Formations
Adult Bible Study

STUDY GUIDE

September-December 2023

God's New People
 Peter's Letter to Spiritual Exiles

. Offering Our Gifts to God

Thinking Deeply about Stewardship

Solomon's Temple
 Building and Rebuilding for God's Glory

Awaiting Christ

The Long-Awaited King Appears



Formations Learner's Study Guide

September–Decemeber 2023

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From the Editor

We are fast approaching the end of another year. I hope it has been good to you: that you have learned something, that you have loved someone, that you have been given more to celebrate than to mourn.

A new year invites us to reflect on how God makes all things new. It invites us to remember where we have come from and how God has been with us along the way. It invites us to take stock of the gifts we have been given and how we can offer them back to God. It calls us to consider how we might find comfort and conviction in good times and bad.

As always, I count it an honor that you have trusted *Formations* to be part of your church's ministry of making disciples. May you end the year well, and may you face the new year in joyful anticipation of greater growth to come.

Blessings,
Darrell Pursiful
Formations Series Editor

How to Use This Study Guide

Adult *Formations* is designed to help adults study Scripture seriously within the context of the larger Christian tradition and, through that process, find their faith renewed, challenged, and strengthened. We study the Scriptures because we believe they affect our lives in important ways. Our format is arranged in four movements:

Reflecting recalls a contemporary story, anecdote, example, or illustration to help us anticipate the session's relevance in our lives.

Studying is centered on the authoritative influence of the Scriptures. In this movement, the biblical material receives in-depth attention and is sometimes surrounded by helpful insights from theology, ethics, church history, and other areas.

Understanding helps us find relevant connections between our lives and the biblical message. The truths we discover help us recognize how God is calling us toward change, renewal, commitment, or action.

What About Me? provides brief statements that help unite life issues with the meaning of the biblical text. These statements summarize the major themes of the session.

In Each Session

Several features are common to each session of Adult *Formations*. The first page of each week's Bible study session contains the session Scripture and a Central Question. The following is a brief description of how each of these features aids in the Bible study process.

- The session Scripture identifies the Scripture text of focus for each week. The text, or a significant portion of it, is printed for your reference.
- The Central Question helps identify life issues that can help focus your thinking. The Central Question attempts to name those areas of possible tension when we open our lives to God's word.
- Supplements for each session are inserted into the text by means of gray boxes. Additional background information is marked by the context icon. A pair of arrows indicates a Scripture cross-reference. A question mark indicates a question offered to highlight the relevance of each study. A

- word balloon points to quotations from notable people, Christian or otherwise, on a topic relevant to the lesson.
- Unless otherwise noted, the NRSV translation of the Bible is used for all Scripture references in Adult Formations.



Context



Scripture Cross-Reference



Questions to Ponder



Quotation

Unit 1: God's New People

First Peter was written to Christians who had been scattered throughout the five provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. This covered a huge geographical territory; therefore, this letter reached many Christians, mostly converted Gentiles. Peter wrote as a hopeful realist. He understood that these early Christians would likely suffer persecution for their faith. Suffering is one of the dominant themes in this letter. Yet Peter believed that suffering was a valuable test to strengthen faith.

In the book of Acts, Peter's opponents called him an "uneducated and ordinary" man (4:13). It is clear from this letter, however, that he was knowledgeable about the Bible. Peter quoted Scripture as prolifically as any other apostle. He regularly quoted the Psalms and prophets to declare Jesus Christ as God's precious cornerstone and anointed one—as the true spiritual leader of the church. Jesus gave his life for all people. He suffered and died, he rose again, and he will return triumphantly. Just as Jesus suffered, Christians also should expect to be mistreated in this life. Yet, amid pain and suffering, God will take care of God's people. We can cast our burdens and worries upon God.

Peter was also a realist who believed in the power of humility and submission. He believed that kindness conquers hate. He understood, too, that Christians are engaged in spiritual warfare. The devil prowls about as a roaring lion, seeking to devour the unprepared. We are therefore to be alert.

Furthermore, Christians are to be disciplined in their behavior and their faith. Peter was convinced that the best way to live within the structures of society was to walk and live humbly and submissively. Christians are to respect the authority of human institutions. God put them in place for our benefit; if they prove otherwise, we must seek to win others over by words and actions of Christian love (1 Pet 4:8).

T. Wayne Proctor is pastor of Eure Baptist Church in Gates County, North Carolina. He has pastored this congregation for twenty years. He is married with two grown children. One of his passions is

walking for exercise. He loves the church and remains engaged in a number of other important ministries.

A Sure Inheritance



1 Peter 1:3-12

Central Question

What does it mean to be saved?

Scripture

1 Peter 1:3-12

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, 7 so that the genuineness of your faithbeing more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Although you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 10 Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace intended for you made careful search and inquiry, 11 inquiring about the time and circumstances that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings intended for Christ and the subsequent glory. 12 It was revealed to them that they

were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look!

Reflecting

Ravan is a church planter in southwestern India. He currently pastors a church of fifty to sixty believers and has groups in six other villages. Ravan understands persecution because when he was younger, he was employed by the government to harass and persecute non-Hindus, predominantly Muslims and Christians.

Working for Prime Minister Modi's RSS, a volunteer right-wing paramilitary organization, Ravan and other young men terrorized many communities under the guise of national purification. He enjoyed being a feared man and thought nothing of beating up innocent people and bearing false witness against them for the purpose of getting them arrested. He relished the power, good pay, and free alcohol, admitting that he was very much an alcoholic.

This was his life until he crashed his motorcycle and almost died. But God used the accident for a greater purpose. When Ravan awoke at the hospital, his mother was by his side. His mother was a Christian and had been praying fervently for him since he was a child.

The next Sunday, Ravan's mother asked him to go to church with her. Ravan didn't want to because he was painfully aware that the Christians knew of his work for the government. Nevertheless, he went. During the service, he knew that God was speaking to him. The pastor prayed with Ravan after the service, and Ravan felt God making changes in his life.

Within two months he had stopped drinking and smoking. He married a Christian woman and became the father of two children. In 2016, he responded to God's call to be a church planter. One of Ravan's former RSS associates accepted Christ because he knew how Ravan had formerly lived and could witness the transformation of his new life. (*Voice of the Martyrs*)

Studying

Peter addresses Christians whom he identifies as both "exiles" and "chosen" (1 Pet 1:1). They were chosen according to the foreknowledge of

God the Father (v. 2), and they were exiles living in places that were not their permanent homes. They may have lived in five Roman provinces along the Black Sea, but heaven was their true home.

The theme of Peter's letter is "a living hope" (v. 3) or "a sure inheritance" (v. 4). It is the message of salvation through Jesus Christ.

What does it mean to be saved? Salvation is a new birth, a new life that God bestows upon those who believe. Like newborn infants (2:2), believers must grow into salvation, nourishing their souls with "pure, spiritual milk."

Though this new birth is something in the readers' past, it looks forward to future blessings. Specifically, Peter



Peter is unique in the New Testament in describing God's saving work in terms of new birth or being born

again (vv. 3, 23). In John's writings, we find the metaphor of being "born from above" (John 3:3, 7) or "born of God" (1 John 3:9, 5:1, 4, 18).

explains that we are born into a living hope and an imperishable inheritance. This inheritance is "kept in heaven for you" (1:4), a further indication that it is not yet something we fully experience on earth. Rather, it is the goal toward which we strive.

This salvation is also explicitly rooted in "the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (v. 3). Later in this chapter, Peter affirms his trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead (v. 21). In chapter 3, he associates baptism with an appeal to God through Jesus's resurrection (3:21).

When we read Peter's sermons in the book of Acts, we see that every one emphasizes Jesus's resurrection from the grave. We serve a risen Savior, and salvation is an act of grace. This salvation was first proclaimed by prophets and angels and the Holy Spirit, all of them communicating God's divine plan for humanity's redemption (vv. 10-12).

This salvation is also based in God's work of providing Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for humanity's sins. The sinless Christ (2:22; Heb 4:15; 7:26-28) voluntarily suffered and died. Though Peter acknowledges that Jesus "suffered for our sins" (3:18), his greater emphasis is on God raising Jesus from the dead.



'Tis no easy matter to be saved. 'Twas difficult work to Jesus Christ to work redemption for us. 'Tis ork to the Spirit to work

difficult work to the Spirit to work grace in us, and to carry it on against corruptions, temptations, distractions.

—Philip Henry

Protected by the power of God (1:5),

believers now commit to live in relationship with Jesus in the context of the church. Centuries before, Deuteronomy 32:18 affirmed that God had given birth to the nation of Israel. In a similar way, the new birth that believers experience is grounded in the community of faith. We are God's own people (2:10), traveling to our promised land.

There is another aspect of salvation: we respond to God by living out our Christian commitment in what Peter calls the "genuineness of your faith" (v. 7). Let us look at this relationship of salvation through three phrases found in this passage.

Peter's first readers have an inheritance with Christ that was "kept in heaven for you" (v. 4). An inheritance is something passed down from parents to children. The plan for inheritance often happens before children are even born. A will is drawn up with the expectation that it will one day be executed. Unlike an earthly inheritance, the Christian's inheritance of salvation is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading" (v. 4). These words describe purity and permanence. No earthly inheritances can claim such an eternal presence.

Christian believers also have a relationship with Christ "through faith" (v. 5). One of Jesus's great parables is that of the prodigal son (Lk 15). The youngest son wanted his inheritance. Although the father was not obligated to give it, he did so anyway. The son proved to be very foolish, however. It wasn't long before he had wasted his father's gift. Eventually he came to his senses, regretting his foolish thinking and wasteful actions. He longed for his father and his home. As he made the journey home, he was a broken and repentant young man who feared that he had lost his father's love and respect forever. He deserved punishment and wanted mercy, but instead he found grace. He got what he did not deserve. The father showed faith in his son not for what he was but for what he could be. The father believed in what he had not yet seen.

If we reverse the story, we can say that the Christian believer has faith in One who is not yet physically seen. "Although you have not seen him," Peter writes, "you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him" (v. 8). Peter had seen Jesus. He had loved Jesus and fully believed in Jesus. He knew that he was blessed to be an original disciple,

yet he also knew that faith in Christ for these new believers could be just as strong and enduring.

Finally, Peter's first readers "rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy" (v. 8). They rejoice in the gift of Christ and in their new relationship with Christ (v. 6).

The theme of joy and rejoicing is prominent in the New Testament. For example, James, a fellow leader of the early church, tells his readers to consider it pure joy when they face trials and testing of their faith (Jas 1:2). And the apostle Paul writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (Phil 4:4).

Joy is akin to happiness, but it is much more than that. Joy doesn't depend on circumstances. It is more than an emotion; it is the byproduct of a vital and enduring relationship with Jesus Christ. One common thread, whether we read it from Peter, James, or Paul, is the exhortation to be joyful even amid persecution. Persecution was a common reality for the first-century church.

According to church tradition, virtually every apostle and key leader suffered and died for their

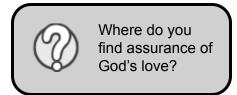
faith. A popular legend is that Peter was crucified upside down when he protested that he was unworthy of being crucified right side up.

What does it mean to be saved? It means that, through the resurrection of Christ, we are heirs of an unfading inheritance. It means that we follow God in faith and rejoice in all that God has done for us. In this way, we live out our commitment to God even when we face resistance.

Understanding

When Kelly Clark was eighteen, she was an Olympic gold medal snowboarding champion. She had money and fame. She had poured her whole life into the sport of snowboarding, yet something was still missing. She had accomplished almost everything, but she lacked joy within.

Then her life was jolted into a new direction she never would have imagined. As she watched some of her competitors come down the pipe in a qualifying round, one of them fell on both of her runs and cried as if her world had fallen apart. A friend came up



to her, trying to make her laugh and telling her, "It's all right. God still loves you."

Overhearing that brief message changed Kelly's world. She couldn't get the idea that God still loved *her* out of her head. Before that moment, Kelly had never gone to church, had never read the Bible, and had never thought much about God. But something undeniable was stirred inside her. When she got back to her hotel room, she thought, "There must be a Bible here somewhere." Sure enough, there was, but Kelly had no clue what to do with it.

Then she remembered that the girl who had said "God still loves you" was staying down the hallway. She knocked on her door and exclaimed, "Hey, my name's Kelly, and I think you might be a Christian, and I think you need to tell me about God."

Kelly spent the next four months thinking, "God, if you're real, reveal yourself to me." Through her struggle and journey, Kelly realized that she could no longer pretend that God did not exist. Therefore, by faith she asked Jesus to come and live life with her. (Clark)

What About Me?

- How do I say thank you for salvation? First Peter begins with an expression of praise to God for the salvation that God has made possible through Christ. Salvation involves a personal relationship with the one who loved us enough to die for our sins, rise from the grave, and prepare an eternal home for all who confess him as Lord. Have you thanked God this week for a salvation that you could not earn? It is Christ's gift to you.
- What does salvation mean to you? These days, we seldom hear the word "salvation" outside of church. In Peter's world, though, the word could refer to any experience of healing or rescue from danger. Reflect on what salvation means to you. From what are we saved, and to what end? What does Peter mean by describing this salvation as a new birth?
- Where did your faith journey begin? Some begin their faith journey in church. Their parents or grandparents bring them, and they hear the message of salvation in Sunday school and worship. In short, they may have never known a life without Christian love and acceptance. Others have

different stories in which they come to know the love of God through Christ later in life. No matter how we grew up, whether in a Christian environment or not, we all have an innate desire and need to know God. Reflect on when you first became aware of this longing for God.

