances, a dual recognition of the enormity of the proposed task and the personal inadequacy and weakness that clearly disqualified the recipient of God’s special assignment.
C. God’s Response

It is instructive to notice how God responded to Jeremiah’s protest. God did not simply tell Jeremiah to be quiet and quit complaining: “Don’t say another word! Just do what I said!” Nor did God simply refute Jeremiah’s claim: “You are not a boy! Quit talking like that!” God’s reply to Jeremiah was not a silencing of the prophet, nor was it a denial of the reality of Jeremiah’s feelings and circumstances. Rather, the divine rebuke disallowed Jeremiah from using his own fears, lack of social status, or feelings of inadequacy as reasons to be excused from following the divine call.

In fact, every objection Jeremiah could potentially make was addressed by the divine promise: “I am with thee” (Jeremiah 1:8). That Jeremiah’s calling was rooted in his relationship to God meant precisely that Jeremiah would never be alone in his task. The presence of God that had accompanied him since before he was born would continue to be with him, no matter what circumstances arrayed against him. And that divine presence would counter any personal inadequacy, any feelings of fear or doubt, and any disrespect due to young age that Jeremiah might possibly face. Later on in the same chapter, God both warned and reassured Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:17–19).

Why do you think Jeremiah was so afraid to follow God’s call? Do you think fear still keeps people from following God’s call?

What advice would you give to someone who is too afraid to pursue God’s call in his life?

How do you personally deal with feelings of inadequacy when it comes to pursuing God’s call in your life?

III. GOD MADE US FOR A PURPOSE

A. God Still Calls Us Today

God is still calling laborers to work for Him in the field (Matthew 9:37–38). Furthermore, that call goes out to every believer, not just a select few. Every Spirit-filled believer is empowered to be a witness for Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8). The call-narrative of Jeremiah that we have briefly explored shows us several important things about the nature of God’s calling in our lives.

First, as with Jeremiah, our divine calling is founded upon and rooted in our relationship with God. God does not offer to be in relationship with us only because we can do things for Him; rather, God, by His grace, enters into relationship with us and then enables us to work for Him. Second, and perhaps paradoxically, we must still choose to fulfill God’s calling in our lives. Even though we know that, like Jeremiah, every believer has a created purpose, we must still submit to that purpose. God does not force us to do what He wants, but He gives us the opportunity to choose to do as He asks. Finally, if we do choose to follow and obey God’s calling, we have assurance that our life’s work will not be wasted but will have lasting impact beyond our wildest imaginations.

However, the story of Jeremiah’s calling also challenges us to disabuse ourselves of a pervasive notion related to God’s calling—our assumption that we will always and
automatically like to do everything God has called us to do. The truth is the call of God often leads us down paths we would rather not walk. This is why Paul chose the language of “living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1) to describe the Christian life. Pursuing God’s calling in your life will always entail giving up something else you could have done.

B. Avenues of Serving His Purposes

The real question is how to connect Jeremiah’s calling to be a prophet with our own work. To put it another way, we have been raised to differentiate the call to be a farmer or a mechanic from, say, the call to be a foreign missionary. However, is such a distinction justifiable? And, more to the point, is the call to be a foreign missionary more important or more valuable than the call to be a teacher?

The roots of our struggle to answer the above question go back to the Protestant Reformation, especially the reaction against medieval Roman Catholic monasticism. Without delving too deeply into arcane church history, a key tenet of the Protestant Reformation was that the call of God was not something only experienced by a select, elite few (such as priests, monks, or nuns) but was something experienced by all believers, no matter their life’s work. Any honest occupation could be considered a God-ordained vocation. This gave birth to what sociologist Max Weber termed the “Protestant work ethic,” the belief that one’s everyday work was a key component of one’s worship to God. God received just as much glory from an honest day’s labor on a farm as from a beautiful sermon delivered in a pulpit. This is not to suggest that changing the eternal destiny of a person through the preached Word is the equivalent of a well constructed storm drain. The point never was to denigrate the crucial roles that pastors and missionaries and pastoral counselors play in the spiritual life of the church and the world but to elevate working roles that had long been considered devoid of any spiritual significance. As Martin Luther said:

_The idea that the service to God should have only to do with a church altar, singing, reading, sacrifice, and the like is without doubt but the worst trick of the devil. How could the devil have led us more effectively astray than by the narrow conception that service to God takes place only in church and by works done therein. . . . The whole world could abound with services to the Lord . . . not only in churches but also in the home, kitchen, workshop, field._

(O.E. Feucht, Everyone a Minister)

Thus Luther’s answer to the above question would be that, no, the call to be a foreign missionary is not inherently more valuable or important to God than the call to be a teacher. Furthermore, to be a foreign missionary when one’s calling was to be a teacher (and vice versa) would be an act of sinful rebellion. All work can and should be seen as God’s work when it is done as unto the Lord.

» _How do you know if you have found God’s calling in your life? What are some key benchmarks to look for?_
C. The Value of Faithfulness

When placed in this context, Jesus’ words about faithfulness take on new meaning: “Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing” (Luke 12:42–43). In the end God does not honor those who do great things for Him; God honors those who do what He asks of them. It is incumbent on us to believe that whatever He asks us to do is a great thing and will work for the greater glory of His kingdom.

The highest expression of our love for God is faithfully obeying His commands and fulfilling His purpose for our lives.

» What advice would you give to a person who feels his work is “invisible” (i.e., under-appreciated)? What advice would you give to a person who feels her career is not her ultimate calling?

» What are some of the different challenges faced by people in high-profile careers? Why would it be just as important for those people to have a sense of “calling” in their work?

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The story is told of a man walking past a construction site who, growing curious about the nature of the project, approached one of the workers, a bricklayer, and asked: “Sir, I was wondering, could tell me what you’re doing here?”

The worker glared up at the passerby and in a surly voice growled, “Well, isn’t it obvious? I’m laying bricks!”

Rebuffed, the pedestrian approached another mason further down the block with the same question. With tired eyes the second worker replied: “Oh, me? I’m building a wall.”

Finally the man approached a third worker with his inquiry and was shocked by a bright smile and enthusiastic answer: “Well, isn’t it obvious? I’m building a cathedral!”

The most important thing to notice, though, is that all three of the workers were doing exactly the same task. Even though they had the same occupation, only the last one had a real sense of his vocation, an understanding of his work as an act of devotion to the Lord that would have lasting significance.

Ultimately, committing to your work as a calling from the Lord is an expression of deep faith. Often we cannot see the larger purpose or the end result of our daily efforts. Having a sense of divine calling, though, reminds us we are not responsible for those things; our only responsibility is to faithfully carry out those duties that have been assigned to us. In that, we can all find a sense of fulfillment and peace that will be a shining witness to the world of the difference God can make in their lives.

» Think of three things you can do to remind yourself of your calling while you are at work this week.
FOCUS VERSE
Jeremiah 18:6
O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the L ORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.

LESSON TEXT
Jeremiah 18:1–11
1 The word which came to Jeremiah from the L ORD, saying,
2 Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words.
3 Then I went down to the potter’s house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels.
4 And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.
5 Then the word of the L ORD came to me, saying,
6 O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the L ORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.
7 At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it;
8 If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them.
9 And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it;
10 If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them.
11 Now therefore go to, speak to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith the L ORD; Behold, I frame evil against you, and devise a device against you: return ye now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good.

FOCUS THOUGHT
I will invite God to shape my life.
CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

How many remember what it was like to be disciplined as a child? Many of those memories probably bring a smile to your face today; however, even though you may see the humor of the situation now, you can still recall how terrible it felt in the moment. Parental discipline, by definition, is not meant to be enjoyable. However, most of you can also look back on those moments and understand your parents’ larger purpose. Your parents were trying to teach you important lessons about life by correcting your behavior. You see, good parents do not simply punish their children for doing something wrong; they discipline their children in order to teach them to do what is right.

OUTLINE

I. THE POTTER CAN MAKE MARRED VESSELS INTO NEW VESSELS
   A. An Enacted Word
   B. The Power of the Potter

II. WE ARE LIKE CLAY IN THE POTTER’S HAND
   A. Divine Judgment for Nations and Individuals
   B. The Guiding Principle of Divine Judgment

III. GOD DESIRES TO SHAPE OUR LIVES
   A. Surrendering to the Potter’s Wheel
   B. The Beauty of Being Made New

CULTURE CONNECTION

PIECES OF OUR LIVES

There are several steps to making a quilt. Usually a quilt is a potpourri of fabric prints sewn together to make a beautiful comforter or blanket. The artisan designing the quilt gives much thought to which fabrics will complement each other. The color, print, consistency, and location of the fabric pieces are all taken into consideration before the first stitch (Rachel May, *Quilting with a Modern Slant*).

Our lives are like an intricate, carefully designed quilt. God has chosen every event in our lives to make up the beautiful finished product. Isolating one disappointing piece of the design and inspecting it without the bordering counterparts may reveal an ugly piece of life. It may seem it does not fit in the master plan. Sorrow, pain, and disappointment are all a part of life, but so are happiness, success, and contentment. If all the good things were stitched together, our lives might look like a crazy quilt, so busy the beauty is lost. God tapers the bright, loud, flamboyant pieces of victory with the muted, dark, subdued pieces of struggle. Enduring the pain becomes easier when we understand it will make the brighter days even better. As we grow older and reflect on the quilt of our lives, we see the beauty of the contrasts revealed.
SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Scripture teaches us to think of God as our heavenly Father (Matthew 6:9); it is only natural, then, that a key aspect of our relationship with God is His work of disciplining our lives to conform to His will and purpose. Jeremiah’s Parable of the Potter’s House provides a powerful image of the nature and purpose of that divine discipline.

» Relate a story from your childhood of a disciplinary moment that taught you an important lesson you have never forgotten. What do you think made that particular lesson so memorable to you?
» Think of some reasons why it might be important for parents to focus on disciplining their children (teaching them right behavior) rather than only focusing on punishing them (correcting wrong behavior)?
» What are the inherent dangers of punishment unaccompanied by discipline?

I. THE POTTER CAN MAKE MARRED VESSELS INTO NEW VESSELS

A. An Enacted Word

In Jeremiah 18 and 19, the prophet was commanded by the Lord to proclaim divine messages to the people of Judah. However, God directed Jeremiah not to speak these words but to enact them, first by making a visit to the potter (Jeremiah 18) and then by smashing a pottery vessel at the entry of the eastern gate (Jeremiah 19). Such symbolic actions were a powerful way for the prophet to make God’s word visible and not just audible to his audience. It should be understood, though, that a symbolic action did more than just illustrate the prophetic message. The symbolic action was understood to be an enactment of the word.

Ezekiel’s word made the threat of exile an imminent reality. In the same way, the interrelated symbolic actions in Jeremiah 18–19 issued a call to repentance followed by a pronouncement of judgment because the people refused to heed God’s word.

B. The Power of the Potter

The initial symbolic action in Jeremiah 18 is intriguing in that it was not an action Jeremiah performed but rather an action he observed. In and of itself, the potter’s work was not out of the ordinary. There is no sense in Jeremiah 18 that the prophet was observing some unusual or marvelous circumstance. Rather, the potter was simply conducting business as usual. As was wont to happen in the process of a potter’s work, the vessel became “marred in the hand of the potter” (Jeremiah 18:4).

The text makes a subtle but important point here. It was not the clumsy hands of the potter that created the imperfection in the vessel; rather, the skillful work of the potter revealed a flaw already present in the lump of clay. Jeremiah did not relate the precise nature of this flaw, but, by inference, we gather that the flaw was significant enough to prevent the potter from continuing to make the vessel he had first set out to make. This introduces dramatic tension, for the audience is left to briefly wonder what the potter will do next. Will he simply throw out the lump of clay and find another
without any dire flaws? That would seem to be both the obvious and easiest solution.

It seems we are meant to hear a note of surprise, then, in the prophet’s next words: “So he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it” (Jeremiah 18:4). At the precise moment when it looked like the lump of clay was bound only for rejection and destruction, the potter was able to save it by transforming it into something altogether different.

The focus is clearly on the power of the potter. The potter expressed no frustration with the flawed nature of the clay. Jeremiah never noted any impatience or even, it seems, any hesitation in the potter’s work. The potter left the clay on his wheel and simply began again to remake the vessel. Suddenly—almost magically—what had once appeared to be a worthless, unusable lump of clay became a beautiful vessel fit for service. Perhaps it is so obvious that it escapes notice: if it were not for the expertise of the potter, the flaw in the clay would have rendered it useless.

When thinking about human history, it is interesting to notice that God chose to showcase His power not by preventing the Fall of Genesis 3 from happening but by immediately launching a long plan to reverse the Fall’s impact on the human race (Genesis 3:14–15).

Throughout Scripture God did not prevent humans from falling into difficult circumstances; rather, God rescued them when they did encounter adversity.

It is vital that we recognize the primacy and priority of divine power in the process of spiritual transformation. Humanity cannot simply transform itself by sheer willpower. Furthermore, even if such actions were possible, they could do nothing to change the real essence—a leopard that looks like a tiger will still act like a leopard. And a person accustomed to a life of sin and bondage will find it impossible to simply begin to live a life of righteousness and holiness. The lump of clay cannot transform itself. The Potter must superintend the process.

The sooner we realize this, the sooner we can begin to experience real and lasting transformation in our lives. Spiritual transformation does not begin when we suddenly work up enough determination or resolve to make the sought-after change permanent. Spiritual formation can only transpire as God works in and on our lives.

» Think back to your conversion experience. Share some key ways God has radically transformed your life since then.
» How do you initially react when you discover “flaws” in those closest to you? How could you learn to react in a more Christ-like way?

II. WE ARE LIKE CLAY IN THE POTTER’S HAND

A. Divine Judgment for Nations and Individuals

As the prophet Jeremiah watched the master potter skillfully re-form the flawed clay into a vessel of beauty, he heard the voice of God speak, interpreting the sign he had
witnessed as a message of hope and warning to the nation of Judah. Before beginning to unpack that message, however, it is important to notice that the prophecy of Jeremiah 18 is specifically addressing issues related to God’s dealings with nations. In the Old Testament, it is clear God is the King of all nations (Psalm 96:4–10).