• How can saved people endure hardships? The salvation Jesus provides is now the inheritance of believers. This doesn't keep us from facing various trials in this world, however. How can suffering cause us to lose sight of what is ours in Christ? What can we do to realign our perspective?

Resources

Kelly Clark, "I've Never Been More Free," BeyondtheUltimate.org, http://www.beyondtheultimate.org/athletes/Kelly-Clark.aspx.

"The Hindu Hit Man Changed Through Prayer," *The Voice of the Martyrs* 56/5 (May 2022): 6–8. Richard B. Vinson, "1 Peter," *1 & 2 Peter, Jude*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2010).

A Chosen Race



1 Peter 2:1-12

Central Question

How can I live faithfully in an unwelcoming world?

Scripture

1 Peter 2:1-12

1 Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. 2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. 4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 5 like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." 7 This honor, then, is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," 8 and "A stone that makes them stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. 9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now

you have received mercy. 11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. 12 Conduct yourselves honorably among the gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

Reflecting

Harold Morris spent many years in prison for a crime he did not commit. As a young adult, he became friends with the wrong crowd. Eventually he found himself driving the getaway car for two men who had shot and killed someone. Later, Harold's friends swore that he was the killer, which resulted in his incarceration on death row. Prison was an unwelcoming world, and Harold largely survived by his wits and hate. Yet the day came when he grew tired of the struggle. Convinced that he had no hope or future, he began to plot his suicide.

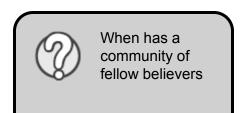
When Harold discovered that he wouldn't be able to secure the poison needed to end his life, he began to rant against a God he didn't believe in. He later wrote, "Now I sat on death row, without hope, unable to live and unable to die. For the first time in my life I knelt and prayed. 'God, if You are real, take my life or free me! I can't stand this place anymore'" (76).

Over the next weeks and months, God brought significant people into Harold's life. The first was a boy, Cliff, who loved sports and Jesus. The second was Harold's brother, Carl, and the third was Harold's mother. Harold had been so ashamed that he refused to let family know of his imprisonment; but now they offered Harold forgiveness and support.

The fourth person was a disabled Marine hero named Clebe McClary. Clebe was now an evangelist, and Harold was his mission. He gave Harold a Bible and challenged him to read it. Soon he was devouring the word of God. Clebe also arranged for Harold to speak to thousands of students, many of whom connected with his story and witness.

Studying

Peter quotes Isaiah 28:16, which describes God's provision of "a cornerstone chosen and precious" (v. 6), and Psalm 118:22, saying



"the stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner" (v. 7). What is the connection between these Old shaped or strengthened your faith?

Testament passages and the exiled believers of Peter's day, described as "living stones" and a "spiritual house" (v. 5)? The connection is the transformative work of salvation. These believers, some of them Jewish but mostly Gentile, have experienced a new spiritual birth; they are now "newborn infants" (v. 2). Therefore, Peter admonishes them to grow in living out the Christian life faithfully. The cornerstone was a favorite metaphor for Peter (see Acts 4:8-12). It was also a favorite Old Testament image. Most temples and other important buildings in the ancient world were constructed of stones. The cornerstone was traditionally the first stone laid, and all other stones were placed in relation to it.

Other prophetic texts speak of the Messiah as a cornerstone. See, for example, Zechariah 4:7; 10:4; and Jeremiah 51:26. In a broader perspective, the cornerstone isn't one specific stone. Rather, it represents the unifying character of the building from the solid foundation to the capstone—the final stone placed. In other words, Peter envisions Jesus the Messiah as the

The Church faces the same problem today as it has faced in every era—the problem of communicating to our culture while not identifying with its values.

—George M. Marsden

beginning and the end, the first and the last, the one who holds God's building together (Mack, 722).

Based on the foundation of Jesus, the true cornerstone, Christians should strive to be the living representation of Jesus. As a preacher, Peter emphasized Jesus's life and resurrection. Jesus is alive, and therefore Christ's church is also alive. And as Peter announces in verse 9, we are a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation."

Peter draws on the language of the Hebrew Bible, but what sets the Christian faith apart from Judaism or any other religion is its grounding in the person of Christ. We are "holy" (vv. 5, 9) because we are set apart as Christ's possession. This is what identifies and empowers the church.

In many ways, first-century Christians were no different from twentyfirst-century Christians. Though the churches Peter addressed were predominantly Gentile, they were still connected to their Jewish roots. When Peter uses the language of "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (v. 9), his readers would have heard the language of inclusion. They knew God's plan extended even to them.

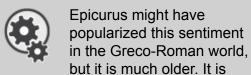
Peter refers to these believers as a "chosen race." God has chosen them. Yes, they have decided to respond to this good news, but their faith in Christ has always been God's plan.

They are also a "royal priesthood." They are not deemed royal by ancestry but by calling. They have a right and privilege to access God for themselves through Christ alone. Some refer to this doctrine as the "priesthood of believers."

Believers are a "holy nation." They are a holy people, based not on geography or culture or even religion but on their allegiance to Christ as Savior and Lord.

Finally, they are "God's own people." They belong to God in Christ. They don't belong to themselves. They are living stewards of grace.

Roman culture was steeped in a diversity of religious expressions, from crass idolatry to mystery religions to rarefied philosophical speculations on the nature of the gods. It was also a culture of widespread sexual immorality and living in excess. The English saying, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for



also found, for example, in Isaiah 22:33 and Ecclesiastes 8:15.

tomorrow we die," is often attributed to the Greek philosopher Epicurus.

Just as today, most people in the ancient world lived for self, for the moment, rather than for God. Therefore, Peter's message is both timely and essential. There was good reason for Peter to admonish the Christians to be sober-minded. He urged them to "prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves" (1:13), to be "holy...in all your conduct" (1:15), to show "genuine mutual affection, love one another deeply from the heart" (1:22), and to "long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation" (2:2).

Peter's message is for these new believers to live differently from the world. He calls his readers to live to a

I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect

higher standard of morality, set apart as God's own people. In this way, people will recognize their Christian faith by their actions at least as much as by their words (vv. 11-12).



them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:15-17)

Sometimes the word "evangelism"

gets a bad reputation. We might envision the obnoxious street preacher with his megaphone or people going door to door with religious tracts, but that is not how successful evangelism usually works. Most of the time, evangelism works best on the personal level. As the saying goes, "people don't care how much you know unless they know you care."

Peter knew that his audience could not easily uproot themselves and leave their homes, jobs, and careers. He also knew that if they did embrace the gospel, they would be slandered and vilified. Finally, he knew that actions speak louder than words, so these early Christians would need to live exemplary lives: unusual lives of faith marked by good, righteous deeds.

In our world today, people are looking for integrity, honor, and true faith. Character matters. Though none of us are beyond saying and doing the wrong thing, a life of humility, of true servanthood, will not go unnoticed. Let us therefore be a faithful, repentant, and humble people.

Understanding

In 1970, what began as a normal chapel service at Asbury College and Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, became the Asbury Revival. The college dean felt the need to share his testimony of faith with the student body. He then encouraged others to do the same. This led to 185 uninterrupted hours of prayer, confession, and testimony.

One senior admitted, "I've wasted my time in college up to now, but Christ has met me and I'm different. Last night the Holy Spirit flooded in and filled my life. Now, for the first time ever, I am excited about being a Christian! I wouldn't want to go back to the emptiness of yesterday for anything" (Blackaby and King, 84).

In the 1970s, tens of thousands of young people chose to follow Christ. Historians call it the "Jesus movement." Many of those who became Christians came from a place of drug use, alcohol abuse, and a dark view of

the future. Yet they all wanted a place where they could belong and find inner peace. The fortunate ones found a spiritual mentor—someone who mentored, loved, and discipled them. This is what Peter means when he writes, "You have been born anew...through the living and enduring word of God" (1:23).

The Asbury experience grew into a true revival because it didn't stay local. As word leaked out, invitations came for Asbury students to speak at churches, colleges, seminaries, and high schools across the nation. Because of these testimonies, combined with the work of the Holy Spirit, literally thousands of students made commitments to Jesus Christ. Eventually, many of these new converts became pastors, missionaries, and creators of enduring Christian ministries (Blackaby and King, 84).

What About Me?

- How much do we value our faith? As a child, I read a story about baseball great Ted Williams. Williams described how he and a teammate both bought brand new cars of the same model and color. Some months later, he noted that the other man's car already looked old, dirty, and damaged. His car, however, looked like it had just come from the showroom. The difference was the way each man valued his vehicle. How do you value your relationship with Jesus? Do you value it enough to pursue holiness (1 Pet 1:16)? Enough to long for the word of God as "pure, spiritual milk" (2:2)? Do you value regular prayer? Confession of sins? Humility and service? Are you hungry to be taught? Do you value the church so much that you are committed not just to attend but to participate in its ministry and missions?
- When have we settled for less than our best? By the last day of the regular season of the year, Ted Williams's batting average was an astounding .4055. His manager gave him the option to sit out the game to preserve hitting history. Williams chose to play because he loved the game more than records. How much do you love the Christian life you've been blessed to live?
- How do we celebrate unity in diversity? Peter called his readers a "chosen race." Since the church was a mixture of various kinds of people, Peter was

not referring to race in the sense of ethnicity or skin color. He meant that Jesus draws people together, no matter their origins. How can the church lead the way in terms of racial reconciliation and racial justice? How does the good news of Jesus bind us together and make us one?

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A Steadfast Shepherd



1 Peter 2:13-25

Central Question

How can I balance my freedoms and responsibilities?

Scripture

1 Peter 2:13-25

13 For the Lord's sake be subject to every human authority, whether to the emperor as supreme 14 or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. 16 As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. 17 Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor. 18 Slaves, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only those who are good and gentle but also those who are dishonest. 19 For it is a commendable thing if, being aware of God, a person endures pain while suffering unjustly. 20 If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do good and suffer for it, this is a commendable thing before God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 22 "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." 23 When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,

so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Reflecting

American pastor Andrew Brunson and his wife Norine began missionary work in Turkey in 1993. They served in the city of Izmir on the site of ancient Smyrna. God blessed their ministry for twenty-three years. They planted churches, hosted national church leadership conferences, and brought many mission teams into Turkey to share the gospel in cities where no one had ever met a Christian.

Andrew and Norine loved the people, yet the work was difficult. They knew of some who had been martyred for their faith in Christ. The couple had received death threats. Despite the dangers, they still hoped to spend the rest of their lives in Turkey and had even applied for permanent residency (Brunson, 16–17, 21).

In 2016, the Brunsons' hopes of living peacefully in Turkey ended. They were arrested, and Andrew was imprisoned under the false charge of military espionage. He later learned that he was a political prisoner used as a bargaining chip by Turkish President Erdogan for prisoner exchanges with the United States. Andrew's case went before the Turkish courts a number of



Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you

falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt 5:11-12)

times, and false witnesses testified against him. Realizing his fate was not in his control, Andrew prayed, sang, and even began the practice of dancing before the Lord (Brunson, 166).

While the Brunsons' situation seemed to be getting worse, Americans became increasingly informed regarding their plight. Behind the scenes, Senator Thom Tillis of North Carolina and officials at the highest levels of government intervened. The most important intervention, however, came from the American church, millions strong, who prayed for Andrew's release. He was freed in October 2018.

Studying

The relationship of church and state has always been strained, complicated, and subject to abuse. Some governments have forbidden Christian churches to gather publicly and have persecuted Christians and other religious groups.

At the same time, some governments have been controlled by Christian forces such that the church and state were hopelessly entangled and the church's mission was diluted. Rather than selflessly serving in Jesus's name, the church becomes yet another arm of the state intent on preserving its own power. Though there will always be some degree of tension between church and state, Jesus gave us the right model, and that model is servant leadership.

More than anyone who ever lived, Jesus understood submission because he practiced it. He came to serve, not to be served (Matt 20:28). He took upon himself the form of a servant, humbling himself and being obedient even unto death, as Paul wrote in Philippians 2:7-8. Furthermore, his submission was voluntary.



But [Jesus] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found

in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Phil 2:7-8)

As Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:21-25, Jesus is our example: we follow in his steps. When insulted, he kept silent. He didn't retaliate. When he suffered, he didn't threaten. Instead, he forgave.

When Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (John 10:11), he was expressing something about the shape his life had already taken. His words became his destiny but also provided grace for the destiny of countless others. Jesus is the steadfast shepherd and guardian of our souls because of what he did for us both in his self-giving life and in his death on the cross.

Peter tells his readers to submit and also to live as free people (v. 16). Peter and Paul agreed that Christians must both respect authority and also live in Christian freedom (see Rom 13:1-7). This was a high standard, but they believed that honoring authority was consistent with individual and corporate responsibility.

To experience true freedom, we must believe and obey. It is God's will that Christians do right (v. 15), even when it is uncomfortable or painful. Peter writes about having a right relationship with God such that we do what is right in private no less than in public. Righteousness is God's will because God is righteous. Peter also knew that being righteous in a corrupt world comes with challenges. It means praying for governmental authorities rather than badmouthing them. It means paying taxes and being good, honest citizens. It means loving and honoring everyone, including people with different beliefs and ideologies and even people who may want to harm us.