As King, God expects all nations to obey His commands and precepts, and He metes out judgments on those nations who rebelliously reject Him. As Deuteronomy 28 reveals, those judgments include natural disasters (drought, locust plagues, earthquakes), economic downturns, as well as military defeat, conquest, and eventual exile. Most important to our understanding here is that, in His dealings with nations, these judgments are meted out in an ascending scale of intensity and impact. God, in mercy, does not simply ignore national sin but rather punishes sin in ways that serve both as warnings and calls to repentance. If these warnings go unheeded, the scale of the next national crisis increases until the nation is either forced to turn back to God or is obliterated by their own arrogant rebellion.

It is the prophet Ezekiel who tackled head-on the issue of individual responsibility for sin. In Ezekiel 18 the prophet’s message began with a citation of a popular saying among the Jews exiled in Babylon: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Ezekiel 18:2). It was an accusation against God, claiming the Jews were being unfairly punished for the actions of prior generations. However, Ezekiel would not let God go undefended (Ezekiel 18:3–4, 20–23).

Michael Fishbane, in his article “Sin and Judgment in the Prophecies of Ezekiel,” notes: “The prophet emphasizes that it is not God’s ways but the people’s that are unjust, and that this fact should be the sole focus of their concern.”

» Why do you think so many people today struggle with taking responsibility for their sin?

B. The Guiding Principle of Divine Judgment

Here, in chapter 18, God revealed to Jeremiah the guiding principle of His judgment, a principle that clearly applies both to God’s dealings with nations and with individuals. Divine judgment, as explained here, has a refining rather than a merely retaliatory purpose. God informed Jeremiah that at the moment a nation under threat of judgment repents, God will reverse the sentence and send blessing upon the nation instead. The reverse is also true: God will renege on a promise of blessing for a nation who turns away in disobedience.

God sent the prophets to proclaim the coming judgment so the addressed nations would repent. If the prophecies had been truly heeded as God intended them to be, they would not come to pass but would bring the rebellious people to repentance and renewed relationship with God. God’s intended purpose for bringing judgment is to draw us back to Himself. The writer of Hebrews reminded us the Lord loves those He chastens (Hebrews 12:5–7).

» How is today’s lesson challenging your thinking about divine judgment?
How should we balance our belief in God’s mercy and grace with our understanding of His uncompromising call to righteous and holy living?

III. GOD DESIRES TO SHAPE OUR LIVES

A. Surrendering to the Potter’s Wheel

When we recall that God’s overriding purpose is to use all things in our lives for His glory and our good (Romans 8:28), we will discover the ability to remain at rest in the Lord even in difficult circumstances. The only task assigned to the clay in Jeremiah 18 was the task of yielding to the potter’s hand.

Our surrender to God can take many forms: staying with our current job and passing up a promising promotion because the move would keep us away from church, watching in pain as loved ones walk away from God but refusing to become angry and bitter toward them, giving up our own dreams and ambitions to serve our ministerial calling. In big ways and small ways, these acts of release bend us, ever so slightly, into greater conformity to God’s will and purpose in our lives.

Think about a moment in the past when you surrendered to God something dear to you. What were your feelings in that moment? Looking back, what are your feelings now? Was the act of surrender worth it? Why?

What are some areas in your life where you feel the need to surrender more to God? Think about and share some practical ways you could do that.

B. The Beauty of Being Made New

Another benefit of understanding the purpose of divine discipline is that it allows us to be open and honest about our own flaws. In Jeremiah 18 the potter never could have made anything out of the lump of clay if it insisted on keeping its flaws hidden from the potter’s watchful eye. Yet that is precisely what we try to do so often with God.

For our lives to be truly transformed, the first step is to reveal our flaws. It is true that owning our flaws should never be confused with celebrating them. However, just like the prodigal son, there is a process of “coming to oneself” that necessarily precedes a return to life with the Father (Luke 15:17). What is most amazing is that, as we own up to our own shortcomings and hang-ups, we discover a beautiful authenticity that allows the glory of God to shine through us in a way we never thought possible.

UK-based company Higgidy is a popular purveyor of handmade pies and quiches. The company name was derived from a made-up word a child invented (probably a corrupted form of the term “higgledy-piggledy,” a colloquial term for confusion or disorder) to describe the fact that the company’s products are all individually made and unevenly shaped.

In 2017 the company underwent a major rebranding. The new company logo breaks the company name up across two lines, while the package designs were inspired by mismatched crockery plates. Shaun Bowen, founder and creative partner of B&B
Studio, the company in charge of Higgidy’s rebranding, said: “The packaging design was inspired by a lifestyle aesthetic born out of the beauty of imperfection, and the mismatched plates gave us an opportunity to tell a story around each recipe, either in terms of its inspiration, ingredients, or associations.” Higgidy’s new tagline is: “The best food always looks a bit Higgidy” (www.designweek.co.uk).

» How is the world’s current “search for authenticity” different from the biblical view of authenticity? What are some lies you have personally seen people come to believe about themselves and God under the guise of being authentic?

» Why is it important for seasoned Christians to be transparent about their shortcomings to new converts and young Christians?

» What are some important strategies we can use to be transparent about our past without glorifying our mistakes and failures?

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

While we celebrate the beauty of Jeremiah’s Parable of the Potter’s House, it is sobering to remember that Judah did not heed the prophet’s powerful invitation to repentance and renewal of relationship. In fact, the immediate response to Jeremiah’s plea is recorded in Jeremiah 18:12: “And they said, There is no hope: but we will walk after our own devices, and we will every one do the imagination of his evil heart.” Judah persisted in sin and degradation until divine destruction came. It all could have been avoided if Judah had simply obeyed the Lord.

The Lord’s discipline may be painful to endure, but allowing God to achieve His purpose and plan in your life will make it worth it in the end. In fact, Jeremiah’s visit to the potter’s house yields some practical advice for allowing God to do His work in your life. First, never attempt to hide your flaws or shortcomings. Always be honest and transparent with God and with those closest to you. Trying to hide your flaws only delays the transformation process and prevents you from becoming what God intends you to be. Second, allow God to take your life in a completely different direction than what you might have planned for yourself. Just because God decides to make you “another vessel” does not mean He has made you an inferior vessel. God’s plans are perfect even when they do not align with your own. Finally, never allow the pain and discomfort in your life to drive you away from God; rather, use it to draw closer to the Lord. There is nothing like a sudden job loss or a backslidden child or an unexpected illness to make us pray more fervently and frequently than ever before. And rather than being ashamed that it took such an extreme circumstance to get you to a new level of relationship with God, recognize that may be part of the reason God allowed this circumstance to come into your life.
FOCUS VERSE
Jeremiah 29:11
For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

LESSON TEXT
Jeremiah 29:10–15
10 For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place.
11 For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.
12 Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you.
13 And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.
14 And I will be found of you, saith the Lord: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the Lord, and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive.
15 Because ye have said, The Lord hath raised us up prophets in Babylon.

II Chronicles 36:22–23
22 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,
23 Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.

FOCUS THOUGHT
I will trust God’s good plans for my life no matter my circumstances.
CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

William Carey (1761–1834) was a British cobbler, a shoemaker, who developed a deep burden for the nations of the world. Motivated by his burden, he packed his personal effects and supplies in a trunk and sailed to Kolkata, India, in 1793. Forty-one years later, Carey died, leaving behind Serampore College, an institute that provided training for indigenous ministers and educated students in the arts and sciences. He also left behind translations of the Bible in thirty-seven different Indian dialects, including Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Arabic, Hindi, and Sanskrit. Because of his work and promotion of missionary endeavors, William Carey is known as the “father of modern Protestant missions” (www.christianitytoday.com, “William Carey”).

CULTURE CONNECTION

TRUST HIM WHERE WE CANNOT TRACE HIM

“When you can’t trace his hand, trust his heart,” is a popular phrase in the gospel song, “Trust His Heart” by Babbie Mason and Eddie Carswell. Though the phrase was attributed to Charles Spurgeon, the attribution is inaccurate. The actual quote from Spurgeon’s sermon, “A Happy Christian,” said, “He (the Christian) believes him to be too wise to err and too good to be unkind; he trusts him where he cannot trace him” (https://www.spurgeon.org, accessed November 2017). We learn to trust God where we cannot see Him, in the times we cannot feel Him or prove He is with us.

Learning to trust God is understanding that He wrote our story. David said, “I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother’s womb You have been My God.” (Psalm 22:10, NKJV). God had a plan for our lives while we were yet in our mother’s womb. Whatever life brings our way, God has a plan. When our faith fails, our trust takes over. We trust He is still in control, He sees the bigger picture, and from the vantage point of eternity, He holds us together. The writer of Hebrews tells us God is the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). He wrote our story and He will see it through to the end. Our faith in the invisible God is evidence that we can trust Him where we cannot trace Him.

OUTLINE

I. GOD WANTS US TO PROSPER EVEN IN OUR CAPTIVITY
   A. God Will Give Us Peace in Our Captivity
   B. God Desires We Not Be Deceived in Our Captivity

II. GOD PROMISES US DELIVERANCE FROM OUR CAPTIVITY
   A. Cyrus Used for God’s Purpose
   B. Cyrus Chosen to Defeat Nebuchadnezzar and Restore Israel

III. GOD HAS GOOD PLANS FOR US
   A. Prosper
   B. Hope
   C. Future

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

William Carey (1761–1834) was a British cobbler, a shoemaker, who developed a deep burden for the nations of the world. Motivated by his burden, he packed his personal effects and supplies in a trunk and sailed to Kolkata, India, in 1793. Forty-one years later, Carey died, leaving behind Serampore College, an institute that provided training for indigenous ministers and educated students in the arts and sciences. He also left behind translations of the Bible in thirty-seven different Indian dialects, including Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Arabic, Hindi, and Sanskrit. Because of his work and promotion of missionary endeavors, William Carey is known as the “father of modern Protestant missions” (www.christianitytoday.com, “William Carey”).

48
SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

While the Christian world honors William Carey, he said his success really belonged to his sister Polly. Polly Carey was bedridden and almost completely paralyzed for fifty-two years. Besides sleeping and eating, she could only write and pray.

Friends propped her up and she wrote loving, inspiring, and encouraging letters to her brother in India. She also prayed daily for him. She prayed for his fellow missionaries, for the translation of the Word, and for new converts. She prayed they would grow in favor with God and men, they would learn how to rejoice in everything, they would live in forgiveness, and they would be rooted and grounded in love. She prayed all the prayers God taught her to pray for William and his associates in ministry. Because of her prayers, great things were done around the world (www.2cherish2commend.com).

Polly Carey was held captive by her physical limitations. She was almost totally dependent on others for her daily needs. However, Polly Carey changed the world. While imprisoned by her paralyzed body, she used the two things she could do and influenced the world.

» What are some things you could do to help those in need?
» What are some prayers you could pray right now for someone in need?

I. GOD WANTS US TO PROSPER EVEN IN OUR CAPTIVITY

Because of Israel’s and Judah’s rejection of God’s law, God sent them into captivity in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar’s army had burned Jerusalem. They had robbed the Temple of the golden vessels. They had taken the royal seed and the best of Jewish leadership into exile. But God wanted Israel to prosper, even in captivity. Jeremiah wrote to the Jewish exiles in Babylon (Jeremiah 29), instructing them to build houses, plant gardens, eat what they produced, marry, and have children. Jeremiah knew the captivity would last seventy years, and the people should make the best of it.

» What sins led to Israel’s and Judah’s captivity?

We all have our own captivity. Some are imprisoned by past abuse and trauma. Others are bound by past mistakes. Sin enslaves some, and fear and regret hold others in jails of their own making.

» What are some things that hold people captive?
» Have you experienced any of these? Explain.

A. God Will Give Us Peace in Our Captivity

Jeremiah also told the Jewish exiles to seek the peace and prosperity of the city in which they lived. They were to pray for their new home. If the city enjoyed peace and prosperity, they would too.

49
In our own captivity, God wants us to prosper. He came to set the captives free. His blood covers our sins and mistakes. His Spirit liberates us from the bitterness of past hurts and the shackles of remorse. His joy gives us hope for a bright future.

B. God Desires We Not Be Deceived in Our Captivity

Jeremiah cautioned against listening to the false prophets. They prophesied peace and security for Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the Lord; however, the Lord had not sent them. Instead, Jeremiah urged the Jews to surrender to the Babylonians.

While the world screams gloom and doom, while it prophesies destruction and chaos, God’s Word proclaims victory through Jesus Christ.

II. GOD PROMISES US DELIVERANCE FROM OUR CAPTIVITY

Jeremiah knew the Jewish captivity would last seventy years. God had given him clear direction and instruction, while also giving him clear warnings to declare to the people. However, God not only gave warnings and instructions about the captivity, but He also declared the people would eventually come out of bondage. God is a God of deliverance and will not leave His people in bondage if they will turn to Him and seek His face.

A. Cyrus Used for God’s Purpose

Nabonidus came to the Babylonian throne in 556 BC. For the most part, he allowed his son and co-regent Belshazzar to control the government. (Since he was only the second in the kingdom, he could only elevate Daniel to be the third highest ruler of the kingdom if Daniel could interpret the writing on the wall. See Daniel 5:7.) Daniel chapter 5 records the downfall of Belshazzar. Verse 31 simply says, “And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old.” Some accounts report the city fell without a battle.

The identity of Darius the Mede is difficult to determine, as he is only mentioned in the Bible. He cannot be found in any historical account. However, the Jewish historian Josephus did record that: “Darius the Mede, who along with his relative, Cyrus the King of Persia, brought an end to the Babylonian empire. Darius was the son of Astyages.” (www.biblehistory.net). Therefore, it is not contrary to history to conclude that Darius’s defeat of Belshazzar prepared the way for Cyrus to march into Babylon unopposed.

B. Cyrus Chosen to Defeat Nebuchadnezzar and Restore Israel

Cyrus was God’s chosen vessel to deliver Israel from Babylonian bondage. Around 150 years before the destruction of Babylon in 539 BC, Isaiah (who prophesied from approximately 739–690 BC) stated, “Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut” (Isaiah 45:1). In II Chronicles 36:22–23 it is recorded, “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,
Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the LORD God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The LORD his God be with him, and let him go up.”

While many of the Old Testament prophets foretold of the coming captivity as judgment for Israel’s and Judah’s sin, they also prophesied of the Jews being gathered from the four corners of the world and repopulating the Promised Land. Cyrus, the heathen king of the Persians, was God’s anointed instrument in initiating the restoration of Israel. It was all part of God’s plan.

III. GOD HAS GOOD PLANS FOR US

Just as God had a plan for Israel, He also has a plan for us. He has called and ordained us as kings and priests in His earthly kingdom (Revelation 5:10; 20:6). We are to rule and reign with Him. Peter said we 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 marvellous light” (I Peter 2:9). For this reason God brought deliverance to our captivity and set us free.

A. Prosper

It is God’s will that we prosper. This is not the name-it-and-claim-it, pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by, or get-rich-quick schemes that some have prophesied over the years. Nevertheless, Joshua 1:8 states, “This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.”

The Christian life is a prosperous life, filled with the joy of the Lord. Freedom from sin is more valuable than all of Solomon’s riches. The peace that comes from being in the presence of the Lord is beyond measure and description. The privilege to call on the Lord in times of trouble is a blessing many believers take for granted.

But serving the Lord certainly is not sentencing us to a life of poverty. The Bible gives many principles regarding biblical stewardship. It has been proven over and over again that when we honor God with our finances and put Him first in our lives, He heaps blessings upon us.

B. Hope

Our world is hopeless. Headlines scream about a possible coming nuclear war between North Korea and the United States. Opioid addictions menace North America. Race relations divide areas of the United States. Uncertainty about tax cuts and other economic pressures around the globe pose questions about the future economy. Space agencies warn of meteors possibly striking the earth. Scientists lament environmental changes because of climate change. Gloom and doom are all around.

Thankfully, our hope is in the Lord. Paul reminded the Romans, “Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through
the power of the Holy Ghost” (Romans 15:13). Grieved by the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews, the prophet Jeremiah lamented:

This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is the faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. . . . It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord. (Lamentations 3:21–26)

The psalmists penned, “Let thy mercy, O Lord, be upon us, according as we hope in thee” (Psalm 33:22), “For in thee, O Lord, do I hope: thou wilt hear, O Lord my God” (Psalm 38:15), and “For thou art my hope, O Lord God: thou art my trust from my youth” (Psalm 71:5).

Our hope is not based on the things of this world that crumble and decay. We have an eternal hope built on the faithfulness of God.

» What are some things you feel will happen in our world in the next five years?
» What are your greatest fears?
» What are your greatest hopes?

C. Future

From the standpoint of worldly politics and international economies, the future is uncertain. If history continues to repeat itself, the future holds world-engulfing wars, international economic collapse, pandemics of disease, and environmental and natural disasters. Without the Lord, the future is hopeless and bleak.

Believers must never take their cue from the reports given by the news networks. This world is full of brokenness and cannot offer steadfast promises of a bright future. Weather forecasters do their best, even using the latest technology, to give us an idea of what the weather will be tomorrow. Unfortunately, it seems they get it wrong more than they get it right. The reason: no one knows the future. God holds it in His hands. Therefore, we can trust Him.

For the children of God, our future is secure in Jesus Christ. In 1882 Louisa M. R. Stead penned,

’Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,
Just to take Him at His word;
Just to rest upon His promise,
Just to know, “Thus saith the Lord.”

For children of God, the future is bright and glorious as we put our trust in the Lord. We do not know when Jesus Christ will return for the church, but we know He is coming and “we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them [the dead in Christ] in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (I Thessalonians 4:17).
To the captives in Babylon, Jeremiah prophesied: “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:11–13).

After seventy years of Babylonia captivity, new generations had arisen. The Jews had found a new home in Jerusalem. They married, had children, and were enjoying their grandchildren. Some had secure positions in society and commerce. Some, such as Daniel, were members of the governing elite. All they knew of the Promised Land was the stories they heard from grey-bearded men with far-away looks in their eyes. Jerusalem lay in waste; the Temple had been burned. The Promised Land held nothing for them. But for the faithful, Jeremiah’s prophecy rekindled hope of a brighter future.

The faithful can still find hope in Jeremiah’s prophecy. We must put our trust in the one who holds the future. We do not need to dread what tomorrow may bring.

The wise man wrote, “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Proverbs 3:5–6).

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The psalmist wrote, “Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass” (Psalm 37:7). Psalm 46:10 states, “Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.” The New English Translation of this verse says, “He says, ‘Stop your striving and recognize that I am God! I will be exalted over the nations! I will be exalted over the earth!’”

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Storms will come. Difficulties will arise in every life. No one will be able to escape this life unscathed, without the experience of pain and heartache. Not only do we all experience pain, but all of us will at some time or another experience things that will hold us captive. Whether it be the consequences of sin and the stronghold of addiction or the results of someone else bringing pain into our lives, we will all know what it means to be bound.

A lack of faith holds some people captive. They continually struggle to see any hope or believe things can be different. While walking through the difficult paths of life, some will be held captive by fear and worry, incapable of breaking free from their chains. But as believers we must remind ourselves, God is ultimately in control.

No prison is too fortified that God cannot open the doors. No pit is too deep that God cannot reach down and lift you out. No forest is too dense that God cannot show you the way out. We must trust God’s plan. We must trust God’s way. We must trust God’s heart. He is a deliverer. He knows how and desires to set the captive free.
The Importance of God’s Word

FOCUS VERSES
Jeremiah 36:2–3
Take thee a roll of a book, and write therein all the words that I have spoken unto thee against Israel, and against Judah, and against all the nations, from the day I spake unto thee, from the days of Josiah, even unto this day. It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the evil which I purpose to do unto them; that they may return every man from his evil way; that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.

LESSON TEXT
Jeremiah 36:1–4, 20–24
1 And it came to pass in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, that this word came unto Jeremiah from the Lord, saying,
2 Take thee a roll of a book, and write therein all the words that I have spoken unto thee against Israel, and against Judah, and against all the nations, from the day I spake unto thee, from the days of Josiah, even unto this day.
3 It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the evil which I purpose to do unto them; that they may return every man from his evil way; that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.
4 Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah: and Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord, which he had spoken unto him, upon a roll of a book.

20 And they went in to the king into the court, but they laid up the roll in the chamber of Elishama the scribe, and told all the words in the ears of the king.
21 So the king sent Jehudi to fetch the roll: and he took it out of Elishama the scribe’s chamber. And Jehudi read it in the ears of the king, and in the ears of all the princes which stood beside the king.
22 Now the king sat in the winterhouse in the ninth month: and there was a fire on the hearth burning before him.
23 And it came to pass, that when Jehudi had read three or four leaves, he cut it with the penknife, and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the roll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth.
24 Yet they were not afraid, nor rent their garments, neither the king, nor any of his servants that heard all these words.
CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

There was both a deep humility and a great strength about the young professor as he stood before the august council of clerics and government officials. Accused of heresy for his criticisms of the corrupt practices of the Roman Catholic Church, the young man stood before the council that day and made the following statement when it was demanded that he recant his statements:

If, then, I am not convinced by proof from Holy Scripture, or by cogent reasons . . . I neither can nor will retract anything; for it cannot be safe or honest for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise; God help me! Amen.

With those words Martin Luther expounded the core principle of the budding Protestant Reformation, the principle of sola Scriptura. With one move Luther swept aside centuries of conciliar and papal decisions and took Christianity “back to the Bible.”

CULTURE CONNECTION

ALL WE NEED

The unique Bible belongs to family members Paula Ryan, 60, and her daughter Claire. You can clearly see a bullet imbedded in the pages. The Bible was given to Leonard Knight by his Aunt Minnie in July of 1915. According to the family, Leonard carried the Bible in his pocket as he walked into battle, and it stopped a German bullet from hitting his heart. The bullet halted around fifty pages from the end, and Leonard escaped without a scratch. (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4124620/Pocket-Bible-saved-life-WWI-soldier-German-bullet-embedded-just-50-pages-going-way-killing-him.html/, accessed October 2017). After five generations the Bible and the story of God’s protection are still alive.

We may not carry the Bible in our pocket and experience protection from flying bullets, but God’s Word does protect us from the works of the enemy. In Psalm 119 we read many benefits of establishing God’s Word in our hearts. It gives us the power to stay away from sin (vs. 11) and strengthens us when we are weak (vs. 28). It brings salvation (vs. 41), gives liberty (vs. 45), and provides courage to proclaim truth (vs. 46). God’s Word gives life (vs. 50) and a song in the midst of darkness (vs. 54). If we ever doubt the power of the Word, we are assured it is bigger than the present, past, and future, for it was established before time began. “For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven” (vs. 89). We can confidently depend on the Word of God in every situation of life.

OUTLINE

I. THE PRODUCTION OF THE SCROLL
   A. The Message from God Was Written on a Scroll
   B. The Message Was Read in the Temple

II. THE DESTRUCTION OF THE SCROLL
   A. The King Showed No Respect for God’s Word
   B. God Spoke Again to Jeremiah

III. LISTENING TO GOD’S WORD
   A. The Blessing of Obeying God’s Word
   B. The Danger of Resisting God’s Word

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

There was both a deep humility and a great strength about the young professor as he stood before the august council of clerics and government officials. Accused of heresy for his criticisms of the corrupt practices of the Roman Catholic Church, the young man stood before the council that day and made the following statement when it was demanded that he recant his statements:

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SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Five hundred years have come and gone, Protestant churches now cover the globe, and Luther’s principled stand at Worms remains the flashpoint of every major Christian revival, including the modern Pentecostal revival that began in Charles Parham's Bethel Bible School in 1901. The story of Luther’s courageous stand proves once again the power that is available to those who simply listen to and obey God’s Word.

King Jehoiakim’s burning of the scroll of Jeremiah’s prophecies found in Jeremiah 36 is one of the most sobering stories in all of Scripture and presents an urgent call to revere and obey God’s Word.

» Why is it so important that our faith be founded on Scripture alone? What are the pitfalls of founding our faith on things other than God’s Word?

I. THE PRODUCTION OF THE SCROLL

A. The Message from God Was Written on a Scroll

In the Book of Jeremiah, there is a unique emphasis on the act of writing, especially in connection with the enactment of prophetic predictions. In Jeremiah 25 the prophet revealed (for the first time) that Babylon was God’s chosen agent to destroy rebellious Judah and simultaneously announced that God would one day come and judge Babylon (Jeremiah 25:12–13).

Again, just before the ending description of Jerusalem’s destruction (Jeremiah 52), the final act of Jeremiah is recorded. He wrote his prophecies against Babylon in a scroll and commissioned Seraiah, one of the princes headed into Babylonian exile, to read it aloud when he arrived in the city, tie a stone to it, and cast it into the Euphrates River that flowed through the city. This action signified that Babylon would one day “sink” under divine judgment never to rise again (Jeremiah 51:60–64).

Even more intriguing is that these clearly-related prophecies occur at the end of the long-recognized “halves” of the Book of Jeremiah, making each section end with a written prediction of Babylon’s downfall. Louis Stulman is right that, in the Book of Jeremiah at least, “The scroll, and not the presence of the prophet, becomes a dominant symbol and a primary medium of divine revelation . . . written prophecy represents an authorized mode by which a community . . . encounters transcendence and grasps the purposes of God” (Order Amid Chaos).

At the almost-exact center of the last half of Jeremiah occurs the story of another written scroll, this one filled with prophecies of judgment against rebellious Judah. It is clear in Jeremiah 36 that the writing of the scroll had at least one very practical purpose: the prophet Jeremiah was detained and could not appear in the Temple court to deliver the divine message (Jeremiah 36:5). Therefore, dictating the message to Baruch and having him go proclaim it was the only practical way to present it. However, given that the last half of Jeremiah is bookended by significant stories relating written scrolls to imminent judgment, it is hard to think Jeremiah’s actions here were purely pragmatic.
What are some reasons you think it is important that we have the Word of God as a written Word? What are some benefits you have experienced from regularly reading Scripture?

B. The Message Was Read in the Temple

Jeremiah commanded Baruch to go to the Temple and read aloud the scroll with the hope that “they will present their supplication before the LORD, and will return every one from his evil way: for great is the anger and the fury that the LORD hath pronounced against this people” (Jeremiah 36:7). This seems to have been an arduous undertaking, for we are told the scroll contained all of Jeremiah’s prophecies from his calling as a boy during the reign of Josiah up to this point (Jeremiah 36:2). In other words, this scroll was the written record of a lifetime of preaching. Clearly such a document would have had great sentimental as well as spiritual value to the persecuted prophet. In a sense Jeremiah’s actions here represented one last attempt to get the people to truly listen to God’s Word in time for them to turn from their wicked ways and repent before the foreseen disaster fell.

September 18, 2017, marked the tenth anniversary of Professor Randy Pausch’s famous “Last Lecture” at Carnegie-Mellon University, where he served as a professor of computer science. Pausch had been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer, but he chose to speak on the topic of “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams.” In the last part of the speech, addressing lessons he had learned, Pausch gave this parting advice: “It’s not about how to achieve your dreams; it’s about how you lead your life.” (The Last Lecture). Pausch’s up-beat and humorous speech became the basis of a book published in 2008 that quickly became a New York Times best seller.

Why do you think we, as a culture, put so much stock in a person’s “dying words”? Share some of the most important pieces of advice you remember receiving from saints and elders before they went on to their reward.

II. THE DESTRUCTION OF THE SCROLL

A. The King Showed No Respect for God’s Word

Jeremiah 36 builds up the tension in the story by relating a series of hearings of the scroll by various individuals and groups, arranged in an ever-ascending order of importance from low palace officials to, eventually, King Jehoiakim himself. Most significant is that, when Baruch read Jeremiah’s words to the lower officials of the king’s court, the chilling threats of judgment struck their hearts cold with fear (Jeremiah 36:16). It appears the scroll initially had its intended and hoped-for effect; the hearts of the hearers were moved in response to the divine Word.