When Peter exhorts his readers to honor the emperor, even the emperor who ordered his execution, he means that we should pray for and honor our President and other elected officials. We don't have to vote for them, but we have to pray for them. This is God's command.

Perhaps Peter's most challenging words are found in verses 18-20, where he urges slaves to submit to their masters. Slavery is reprehensible, and Christians today should denounce it as strongly as William Wilberforce did in the early 1800s. We should speak and work against wage slavery, sex trafficking, and every other way that people exploit the labor—and often the bodies—of others for their own benefit. Christians must not sit back and let evil rule.

How, then, are we to understand Peter's words here? As detestable as it was, slavery was everywhere in the ancient world. And Christians are called to love and serve everyone—even their enemies. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus praised the meek, the peacemakers, and those who



are reviled and persecuted (Matt 5:5, 9, 10-11). Jesus followed these words of blessing with calls to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (vv. 44-45), and to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48).

When we turn the other cheek, suffer abuse without retaliating, or forgive even the worst among us, we show ourselves to be complete and whole—perfect as God is perfect. This is the attitude and behavior of grace. Jesus

lived up to his own words, which Peter reflects in verses 21-24. If we do wrong in this world, we are rightly punished. But even if the Christian does right and is still punished, they should endure it, knowing that this suffering brings honor to God and God's people.

Jesus went to the cross as a free man. He was sinless. He had done harm to no one. His conscience was clear. It is said that "no one ever loved like Jesus." That is so true. Jesus's kind of love allows a human being to endure the most inhumane conditions imaginable.

And he is the Christian's example. Although he was mercilessly beaten and tortured, "he committed no sin," "no deceit was found in his mouth," "he did not return abuse," and "he did not threaten" (vv. 22-23). Instead, he entrusted himself fully to God.

But why? Why would the Son of God do such a thing? Christ died so that people could be free. Christ died so that we could be healed physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. He died on the cross because he is the shepherd and guardian of our souls (v. 25).

Freedom comes with responsibility. God calls us to live responsibly in our present circumstances, as imperfect as they may be. By loving God, loving others, and living sacrificially and responsibly, we live as free people regardless of our status or place in life.

Understanding

Charles Sheldon first read his book *In His Steps* one chapter at a time to his church's young people in Topeka, Kansas. Since that time, publishers have printed this classic story in many different languages.

The scriptural basis for the novel is 1 Peter 2:21. It is a story that could be lived out in any community across America or around the world. Led by their pastor, First Church is committed to asking the question, "What would Jesus do?" What would Jesus Christ do if he were in my situation?

This commitment begins when the pastor and church are confronted by a poor man. Will they turn him away or



More like Jesus would I be, let my Savior dwell with me;

Fill my soul with peace and love—make me gentle as a dove;
More like Jesus, while I go, pilgrim in this world below;
Poor in spirit would I be; let my

Poor in spirit would I be; let my Savior dwell in me.

—Fanny Crosby

will they help him? Their commitment

to live "in his steps" is revolutionary. These people will never be the same. And their newfound, vibrant faith becomes contagious. There is, however, a cost to this kind of discipleship. Some think it is undignified to sacrifice for sinners, as if helping a prostitute or an alcoholic will defile the person who helps them.

Peter's message strikes us at several different levels. It begins with the individual Christian who commits to live with honor toward people in every aspect of society. The message grows to challenge the church to live with honor within its community, whether or not the cultural or political environment is friendly. Finally, there is the most uncomfortable challenge: to lead a life of love, humility, and servanthood when we are being victimized.

We may still wonder why Peter and the other apostles didn't address social abuses like slavery more forcefully. Ultimately, they believed that following in Jesus's steps was the best way for them to influence the world for good.

What About Me?

- What does it mean to live as free people? Peter teaches us to submit to others while remaining free. In many ways, first-century Christians were not free. Most of them were not Roman citizens, thus their freedoms were limited in most legal ways. More than this, many early Christians were enslaved and often treated poorly, even reprehensibly. Yet Peter taught that despite those challenges, Christians could live as free people. Their voluntary submission helped them to be inwardly free. How can we embrace this teaching? What would it take for us to live in this kind of freedom?
- How can we really live like Jesus? Living like Jesus may be easy when times are good and when society treats us fairly, but how do we live like Jesus when we find ourselves swimming against the world's current? How can we live like Jesus when we are treated shamefully by our own family, by work associates, or by others? The example of Christ as suffering servant is a model for us. He suffered and died because his eyes were fixed

on a higher purpose. What do we need to do to live like Jesus even in an inhospitable world?

• What is the Christian's responsibility toward government? Peter, Paul, and the other apostles sometimes spoke to high government officials. They didn't cower. Rather, they boldly preached about Christ's death and resurrection and called people to repentance. Perhaps they believed the best way to redeem an unfriendly government was by living more honorably than anyone else, leading by witness and example. In our world, we may be frustrated by governmental neglect and abuse. What can we do to call our government to a higher standard of honesty and responsibility? When should we be silent, and when should we be vocal? In either case, we must remain engaged and faithfully bear witness to Christ.

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A Ready Answer



1 Peter 3:8-17

Central Question

How can I show Christ's love and power to the world?

Scripture

1 Peter 3:8-17

8 Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. 9 Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse, but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called that you might inherit a blessing. 10 For "Those who desire to love life and to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; 11 let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it. 12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." 13 Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? 14 But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, 15 but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, 16 yet do it with gentleness and respect. Maintain a good conscience so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. 17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.

Reflecting

Recently I read *Finding Grace*, Donna VanLiere's personal memoir, which tells how she came to truly know and trust God. Raised in a Christian home, Donna believed in God, attended church, and read her Bible. She envisioned and desired an idyllic life. Instead, she experienced trauma.

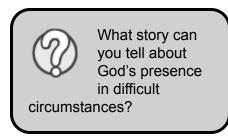
When VanLiere was a preschooler, playing at her neighbor friend's house, she was sexually molested by her friend's teenage brother. For decades she blamed herself for this violation. Another painful reality was her inability to become pregnant. She and her husband desperately wanted to have children of their own, but it was not to be.

One day after work, Donna opened the Gospel of John and thoughtfully read chapter 9, the story of Jesus healing the blind man. She wrote her own version of this account focusing on the blind man. For years he existed, but seemingly no one noticed. Then Jesus noticed him and healed him, which would lead to condemnation by the religious authorities but acceptance and grace from Jesus. Donna saw her own life in the blind man. She writes, "I had always known God but for the first time in my life I felt like I was actually finding him" (135).

Donna found grace when she quit blaming herself. She found grace when she accepted that God's plan for her and her husband was to adopt. She found grace when she discovered that God wanted her to write books. Writing is the avenue by which she gives "a ready answer" to how to find God and experience grace.

Studying

Our passage today sums up previous teachings about how to live within family and social structures. Christians are to live honorably while also submitting to those in positions of authority. Peter calls for good



citizenship regardless of the oppression or persecution believers might endure. He believes that the best way to transform culture is by exemplifying Christian values and principles in one's attitudes and lifestyle.

Though we might think that Peter, the bold man of action, would encourage a degree of political activism to fight the injustices of his day, his response is much more reserved. In fact, his words to the church are in line with what Jesus taught years earlier. In 3:8-9, he uses words and phrases like "sympathy," "love for one another," "a tender heart," "a humble mind," and "repay with a blessing." According to Peter, this type of submissiveness and humility is the key to experiencing unity of spirit.

Unlike the *Didache*, 1 Peter does not recommend non-retaliation as a strategy for winning the hearts and minds of one's enemies. The motive clause, in the last part of v.

9, focuses on how acting this way is part of God's call to believers and brings with it the promise of blessing on Judgment Day. (Vinson, 162)

As noted previously, Peter often quotes from the Old Testament. Here he quotes Psalm 34:12-16. The background of this psalm is 1 Samuel 21:10-15, where King Saul, in his increasing paranoia, repeatedly tries to kill David. As the pursuit raged, David hid in caves and other secure spots and even found refuge among the Philistines of Gath. When Achish, the king of Gath, became suspicious of David's intentions, David pretended he was insane. Perhaps out of superstition, the king implored David to leave, and he gladly complied. David's faithfulness to God eventually led him to become the legitimate king of Israel. He had numerous opportunities to take the throne by violent means, but he believed that if he was submissive to God, God would provide.

How should Christians live in the face of opposition? As in the days of David, "the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous" (v. 12). Therefore, even in difficult times, Christians should be careful with their speech, keeping their tongues from evil and their lips from deceit (v. 10).

are called to righteousness, not evil.



Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is

mature, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. (Jas 3:2)

Peter's message is truly timeless. It seems that today we live in an unfiltered world. We hear vile language—not just specific words but the anger and hatred behind them. Coarse and hurtful language cannot be justified among God's people. Thinking evil thoughts, listening to evil words, and watching evil images will only lead to greater evil. Christians must turn from evil and seek peace in all relationships. We

Peter outlines several truths related to how God responds to evil or righteousness. God's face is against those who do evil (v. 12), Peter says, quoting Psalm 34:16. He doesn't quote the second half of the verse, where David says that God will destroy their very memory. Destruction will be complete as God justly punishes the unrighteous.

At the same time, God favors the righteous. God listens to their prayers. God blesses them and gives them peace. Peter certainly understood the temptation to strike back when persecuted. After all, he is the one who struck the high priest's slave with a sword when soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the garden (John 18:10). He had experienced his share of suffering, but he believed that when Christians eagerly treat others well, God will bless their attitudes and actions. God will provide.

Peter wants the church to earn the right to be heard so that they can share about the hope they have within them whenever the opportunity comes (v. 15). In other words, Peter asks his readers to be ready to share their faith story. He does not give them an evangelistic program or formula. He simply calls them to tell their story about how Jesus changed their lives so that now they live in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

They must share this hope "with gentleness and respect" (v. 16). It can't be forced upon others. The point is not to win an argument but to glorify God. Loudness doesn't convict the heart of sin or lead people to repentance. Rather, Christ's followers share their faith in the spirit of Jesus, who showed by his life that love wins.

Throughout church history, many have embodied the life that Peter describes in the face of persecution and even martyrdom. One such person was Polycarp, the bishop of the church of Smyrna in the mid-second century. He was a disciple of the apostle John and the teacher of Irenaeus of Lyons. When the Roman authorities demanded his arrest and execution, Polycarp was ready and willing to sacrifice his life for his Savior. He had lived a long life and was ready for his heavenly reward.

The method of execution chosen for Polycarp was burning at the stake. But before his executioners lit the fire, they gave the bishop an opportunity to recant his faith. He steadfastly refused, famously saying that he had faithfully served his King and Savior for eighty-six years.

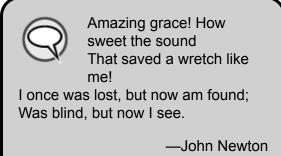
He joyfully went up to the stake, and amidst the flames praised God for having deemed him worthy "to be numbered among his martyrs, to drink the cup of Christ's sufferings, unto the eternal resurrection of the soul and the body in the incorruption of the Holy Spirit" (Schaff, 52).

Understanding

As a young man, John Newton became the captain of a slave ship. He did not lead a Christian life. He said and did things that later caused him shame. During a particularly horrific storm, however, when he desperately feared for his life, he called out to God to save him.

Now a follower of Christ, Newton pursued advanced education. He learned Latin, Hebrew, and Greek and became a biblical scholar. Eventually, he left the seas for the pulpit, where he served as pastor of several churches and wrote many hymns. He was humble and highly respected in both the church and the community.

John Newton is best known for writing the hymn "Amazing Grace," but he also became a fervent abolitionist. He couldn't forget the anguish of his former life as a slave trader. He exerted great influence upon William Wilberforce and the British Parliament to bring down Great Britain's substantial slave trade (Kerr and Mulder, 87).



Peter was a practical man. Like John Newton, he lived in difficult days when evil abounded. The model for Peter's teaching was Jesus Christ. The influence of Jesus's sermons is evident throughout this letter. Peter the preacher and pastor was a much humbler and gentler man than the one who wanted to take the sword to those arresting his Master.

Following the example of Jesus, Peter believed the best way to influence the world for good and for God was to take on the role of a servant. He advocated submission. He called for unity—not forced unity but unity of spirit. When Christians are united in mission, lovingly sharing their faith in Christ, the world is winnable. The Christian's power comes from the Holy Spirit, not human force.

What About Me?

- How do we make unity a reality? How much unity do you experience with the people in your life, whether at work, at church, or in other spheres? How can you facilitate unity? Cultivating unity is much harder than just saying the word or hoping it will happen. We live in a divisive world, and this divisiveness is toxic. The church can either expand divisiveness or lead the quest for unity. How can we foster a love and care for others that fosters unity? How can Peter's words help us to grow into greater unity of spirit?
- What does my speech sound like? We often associate "evil" speech with vulgar language. Certainly, Christians must guard their tongues in this sense. But there are other ways we must keep our tongues from evil. Peter specifically mentions "speaking deceit" (v. 10). We might also consider spreading rumors and conspiracy theories, boasting, and making uncharitable remarks that cast others in the worst possible light. How can we better control our tongues? How can God's Spirit guide your thoughts, speech, and actions?
- Are you ready to share the hope you have? A lived sermon is always more powerful than a spoken one. Even so, there are times when we must share our faith in words as well as deeds. We are to share our faith within our families, in our church, and with those who don't know Christ. How can we share our faith more effectively? Effective sharing requires vulnerability. How can we achieve this frame of mind so that we approach the task with sincerity, gentleness, and respect? How can we proceed graciously when we are maligned or persecuted for our faith?