However, when the scroll finally received its official audience with the king, the reaction was the precise opposite of those first hearers (Jeremiah 36:21–23). The tragic irony of Jehoiakim’s actions is heightened by the allusion to the good king
Josiah, during whose reign Jeremiah began his prophetic ministry. Josiah, like Jehoiakim, had also had a confrontation with the divine Word, this time in the form of a rediscovered copy of the law of Moses. However, when King Josiah heard the Word of God read to him, he responded in humility (II Kings 22:11–13).

Though it is hidden in the English translation, the word translated “cut” in Jeremiah 36:23, describing Jehoiakim’s destruction of the scroll, is the same Hebrew root (qr’) translated “rent” in II Kings 22:11, describing Josiah’s tearing of his clothes in grief and repentance. In other words, Jehoiakim’s reaction to the divine Word is the precise opposite of Josiah’s response. Instead of tearing up his garments as a sign of mournful repentance, Jehoiakim decides to tear up the scroll, an act he mistakenly thought would counteract the divine judgment the scroll proclaimed. Walter Brueggemann puts the point exceedingly well:

*The king wants to be and is ‘scroll-less’ because he imagines he is autonomous and need give no answer. Whereas his princely advisors had responded to the scroll in great fear [Jer. 36:16] . . . now the king and his entourage exhibit no ‘fear’ [Jer. 36:24] . . . The contrast between the frightened princes and the unresponsive king is complete. The contrast serves to show that the king is utterly cynical, utterly in opposition to the scroll and to the God who speaks in the scroll.* (A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming)

In fact, Jehoiakim’s rage against God’s Word went beyond even his scornful destruction of the scroll, for he then immediately issued an order to have the prophet Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch arrested and imprisoned. Fortunately the Lord miraculously intervened to protect both of them from the king’s wrath (Jeremiah 36:26).

It is important to pause for a moment and allow the enormity of Jehoiakim’s actions to sink in. It is well-known that scroll production in the ancient Near East was a labor-intensive and costly endeavor. Also, as was noted previously, this scroll represented the totality of Jeremiah’s “life’s work.” And far above those two already-compelling considerations, when we add that this scroll contained the Word of Almighty God, we have a sense of depth of Jehoiakim’s sheer spite for the prophet and the Word the prophet proclaimed. It is important to note the deliberation with which Jehoiakim acted in this scene, cutting the scroll up bit by bit and feeding it into the fire (and not, for example, ripping the whole scroll out of the reader’s hands and angrily casting the entire thing into the flames). The very calculation of Jehoiakim’s actions is chilling. The sardonic echo of his righteous father’s response to God’s Word is purposefully frightening.

» What do you think was the real motivation behind Jehoiakim’s disdainful actions toward the scroll of prophecies? Was it fear? Anger? Jealousy?

» Think of three key reasons why our culture no longer seems to respect the Word of God? What can we as the church do to help our culture regain that respect?
B. God Spoke Again to Jeremiah

However, Jehoiakim’s apparent “victory” over the divine Word was short-lived. God immediately commanded Jeremiah to produce another scroll, this one containing even more words of judgment against recalcitrant Judah (Jeremiah 36:32). This intensification of the words of judgment was not the most frightening aspect of this rewritten scroll, however. God gave Jeremiah a specific prophecy against King Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 36:30–31).

Jehoiakim would die in a way that matched the shameful way he destroyed the scroll—with his corpse left unburied and exposed to the elements. Gone was the glimmer of hope for repentance and restoration. The king and the people had refused for the final time to heed the Word of God. Now all that awaited them was judgment and destruction. In an ironic twist, Jehoiakim's burning of the prophetic scroll became a kind of “sign-act,” or symbolic action of the city’s destruction. By burning the scroll, it was as if Jehoiakim had chosen the specific fate of the city of Jerusalem, for the final chapter of Jeremiah records:

Now in the fifth month, in the tenth day of the month, which was the nineteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon, came Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, which served the king of Babylon, into Jerusalem, and burned the house of the Lord, and the king’s house; and all the houses of Jerusalem, and all the houses of the great men, burned he with fire: and all the army of the Chaldeans, that were with the captain of the guard, brake down all the walls of Jerusalem round about. (Jeremiah 52:12–14)

The sad truth is that an entirely different possibility hangs over Jeremiah 36. In the opening of the chapter, the prophet Jeremiah was hopeful that the divine Word would bring the people to repentance. The echoes of the story of Josiah’s encounter with the divine Word likewise pointed out that God had, in the recent past, responded favorably to royal contrition and repentance. In a sense, at the beginning of Jeremiah 36, the conditions were ripe for a revival; however, by the end of the chapter, all hope of salvation was effectively extinguished.

» Share how you imagine the Book of Jeremiah would have ended if Jehoiakim had heeded the Word of God rather than burning the scroll.

» Have you personally witnessed others destroy their lives by ignoring God’s Word? What would you say to warn someone you saw taking that destructive path?

III. LISTENING TO GOD’S WORD

A. The Blessing of Obeying God’s Word

We have taken some time today to linger in the story of Jehoiakim’s rejection of the Word to allow ourselves to feel the full effect of his cavalier action. It was this moment, as much as any other in the Book of Jeremiah, that finally sealed the fate of the city for destruction.
Yet lingering in the background is the story of Josiah, a story that illustrates the blessing of obedience to God’s Word. It is easy to forget that just ten short years before Josiah became king, Judah had been subjected to the long and wicked rule of King Manasseh.

But King Josiah, who had grown up knowing nothing but the disgusting degradation of pagan idolatry, was radically transformed by a single encounter with the holy Word of God and launched the single greatest revival the people of God had ever known. In fact, the contrast can be seen in the writer’s equally brief summary of Josiah’s reign: “He did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left” (II Kings 22:2). Josiah’s obedience to God’s Word not only undid the idolatry of his grandfather Manasseh, but it reached all the way back to undo the idolatry of Jeroboam I. His choice to obey the divine Word literally reversed generations of idolatry and its sinful effects. One single act of obedience has the power to defeat lifetimes of disobedience.

Looking back over your life, name three blessings you feel can be attributed directly to your obedience to God’s Word.

Why do you think the New Testament teaches that the highest expression of our faith is obedience to God?

B. The Danger of Resisting God’s Word

Just as it is difficult to estimate the positive impact one simple choice of obedience can have in a person’s life, it is likewise difficult to gauge the lasting negative impact of those who choose to resist God’s Word. In the story before us today, King Jehoiakim rashly squandered Judah’s last real chance at salvation before the Babylonian onslaught. In the most ironic way possible, Jehoiakim’s burning of the prophetic scroll sealed rather than reversed Jerusalem’s fate. Perhaps this is the greatest danger of living a life resistant to God’s Word: bringing down destruction upon your own head, while thinking your actions are protecting you. Living a life resistant to the Word of God leads to inescapable self-deception and strong delusion, of which Paul warned the Thessalonians (II Thessalonians 2:10–12).

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Take a moment and close your eyes. Visualize the still-smoldering ruins of ancient Jerusalem—bodies of the slain strewn and piled everywhere, houses and walls reduced to heaps of rubble. Smell the stench of death and burning; see the ghastly faces of the corpses; hear the mournful cries of widowed women and orphaned children. Now say to yourself, “This happened because Jehoiakim did not obey God’s Word.” In fact wherever you see evidence of sin’s destruction—in the news, on the street corner, or at the local mall—you can remind yourself that all that is wrong and broken in our world is a result of people not heeding and obeying God’s Word. But likewise remind yourself that the only hope for our broken world is found in those who will obediently yield themselves as servants of God.
FOCUS THOUGHT
I will seek the Lord daily for His mercy.

FOCUS VERSE
Lamentations 3:22
It is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.

LESSON TEXT
Lamentations 3:21–26
21 This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope.
22 It is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.
23 They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.
24 The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.
25 The LORD is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him.
26 It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.

Psalm 51:1–9
1 Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash me throughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.
4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.
5 Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.
6 Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.
7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
8 Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.
9 Hide they face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.

Ephesians 2:4
4 But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us.
CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Jeremiah was called the “weeping prophet.” He stated, “Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” (Jeremiah 9:1). He cried tears of sadness, not only because he knew what was going to happen, but because no matter how hard he tried, the people would not listen to him. He was God’s spokesman, but the people preferred to listen to false prophets who foretold peace, prosperity, and victory.

God called Jeremiah to be a prophet when he was a child (Jeremiah 1:6). God told him not to marry or have children because of the destruction coming upon Judah in judgment of her idolatry and sin. He prophesied from the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah of Judah (627 BC) to the eleventh year of King Zedekiah and the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC). Jeremiah urged the people of Jerusalem to surrender to the Babylonians (Jeremiah 21:9; 32:24–28; 37:9–10). Consequently, the Jewish authorities considered him a traitor and imprisoned him.

OUTLINE

I. WE HAVE HOPE EVEN IN BAD TIMES
   A. Because of God’s Love, We Are Not Consumed
   B. His Compassion Never Fails

II. GOD’S MERCY IS NEW EVERY MORNING

III. GOD IS FAITHFUL

IV. THE LORD IS GOOD TO THOSE WHO HOPE IN HIM

CULTURE CONNECTION

NEVER GIVE UP ON A GOOD CAUSE

As the yearly NBA (National Basketball Association) trade deadline approaches, each team carefully examines their roster needs and tries to determine if there are any potential free agent players who could propel their team to greatness. For the 2017-2018 season, the Cleveland Cavaliers decided to make some significant changes to their roster.

Out of all the roster changes the Cleveland Cavaliers made, one key player decided to stay in the burgundy and gold uniform, LeBron James. According to Fox News, one of the headlines read “LeBron says he’s staying put: ‘I could never give up on my teammates like that.’” (http://fox8.com, accessed February 2018) Even though the 2017-18 Cavaliers were experiencing some setbacks and needed some adjustments in order to live up to expectations, James was willing to stick with his teammates and persevere through the season.

LeBron James did not view adversity and some hard times as an excuse to quit. He believed his fellow teammates could come out of their slump and live up to the expectations that had been set for his team. This same can be said about our God. His attitude and opinion of each of us is to never give up on us, no matter how much we fail to live up to expectations or perform to our potential.

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

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» What is the purpose of prophecy?

62
Searching the Scriptures

I. WE HAVE HOPE EVEN IN BAD TIMES

Even though the Chaldeans (Babylonians) surrounded Jerusalem and even though many Jews were living in Babylonian captivity, Jeremiah had words of hope for them:

*Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all that are carried away captives, whom I have cause to be carried away from Jerusalem unto Babylon; build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace. . . . For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.* (Jeremiah 29:4–11)

Regardless of the pending destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah encouraged the Jews to look to the promised blessings of the Lord. His prophecies showed that God was still in control and knew the beginning from the end.

A. Because of God’s Love, We Are Not Consumed

Because of the multitude of sins, all of Judah should have been annihilated. However, because of God’s love, many had been spared the sword and spear and were living comfortably in Babylon. This was a sign of God’s love in the face of divine judgment.

God is a God of judgment. Consider:

- Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, and God exiled them from the Garden.
- The Flood drowned the world, but Noah’s obedience in building the ark saved him and his family.
- Fire fell from Heaven, destroying the cities of the plain (Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboim [Deuteronomy 29:23]), but angels delivered Lot and his daughters.
- Shouts from Israel’s army caused the walls of Jericho to fall, but God provided an escape for Rahab and her family.

While God’s judgment may fall, His love brings deliverance to the righteous.

B. His Compassion Never Fails

The lesson’s focus verse (Lamentations 3:22) states, “It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.” This statement causes us to ask the question, “Is there a difference between love, mercy, and compassion?”

What is mercy? What is love? What is compassion? How do these three things differ?

When comparing various English translations of the focus verse, it should be noted that many versions substitute love for mercy (KJV) and mercy for compassion (KJV). Consider:
• “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end” (ESV).
• “The LORD’s unfailing love and mercy still continue” (GNT).
• “Because of the LORD’s faithful love we do not perish, for His mercies never end” (HCSB).
• “The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease” (NLT).

On the internet blog Awareness Is Free, the writer suggests that love—on a human level—is personal while compassion is impersonal. According to the writer, we love things and people that give us pleasure and meet our needs. We expect something in return. The blogger states, “Parents/spouses/offspring/friends—all these relationships exist because of interdependence. They fulfill our needs and we theirs. Thus love arises from a sense of self.”

However, he says compassion is selfless: “It [compassion] is impersonal because it can exist without any relationship at all. I do it weekly at the homeless shelter. It would be disingenuous to say I love them when they are strangers to me and I to them. Yet I have unreserved compassion for them. The liberating thing about it being impersonal is that it comes without emotional baggage. Compassion does not demand anything in return. That is why I can still feel compassion even when they are unappreciative or even abusive. I would help my worst enemy if his life were endangered. Compassion is unconditional” (https://awarenessisfree.wordpress.com).

» Do you agree with this blogger’s thoughts?

On the divine level, God loves us unconditionally. Jesus Christ proved—not that He needed to—His love for us by His sacrificial death on Calvary. He loves us because that is His nature. God is love. His love is so complete, so full, He cannot love us anymore than He already does. Scripture says He loved us when we were dead in our trespasses and sin, so His love is not affected by our deeds or condition. Whether we are the model Christian or the vilest sinner, God extends His love to us.

Paul wrote to the Ephesian church:

But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: that in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4–7)

God loved us while we were sinners. Consequently, we cannot do anything to make God love us more than He does now. Conversely, we cannot do anything to make God love us less. God’s love is so total, complete, perfect, and genuine that nothing can be added to it.

It is this perfect love that moved Christ to compassion. Consider:
• “But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd” (Matthew 9:36).
• “And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and he healed their sick” (Matthew 14:14).
• Jesus said, “Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt” (Matthew 18:27).
• “And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him, and saith unto him, I will; be thou clean” (Mark 1:41).
• “And Jesus, when he came out, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd: and he began to teach them many things” (Mark 6:34).

The recipients of Christ’s compassion were not guilty of sin or offence. Nevertheless, their plight moved the heart of God incarnate.

II. GOD’S MERCY IS NEW EVERY MORNING

The English translation of Martin Luther’s German version of Lamentations 3:22–23 says, “The goodness of the Lord has no ending. His mercies never cease. They are new every morning. Great is His faithfulness.”

God is a God of mercy. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines mercy as “kind or forgiving treatment of someone who could be treated harshly.” Mercy, therefore, implies that the recipient deserves punishment for crimes or an offence. If it were not for mercy being extended, individuals would face consequences for their wrongs. (*Compassion* does not have this connotation.)

David is a prime example of God’s mercy. His sin with Bathsheba is well documented. Instead of leading his troops out to battle, David was on his rooftop and spied Bathsheba bathing. His lust led to adultery and then the murder of Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband. The prophet Nathan confronted David and made him recognize his sin.

Psalm 51 records David’s prayer of repentance. David’s repentance was a cry for God’s mercy. His guilt was evident, and so was his remorse. God in His abundant mercy forgave and restored David.

One lesson to take away from this story is that we must seek God’s mercy. David prayed:

_Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me._ (Psalm 51:1–3)

David’s repentance was genuine. The word of God from the prophet Nathan convicted David and made him realize this sin. Likewise, when we fail God, we must repent and ask for His tender mercies and forgiveness.

_In his prayer of repentance, David said, “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight” (Psalm 51:4). Did he not sin against Bathsheba?_
What do you think this may mean?

Another example of God’s mercy is the story of Abraham interceding for Lot and the city of Sodom (Genesis 18). God revealed His plans for the city to Abraham. Abraham began to intercede by asking God to spare the city if fifty righteous people lived there. God agreed. Then Abraham interceded again and asked that the city be spared if it contained forty-five righteous ones. God agreed. Abraham continued interceding: forty, thirty, twenty, ten. God in His mercy agreed not to destroy Sodom if just ten righteous people lived there. Fire eventually fell on the city; only Lot, his wife—although she turned back to look, turning to a pillar of salt—and his two daughters were led out of the city. Nevertheless, God’s mercy would have prevented the destruction of the city if only ten righteous could have been found, because Abraham pleaded for God’s mercy for the righteous.

Who else in the Bible sinned and begged for God’s mercy?

III. GOD IS FAITHFUL

God’s faithfulness is evidenced by His steadfastness and constancy, for He never changes. He is not capricious, impulsive, or unpredictable. He is always the same. Jeremiah captured this quality when he said, “They [God’s compassions] are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:23). Because of God’s consistent character, Jeremiah knew God’s compassions and His mercies arrive new every day.

That cannot be said about most of us mortals. We wake up moody. Some days we are raring to go to work and get things done. Other days our head hurts and we would like to stay in bed. Lack of sleep, poor blood sugar levels, squabbles with the spouse, financial stress, disappointments in life, and a multitude of other things affect our moods. We vacillate between being peppy or tired, happy or sad, hopeful or depressed, positive or negative, and confident or insecure.

God is not like us. The writer of Hebrews said it so well: “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever” (Hebrews 13:8). God never changes. His promises are true and established forever. What He said He would do, He will because He is faithful.

An old hymn says, “‘Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus, just to take Him at His Word.” Another one says, “Every promise in the Book is mine.” These songs teach us God is trustworthy. If He said it, then we can rely on it. God’s promises have validity because God is unchanging. What He promised in His Word, He will do because He is faithful. His immutability gives legitimacy and authority to His promises. We can rely on God to save us, to heal us, and to provide for us simply because He is faithful to His Word.

IV. THE LORD IS GOOD TO THOSE WHO HOPE IN HIM

Jeremiah said, “The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him” (Lamentations 3:24). The psalmist penned:
• “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God” (Psalm 42:11).
• “Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy” (Psalm 33:18).
• “The LORD taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy” (Psalm 147:11).

Wikipedia, the online free encyclopedia, defines hope as “an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one’s life or the world at large. As a verb, its definitions include: ‘expect with confidence’ and ‘to cherish a desire with anticipation.’”

Hope is what keeps Christians looking skyward. Our modern world is full of fear. Headlines scream of pending nuclear war with North Korea, catastrophic destruction because of natural disasters, the possibility of worldwide famine, breakouts of pestilence and disease, and global economic collapse. It’s a world without hope, but one filled with ethnic and religious strife, unstable governments, and a lack of strong leadership. However, as Christians, our hope is in Christ. Paul stated, “Hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us” (Romans 5:5).

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Jean had a child late in life. Her older two daughters were nigh on perfect. From kindergarten on, Pam was wild, sassy, self-willed, and incorrigible. After a life of sin and broken marriages, fifty-five-year-old Pam decided to give her life to Christ. She talked her biker husband into going to church with her. To her surprise he went with her to the altar, repented, and was baptized in Jesus’ name. Jean and Pam were behind the baptistry as the pastor immersed Joe in the watery grave. Jean was ecstatic! Having her daughter beside her and watching her son-in-law being baptized were answers to Jean’s fifty-five years of praying for her daughter’s salvation.

What kept Jean praying for her daughter for fifty-five years? Hope. “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Jean put her faith in the promises of the God who is faithful. Her hope—her expectation of positive outcomes—sustained her when it seemed Pam would never turn her life around. Jean placed her hope in the promises of her faithful God. She knew, “The LORD is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD” (Lamentations 3:25–26).

Without doubt, “The goodness of the Lord has no ending. His mercies never cease. They are new every morning. Great is His faithfulness.”
FOCUS VERSE
Ezekiel 3:17
Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me.

Lesson Text
Ezekiel 3:16–21
16 And it came to pass at the end of seven days, that the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,
17 Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me.
18 When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand.
19 Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul.
20 Again, When a righteous man doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumblingblock before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be remembered; but his blood will I require at thine hand.
21 Nevertheless if thou warn the righteous man, that the righteous sin not, and he doth not sin, he shall surely live, because he is warned; also thou hast delivered thy soul.

FOCUS THOUGHT
I will listen to my pastor’s voice in my life.
Modern sailing vessels have GPS navigation, sonar equipment to determine the depth of the water, and warning devices to alert the captain of obstacles or dangers around them. It is easy to become dependent on automated responses, and the watchful eye of the sailor becomes less crucial for the safety of the vessel. However, more recent events have illustrated the need for continued vigilance of those who are responsible to man the watch stations.

In 2017 there were two separate incidents involving Navy ships in the Asian Seas that resulted in seventeen sailors losing their lives. The first was off the coast of Japan where the USS Fitzgerald, a guided-missile destroyer, was struck by a container ship resulting in the deaths of seven US sailors. In the second fatal incident, another Navy guided-missile destroyer, the USS John S. McCain, also suffered damage when it collided with an oil tanker as it navigated through the waters east of Singapore. Ten sailors were lost in this incident. Where were the watchmen? Where were the warnings?

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CULTURE CONNECTION

UNQUALIFIED

Overhearing his name mentioned while playing YouTube casually in the background, Steven Furtick’s ears perked up. Someone was interviewing a renowned theologian. The interviewer asked, “What comes to your mind when you hear the name Steven Furtick?” His response was simple, but devastating, “Unqualified.”

At that moment Furtick, lead pastor of Elevation Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, had a choice. He could either let this destroy him and his ministry, or he could look at it from a “Friend, you don’t know the half of it,” point of view. He chose the latter. The incident inspired him to write a book, (Un)Qualified. In the book He stated, “I think we all secretly fight feelings of inadequacy, insufficiency, and incompetence. We wonder whether we really measure up.” Furtick admits his shortcomings and unashamedly prints them in his book. However, he turns the situation around and builds confidence in his readers by saying that all great men and women of the Bible were unqualified.

It takes the pressure off to realize that we do not need to be that “cutting edge” preacher, or “make it real” Sunday School teacher. Pastors can feel inferiority as much as anyone else, but thankfully God uses available, unqualified vessels and makes them perfect instruments for His purpose. He calls the unqualified, then qualifies the called.
SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

It is hard to imagine how such modern naval ships designed for war could be broadsided by other larger, slower-moving sea vessels resulting in the loss of life and serious damage to the ships. In addition to all the advanced radar and communications equipment, sailors are stationed in various positions to keep watch especially during the night as shipping lanes get more crowded. These tragic incidents sparked internal investigations within the Navy resulting in the removal of the officers in charge and disciplinary action against sailors who were found at fault. In the investigations it was reported that the sailors on watch “lost situational awareness.” In other words, we may assume they were not watching at the time. By the time they became aware of the situation and alerted the bridge of impending danger, it was too late to avoid collision.

When the watchman fails in his responsibility, the consequences are dire. Sometimes it may be just an inconvenience, but when the failure results in the loss of life, there is no way to assess a value to compensate for the casualties. How much more crucial is the watchman of the soul, considering its importance and the eternal consequences?

In what ways is the pastor like a watchman?

I. THE WATCHMAN

The lesson text reveals the call of God to the prophet Ezekiel to be a watchman for the house of Israel. God chose him to be aware of the spiritual condition of the people while they endured exile in Babylon. He was to alert them to the dangers of disobedience and to sound an alarm to those who were insensitive to the warnings of Scripture.

Everyone needs a living, breathing watchman. We can never become complacent and rely solely on mechanical ministry techniques. Pat answers and memorized responses can never replace the personal ministry of a pastor. YouTube sermons and a steady diet of favorite church podcasts can never replace the dynamics of actual church attendance and the interaction with other believers affording the opportunity to receive spiritual ministry. While various electronic devices can enhance our learning and aid in our spiritual growth, we still need a watchman—someone who is alert to changing cultural conditions and aware of the snare of spiritual deception. We all need a watchman to whom we may submit ourselves and to whom we can be accountable (Hebrews 13:17).

We have a responsibility to our watchman. It is our duty to seek the guidance of our spiritual authority, the pastor God has placed in our lives. Submit to ministerial leadership and willingly obey the pastor’s instructions. Blessing and safety are the results of living under the authority of spiritual leadership.

How have digital resources and the internet made us less dependent on pastors to provide direction and counsel?

What are some things that may bring grief when the pastor gives an account for some?
II. THE LORD SPOKE DIRECTLY TO THE WATCHMAN

Ezekiel had no choice when the Babylonian forces removed him from his homeland and everything that was familiar. In the second siege and attack against Jerusalem in 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar controlled the city, set up a new puppet king, and took King Jehoiachin as a captive to Babylon, as well as ten thousand additional subjects from Judah.

Ezekiel was about twenty-five years of age when he was taken into exile. He spent his life in a camp of exiles along the River Chebar. Living and working alongside other craftsmen of Judah, Ezekiel had firsthand knowledge of what his people experienced in captivity.

While Ezekiel labored to survive in this strange land, God began to speak to him through visions. He saw fanciful images of apocalyptic intent, wind, fire, and strange beasts, not unlike those seen by John and recorded in the Book of Revelation. After the first vision, the Lord caused Ezekiel to stand up, and He spoke to him, “Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me: they and their fathers have transgressed against me, even unto this very day” (Ezekiel 2:3).

Ezekiel was warned the people had become rebellious and hard-hearted, and there was no assurance they would receive his message. He was instructed to deliver God’s message regardless of how the people looked or how they responded. Even if no one responded, they would all know, “There hath been a prophet among them” (Ezekiel 2:5).

When God called the prophet Ezekiel to be a watchman for the house of Israel, he became the one God spoke to concerning the condition of the nation. Through signs, visions, and parables or allegories, Ezekiel delivered the messages he received from the Lord. Some of his illustrated sermons were sure to annoy the rebellious exiles of Israel, but perhaps some would see the signs and remember the message long enough for it to make an impact.

Far away from Jerusalem, Ezekiel proclaimed the judgment of God against the land and its people and acted out the destruction of the city. He accurately delivered the news of the siege of Jerusalem while his sermon was accompanied by visual aids. A large rock became the city and sticks and stones illustrated ramps, battering rams, and the hosts of the forces arrayed against Judah.

Lying on one side for three-hundred-ninety days and on the other for forty days, Ezekiel depicted the years of Israel’s judgment and the exile of the people of Judah. While most rejected the message of Ezekiel, they could not forget the dramatic signs that accompanied his pronouncement of judgment from God.

» How must Ezekiel have felt when he was forcibly removed from his home and made to march into Babylonian exile?

» How did this experience prepare him to be a watchman?

» Why do you think Ezekiel was told by God to use visual props to illustrate his message?
III. THE WATCHMAN IS TO WARN THE PEOPLE

Conversely from the role of a pastor today—who has good news to share—the responsibility of the watchman is often to deliver a message of warning to those who are unprepared for future judgment. Knowing what is to come, the watchman warns the people. In the role of a watchman, Paul found it necessary to warn his sons in the gospel because of his close relationship with them. He said, “I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you” (I Corinthians 4:14). As an aging man, Paul expressed his deep love for those he called sons, yet he warned them with strong words of correction out of his concern for them.

*Watchmen hear from God.* Their message is not picked from a sermon book or chosen from an online resource. These watchmen have been in communication with God. They have heard a certain word and will communicate that message to its intended audience. Though resources may be helpful to improve communication of the message, the kernel of truth and the inspired application must come from communion with the Lord.

*Watchmen see what others may not see.* The watchmen have a vantage point others do not possess. Through God’s eyes watchmen are alerted to dangers beyond the horizon; they see beyond the blinds and are undeterred with the distractions of deception. God knows the thoughts and intents of the heart. God warns watchmen to prepare the people so they may stand against the false prophets and identify the deceiving spirits of our age.

*Watchmen are alert to the dangers ahead and are responsible to warn others.* The watchmen must always be in communication with God, receive directives from the Lord, and convey messages of warning faithfully to all who will listen. As God instructed Ezekiel, so he speaks to today’s watchmen, “Hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me” (Ezekiel 3:17).

The seriousness of faithfully delivering the warnings of God cannot be overstated. The eternal future of the intended audience depends on it, and judgment against the disobedient prophet is also at stake. God declared He would hold Ezekiel responsible if he did not deliver the message as instructed. A watchman is duty bound to deliver the message just as it was received.

» What are some responsibilities of the watchman?
» If the people do not respond to the message of the watchman, what will happen to the one who delivered the warning?

IV. GOD GIVES US PASTORS

“And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jeremiah 3:15).