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A Watchful Discipline



1 Peter 4:7-11; 5:5b-9

Central Question

How can I be more intentional about spiritual growth?

Scripture

1 Peter 4:7-11

7 The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. 8 Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Be hospitable to one another without complaining. 10 Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. 11 Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 5:5b-9

5b And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." 6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. 7 Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. 8 Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers

and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

Reflecting

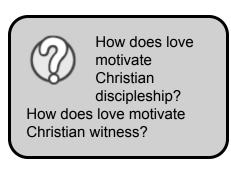
John Chau spent almost a decade preparing for what turned out to be a short career as a missionary. In 2009 he took his first mission trip, and he was hooked. His first step was enrolling at a Christian university. He also volunteered with an inner-city mission for disadvantaged young people and helped with a soccer ministry for immigrants from Myanmar. A former school representative said of John, "He was one of the most prepared men I've ever met" ("Who Will Take My Place?" 5).

Chau felt called to serve on North Sentinel Island, east of India, where no missionary had ever worked before. He understood the risks, but he trained as if he would spend the rest of his life with the Sentinelese. He took cold showers because he knew they didn't have hot water. He earned certification as a wilderness EMT. He took four scouting trips to the nearby Andaman Islands. He talked with the locals, particularly the fishermen. He learned about church planning in different cultural settings. He was a learner, and he was humble. In short, he did everything possible to prepare.

Chau hoped that acts of love and kindness would attract the Sentinelese. He kayaked to the edge of their shore, shouting that Jesus and he loved them. He brought fish and other gifts. In return, the locals showered him with arrows. Undeterred, John later stepped forth on their sandy beach. His last documented words were, "You guys might think I'm [foolish] in all this, but I think it's worth it to declare Jesus to these people" (4).

Studying

If you knew that today would be the last day of your life, how would you spend it? What unfinished business might you attend to? What relationships might you try to mend? You might hope to be a better person or a better Christian.

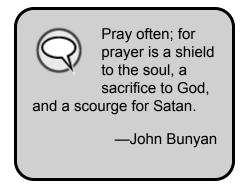


The first Christians imagined two ways they might die prematurely. They might die by persecution, or they might depart the earth at Christ's return.

Though Peter was ready for either consequence, he believed it was his duty to help his friends live faithfully in the time they had left.

"Therefore," Peter writes, "be serious and discipline yourselves" (4:7). How does one grow spiritually? Peter's guidance in chapter 4 serves as a template for understanding and practicing spiritual disciplines. His purpose is to make intentional spiritual growth practical for every believer. Let's examine Peter's multifaceted message.

Prayer is the most central discipline because it brings the Christian into communion with God. In authentic prayer, we think God's thoughts, we desire the things God desires, we love the things God loves, and we will the things that God wills (Foster, 33). God's perspective is bathed in love. "Maintain constant love," Peter pleads (v. 8). Christians must love one another, and that



love must be genuine. We all make our share of mistakes, but Christian love can cover and cleanse all of them.

Furthermore, Peter instructs his readers to "be hospitable to one another" (v. 8). Hospitality is a great gift. In congregational life, no gift is needed more than hospitality. Acts of kindness freely given, without complaining or seeking compliments, are truly powerful. A smile, a kind word, or a timely gift speaks volumes to everyone, believers and non-believers alike.

Finally, Christian maturity both speaks and acts. In 4:10-11, Peter gives a simple equation for being good stewards of whatever gift God has given: speak as if you are speaking the very words of God, and serve with the strength God provides. Do this, he says, and God will be glorified in Jesus Christ. Spiritual gifts are both personal and communal. From beginning to end, their purpose is to glorify God.

Sometimes in our worship we sing a doxology or benediction such as the one we find in verse 11. According to Archibald Hunter, "In three of the apostolic benedictions glory is given to God through Christ: Rom. 16:27; Jude 25, and here.... Amen means 'This is really so' rather than 'So be it.' Borrowed from synagogue worship, it is an affirmation rather than a petition" (141). These intentional actions of love and grace affirm the genuineness of the relationship between Christ and Christian.

As noted in previous lessons, Peter habitually quotes from Scripture. In 5:5, he quotes Proverbs 3:34, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." James also quotes this proverb (Jas 4:6).

Peter uses vivid word pictures in his teaching, such as in 5:5, where he implores Christians to "clothe" themselves with humility in their dealings with others. This conveys the image of a servant putting on an apron. Humility is related to submissiveness in the most positive and beneficial way. Marvin Vincent calls it a "working virtue in ministry" (668).

Sometimes we can be paralyzed by worry. We fail to act because we are overly concerned about offending others. When we are weighed down by thoughts of inadequacy, Peter urges us to cast our concerns and worries before God. Give your negatives to God and let God turn them into positives. God loves you no matter what.

In 1 Peter 5:8-9, Peter writes about spiritual warfare. The New Testament writers often portray the Christian life as a struggle against evil, and this evil is sometimes personified as evil spirits of various sorts.

In this context, Peter compares "your adversary the devil" (v. 8) to a roaring lion seeking to devour its prey. Lions are among the most feared creatures on earth. We call the lion the king of the jungle for good reason. It is healthy to fear the lion. We also know that the lion does not randomly attack and kill its prey. It is a student of animal behavior. It stalks and hunts, patiently separating the weak from the strong. It also usually attacks an animal that is alone, adrift from its family.



Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power; put on the whole armor of God, so

that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:10-12)

Peter doesn't minimize the devil's power in this world—though it is nowhere close to the power at God's disposal. His strategy for resisting the devil sounds like common Christian teachings: be humble, pray, remain vigilant and steadfast in faith even amid suffering. Do these things, Peter says, and we will be able to resist temptation.

Like Peter, James also exhorts believers to resist the devil (Jas 4:7). We can rely on these ordinary disciplines to guide our choices when faced with

difficult and even seemingly impossible situations. Whatever you are going through, Christ himself will "restore, support, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Pet 5:10). Most things in life are temporary, but God's grace is eternal. Remember your source of strength: "For the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). In the end, Jesus wins, and the forces of evil lose.



Understanding

God saw fit to bless my wife and me with two children, a boy and a girl, now grown and independent. As their parents, we believed it was our responsibility to give them proper structure and discipline. When they said or did things that we did not approve of, we disciplined them because we wanted to prepare them for a better future. We varied the methods: sometimes it was "time-out" and sometimes it was losing a privilege. Discipline can be painful for children and also for parents.

In a similar way, God disciplines us. God knows what is good for us and what isn't. More than that, God wants what is good for us. But just as we give our children choices, God gives us choices. God wants us to grow in grace and wisdom as we learn to practice spiritual disciplines.

Some people are naturally good at leading disciplined lives. Others, maybe most of us, struggle with maintaining healthy habits and embracing the structures and disciplines that make us stronger. Whether we find it easy or hard, discipline is not impossible.

Peter instructs us to take the initiative to discipline ourselves (5:8). But we all need help along the journey. We need family, and we need the church. We also need to trust that Christ will restore, support, and strengthen us. God gives grace to the humble, so that is what we need to be.

Moreover, our attitude matters. A proper attitude will result in better and purer actions. We can make a positive difference with our words and deeds. How we speak and how we work matters. May we be good stewards of every blessing that God has given us.

What About Me?

- Are you intentional about spiritual growth? We do what we do for a variety of reasons. It might be because we're forced to do something or because we fear punishment. We can also do things for positive reasons and even purely spiritual reasons. For example, we might want to honor and please God or to serve others. As you think about yourself and your personal habits, are you intentional about spiritual growth? What are you doing to help facilitate this growth?
- What does it mean to practice humility? What does it mean to clothe oneself with humility? In part, this requires cultivating a servant's attitude. A friend of mine once wanted to do something for the homeless person he regularly saw standing on a street corner. After praying about it, he bought the man breakfast from a nearby fast-food place. We all need to eat, homeless or not. How can we contextualize humility and servanthood in ways that advance God's kingdom?
- How do you find victory over the devil? Spiritual disciplines are a needed defense against temptation. When Jesus was tempted, he fasted, prayed, and quoted Scripture. What tools do we have against the negative influences we face? What can we do to be victors, not victims?

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Unit 2: Offering Our Gifts to God

Some churches will observe World Communion Sunday on the first Sunday in October. It is one of my favorite Sundays because I like Communion. Ever since I was small, I was enamored with this celebration and the idea that God invites us to a table to remember Jesus's death and resurrection. This table communicates God's greatest offering and gift to us. As we eat the bread and drink from the cup, we offer our very lives back to God. All are invited to feast and give our offerings to God.

The rhythm of receiving God's gifts and offering our gifts in return defines this unit. In the first lesson, ancient instructions on tithing remind us that our gifts have more to do with celebration and justice than with money. Do we give joyfully because everything we own is God's to begin with?

The second lesson explores our posture towards God. Like Israelites gathering on Mount Carmel with the prophet Elijah and the prophets of Baal, we are called to decide whom to follow. Will we give God our whole hearts?

The third lesson is a practical story that communicates a heavenly principle. In meeting a lame beggar outside the temple, Paul and John do not have money to offer. Instead, they have something more valuable: the healing power of prayer. Here we see that our offering can be a life-giving gift to those around us.

The last lesson is about our sacrifice of praise. When we worship God in unity, then we can live for God in generosity and perseverance. In our praise, we offer God our very lives.

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Offering the Tithe



Deuteronomy 14:22-29

Central Question

How does my giving reflect God's kingdom?

Scripture

Deuteronomy 14:22-29

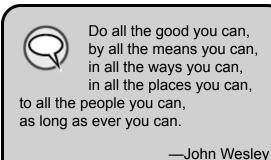
22 "Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. 23 In the presence of the LORD your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. 24 But if, when the LORD your God has blessed you, the distance is so great that you are unable to transport it, because the place where the LORD your God will choose to set his name is too far away from you, 25 then you may turn it into money. With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the LORD your God will choose; 26 spend the money for whatever you wish: oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your household rejoicing together. 27 As for the Levites resident in your towns, do not neglect them, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you. 28 Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year and store it within your towns; 29 the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake."

Reflecting

Growing up, I heard people talk about the Bible as if it contained two different gods: a God of wrath in the Old Testament and a God of grace in the New. I was taught that the Jewish people championed the first and Christians the second. It seemed that Jesus represented such a contrast from the "God of the Old Testament" that the Old Testament became irrelevant for contemporary living.

Now, many years later, I can see the danger in this approach to the Bible—to say nothing of its danger to Jewish-Christian relations. A careful reading of all Scripture shows the beauty, consistency, and master plan of a God of grace and love. From Genesis to Revelation, God cares for the whole world and expects us to do the same. The Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, tells the story of a God who makes covenants and gives gifts of blessing. The gifts we give back to God reflect grace to others and to the world.

This month's unit focuses on our gifts and offerings to God. It begins with tithing and celebration and ends with worshipful praise. This unit is about generosity and our full devotion to the one true God of the Bible. Generosity is measured not by how much we give but by how well we know God. If we know God as one who is full of wrath, we will be stingy. But if we know God as one



whose love is ever-expanding, generosity will abound. Today's lesson in Deuteronomy challenges us to examine our relationship with God and, in turn, our understanding of generosity.

Studying

Deuteronomy is the last of five books in the Torah or "law." This part of the Bible may seem to be filled with stuffy codes and creeds, but in the ancient worldview, it is so much more. Torah tells of God's creation, God's covenants with the chosen people of Israel, liberation from Egypt, and Israel's sojourn towards the promised land. Another valid translation of Torah is "instruction."

Laws and ordinances are indeed a part of that story. They represent guidelines that apply to every aspect of life. The biblical laws apply to personal hygiene, worship, and work. God pays attention to the details of life and cares for Israel. God is holy and desires Israel to be holy. These laws do not limit the actions of the Israelites in a punitive way. Rather, they free Israel as a nation called to dedicate every aspect of life to God. God cares for every facet of creation and wants the people to care for all of creation too. If we know how to live in dedication to God, we can do so freely. We can be confident that we are living well.

In Deuteronomy, a major thread uniting these regulations is the theme of justice (Gushee, 120). God is concerned with *shalom*—equity, well-being, and peacemaking—for everyone from the most powerful to the most powerless. This ethic of justice makes its way into the rhythm of daily life, such as in the need to observe the Sabbath. It makes its way into business as God seeks to protect laborers



among God's people. How are you meeting the needs of immigrants and refugees in your community?

and immigrants who work the fields. It makes its way into politics with laws to protect those who are most vulnerable such as resident aliens, widows, and orphans. Justice doesn't happen by accident. Rather, it requires intentional acts of love infused with mercy. God pays attention to details. Justice demands that we pay attention to the details of how we love our neighbors as ourselves.

Reading the Torah from a lens of justice requires a certain worldview. Specifically, it calls us to see all creation as enveloped in God's care and holiness. The psalmist writes, "The earth is the LORD's, and the fullness thereof" (Ps 24:1). Human beings are made in God's image, and everything

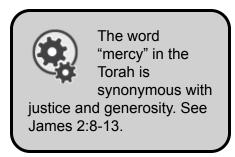
in all creation belongs to the God who created it. We are caretakers of creation. God calls us to manage the things that belong to God.