The five-fold ministry is a gift to the church. Paul acknowledged that apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers were given to believers to lead them into maturity. While all of the five-fold ministry is important for the development of believers,
Pastors are often seen as those who are closest to the believers and therefore most necessary to provide accountability for the followers. Pastors are shepherds over the flock of God; to them is given the ministry of caring, comforting, and correcting.

“And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11–13).

In what ways is the ministry a “gift” to the church?

How is a pastor like a shepherd?

A. The Pastor Is a Watchman

Some view the pastor as the CEO, as a coveted position of authority and prestige. Though there are times when a pastor will be honored for leadership and recognized for wise decisions, there are other times when a pastor must issue warnings and make unpopular decisions for the benefit of the congregation’s spiritual well-being.

Pastors must see what others do not. They must sometimes act methodically according to spiritual impulses rather than snap responses to surface situations. They are watchmen over the flocks. They must always be alert to dangers from the outside and deception on the inside.

Should a pastor issue warnings when he sees things that will adversely affect the spiritual growth of the membership? Why?

What if people do not receive the instruction?

B. The Pastor Watches for Our Souls

Inasmuch as pastors are shepherds to believers who are following Christ, at times the followers are referred to as the flock. Paul’s admonition came to other pastors—the elders of Ephesus—as his ministry with them was coming to a close and he was leaving for Jerusalem, “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:28–29). As shepherds, pastors are obligated to warn against the wolves in sheep’s clothing that seek to destroy the flock.

Jesus assigned value to every person. All those we mentor or minister to have great value. The worth of the soul is inestimable. Jesus assessed the wealth of the world as being in deficit when compared to one soul. He asked, “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

Catastrophes cause us to focus on the most important things in life. More than all the stuff for which we spend our time and money, all the material possessions and
temporal acquisitions, there is greater value placed on life above all these things. Even more so it is true of the soul. In the light of eternity, all else pales in significance. The second question Jesus asked was, “What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

One of the weightiest responsibilities of the pastor is being the watchman of the soul. The heavy burden for the destiny of an eternal soul grips the heart of every caring pastor. It is not a matter of consumer marketing, attracting new members to enhance growth statistics, or increasing the bottom line of financial stability. Being a pastor is not endeavoring to find status within the ministerial community or achieving notoriety in the top one hundred successful pastors in North America. A pastor’s most pressing responsibility is the salvation of souls and the continuing discipleship of believers to achieve their greatest potential in the kingdom of God.

How much is a soul worth? How can we put it in terms that illustrate the value of a soul? What experiences will help us realize the value of life and the soul far above material things?

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

In view of the seriousness of the soul and the great value Jesus gave to its eternal destiny, we must, in turn, value the responsibility for our own spiritual well-being and discipleship. The best way to do that is to stay close to the pastor and give attention to the instructions and warnings given us from the Word of God. We must purpose to listen to the pastor’s voice and allow that voice to give direction and focus for our lives.

We all need a pastor, someone to whom we may be accountable. We need that spiritual authority in our lives. We must allow that voice to speak to us as we obey the instructions we receive with submission. We must give permission for someone to speak more than words of encouragement; we need someone who can speak correction and warning to us as well.

We must teach and preach the everlasting gospel, sharing the good news of salvation. Ours is a wonderful message of hope, deliverance, and transformation. However, the consequences of sin remain. The adversary of our souls has not resigned or surrendered, so the onslaught of evil will continue to be a threat to those who are striving to follow Jesus. A part of this message must also be the ministry of the watchman. Paul said we preach both hope and a warning. He wrote that it is “Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus” (Colossians 1:27–28, NKJV).

God loved us enough to give us a watchman to care for our souls. A pastor is one of God’s greatest gifts to the church.
A New Heart

FOCUS THOUGHT
I surrender my heart completely to God.

FOCUS VERSE
Ezekiel 36:26
A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

LESSON TEXT
John 3:1–8
1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:
2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.
3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.
4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?
5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.
6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.
8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

II Corinthians 5:17
17 Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.
CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The heart is one of the most important organs in the human body. A person cannot live without the continual pulsing of the heart that circulates five to six quarts of blood every minute, twenty-four hours a day. When a person begins to have heart problems, there are many procedures and treatment plans that may be prescribed to help the heart function better. When all treatments have proven unsuccessful and a patient is determined to be experiencing the final stages of heart failure, the final option is to perform a heart transplant.

There are about two thousand heart transplants annually in the United States. However, there are more than three thousand patients on waiting lists, dependent on the availability of a suitable organ for transplant. According to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 85 percent of patients receiving a transplant will survive a year or more. Those added to the transplant list must be critically in need of a new heart, although healthy enough to survive such a radical surgery.

CULTURE CONNECTION

BEATING HEART OF HOPE

Greg Robbins had a heart attack at the young age of forty-eight. After open heart surgery, his heart was only working at 25 percent, and he needed a heart transplant to live. On September 16, 2016, Robbins was told a heart was available. That same day he went into surgery and received Greg Ricks’ heart after Greg had been killed in a car accident. Greg Ricks’ heart saved Greg Robbins’ life. Was it coincidence that they were both named Greg?

Six months later Ricks’ mother, Anna, invited the Robbins to the home of her deceased son so they could see where he had lived and meet his family. The meeting was emotional. Robbins’ wife, Gwen, said they knew when someone goes on the transplant list, someone else would have to give his life. At one point in the meeting, when Anna placed a stethoscope on Robbins’ chest, she covered her mouth and burst into tears, hugging Robbins she said, “Thank you.” (https://www.today.com/health/organ-donation-mom-hears-son-s-heartbeat-again-t112270/, accessed October 2017). Greg Ricks’ heart was beating again.

Obviously, people who choose to be an organ donor never live to see the results. However, the family of the donor are the ones who witness the selfless act of that decision. In the midst of their loss and sorrow, there is a small thread of joy knowing the sacrifice of their loved one helped someone else live. However deep the pain, it is rewarding to know that their loved one is helping create hope for another human being.

OUTLINE

I. WE NEED A NEW HEART
II. EZEKIEL PROPHESIED OF A NEW HEART
III. THE NEW BIRTH
   A. Nicodemus Came to Jesus
   B. You Must Be Born Again

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

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Research and development attempts to design a completely artificial heart have been going on for many years. In 1982 the Jarvik 7, the first artificial heart, was implanted and external controls were attached to Barney Clark. Barney survived 112 days, becoming the first person to live without a human heart (https://healthcare.utah.edu).

Since then, many others have seen an extension of life through the use of artificial hearts. However, now they are primarily used to bridge the time needed to wait for a viable heart to become available for transplant. There has been no mechanical device created with the same unique capabilities as the natural human heart. The only thing that will assure the length and quality of life is to receive a new heart. So it is for those who find their hearts diseased by sin and broken by transgression.

How is the need for a spiritual heart the same as or different from those who require a physical heart transplant?

I. WE NEED A NEW HEART

In our contemporary thought, the heart we refer to most sits at the center of our emotions and feelings. It is also the core of our spiritual expression. When we confess love, it is communicated by saying, “I love you with all my heart.” When we express feelings of sincerity, we say we are speaking “from our heart.” We often sing songs like “Lord, I give You my heart.”

The Scripture also speaks of the heart in this spiritual and relational aspect. In David’s prayer of repentance, he asked, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). This man, whom God said was “a man after mine own heart,” wrote often of those who were “upright in heart” (Acts 13:22; Psalm 32:11; 64:10). The psalmist asked a rhetorical question, “Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place?” He responded with his own answer, “He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart” (Psalm 24:3–4).

On the other hand, the gossip was depicted as a talebearer with a wicked heart. The gossip’s “burning lips and a wicked heart are like a potsherd covered with silver dross” (Proverbs 26:23). Jeremiah prophesied against those who “walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart” (Jeremiah 7:24).

Born with a nature tainted by sin, our hearts do not become pure by default. There is no evolution of behavior where we may become more virtuous, loving, and kind throughout life. Rather, Jesus taught that the heart was the source of all kinds of evil (Matthew 15:19).

Only God knows the heart. Just prior to the first anointing of David to be king of Israel, God reminded Samuel, “The LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart” (I Samuel 16:7). The Lord is aware of our thoughts and our intentions.

What makes a heart “pure” or “evil”?

Why is it impossible to fix the heart with good resolutions and positive promises?
The unredeemed find themselves in desperate need of a spiritual heart transplant. The old heart is cursed and the condition is terminal. Sin takes its toll and the life-giving blood slows through its essential circulation, restricted by the calcification of the carnal condition. Self-improvement, positive thinking, or healthy eating will never repair the damage in this vital organ. The only hope is to receive a new heart.

What began in the Garden of Eden, with a simple act of disobedience in eating the fruit from the forbidden tree, produced far-reaching consequences in the perpetuation of sin (Romans 5:12). Through Adam all share the guilt and consequence of sin. However, we cannot lay the blame entirely on the couple in the Garden. James said, “Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (James 1:14–15).

The progression of transgression results in death. It is sometimes gradual and its effects are felt incrementally, but the outcome is the same. Paul declared, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

From this backdrop of despair emerged a shining star of hope. The eastern star signaling the birth of Christ also illuminated the fulfillment of the first promise of redemption. The seed of the woman would deliver defeat to the power of the curse (Genesis 3:15).

Sin and the curse were not the only things that began in the Garden; the promise of redemption and humanity’s restoration also found root in the paradise of Eden. While sin promises wages, God gives gifts. “The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

II. EZEKIEL PROPHESIED OF A NEW HEART

The prophet Ezekiel was called to declare God’s word to an obstinate and rebellious people who were exiled in Babylon because of their sinful ways and idolatrous worship. When the prophet was called, he was warned the people would not receive his message and repent. Yet Ezekiel was true to his calling and pursued his purpose. God did not leave His people without hope and judge them without an opportunity for redemption.

Ezekiel faithfully delivered the word of God and the desire of God to restore the people and rebuild the nation. The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel and he prophesied to the mountains of Israel (Ezekiel 36:24–28).

The fulfillment of the prophecy was primarily focused toward the restoration of the nation of Israel and the return to their land. They forsook their idolatry and returned to Jerusalem and the inheritance of their fathers. However, there was also a future fulfillment imbedded in the prophecy—a time when they would be cleansed of their transgression and given a new heart of flesh. No doubt the future redemptive work of Christ was in view through this prophecy.
The prophet Jeremiah also announced the promise of restoration, using the analogy of the heart. He declared the word of the Lord saying, “And I will give them an heart to know me, that I am the Lord: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God: for they shall return unto me with their whole heart” (Jeremiah 24:7).

Again Ezekiel prophesied in the midst of a valley of dry bones. He was instructed to prophesy to the bones, then to the wind, and finally to the people of Israel. When the people said, “Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost” (Ezekiel 37:11), he responded with a word from the Lord, “I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. . . . And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord” (Ezekiel 37:12, 14). God’s desire for Israel was that they might have a new heart and be filled with His Holy Spirit.

The restoration was about more than bringing the nation in exile back to their promised land. God’s plan was greater than property and provision. His purpose was to bring them into relationship with Him. When the fullness of time had come, Jesus was born to bring this plan into reality. (See Galatians 4:4–5.) John declared Jesus to be the Word: “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

The ministry of Jesus began with good news; that is the message of the gospel. Jesus came to deliver us from the curse of death and offer restoration through His resurrection. It is good news to the brokenhearted, the captive spirit, and the wounded soul (Luke 4:18–19).

III. THE NEW BIRTH

More is needed than a transplanted organ. Transformation through a spiritual rebirth is required. Jesus came to give us more than a new heart; He came to give us a new birth. Jesus said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

A. Nicodemus Came to Jesus

Nicodemus was a Pharisee who feared the ridicule of his peers should he be seen seeking spiritual advice from Jesus. He chose to come under the cloak of darkness to inquire of Jesus and learn more about His teaching. Jesus quickly cut to the core of his questions: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

As is often the case, answers only open up more questions. Puzzled, Nicodemus asked, “How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” (John 3:4).

Jesus spoke of spiritual things drawn from the understanding of natural experience. He said, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the
kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the
Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again” (John 3:5–7).

» Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus at night?
» What natural experience did Jesus speak of to illustrate a spiritual miracle?

B. You Must Be Born Again

The same prescription for the sin condition remains today. The straightforward
directive of Jesus was clear: You must be born again. The new birth is not merely a
suggestion, an optional alternative, or just a good idea. It is a prerequisite pronounced
to every individual who desires a new heart and the promise of eternal life.

When we respond in faith to the gospel message, God will lead us into the fullness
of spiritual experience—the birth of the water and the Spirit. The teaching of Scripture
and the witness of the Spirit of God will bring us to faith and to life. John wrote,
“These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and
that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:31).

The gospel message was proclaimed clearly on the Day of Pentecost. The crowds
grew as the word spread concerning the phenomenon of people speaking in tongues
they had never learned and behaving as though they were drunk though it was barely
nine o’clock in the morning. Thousands gathered in the courtyard of the Temple in
Jerusalem where Peter stood along with the other disciples. Peter began to explain
that this was what had been prophesied by the prophet Joel; this was the outpouring
of the Spirit of God. He declared that this was the work of Jesus the Messiah whom
some in that crowd had helped crucify just fifty days prior.

There was a mixed reaction to Peter’s message, but thousands responded in faith
and contrition. “They were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the
apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37, NKJV). Peter’s ready
response was, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ
for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:38).
These simple instructions were the application of the new-birth message.

To everyone who believes, the directive is clear: Forsake your sin, ask forgiveness,
and through faith and obedience be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The
promise of the Holy Spirit is being extended to those who hear, to their children, and
many more who are far away. (See Acts 2:39.) This is the way to be born again of the
water and of the Spirit. This is the beginning of a great transformation to a new life
and a new heart following after Jesus Christ.

» How did the disciples apply the message Jesus communicated to them concerning the
new birth, baptism, and making disciples?
INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The only problem with a heart transplant is that someone who is willing to donate his organs must die. Some have sacrificed a kidney to save another from dialysis and the associated problems of kidney failure. That is an awesome gift of sacrifice, but a person can live with one kidney. However, no one can give up his heart and survive. The unfortunate sacrifice through an accident or traumatic head injury causes death to one, but the donor’s organs can help several other people. One blessed person awaiting a heart transplant receives the call that a match has been found. The recipient drops everything to rush to the hospital and prepares for surgery to receive this great gift of life, a living heart.