This worldview assumes a generous spirit through which we give back to God and share with others. If we see all of creation as God's possession, we will be joyfully generous. If, however, we assume the world is hostile and competitive, we will be more apt to hoard *our* belongings, defend *our* property, and exploit others. In other words, we will obsess over the things we possess.

To combat this attitude, God ordained specific laws concerning tithes and offerings. God commands the people to offer a tithe, or a tenth, of their possessions back to God and to the community of God's people.

There are two parts to this command: First, people are to bring an annual tithe to a central sanctuary of God's choosing (Deut 14:22-27). The purpose of this tithe is to celebrate the blessings of the Lord and worship God in feasting and song. Generosity includes celebration.

The second part involves people giving a special tithe every third year to distribute as needed to "the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns" (vv. 28-29). This act of mutual blessing connects the tithe to God's mercy. This third-year tithe reminds Israel that everything belongs to God and that "the interests of the poor and needy are



bound up with the interests of God" (Thompson, 185). The tithe includes not only celebration but justice.

These commands show that the Torah's rules about generosity are not based on power or social status but on righteousness. Everything we have is God's. God's mission for Israel is to create a culture of generosity where people work neither themselves nor others to death. Nor are they to place their trust in possessions. God calls Israel to relate to resources and labor in a way that leads to the redemption of all things.

Note, for instance, the context of today's passage. The beginning of Deuteronomy 14 outlines dietary laws. These laws are connected to generosity because people in ancient times saw possessions as extensions of their bodies. If they are intentional in caring for their bodies, they will be

sure to take care of the harvests and commodities that they have produced with those same bodies.

In Deuteronomy 15, Moses outlines procedures for dealing with debt. Every seventh year, slaves are to be set free and debts are to be canceled. "Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so," God says, "for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake" (v. 10) because there will never be any need in the community.

The tithe reminds Israel that God expects this kind of justice to shape their way of life. It is not a transactional obligation but a way of sharing the joy of knowing God's love and liberation. Mark Biddle puts it this way:

The theological rationale for this communal aspect of Sabbath expresses a key insight into the character of Israel's God.... YHWH delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage not only because they were in bondage, but also because of his intention to bless Israel and, through them, to multiply blessings in the world. (254)

Understanding

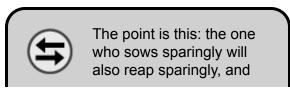
Generosity is not an obligation; it is a source of joy and celebration. In ancient times, some people tithed from their harvest while others tithed from their livestock. Some traveled from afar and needed to convert their tithe into silver; others celebrated with their neighborhoods.

God's people still tithe today in ways that exhibit diversity, creativity, and joyful sharing. Many Christians I know tithe in the form of time and resources. Others focus on money, budgets, and financial support.

Too often, we tithe to alleviate guilt more than giving with a spirit of grateful response to God's grace, love, justice, and mercy. Sharing in God's generosity is a blessing that connects us to God's generous heart. People who are generous live free from the clutches of tight-fisted greed and hostility.

Generosity is the result of a biblical worldview in which "those who need money and those who can give money meet on the common ground of God's love" (Nouwen, 22). Tithing is therefore closely aligned to justice.

If we love God and know that God is just, we will do what God has charged us to do cheerfully and joyfully. Is the



God you serve generous or greedy? How does your giving reflect God's mercy and kindness? Are you free to give, or is your giving burdened by guilt and obligation? the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Cor 9:6-7)

What About Me?

- Do you have a generous worldview? Take a moment to assess how you see the world around you. Do you view the world as a hostile, violent place or do you see the world as a place where God is at work? If you see the world as utterly hostile, you're likely to focus on protecting your possessions. You will see others as lazy people who ought to fend for themselves, no matter their circumstances. On the other hand, if you approach the world from the perspective that "God so loved the world" (John 3:16), generosity will be your natural approach to relating to possessions and to others. Your highest priority will not be to defend your property and accumulate more stuff but to imitate God's generous heart with the resources you have.
- How can our giving foster an attitude of celebration? Some people serve what they believe to be a hostile, judgmental, and wrath-filled God. They live in a kind of bondage, relating to others out of fear, bigotry, and hate. Some people serve what they believe to be a transactional God, expecting that God will bless them if they "name it and claim it." But the God of the Bible is holy, just, and loving. God is a sovereign King who cares for creation and expects us to do the same. God instituted the Sabbath to make room for joy and celebration—freedom from fear, work, and human competition. As Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). How does tithing become a response to the rest, release, and joy that God desires for us? How can we become cheerful givers?

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Offering Allegiance



1 Kings 18:21, 30-39

Central Question

What allegiance does God require of me?

Scripture

1 Kings 18:21, 30-39

21 Elijah then came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him." The people did not answer him a word.... 30 Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come closer to me," and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down; 31 Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, "Israel shall be your name"; 32 with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. 33 Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." 34 Then he said, "Do it a second time," and they did it a second time. Again he said, "Do it a third time," and they did it a third time, 35 so that the water ran all around the altar and filled the trench also with water. 36 At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I

have done all these things at your bidding. 37 Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God and that you have turned their hearts back." 38 Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust and even licked up the water that was in the trench. 39 When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God."

Reflecting

A single decision in battle can mean the difference between life and death. Late in the American Revolutionary War, Major General Nathanael Greene assumed command of 2,500 patriots in the southern colonies. He was tasked with confronting the British army led by General Charles Cornwallis but was instantly frustrated when only 1,000 men showed up to serve. Facing steep odds, Greene made a decision that defied both friend and foe alike. He split his small army and set out to strike Cornwallis on two fronts.

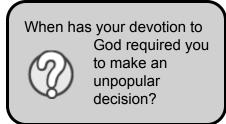
When Cornwallis learned of this, he advanced, assuming he would have an easy victory. Instead, his forces met fierce and persistent resistance at the Battle of Cowpens, one of the last military engagements that eventually led to British surrender (Wood, 208-209).

Just as one decision can determine the outcome of history, so too can hesitation—the failure to decide. If Major General Greene had looked only at the facts, measuring gun for gun and soldier for soldier, he would have surrendered immediately. Greene had something that goes a long way in winning a war: determination to decide and courage to follow through.

Many people don't think that a decision to follow God is as urgent as a decision made on the battlefield. They are content to stumble through life, and indecision robs them of the blessings of being fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. The medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides once said, "The risk of wrong decision is preferable to the terror of indecision." Following Christ requires determination to make the choice and courage to go through with it.

Our passage today describes a different kind of battle between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Like General Greene, Elijah was the underdog.

Though he was alone, he mustered his courage and challenged the prophets of a powerful administration led by King Ahab. More important, he challenged the hearts of the people. Would they give their allegiance to Baal or to the one true God of Israel?



Studying

Ancient people believed their kings were responsible for weather and crops just as many modern people believe presidents are responsible for the economy (Brueggemann, 209). In 1 Kings 18, Israel is three years into a drought that was God's judgment for King Ahab's establishment of altars to the rain god, Baal, and the goddess of fertility, Asherah. Times became desperate until, at last, God commissioned Elijah to tell Ahab that the drought would end.

Elijah didn't simply announce the end of the drought. Rather, he challenged Ahab to a contest, telling him to send prophets of Baal and Asherah to Mount Carmel to see which deity would send rain.

The people of Israel gathered at the mountain, and Elijah offered them an ultimatum. He challenged them to decide which god they would serve. "His words," writes Alexander Maclaren, "have the ring of authority as he rebukes indecision and calls for a clear adhesion to Baal or Jehovah" (254). Israel can't limp along serving whichever god is convenient. Will they follow God with their whole heart, or will they follow the false gods embodied by Ahab's failed political power? It's a critical choice that means the difference between life and death.

The contest between Elijah and Ahab's prophets unfolds on Mount Carmel. On one side are the prophets of Baal and Asherah calling their gods to consume the sacrifice on the altar. They sing and dance, but when things become desperate, they start to cut themselves. They "raved on...but there was no voice, no answer, and no response" (v. 29). The threefold emphasis on the false



The famous phrase "limp along on two opinions" dramatizes Israel's perennial attempt to have it

both ways. To choose against Yahweh is impossible in Israel; but to choose singularly for Yahweh appears to be excessively radical and costly. The issue is endlessly a life-or-death issue for Israel. The same issue is expressed in Rev 3:16:

gods' lack of response emphasizes the futility of the prophets' prayers.

The other side consists of a sole prophet of Yahweh, Elijah. After repairing the altar damaged by the opposing prophets, he requests that "So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." When the faithful are neither hot nor cold, there is no clear passion in any direction. (Brueggemann, 224)

Ahab's servants pour twelve jars of water on it (vv. 33-35). This preparation was intended to mock Ahab, whose sins brought on the drought in the first place. The king's servants bring four jugs of water past a thirsty crowd of people—three times. Each time would have seemed like a waste of precious resources.

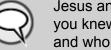
Once all the preparations are made, Elijah prays. He affirms God's power and his own powerlessness as God's servant. Then he implores God to act and turn the hearts of the people back to God.

Fire consumes the altar, and all that precious water dissipates in fiery steam. God is victorious. Brueggemann notes that this passage is a movement from drought to rain and represents a "deep turn to life" (228). Following a false god is neither lucrative nor beneficial. Idols do not command or provide life, and humans can no more manipulate gods to improve the economy than humans can heal themselves. Only God can do that, and God is attentive to every detail: "Now therefore, O kings, be wise.... Serve the LORD with fear; with trembling kiss his feet" (Ps 2:10-11).

In our own time of economic uncertainty, political pandering, and cultural immersion, which god will we serve? Will we conjure our own solutions, trusting in our handmade idols for better markets and higher profits? Or will we submit our allegiance to God decisively and courageously, giving the Lord all our heart, attention, and trust?

Years ago, theologian O. O. Burgess wrote that people have four basic spiritual hungers: security, companionship, knowledge, and the indwelling of God (109). In setting up their false idols, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel sought to satisfy the hungers of their nation. They believed that Baal would provide the water while Asherah would provide the bread. The gods failed at providing security, companionship, knowledge, and a personal indwelling of God.

Idols, ideas, and opinions always fail to fulfill our deepest longings and quench our thirsty souls. Jesus, who comes to us as "living water" and the "bread of life," is the only one who can do that. God dwells with God's people through the person of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. This divine, nourishing presence demands our all.



Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,'

you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." (John 4:10)

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35)

The fire falls, and there is nothing left to do but execute God's justice. Once

Israel affirms Yahweh as Lord, Elijah orders the people to seize the prophets of Baal and kill them (1 Kgs 18:40). The slaughter of the prophets may be offensive to modern ears, but remember that Elijah's call for execution is a call for justice. The prophets of Baal were not humble priests supporting local charities; they were powerful players in an administration that promoted human sacrifice, assassinations of political prisoners, and "unmentionable abominations in the name of their gods" (Fife, 55). By his extreme order, Elijah seeks to preserve the life of the nation and its most vulnerable citizens.

Understanding

On the surface, our lesson today pits Elijah against the prophets of Baal and Asherah, but there is more at stake. Elijah's contest has to do with God's sovereignty in the face of things that distract us from full devotion. It is also about prophetic truthtelling amid a politically motivated abuse of power. King Ahab and his loyalists believed that they could manipulate idols and improve their social standing. They believed that by setting up idols, they



could stimulate economic gain. Financial and physical security distracted them from doing what God wanted them to do.

Elijah shows us a different way. He doesn't wield power in the political centers of Israel but rather on the margins of society. The prophet relied on hearing and obeying the word of the Lord. He had a laser-like focus on prayer, preparation, and fulfilling God's purpose in his life.

From our side of Scripture, it's easy for us to criticize King Ahab and cheer for Elijah. We don't set up sacred poles or hire prophets of strange gods, so it is easy to pass judgment. When we delve deeper, however, this lesson reveals all the ways that we are distracted from following God. Our idols may not be to Baal or Asherah, but there are things that divide us and distract us—and they can be just as fatal.

Our passage also reveals how we hesitate in trusting God and believing that God will provide for us. When we fail to seek God's guidance and obey God's word, we fail to drink deeply from the power and wellspring of divine provision. We follow a God who provides all we need.

We limp through life when we refuse to approach God's throne of grace. Deciding to follow God is just as pressing a matter now as it was for Israel in Elijah's day. As Jesus says, "we cannot serve two masters" (Matt 6:24). We must choose whom we will serve.

What About Me?

- What decision do I need to make today? Each day is a gift, and we never know what circumstances will unfold tomorrow. Even so, we worry a lot about what tomorrow might bring. We are anxious about finances, health, family, and our communities. Each day, therefore, ought to begin with an important decision: Will I follow God today? Will I trust in Jesus today? Some of us decided long ago to ask Jesus to be our Lord and Savior, but we forget that it takes a daily commitment to turn to him with our concerns and worries.
- What idols do I hope will fulfill my spiritual hungers? Take time to consider how O. O. Burgess's four spiritual hungers drive our actions and intentions in life. What idols do we erect to provide protection and companionship? What idols do we use to increase our hunger for knowledge? What gods or products or diversions do we consume to fill that hole in our heart that only Jesus can fill? Like the Israelites in our lesson

today, may we turn our hearts toward Jesus and affirm that "The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God" (v. 39).

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Offering Compassion



Acts 3:1-11

Central Question

How can I show compassion in Jesus's name?

Scripture

Acts 3:1-11

1 One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. 2 And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. 3 When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. 4 Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." 5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. 6 Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." 7 And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. 8 Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9 All the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, and they were filled with wonder and astonishment at what had happened to him. 11 While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to

them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished.

Reflecting

When I was ten years old, church time meant nap time. My family had moved from New York to Florida, and we started attending a traditional Baptist church in our new community. It was larger than the church we attended in New York, so we felt a bit out of place. My mother didn't care for it too much. The pastor wasn't very exciting. I dozed on Mother's shoulder at worship every Sunday.

Soon we started visiting around and ended up at Calvary Chapel of Miami. This church was unlike any I had ever attended. We met on Sunday night, so I was wide awake. It was smaller. People were happy to be there. They worshiped with joy.

What stuck with me the most was the pastor's relationship to children. Every Sunday before the service, he took a few minutes to play with us. He got on his knees and actually looked us in the eye. He asked about our week and listened to our answers. He smiled a big, welcoming, loving smile. For the first time, I saw in that pastor what I had imagined the face of Jesus might look like. I felt as if I belonged.

That pastor showed me the power of seeing other people with the love of Christ. By seeing people, I mean really looking at them: seeing their needs, their eyes, their personhood. He showed me the importance of getting on other people's levels and being church to them. He taught me that seeing eyes are healing eyes.

Today's lesson recalls one of Peter and John's earliest public engagements in ministry after being empowered by the Holy Spirit. In the passage, we can see all the ingredients of what makes the gospel live up to its name: "good news" about Jesus. These ingredients include worship, prayer, attention to people in need, and, most important, the power of participating in the life of another person.

To be sure, Peter and John didn't have monetary resources, but they had healing eyes, a loving touch, and the power of Jesus's name. As a result, a man who had been lame from birth was restored to health and found belonging in Christ.

Studying

The book of Acts is Luke's sequel to his account of the life and ministry of Jesus. In the Gospel that bears his name, Luke informs his benefactor, Theophilus, that he intended to write about Jesus using the most accurate resources at his disposal—eyewitness accounts and testimonies. In Acts, he picks up the story after Jesus's resurrection and describes the continuing mission of Christ's church.

In Acts 3, Peter and John go to the temple for prayer. In Judaism, several set times of prayer were part of the daily routine of the devout. In Jerusalem, many chose to gather at the temple to pray at the time of the morning and evening sacrifices, and that is what Peter and John are doing at three in the afternoon.

There at the gate, a man lame from birth begs pilgrims and city dwellers for help (Acts 3:2). It is his daily routine but, unlike Peter and John, he is not allowed into the temple. He is left out, marginalized, and unable to participate fully in community because of the legalities of Torah, the Jewish law. The best he can do is beg for a few coins to buy something to eat. Thankfully, almsgiving was as much a part of Jewish piety as prayer.



Evening and at noon I utter my complaint and

moan, and he will hear my voice. (Ps 55:17)

Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously. (Dan 6:10)

Peter and John don't have many resources, but they know something about a hard life. They are from the lower classes, and they have been out of work for some time while following Jesus. Yet they know the power of healing that Jesus brings. They trust in the work of the Holy Spirit. They have seen people healed, the dead resurrected, and lost souls saved. They have good news to share.

Peter tells the man to look at him and John. This isn't a challenge or rebuke. Rather, it is a gentle acknowledgment that what the disciples have to offer provides far more than money. They are offering the Bread of Life, who restores even the most marginalized people to the heart and family of God.

This act of eye contact would have filled the lame man with confidence and hope. It would have provided a sense of belonging. As he raises his eyes, he moves from indifference to expectation (Marshall, 88). Part of seeking healing is the need to find belonging. Before we can see the hope of healing, we need to look up and experience the love of Jesus. Before we can have healing eyes, our eyes need to be opened and enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

Peter admits that he has no silver or gold, but then he commands the man to stand up and walk "in the name of Jesus Christ" (v. 6). This description reveals two important truths: First, when Jesus told his disciples that they could ask for anything in his name" (John 14:14), he meant it literally. Of course, not every prayer is answered the way we expect,



The Jewish historian Josephus remarks that the Beautiful Gate, constructed of rich Corinthian bronze,

greatly surpassed the workmanship and value of all the other temple gates, which were plated with silver or gold (*Jewish War* 5:5:3).

but we are to ask and be honest with our request. All Jesus asks is for us to have faith, not to anticipate or problem-solve if the prayer goes unanswered.

Second, Peter's statement is clear, concise, and specific. He gives the man specific instructions: stand up and walk. Peter doesn't ask God to heal the man. Rather, he declares that the man is already healed. Prayer needs to be specific, not vague or general. Perhaps this lesson is more about confidence in Jesus than the healing. When we are confident, miraculous things happen. People are restored.

Peter is confident even though the man is not instantly healed. If you read closely, you see that Peter takes the man's hand before his feet are healed and raises him up (v. 7). Only then are the man's feet and ankles

"immediately" strengthened. Peter acts before seeing evidence that the man is



Luke uses seven verbs to describe the man's actions upon being healed, including "leaping" and

"praising." Biblically, the number seven is symbolic of healing and completeness.

healed. He raises him up by the same power that raised Jesus from the grave (Johnson, 66).

How often do we pray for something and then sit around looking for evidence that we have been heard rather than acting on faith? This is the key to the miracle: in order for the healing to take place, the man had to decide to follow through and stand regardless of his condition. Faith requires risk, courage, and confidence. Prayer without action is simply wishful thinking.

Another important aspect of our lesson is that healing is more than the repair of an individual's body. The man's healing doesn't merely mend his body; it restores him to his community. Upon standing, the man jumps, walks, enters the temple, leaps, and praises God. For the first time in his life, he can worship and praise God and—most important—enter a sacred space he was never allowed to enter before.

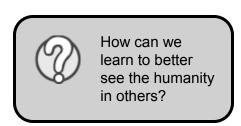
Healing includes restoration and reconciliation. It means making things right, not only with the soul but with the body, the heart, and the community. This healing is for everyone, not just one man. When the crowds see the healed man walking and hear him praising God, they join in the joy, hope, and salvation of the healing. The crowd gains healing eyes as they recognize him, and all are filled with awe and amazement, utterly astonished (v. 10).

Understanding

When I was in high school, I returned to New York for a summer. I attended a college-level art program at the Parsons School of Art and Design in Manhattan. This involved a commute from Staten Island to attend class. Before I went, my father, a native of Brooklyn, gave me some advice: Always keep your back against the wall in the subway, place your wallet in your front pocket, and look like you know where you're going. Most important, don't make eye contact.

I followed Dad's instructions. I caught the train to the ferry, took the ferry to the subway, walked a half-mile to the school, purchased a bagel from a vendor on the corner, and attended class.

It was an hour commute one way, at the end of which I had successfully traversed one of the busiest cities on earth without looking anyone in the eyes. It was fun, but I found that taking my dad's advice was exhausting work. I went for five weeks without making



any eye contact with my fellow commuters. No one smiled or said good morning or held doors for other people. It was truly a "rat race."

A few years later, terrorists attacked our nation on September 11, 2001. Many lives were lost, and our culture, politics, and economic stability shifted for the worse. And yet something changed after that day, especially in New York. People started seeing each other. People talked with one another on the subway and on the street corners. People were gracious. They started helping their neighbors. Total strangers were recognized as fellow human beings. At least for a few years, life in Manhattan became less of a rat race and more of a delight.

It didn't take a tragedy for the lame man in Acts 3 to find healing. It only took a couple of ex-fishermen to make eye contact and offer a hand up rather than a handout. It was more than encouragement or a courtesy; these two strangers spoke in the name of Jesus and offered God's life-changing, restorative healing and abundant life. Who wouldn't dance, sing, shout, jump, and share about a miracle like that?

What About Me?

- Do you have "healing eyes"? How many people do we walk past and fail to see? What needs do we not notice? We often live as if life is a rat race. We rush through our daily routines and fail to look up. We need the Holy Spirit to open our eyes so that we might see others and help them in Jesus's name.
- How can we meet people's deeper needs? Peter and John could have scrounged up a penny or two for the man begging at the Beautiful Gate. After all, any little bit would have helped his situation. If Peter and John gave the man a denarius, it would have fulfilled his needs for the time being. But that solution would still leave the man outside the gate to God's house. Peter and John knew what authentic wholeness and restoration look like. Jesus called them to make people well and to welcome people into full communion in the family of God. It is not enough to meet someone's daily needs. We must meet their deeper needs for companionship and belonging.
- How does God bring healing today? I have never personally witnessed a miraculous healing of a person's body on the spot. I have, however,

witnessed thousands of miracles of people being made well with the latest medical technology God gave us through the wisdom and initiative of medical professionals and caregivers. Yet even in our technological age, healing of the body is only part of the answer. Jesus still expects us to bring healing to entire communities by announcing the transformative, reconciling work of God through Jesus Christ. In what ways are we, as witnesses empowered by the Holy Spirit, called to make our communities safe spaces in which healing and reconciliation occur for all people regardless of faith, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or disability?

Resources

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Offering Praise



Hebrews 13:8-17

Central Question

What is my offering to God?

Scripture

Hebrews 13:8-17

8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. 9 Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them. 10 We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat. 11 For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. 12 Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. 13 Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. 14 For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. 15 Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. 16 Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. 17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing, for that would be harmful to you.

Reflecting

Where should church announcements come in the order of worship? This is the stuff that theologians and academics have wrestled with for years.

On the one hand, church announcements are superfluous. Can't people read the bulletin for themselves? On the other hand, it seems that without church announcements—especially from the pulpit, I am told—no one will participate in church activities. So right there, along with singing God's praises and inviting people to embrace Jesus's call to discipleship, we also take a few minutes to tell the church about softball games, potlucks, and youth car washes.

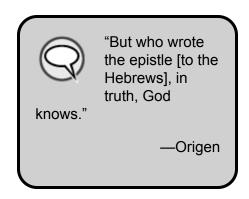
You might be surprised to know that ministers have incorporated announcements into worship as early as the New Testament. They are different from today's church announcements, of course, but they are there. Many New Testament letters end with a series of disconnected exhortations—last-minute challenges that inspired believers to put Christian living into practical terms (see 1 Cor 16:1-20; Col 4:2-17; 1 Thess 5:12-22). We might think of these as the "announcements" we often hear at the end of a worship service.

In that respect, church announcements are a part of Christian worship because they connect authentic worship with right living. Maybe by the end of this lesson we will have a better understanding of how to incorporate our own "announcements" to bolster worship and encourage the heart!

Studying

Biblical scholars have long debated who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. Some have proposed Barnabas, a Levite disciple of Jesus, while others state that Apollos wrote it.

There is general agreement, however, that Paul is not the author. The language in Hebrews is different from what we find in Paul's letters. The Greek in the book of Hebrews is highly refined and sophisticated,



perhaps the most elevated in the entire New Testament. Though Paul's

Greek is not shabby at all, it doesn't rise to this level. Nor does Paul use the same themes or metaphors to describe the Christian faith.

Furthermore, in Galatians 1, Paul states that the gospel he proclaims did not come from any human source. Rather, "I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (v. 12). It is hard to imagine that the apostle who wrote those words would say that his message "was declared at first through the Lord, and it was confirmed for us by those who heard him" (Heb 2:3). Unlike Paul, the writer of Hebrews says that he received the gospel secondhand.

Many scholars propose that Hebrews is not a letter but a sermon. Edgar McKnight argues that the writer is addressing Jewish-Christian communities in Rome and using rabbinic preaching techniques (16).

Thomas Long agrees that Hebrews is a sermon and that Hebrews 13 ends with the "announcements" portion. He writes:

The Preacher now turns to the more routine aspects of congregational life, to the ministry of hospitality, the prison visitation program, the stewardship emphasis, and the like. In short, the sermon is being followed by the announcements and the "joys and concerns." As is the case with all good preachers, however, the sermon actually continues. The preaching does not stop when the sermon notes are folded up. (Long, 142)

These "announcements" encourage believers to remember and obey their leaders and consider Jesus as the ultimate teacher (v. 7). The writer proposes three ways of doing this: by remembering the word of God, by considering the outcome of their way of life, and by imitating the faith of their Christian leaders. These three aspects are fleshed out in the verses that follow.

In verses 9-10, the Preacher encourages his audience to avoid being "carried away by all kinds of strange teachings" (v. 9). Believers are strengthened by grace, not by religious rules. He goes on to assert, "We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat" (v. 10). This is a new altar whereby we come into God's presence: the altar of the heart.

The Preacher draws an analogy to Levitical laws about bringing a proper sacrifice. Jesus offered the ultimate sacrifice for sin and through this established a new covenant (chs. 9–10). This means that certain regulations

—especially those that would restrict God's grace—need not hinder the church's mission.

Before, the writer's audience found comfort in the rules, the restrictions, and even the animal sacrifices. But now there is no going back. These things are at odds with the gospel of Christ and his once-for-all sacrifice.

In 13:11-14, the Preacher contrasts the many Levitical sacrifices with the one sacrifice of Christ. This leads to a challenging exhortation to imitate Jesus in his self-giving love. Jesus was executed outside the temple. According to the Preacher, this is an echo of the Levitical law that called for the burning of sacrificial animals to take place beyond the boundary of the tabernacle (Lev 16:27).