Indeed, Jesus had to die to provide new hearts for believers who come to Him. Because of His death, life has passed to many. Jesus said, “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24, NIV).

On the last evening Jesus spent with His disciples before His arrest, trial, and death, Jesus took bread and drink from the table and gave new significance to them. With the cup in His hand, He proclaimed, “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28, NKJV). Through this act He signified the death He would soon endure and the significance of the sacrifice He made. His blood is essential in the remission of our sins, the cleansing of our spirits, and the empowerment of the new covenant in our lives.

Replacing the human heart with an artificial one has been especially difficult. The heart must work constantly, and it requires a lot of power to pump the thousands of gallons of blood through the body every day. The natural heart gets power from the blood. Artificial organs have not been able to figure out how to do that, so they depend on batteries or electrical recharge (http://www.businessinsider.com/mechanical-hearts-could-replace-human-ones-2015-11).

It is interesting that they have found that the power for the natural heart comes from the blood itself. We have found that our new hearts are empowered by the blood of Jesus Christ. The power is in the blood.

A new heart will change your life. Those who have had a heart transplant have confessed to having more energy, increased gratitude for the simple joys of life, and a greater focus on things that are truly important. After a brush with death, it is no wonder they have a greater appreciation for life and all those in it.

Jesus came to make all things new. Those who come to Him are promised a new life in Christ Jesus. Paul wrote, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (II Corinthians 5:17).
Restoration in the Valley

FOCUS THOUGHT
I will seek God to restore the broken parts of my life.

FOCUS VERSE
Ezekiel 37:14
And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it, saith the LORD.

LESSON TEXT
Ezekiel 37:11–14
11 Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts.
12 Therefore prophesy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel.
13 And ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves,
14 And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it, saith the LORD.

John 10:10
10 The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.
CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The burial custom in much of present-day western culture is to bury the deceased at a cemetery. A graveyard exists for the perpetual internment of the deceased, but, despite its solemn purpose, caretakers often take great pains to create an idyllic setting. This is not the case in other parts of the world, or even in other periods of western history. In some geographic locations where the ground is rocky and space is limited, bodies are interred only for a short time. Once the body has fully decomposed, the grave is opened and the bones are removed and placed in what are known as charnel houses, thereby allowing the burial plot to be reused.

Charnel houses are not as beautiful as cemeteries. They may contain thousands of bones, often lying out in the open for all to see. Yet one of the most uplifting accounts in Scripture is set in what could be described as a massive charnel house: Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones. Ezekiel described this valley as being “full of bones” (Ezekiel 37:1). Yet this place that could have been the backdrop for a horror movie became a place of miraculous promise.

OUTLINE

I. THE ENEMY COMES TO STEAL, KILL, AND DESTROY
   A. The Valleys We Experience
   B. The Battles We Face

II. GOD IS THE GIVER OF LIFE
   A. Ezekiel Preached
   B. Bones Came Together

III. GOD RESTORES
   A. Life Came into the Bodies in the Valley
   B. God Makes New

CULTURE CONNECTION

MAGNOLIA MIRACLES

Chip and Joanna Gaines are from Waco, Texas. This couple is widely known as being prolific at taking homes that are considered “Fixer Uppers” and turning them into beautiful living spaces for their customers. Their motto is “Making Waco beautiful, one home at a time” (https://magnoliamarket.com/about/, accessed October 2017). Their unique goal has been to tailor each home they restore to reflect the dynamics of the family for which they are building. In their minds, they are not just creating a lovely house, but leaving the family with a home that has their own special stamp on it.

Similar to the Gaineses taking dilapidated pieces of real estate and beginning restoration, so God works on us. He can step in and patch things up that we have left unattended or ignored, like forgiveness and spiritual disciplines. He is frequently tugging at our hearts to maintain the condition of our souls. However, there are times we get ourselves in such a mess that we need a complete overhaul. The fixer upper process sometimes requires a complete demolition and reconstruction. Jesus said, “Behold, I make all things new” (Revelation 21:5). We are more than a fixer upper; God has made us brand new.

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Charnel houses are not as beautiful as cemeteries. They may contain thousands of bones, often lying out in the open for all to see. Yet one of the most uplifting accounts in Scripture is set in what could be described as a massive charnel house: Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones. Ezekiel described this valley as being “full of bones” (Ezekiel 37:1). Yet this place that could have been the backdrop for a horror movie became a place of miraculous promise.
I. THE ENEMY COMES TO STEAL, KILL, AND DESTROY

Jesus outlined the threefold itinerary of the thief in John 10:10 when He said, “The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy.”

The word thief that Jesus employed meant “embezzler.” The word denotes one who “steals by stealth” (Strong’s Concordance). Satan does not kick down the door of the house and rob his victims by force. Rather, he is subtle: he steals in secret, a little at a time. His victims often do not realize what they have lost until it is too late.

When describing the thief’s desire to kill, Jesus used a word with connotations of sacrifice (Strong’s Concordance). Satan does not seek to physically murder his victims; all he needs to do is convince them to sacrifice their lives on the wrong altar, wasting themselves in the pursuit of false gods.

Finally, Jesus said the thief’s endgame is to destroy. Here, Jesus chose a word that meant “abolish, ruin, or render useless” (Strong’s Concordance). Satan wants his victims to feel they have no hope and no chance of restoration. His goal is complete annihilation. He wants to crush souls with utter despair.

Thankfully, God specializes in restoring hopeless cases and situations. In Matthew 18:11 Jesus declared His personal mission was “to save that which was lost.” The word translated destroy in John 10:10 is the same word Jesus used for lost in Matthew 18:11 (Strong’s Concordance). Jesus came to reclaim and restore what the thief destroyed.

Few accounts in Scripture better illustrate God’s restorative power than Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones.

A. The Valleys We Experience

There are many beautiful valleys on this planet, but Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones would not have been one of them. Ezekiel did not waste words describing the valley’s geographic features, mostly because the valley had one characteristic that made visitors forget all others: it was full of dry bones.

Imagine taking a walk through a beautiful valley and discovering a decomposing corpse somewhere along the trail. The setting would instantly take on a sense of foreboding, regardless of the beauty of the surrounding landscape. Likewise, a person’s life may be encircled with comfort, health, and wealth, but if his path is littered with metaphorical dry bones, it is hard to appreciate those blessings. It is impossible to ignore dry bones.

However, the dry bones were not the most depressing feature of the valley. God told Ezekiel the dry bones represented Israel, a nation who felt they were without hope (Ezekiel 37:11). Invading armies and national captivity had crushed Israel’s spirit. They believed they could not rise from the ruins.
Solomon noted, “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones” (Proverbs 17:22). Few things are more depressing than a broken spirit. When the spirit is broken, hope dries up. For Israel, and even for Ezekiel, believing their situation would improve seemed like foolishness. This truly was a valley without hope.

» Describe a situation in which you felt a sense of hopelessness.
» How did God restore your hope?

B. The Battles We Face

This valley was also a place where Ezekiel had to face his doubts. Would he believe what his eyes could see and his heart felt, or would he trust God’s omnipotent power?

God did not try to hide anything from His prophet. It was God who brought Ezekiel to the valley in the first place (Ezekiel 37:1). God did not attempt to sugarcoat the situation; He gave Ezekiel a full tour of the valley before asking, “Can these bones live?” (Ezekiel 37:3).

Ezekiel had surveyed the skeletons and took note that “lo, they were very dry” (Ezekiel 37:2). No flesh was visible; the vultures apparently had picked them clean. The bones were bleached by the sun. Their condition caused Ezekiel to question. His voice undoubtedly was tinged with hesitation when he responded, “O Lord God, thou knowest” (Ezekiel 37:3).

Every believer faces similar battles with doubts and questions. Sometimes things appear to be hopeless. Then God asks a question that makes us question. Can this relationship truly be healed? Will our backslidden children come home? Can our failing marriage be revived? Can our church survive this crisis?

Sometimes our feelings of doubt are so overwhelming that we can barely muster the faith to whisper, “Lord God, thou knowest.”

» What doubts and questions are you currently facing?

II. GOD IS THE GIVER OF LIFE

James DeLoach, a pastor from Houston, Texas, described an inspiring painting he once saw. The painting featured a mountain shack that had burned to the ground, with only the chimney still standing. A grandfatherly-looking man and a young boy stood in front of their ruined home, surveying the damage. They were clutching their last few remaining earthly possessions. Understandably, the boy was crying.

In the caption of the painting, the artist had included the grandfather’s response to the young boy’s tears: “Hush child, God ain’t dead!” (www.SermonIllustrations.com).

Ezekiel probably could have related to the young boy in the painting. Israel’s situation did appear hopeless, but God was not dead. A miracle was needed to restore hope, but God is a miracle worker.
The thief may have stolen what was precious and laid waste to our lives, but Jesus is the restorer (John 10:10). Jesus has risen from the dead, and He has been resurrecting hopeless situations ever since.

A. Ezekiel Preached

God gave Ezekiel many peculiar commands throughout the prophet’s ministry. (See Ezekiel 4:9–15, for example). On this day God gave Ezekiel another unusual assignment: preach to dead bones (Ezekiel 37:4). God even provided the sermon Ezekiel was to preach: “Ye shall live” (Ezekiel 37:5). The sermon must have seemed silly under the circumstances, but regardless of how ridiculous he may have felt, Ezekiel prophesied as he was commanded (Ezekiel 37:7).

» Has God ever asked you to do something you did not understand? Explain.
» What was your response?

The prophet’s obedient response stands as a challenge to modern-day believers: will we obey God and speak His Word over our hopeless situations, or will we allow despair to silence our prayers? The thief desires to steal the faith from our hearts and God’s Word from our lips, effectively annihilating any hope of restoration. But when we declare what God has said, all things become possible.

» Which Scripture verses speak to your situation? Commit them to memory and begin using them as part of your personal devotions.

B. Bones Came Together

There would not seem to be a more unresponsive congregation than a valley full of dry bones. Yet, as Ezekiel obeyed God and declared His message, something supernatural occurred. It is easy to imagine Ezekiel temporarily going speechless with amazement when the heretofore dead congregation responded with “a noise” and “a shaking” (Ezekiel 37:7). This probably was not what the prophet expected.

Ezekiel watched in awe as the bones came together. Then muscles and flesh enclosed the skeletons. Finally, skin covered the bodies. Ezekiel had to be elated. His preaching had been followed by an incredible demonstration of God’s power.

The results of Ezekiel’s preaching foreshadow Paul’s words in Ephesians 4. God’s purpose is that His “whole body” would be “fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth” (Ephesians 4:16). Whether in the physical body or the body of Christ, there can be no healing or restoration until the individual members come together in unity. Sometimes the body of Christ needs a miracle similar to what Ezekiel witnessed in the valley.

Ezekiel preached, yet the restoration was only partially complete. God could have immediately caused the bones to come together into a fully formed, fully outfitted, and wholly alive army ready to march into battle against Israel’s enemies. Instead the bones joined together and were restored into fully formed bodies, but they were still dead.
As He so often does, God used a process to perform the miracle. God usually does not complete His work in our lives with one prayer. As Jesus demonstrated in the Gospels, sometimes a “second touch” is required before restoration is complete. (See Mark 8:22–26.)

Do not be discouraged when God’s work seems unfinished. God does not always instantly restore the dry bones in our lives. He requires us to proceed in obedience, watching His plan play out one step of faith at a time. We cannot quit. We must keep praying. We must continue speaking the promises of God. We must position ourselves in a place where we can hear God’s Word proclaimed, because His Word restores. The miracle is underway!

» What miracles are currently in progress in your life?

III. GOD RESTORES

Ezekiel was amazed by what God had done in restoring the bones into bodies, but he could not overlook an important reality: “there was no breath in them” (Ezekiel 37:8). The prophet recognized that a dead corpse is just as useless as a pile of bones. The miracle was not yet finished, but neither was God. He spoke to Ezekiel again and commanded, “Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live” (Ezekiel 37:9).

Like Ezekiel, we must keep proclaiming what God has spoken. His work is not finished.

» How do faith and perseverance work together?

A. Life Came into the Bodies in the Valley

Ezekiel may have felt a little foolish prophesying to the dry bones, but his faith undoubtedly was bolstered by the time he began prophesying to the wind. There may have been hesitation in his voice before, but now it is easy to imagine him proclaiming God’s commands with confidence.

As Ezekiel obeyed, the wind began to blow. God’s prophet must have felt a holy chill run down his spine as he watched these corpses inhale breath. Moments later they began to stir and then stand to their feet. Soon Ezekiel was leading roll call for “an exceeding great army” (Ezekiel 37:10).

God’s work was not complete just because dry bones were now breathing bodies, however. The people to whom this vision was given needed more than physical breath: they needed hope. They were in exile in a foreign land. They felt their nation was dead and buried, relegated to the ash heap of history.

God knew Israel’s predicament, so He gave them an additional promise: “[I] shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the L ORD have spoken it, and performed it, saith the L ORD” (Ezekiel 37:14).

87
God still cares about those who are far from Him today. To those in spiritual exile, God offers a promise of hope through the apostle Paul: “But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ . . . For through Him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father” (Ephesians 2:13, 18).

Do you know any spiritual “exiles”?
What could you do to encourage them?

B. God Makes New

Reading Ezekiel’s vision of a miraculous wind that revived an army and restored a nation reminds us of a conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus, a first-century spiritual “exile.” Jesus told Nicodemus about another wind that was beginning to blow across the land. “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

“Suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind . . . And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:2, 4).

The little band of Spirit-filled believers who walked out of that Pentecostal prayer meeting began their work by following the example of the prophet Ezekiel: they proclaimed God’s Word to a nation enslaved in dead, dry, religious traditions.

That same wind continues to blow around the world today. The Holy Spirit still restores the dead to life and brings hope to broken spirits. The promise Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost still applies to us today. This wind knows no boundaries, and it will blow wherever people will obey.