Just as these believers were no longer welcome in their society, in their families, and perhaps even in their synagogues, Jesus was not welcome in the temple. In accepting Jesus as the Messiah, they joined him outside of the established sacrificial system, where they too would "bear the abuse he endured" (v. 13). This part of the Preacher's announcement is both encouraging and foreboding: newly converted followers of Jesus were outsiders, but they were not alone.

The next part of the Preacher's "announcement" states that the church still has work to do. They make their own kinds of sacrifices and worship at the altars of their hearts. Verses 15-16 exhort the church to offer a true sacrifice of praise, to confess Jesus's name, to be generous, and to keep doing good.

These four exhortations give us a glimpse into the Preacher's vision of worship. It isn't only about offering



Blood sacrifices were part of every religious movement in the Greco-Roman world, pagan and

Jewish alike. Jews in the wider Hellenistic world, living hundreds or thousands of miles from Jerusalem, came to believe and teach that other spiritual practices such as prayer served as an appropriate substitute for the sacrifices offered in the temple.

songs or listening to a sermon. Rather, worship is wrapped up in action, confession, evangelism, generosity, and civility. In offering a "sacrifice of praise" (v. 16), we are called to offer God not the blood of bulls and goats but our whole selves. We do this in imitation of Jesus, who offered himself once and for all on the cross.

When we confess the name of Jesus, we declare that God is working to save, restore, and repair the world through him. Doing good and sharing what we have translates into being a generous community that shares God's love. We give because God gave us Jesus. We are good because our behavior ought to influence our community in meaningful and productive ways.

Understanding

The church announcements in Hebrews are not about potlucks or youth lock-ins. They are pointed exhortations that challenge the community's allegiances.

In encouraging readers to remember and obey leaders, the Preacher urges them to honor their true allegiance to Jesus. This allegiance is not about getting our way; it's about offering God our lives. We are called to endure hardship, work together, do good, and be generous in concert with our leaders and each another.

At the same time, submitting to leaders is difficult for many of us. Leadership changes with the passage of time, and some leaders disappoint us. Notice that the Preacher doesn't call us to put our trust in leaders. Rather, he calls us to look to Jesus as our model for faith and action. Unlike our earthly leaders, Jesus never changes. He is the same, and therefore the church will



Though their first teachers and guides may have died to bear witness to their faith, Christians will always

have a teacher and guide who will never die, who lives for ever crowned with glory. [Human leaders] come and go but Jesus remains forever. (Casciaro, 143)

endure regardless of persecution or position in the culture.

The Preacher addresses people who are no longer at home in the spiritual culture of their upbringing. This detail makes the message of Hebrews as relevant today as it was back then. We are seeing the decline of the institutional church. Many lifelong Christians are engaged in "deconstructing" the faith of their childhood: putting things they had long accepted to the test—much as the first readers of Hebrews had to come to terms with a spirituality that did not involve animal sacrifices. Then and today, cherished beliefs and practices are up for grabs. What really matters? For what would we be willing to suffer abuse and persecution?

The Preacher calls us to go to Jesus "outside the camp" (v. 13). Jesus—not our doctrines, our institutions, or our beloved traditions—is the true and authentic center of our faith.

What About Me?

- Who are the leaders who speak God's word to you? Hebrews tells us that "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" (12:1), biblical heroes who inform our faith. God also puts leaders in our lives today whom we are called to remember. What leaders have informed your faith? Whom do you need to listen to, knowing that doing so will promote joy and unity?
- *Imitate Jesus*. Jesus is the ultimate leader we are called to remember, imitate, and obey. We are to imitate Jesus by enduring the same abuse he endured. What does that mean in our Christian life? How are you called to take up your cross, deny yourself, and follow Jesus today?
- How do we obey leaders while holding them accountable? This lesson can lead to some confusion and, in the most extreme circumstances, a perpetuation of abuse. Some churches teach people to obey leaders even when they are abusive, but that is not what the Preacher means. Rather, this text is about looking to Jesus and holding people accountable (see v. 17). We need to hold abusive, oppressive, and exploitive leaders accountable. Churches must not be complicit in shaming or silencing the victims of abuse, including spiritual abuse. How can we balance submitting to leaders while holding them accountable?

Resources

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Unit 3: Solomon's Temple

David wanted to build a temple for the Lord. God didn't allow him to do so, but David did make a lot of preparations for it. The construction of the temple fell to David's son and successor, Solomon. Solomon spent many years and many resources building the temple. The temple was a magnificent structure that served as the focal point for Israel's worship for centuries to come.

The lessons in this unit all deal with the building of the temple. They are drawn from the book of 2 Chronicles. The books of 1–2 Chronicles offer a reinterpretation of Israel's history from a perspective later than that of the history reported in 1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings. Second Chronicles gives additional attention to and provides more detail concerning Solomon's building of the temple. For the Chronicler—as scholars refer to the author of 1–2 Chronicles—Solomon's role in building the temple is very important.

Our lessons will focus on various aspects of the events surrounding the construction of the temple. They will also lead us to ask questions about what those events might say to us.

The first lesson examines Solomon's decision to build the temple and leads us to ask how we can best use our resources to serve God. The second lesson examines the finery with which Solomon decorated the temple and leads us to ask how our environment can help us worship. The third lesson focuses on the celebration of the completion of the temple and leads us to ask what blessings we need to celebrate. The fourth and final lesson considers the coming of the Lord's glory upon the temple and leads us to ask how we respond to God's glory.

I hope and pray that these lessons will inspire us to ponder the ways we experience and respond to God in worship and in service.

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Solomon Decides to Build



2 Chronicles 2:1, 3-12

Central Question

How can I best use my resources to serve God?

Scripture

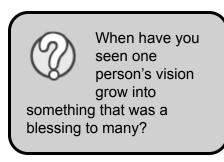
2 Chronicles 2:1, 3-12

2 Solomon decided to build a temple for the name of the LORD and a royal palace for himself.... 3 Solomon sent word to King Huram of Tyre, "Once you dealt with my father David and sent him cedar to build himself a house to live in. 4 I am now about to build a house for the name of the LORD my God and dedicate it to him for offering fragrant incense before him, and for the regular offering of the rows of bread, and for burnt offerings morning and evening, on the Sabbaths and the new moons and the appointed festivals of the LORD our God, as ordained forever for Israel. 5 The house that I am about to build will be great, for our God is greater than other gods. 6 But who is able to build him a house, since heaven, even highest heaven, cannot contain him? Who am I to build a house for him except as a place to make offerings before him? 7 So now send me an artisan skilled to work in gold, silver, bronze, and iron and in purple, crimson, and blue fabrics, trained also in engraving, to join the skilled workers who are with me in Judah and Jerusalem, whom my father David provided. 8 Send me also cedar, cypress, and algum timber from Lebanon, for I know that your servants are skilled in cutting Lebanon timber. My servants will work with your servants 9 to prepare timber for me in abundance, for the house I am about to build will be great and wonderful. 10 I will provide for your servants, those who cut the timber, twenty thousand cors of crushed wheat, twenty thousand cors of barley, twenty thousand baths of wine, and twenty thousand baths of oil." 11 Then King Huram of Tyre answered in a letter that he sent to Solomon, "Because the LORD loves his people, he has made you king over them." 12 Huram also said, "Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, who made heaven and earth, who has given King David a wise son endowed with discretion and understanding who will build a temple for the LORD and a royal palace for himself."

Reflecting

Francis Bernardone, the son of a wealthy garment merchant, was born around 1182 in the Italian town of Assisi. During a war with a neighboring city, Francis was captured and held captive for about a year. After returning to Assisi, he became seriously ill. These experiences led him to turn inward and to move toward becoming a dedicated Christian. While praying in front of a painting of the crucified Christ in the dilapidated church of Saint Damian near Assisi, Francis heard a voice saying, "Francis, do you not see that my house is being destroyed? Go, therefore, and repair it for me."

Francis assumed that Christ wanted him to rebuild the crumbling building where he was praying and set about doing so. But Francis's call also had a deeper meaning. He spent the rest of his life pursuing a relationship with Christ marked by the embrace of poverty. He also founded a religious order, the Franciscans, that is still influential today.



Francis of Assisi obeyed what he understood as a literal command to rebuild a church. He also obeyed the call to rebuild Christ's church spiritually. Francis used both physical and spiritual resources to serve God (Howell, xix-xxiv).

Today's passage recounts events surrounding Solomon's decision to build a temple for God. Solomon had many physical resources for building this temple. Some of these were in Israel, and some he had to secure from elsewhere. He also had many spiritual resources. Solomon used the resources he had to accomplish the goals he believed God had placed before him. As we consider Solomon's actions in preparing to build the temple, let us also consider how we can best use our resources to serve God.

Studying

The author of 1–2 Chronicles, conventionally called the Chronicler, used the books of Samuel and Kings as his main sources, but he edited those books in line with his interests. One of those interests is Solomon's construction of the temple in Jerusalem. All the lesson texts in this unit deal with that great building project. The Chronicler gives much more attention to the building of the temple than his source material does.

One of the reasons for this greater interest is that he wrote during or after the time when the returning exiles rebuilt the temple destroyed by the Babylonians. We know this because the Chronicler concludes his book with the decree of the Persian ruler Cyrus that allowed the exiles in Babylon to return to Judah to rebuild the temple. So the Chronicler writes not only to recall the building of Solomon's temple but also to support the building of the second temple.

Our passage begins with Solomon's announcement that he has decided to build a temple for the Lord and a palace



In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the

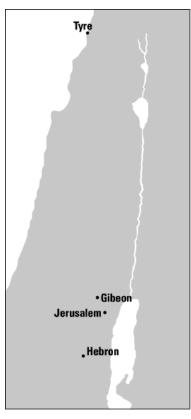
LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also in writing, saying: "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Let any of those among you who are of his people—may the LORD their God be with them!—go up." (2 Chr 36:22-23)

for himself (v. 1). The Chronicler gives little attention to the palace, focusing instead on the temple. He makes it clear that Solomon didn't suddenly decide to undertake this construction project. He gives a lot of attention in 1 Chronicles to preparations that David made for the temple (see especially 1 Chr 22). For the Chronicler, the deep involvement of

Israel's two great kings in the construction of the temple underscores its significance.

Most of our passage reports the contents of an exchange of letters between Solomon and Huram (elsewhere spelled Hiram), the king of Tyre. Tyre is located on the southern coast of Lebanon. It was renowned in ancient times for its cedar trees. Solomon begins his letter by reminding Huram of his previous dealings with King David. Huram had provided cedar for the construction of David's palace. Solomon implicitly contrasts his building project with his father's. Huram had provided cedar for David to build a house for himself, but Solomon is requesting building materials to construct a house for the Lord (along with the palace for himself).

Solomon says several things in his letter to Huram about the temple he is about to build. He first says something about the temple's purpose: it



will be dedicated to the worship of the Lord. Solomon specifies the types of offerings that will be offered in the temple and the occasions on which they will be given. The purpose of the temple is to provide a means for the people to demonstrate their devotion to God.

Solomon next says something about the temple's grandeur. He wants to build a great house for the Lord. Why? Because "our God is greater than other gods" (v. 5). The greatest God deserves the greatest temple. Therefore, the temple that Solomon builds must be a magnificent structure.

Solomon then says something about the temple's limitations. No matter how great a temple Solomon builds for the Lord, it cannot contain the Lord—not even the highest heaven could do so. If even the highest heaven can't contain God, then a building, no matter how magnificent, cannot contain God either.



Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the prophet says, "Heaven is

my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?" (Acts 7:48-50)

In making this statement about the temple's limitations, Solomon also says something about his own. Though he is a great king, Solomon can't build a temple that will contain God. So why is he expending so much effort and expense to construct a temple for the Lord? He does so because he understands the temple to be a means to an end. The temple isn't meant to contain God. It is meant to offer a way for the people to worship God.

Solomon's acknowledgment of his limitations may demonstrate appropriate humility on his part. He is also admitting that he needs help to complete this massive project. Now he begins the part of his letter where he asks Huram for help in building the temple.

The king's request falls into two categories. First, he asks Huram for a skilled artisan to assist in the work. His father David provided skilled workers for Solomon, but he seems to need someone with particular skills. He wants Huram to provide a craftsman who has quite a range of skills, including working in metals, fabrics, and engraving. We may wonder if one person can meet the requirements that Solomon lays out!

Second, Solomon requests that Huram supply him with timber for the construction. He specifies cedar, cypress, and algum. (We aren't sure what kind of wood algum was.) Solomon points out that Huram has both the timber Solomon needs and the lumberjacks who can fell the trees.

We should note the cooperative nature of this proposed partnership. Solomon asks Huram to supply materials and workers for the temple building project, but he also pledges to have his workers labor alongside Huram's and to compensate the Tyrian workers fairly. Solomon's desire to serve God by building a temple leads him to reach beyond his inner circle to find a partner in the effort.

Huram responds positively to Solomon's letter. In verses 11-12, he praises the Lord for making Solomon ruler of Israel. In the verses that follow, Huram says he will fulfill Solomon's request for an artisan by sending a man named Huram-abi. He also promises to send the timber Solomon needs.

Understanding

What can we learn from Solomon as he prepared to build the temple? First, we can consider the importance of sacred space. Solomon's commitment to

build a house of worship for God inspired him to use the best resources available. Most of our churches commit much of our budget to providing and maintaining our worship space and other facilities. We do so because sacred space enhances our experience of God.