Why do you think Jesus chose the analogies of breath and wind when describing the Holy Spirit?

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Ezekiel’s vision of a valley of dry bones still speaks to us today because we can relate to Israel’s situation and their resulting emotions. Hopelessness. Despair. Shattered dreams. Despondency. They overwhelm us. Where do we turn when people don’t keep their promises? What do we do when it feels we are far from where we know we should be? How do we respond when the thief steals our hope and annihilates our dreams?

Thankfully, the Savior does keep His promises. He says, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Jesus promises to restore the hopes and dreams the thief has stolen. He promises abundant life through the power of His Holy Spirit.

Why do you think the account of the valley of dry bones is so well loved?
What timeless truths does this vision convey?
Behold the Lamb of God

FOCUS THOUGHT
I will worship the Lamb of God who suffered and died to give me salvation.

FOCUS VERSE
John 1:29
The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

LESSON TEXT
Isaiah 53:1–10
1 Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?
2 For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.
3 He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
4 Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.
5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.
6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.
7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.
8 He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.
9 And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.
10 Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.
CULTURE CONNECTION

GIVING UP TO GAIN

Often things worth doing or acquiring come with a price. The price may not always be accommodating to our personal budgets, but if we desire it badly enough, the price may not be too great of a burden. Each person places a different value on opportunities to obtain something they desire. What might be worthless to one, may be priceless to another.

For most the price tag placed on our own lives is significant. Priceless even. A recent Global News article headline reads, “Father sacrifices himself to save daughter from getting hit by train” (https://globalnews.ca, accessed February 2018). This father valued his child’s life much more than his own.

As the news story described, the daughter’s foot was stuck in the tracks and the train was quickly approaching. In the heat of the moment, this father did not have to spend much time contemplating the value of his life compared to the life of his daughter’s. He acted out of instinct and a father’s love.

There are times where selflessness and love will far outweigh our own priorities. Just like the father in the story above, some things simply do not matter when compared to those whom we care for. We find this every day when it comes to God’s mercy. Jesus Christ sacrificed His own life on Calvary, valuing our salvation above His own life.

OUTLINE

I. JESUS CAME TO EARTH TO REDEEM US

II. SUFFERING WAS PART OF THE PLAN
   A. Man of Sorrows and Acquainted with Grief
   B. Despised and Rejected by Men

III. HE WAS WOUNDED FOR US
   A. Our Transgression and Iniquities
   B. Our Healing

IV. HIS SUFFERING BROUGHT US SALVATION

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The US Navy’s Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) training program is considered one of the most grueling in the world, but it produces elite commandos.

BUD/S trainees can quit anytime they feel their suffering has become unbearable. All they must do to end the misery is ring the bell that hangs in the center of their training compound, signaling to their instructors they have had enough.

At the University of Texas on May 17, 2014, Admiral William McRaven told students about the constant temptation offered by the presence of the bell.

Ring the bell and you no longer have to wake up at five o’clock. Ring the bell and you no longer have to do the freezing cold swims. Ring the bell and you no longer have to do the runs, the obstacle course, the PT—and you no longer have to endure the hardships of training. Just ring the bell.

McRaven then said, “If you want to change the world, don’t ever, ever ring the bell” (https://news.utexas.edu).
SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

On His way to Calvary, Jesus Christ had plenty of opportunities to “ring the bell.” Satan showed Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them” (Matthew 4:8) and offered Him the crown without the cross. As death drew closer, Jesus knew He had “more than twelve legions of angels” at His disposal, ready to respond at His direction (Matthew 26:53). The chief priests, scribes, and elders challenged Him to call it quits, jeering, “Let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him” (Matthew 27:42).

Despite these taunts and temptations, Jesus Christ “endured the cross, despising the shame” (Hebrews 12:2). The result of His suffering was new life, healing, strength, and, most importantly, salvation for all humanity.

In what ways has suffering produced blessing in your life?

I. JESUS CAME TO EARTH TO REDEEM US

The road to the Cross began in the Garden of Eden. As soon as man sinned, God offered the promise of restoration. Even while pronouncing judgment, our Creator promised a deliverer who would bruise the serpent’s head (Genesis 3:15).

Several thousand years later, John the Baptist heralded the arrival of Jesus, proclaiming, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). First-century Jews living in Palestine were accustomed to the presence of sheep in their daily lives. The animals provided everything from clothing to food. But for a devout Jew, a lamb’s most important role was to serve as a sacrifice. Devout Jews could recite the story of how their ancestor Abraham had taken his only son, Isaac, to the top of Mount Moriah where he prophetically declared, “My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering” (Genesis 22:8). Lambs and sacrifice were intertwined thereafter.

Thus, inherent in John’s commendation was the idea that Jesus, the Lamb of God, would be slaughtered for the salvation of others. It was a plan that hearkened back to before time began. Jesus came to earth knowing He was “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8).

II. SUFFERING WAS PART OF THE PLAN

Scan the news headlines and it is obvious the world is full of suffering, much of which results from sin. From felonious acts fueled by alcohol and drugs to atrocities inspired by pride and greed, it is evident sin is the root cause of much of the suffering in the world.

So it has been since the beginning. God told Adam and Eve their sin would bring suffering. God warned Eve, “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow” (Genesis 3:16). Even the joyous occasion of childbirth would be tarnished. Turning to Adam, God said, “Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life” (Genesis 3:17). Even creation itself was marred, as God warned that “thorns
also and thistles” would spring up from the ground (3:18), making man’s work more difficult. God promised Adam, “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground” (Genesis 3:19). Since that day, suffering has been a consistent theme in the story of humanity.

In order for Jesus to relate to the world He wanted to save, He had to suffer. Suffering was part of the penalty of sin, and since Jesus came to bear that penalty on our behalf, He joined us in our sufferings.

» How have your personal sins produced suffering in your life?

» How has Jesus helped you deal with that pain?

A. Man of Sorrows and Acquainted with Grief

Isaiah wrote one of the most poetic and prophetic descriptions of the suffering Christ. In chapter 53 the prophet described the Messiah as a man subject to “sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3).

Jesus was not afraid to associate with those who had lost someone they loved. He accompanied Jairus to his dying daughter’s bedside (Luke 8:41–42, 49–56). Jesus dropped in on a funeral procession at the city of Nain, comforted the grieving mother, and raised her son back to life (Luke 7:11–16). While Jesus showed up late for His friend Lazarus’s funeral, He did so with a divine purpose (John 11).

Sometimes we are afraid to be around those who have suffered grief or loss because we really do not know what to do or say. We fear doing or saying the wrong thing, so we avoid the situation. But not Jesus. He knew precisely what to say to the suffering. He knew how to console the grieving. He could minister to the hurting. And He still does today.

» Do you sometimes avoid those who are suffering because you do not know what to say? Explain.

» In what ways could God help you become a comforting presence to those individuals?

B. Despised and Rejected by Men

If any man ever felt the sting of rejection, it was Jesus. Before He was even born, Isaiah described Him as “despised and rejected of men . . . he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:3).

The rejection began close to home. John 7 opens with “the Jews sought to kill him” (John 7:1), followed by an account of how Jesus’ own brothers scoffed at His ministry (John 7:3–5). In another incident Mark records that Jesus’ family responded to His actions by saying, “He is out of His mind” (Mark 3:21, NKJV). No wonder Jesus said, “And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household” (Matthew 10:36).

Jesus’ childhood neighbors offered Him a less-than-friendly reception when He came home to preach. The residents of Nazareth were “offended in him” (Matthew 13:57) and dismissed Him in derision, saying, “Is not this the carpenter’s son?”
This prompted Jesus to observe, “A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house” (Matthew 13:57).

The final week of Jesus’ life was highlighted with rejection. Things began promisingly enough. Jesus entered Jerusalem to echoes of “Hosanna: Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord” (John 12:13). However, before the week was over, those shouts of praise had turned to bloodthirsty chants of “crucify him” (John 19:15). When Pilate offered the people a choice between Barabbas and Jesus, the mob chose the criminal over Christ.

Jesus even endured rejection from and abandonment by His closest disciples. Judas betrayed Him with a kiss (Luke 22:48), and the rest ran away in fear (Mark 14:50). Peter “followed him afar off” (Mark 14:54) before proceeding to deny Jesus three times, exactly as the Lord had previously predicted.

When Jesus needed support the most, He instead felt the painful stab of abandonment and rejection. Isaiah wrote, “We esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:3), using a term associated with accounting (Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, Lexical Aids to the Old Testament). Even those who were closest to Jesus did not understand His true value or worth.

Have you been dismissed? undervalued? rejected? So was Jesus. Paul encouraged Timothy by saying, “If we suffer, we shall also reign with him” (II Timothy 2:12). One day our worth will be revealed by the Savior who also knew how it felt to suffer rejection.

How does the fact that Jesus was rejected help you deal with rejection?

III. HE WAS WOUNDED FOR US

Jesus’ suffering went beyond the emotional trauma of sorrow, grief, and rejection. He also endured physical harm on our behalf. “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

The physical wounds of Jesus bring healing to the damage inflicted by our transgressions. He is more than the Comforter who will join us in our sorrows: He is the Savior who will deliver us from our sins.

A. Our Transgression and Iniquities

David wrote of the blessed state of the man “whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” (Psalm 32:1). David certainly knew firsthand how it felt to be forgiven. Isaiah said the Messiah would be “wounded for our transgressions” (Isaiah 53:5). The word David and Isaiah both used for transgression also meant “rebellion” (Strong’s Concordance).

There is nothing accidental about our transgressions. We did not “slip up” and fall into sin. Isaiah accurately described our attitude when he wrote, “We have turned every one to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). We willfully chose the path of rebellion against God, His commands, and His kingdom. Yet even that willful rebellion can be forgiven.
How does making excuses for our sins hinder us from experiencing forgiveness and restoration?

Jesus Christ took our rebellion and our iniquities to the cross. Isaiah said, “The LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). Isaiah’s words bring to mind Leviticus 16, with its description of the scapegoat bearing the sins of Israel into the wilderness (Leviticus 16:10). Our bloodied, beaten Savior put both the cross and our sins on His lacerated back and dragged it all to Calvary.

This imagery is further established in Isaiah 53:11, when the prophet added, “For he shall bear their iniquities.” Isaiah used a word that meant “bear a load, drag oneself along” (Strong’s Concordance). The weight of the sins of the world was the heaviest burden anyone ever has borne, yet Jesus Christ shouldered the load.

David referenced the manner in which we obtain forgiveness for our transgressions and iniquities. He wrote, “I acknowledge my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin” (Psalm 32:5).

Just as the Old Testament priest confessed the sins of the people over the scapegoat, so we confess our sins to Jesus Christ. We do so with complete confidence that He will carry them away forever, never to be held against us again.

What sins do you need to confess to God? Take time to do so today.

B. Our Healing

The second benefit of Christ’s suffering was it purchased our healing, both spiritual and physical. Isaiah declared, “With his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

Matthew, Mark, and John all described Jesus being whipped by Roman soldiers (John 19:1; Mark 15:15; Matthew 27:26), while Luke alluded to this act (Luke 23:22). Jesus’ flesh was torn open by a Roman whip so our flesh could be healed.

Isaiah used a Hebrew word for “healed” (raphe) that most Bible students are at least somewhat familiar with. God previously had revealed Himself as Jehovah-Rapha, the healer, in Exodus 15. Israel had encountered the brackish waters of Marah, and God “healed” the bitterness when Moses threw a tree into the pool at God’s command (Exodus 15:22–27).

When Jehovah-Rapha took on human flesh through the Incarnation, healing was a significant part of His ministry. Jesus’ first miracle was similar to the one in Exodus 15, but instead of making bitter water drinkable, He turned ordinary water into “good wine” (John 2:10). Peter offered a single-verse biography of Jesus in his sermon at Cornelius’ house, stating the Lord “went about doing good, and healing” (Acts 10:38). The type of infirmity did not matter. Jesus cured everything from skin diseases to death.

Peter repeated the promise of Isaiah 53:5 when referring to the crucifixion of Jesus in his first epistle (I Peter 2:24). Peter had seen many of Jesus’ healing miracles
firsthand, and he also had witnessed the power of healing in his own ministry (Acts 3:1–10). Years later Peter encouraged his readers with the promise that God still heals.

» **What miracles of healing have you personally witnessed?**  
» **Share those stories with someone who needs healing.**

### IV. HIS SUFFERING BROUGHT US SALVATION

Crucifixion is one of the most painful and humiliating forms of torture ever devised, almost too horrible to contemplate, yet Christ “endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). Why? Jesus was nailed to a cross, in full view of a gawking populace. Newsweek magazine described crucifixion as “a political weapon,” used against agitators. The magazine quoted author Stephen Mansfield as saying it was “an act of state terror.” Crucifixion was intended to send a chilling message to any would-be rebels: do not try this at home. The Romans cruelly executed thousands in this manner during the time of Christ (www.newsweek.com).

Jesus Christ took one of the ugliest acts ever devised, a form of torture designed to generate fear and ensure subjugation, and used it to bring joy, peace, and liberation to millions. Today the cross is not viewed as a symbol of torture, but as a beacon of hope. Only the highest aim could motivate someone to accept the worst form of punishment, and there was no loftier goal than the one Jesus Christ pursued at the cross. His suffering brought our salvation.

» **As you travel throughout your community this week, pay special attention to any crosses you see. What message do you think is intended by the display of those crosses?**

#### INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Most of the people who watched Jesus die did not understand who He was or why He came. They fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, “We esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:3). They thought He was just another would-be messiah, a threat to the local peace and their way of life. They were glad to be rid of Him.

There were a few whose minds were changed as they beheld Christ on the cross. Matthew wrote, “Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God” (Matthew 27:54).

May that be our experience as we “behold the Lamb.” We should spend time prayerfully contemplating the sacrifice Jesus made for us. May it never become just another story.

John repeated this statement, “Behold the Lamb!” in John 1:36. Two of his disciples, including Andrew, “heard him speak, and they followed Jesus” (John 1:37).

» **How can you “Behold the Lamb” in your personal worship time this week?**

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95