Second, we can consider the reality that sacred space lies beyond our church's physical space. Our sanctuaries may feel especially holy to us, but God isn't confined even to such special places. Solomon realized that in building the temple, he was not building a dwelling place for God. The entire universe can't contain God. And yet any place where we become aware of God's presence can be sacred space for us.

Third, we can consider the role that planning plays in our service to God. Solomon planned to build the temple. Our churches establish budgets and name committees to ensure the maintenance of our buildings. But the need for planning extends beyond our physical facilities to encompass all the church's ministries. Churches have the privilege and responsibility to balance the resources we spend on architecture and adornments with what we spend on missions and ministry.

Fourth, we can consider the place of partnership in the work of the church. Solomon had many resources to draw from, and he spared no expense or effort in using them. But he also reached out to King Huram of Tyre to secure other resources that he needed. He worked with Huram to ensure that the work would be completed. Our service to God may lead us into interesting partnerships with people beyond the walls of the church.

What About Me?

- How can we become more aware of sacred space? We are blessed to have the sacred space that our church provides. Do we take this space for granted? How do we take advantage of the opportunities for worship that our church offers? We can also find sacred space outside our church buildings, since God is present everywhere. How can we become more alert to God's presence in the world?
- How can we prepare for the experience of a sacred space? We may not really expect to encounter God, and so we sometimes come into a sacred space unprepared. What spiritual practices—such as prayer, Bible study,

fasting, and service—can we engage in to prepare us to encounter God in the sacred space we find, whether inside or outside the church?

- How can we balance maintaining our facilities and ministering to our community? The sacred space that our church buildings provide is vital to our worship and our church life, and we are responsible for preserving, maintaining, and improving it. At the same time, the church is much more than its buildings. The church is the body of Christ in the world. What steps can our church take to make sure we meet all our responsibilities?
- How can we better use our resources to serve God? Neither our church nor we as individuals have the vast resources of Solomon, but we do have special blessings from God. How might we adjust our priorities to make the best use of what God has given us?

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The Finery of the Temple



2 Chronicles 3:3-17

Central Question

How can my environment help me worship?

Scripture

2 Chronicles 3:3-17

3 These are Solomon's measurements for building the house of God: the length, in cubits of the old standard, was sixty cubits and the width twenty cubits. 4 The vestibule in front of the nave of the house was twenty cubits long, across the width of the house, and its height was one hundred twenty cubits. He overlaid it on the inside with pure gold. 5 The great hall he lined with cypress, covered it with fine gold, and made palms and chains on it. 6 He adorned the house with settings of precious stones. The gold was gold from Parvaim. 7 So he lined the house with gold: its beams, its thresholds, its walls, and its doors; and he carved cherubim on the walls. 8 He made the most holy place; its length, corresponding to the width of the house, was twenty cubits, and its width was twenty cubits; he overlaid it with six hundred talents of fine gold. 9 The weight of the nails was fifty shekels of gold. He overlaid the upper chambers with gold. 10 In the most holy place he made two carved cherubim and overlaid them with gold. 11 The wings of the cherubim together extended twenty cubits: one wing of the one, five cubits long, touched the wall of the house, and its other wing, five cubits long, touched the wing of the other cherub; 12 and of this cherub, one wing, five cubits long, touched the wall of the house, and the other wing, also five cubits long, was joined to the wing of the first cherub. 13 The wings of these cherubim extended twenty cubits; the cherubim stood on their feet facing the main hall. 14 And Solomon made the curtain of blue and purple and crimson fabrics and fine linen and worked cherubim into it. 15 In front of the house he made two pillars thirty-five cubits high, each with a capital of five cubits on its top. 16 He made encircling chains and put them on the tops of the pillars, and he made one hundred pomegranates and put them on the chains. 17 He set up the pillars in front of the temple, one on the right, the other on the left; the one on the right he called Jachin, and the one on the left, Boaz.

Reflecting

The church of my growing-up years had a simple, unadorned sanctuary. The only decoration was a wall painting of the Jordan River behind the baptistery. We worshiped God in simple ways in that simple sanctuary.

One time, our pastor was invited to participate in a wedding ceremony in a church of a different tradition. The groom was a member of our church, and the bride was a member of the other church. Our pastor returned from the wedding marveling over—and complaining about—what he regarded as the extravagance of the other church's sanctuary. But what he considered to be unnecessary distractions, others consider essential contributions to the worship experience.

How many different churches have you worshiped in? Some of us have worshiped in the same church—and therefore the same physical environment—all our lives. Some redecorating may have been done along the way, but for the most part things have remained the same. Others of us have worshiped in several, even many, different churches and experienced various physical worship environments. If we have worshiped in churches of different denominations or traditions, we may have experienced worship environments that differ significantly from one another.

Our worship environment contributes to our experience of worship, either in its grandeur or in its simplicity. Our environment communicates

something about the God we worship. Solomon built an impressive temple decorated with much finery because he wanted to demonstrate the wonder and majesty of God. How much thought do we give to how our sanctuary contributes to our worship of God?



How can a simple sanctuary point to God? How can a richly adorned sanctuary point

Studying

The verses leading up to today's text describe where the temple was and when its construction began. Solomon built the temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. That was the location of Ornan the Jebusite's threshing floor, where David had a vision showing him that the temple should be built there (1 Chr 21:18–22:1). It was also the place where God told Abraham to offer up his son Isaac (Gen 22). The Chronicler tells us that the construction of the temple began "on the second day of the second month of the fourth year of [Solomon's] reign" (2 Chr 3:2).

The Chronicler gives the measurements of the temple in "cubits of the old standard" (v. 3). The old standard was evidently in use in Solomon's time, while the new standard was apparently used in the Chronicler's time after the Babylonian exile. The length of a cubit under the old standard was about twenty and a half inches, while under the newer standard it was about seventeen and a half inches (Redditt, 203).

The main part of the temple was about ninety feet long by about thirty feet wide. The vestibule's width was the same as the width of the main temple. Chronicles gives the vestibule's height as one hundred eighty feet, but there is an issue with the numbers in the Hebrew text that makes the height uncertain (Hooker, 128). In all likelihood, the height of the vestibule was the same as the height of the rest of the temple.

Solomon paneled the nave or great hall of the temple with cypress (vv. 4-5). Given the emphasis that Solomon placed on acquiring cedar from Lebanon in his letter to King Huram of Tyre (2 Chr 2:3-9), it is surprising that the Chronicler never mentions cedar being used in the construction.

Solomon adorned the interior of the building with decorative precious stones, palms, and chains. He had the inside of the building covered in gold plating. The Chronicler says that the gold came from Pavraim (v. 6), a

locale we cannot identify with certainty. It is possible that by the time of the Chronicler, the name was being used figuratively to refer to "finest gold" (Williamson, 207–208).

In verse 8, the Chronicler shifts his attention from the vestibule and great hall to focus on the construction of the "most holy place," sometimes referred to as the holy of holies. The holy place was shaped like a cube with twenty cubits to a side. Solomon had it overlaid with 600 talents (about 45,000 pounds) of fine gold. The most holy place



was so golden that even the nails that fastened the gold plating to the walls were made of gold! The Chronicler says that "the weight of the nails was fifty shekels of gold" (v. 9), about twenty ounces. Apparently we are meant to understand that the nails were gold-plated.

Solomon had two cherubim constructed to adorn the most holy place. Their combined wingspan was twenty cubits. Each of the cherubim had two wings that were five cubits long. With one wing they touched the wall of the most holy place, and with the other they touched their wingtips together.

Another feature of the most holy place according to the Chronicler was a blue, purple, and crimson curtain or veil with designs of cherubim woven into it. His source material in 1 Kings doesn't mention a curtain in Solomon's temple. The Chronicler may have included a curtain to align the temple with the wilderness tabernacle, which did have a curtain, as we would expect in a portable sanctuary. The second temple, which was built after the Babylonian exile, did have a curtain, so it's possible that the Chronicler is thinking of that later curtain (Japhet, 557). Christian readers will recall that curtain being torn when Jesus died (Mt 27:51).

Next, Solomon had two pillars constructed for the front of the temple. They were decorated with chains and pomegranates. The Chronicler says they were thirty-five cubits high, or fifty-two feet, while 1 Kings says they were eighteen cubits high or about twenty-seven feet (7:15).

Some interpreters suggest that the Chronicler's greater height for the pillars results from his combining all the measurements given in 1 Kings for each pillar—height, circumference, and capital (Japhet, 557). First Chronicles and 1 Kings agree that the capitals atop the pillars were five

cubits high. These pillars were named Jachin, "he establishes," and Boaz, the name of Ruth's husband, who was an ancestor of David. The Chronicler offers no information on the reason the pillars were given those names.

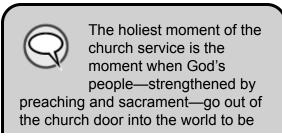
In Solomon's letter to King Huram of Tyre requesting help in building the temple, he said, "The house that I am about to build will be great, for our God is greater than other gods" (1 Chr 2:5). The temple wasn't particularly large, but what it lacked in size, it made up for in opulence. The details of the temple's construction are meant to impress us with its beauty and grandeur. The Chronicler wants us to know that Solomon built a great temple for the greatest God.

Understanding

What can we learn from Solomon's determination to decorate the temple with the finest possible ornamentation? First, our worship should focus on God. Decorations and ornamentation serve their purpose when they draw our attention to God. We should do all we can to keep God at the center of our worship. But the physical adornments of our worship space are only a means to an end. They aren't there simply to appeal to our sense of aesthetics. They serve their purpose when they focus our hearts and minds on God. This is the case whether our church's decorations are simple or elaborate.

Second, God deserves the best we have to offer. Solomon went to great effort and spared no expense in decorating the temple. The result was a glorious sanctuary dedicated to the worship of God. Not all worship spaces are elaborate, nor should they be. But regardless of the simplicity or complexity of our decorations, surely we want the condition of our sanctuary to honor God. Maintaining a clean and orderly worship space is the least we can do to bear witness to our reverence and respect for God. But we want to go beyond the least we can do—we want to honor God with the best we have to offer.

Third, we should remember that our worship extends beyond the sanctuary. Our worship inside the sanctuary should inspire us to serve God with our lives in the world outside the sanctuary. The sanctuary's adornments can remind us



of the characteristics that should adorn our lives as worshipers of God and as followers of Jesus Christ. Then we can commit ourselves, by the grace of God and with the help of God's Spirit, to the church. We don't go to church; we are the church.

—Ernest Southcott

developing qualities that will honor God and bear witness to our relationship with Jesus.

What About Me?

• How can we more fully experience our worship environment? When we participate in congregational worship, we do so in a particular environment. How aware of it are we? How intentional are we about taking in our surroundings? How open are we to what God may be saying to us through our worship environment? How can we make ourselves more aware of how our environment inspires us to worship? To live?



Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion,

kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.... Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col 3:12, 16-17)

- How can we contribute to the beauty of our sanctuary? One way is by giving our tithes and offerings, since a small portion of our gifts contributes to the upkeep and adornment of the sanctuary. We could also volunteer to serve on the altar guild, flower committee, or some other group that provides and organizes the church's paraments, banners, flowers, and other decorations. Or we could just do our part in helping to keep the sanctuary tidy and clean.
- How can we best serve the God our worship environment invites us to worship? Whether our sanctuary is simple or elaborate, we worship almighty God, who is the Creator of the universe, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the sender of the Holy Spirit. Our worship is all about God. It is about serving God both inside and outside the sanctuary. Solomon

gave the best he had to adorn the temple. How can we give the best we have to serve God?

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Completing the Work



2 Chronicles 5:1-10

Central Question

What blessings do I need to celebrate?

Scripture

2 Chronicles 5:1-10

1 Thus all the work that Solomon did for the house of the Lord was finished. Solomon brought in the things that his father David had dedicated and stored the silver, the gold, and all the vessels in the treasuries of the house of God. 2 Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the people of Israel, in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion. 3 And all the Israelites assembled before the king at the festival that is in the seventh month, 4 And all the elders of Israel came, and the Levites carried the ark. 5 So they brought up the ark, the tent of meeting, and all the holy vessels that were in the tent; the priests and the Levites brought them up. 6 King Solomon and all the congregation of Israel, who had assembled before him, were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and oxen that they could not be numbered or counted. 7 Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. 8 For the cherubim spread out their wings over the place of the ark, so that the cherubim made a covering above the ark and its poles. 9 The poles

were so long that the ends of the poles were seen from the holy place in front of the inner sanctuary, but they could not be seen from outside; they are there to this day. 10 There was nothing in the ark except the two tablets that Moses put there at Horeb, where the LORD made a covenant with the people of Israel when they came out of Egypt.

Reflecting

I was privileged to participate in an educational trip to Washington, DC, in 1973 when I was fourteen years old. We visited many historic landmarks, including the Washington National Cathedral. I remember the tour guide telling us that construction of the building had begun in 1907 and was still ongoing. At that point, workers had been building the Cathedral for sixty-six years! I'm sure there was much celebration when, after eighty-three years of work, the Cathedral was finally completed in 1990. The National Cathedral has served as the site of many national observances, including prayer services for presidential inaugurations and state funerals for presidents.



National Cathedral (Credit: Accr1961 / Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA3.0)

The Jerusalem temple was a national center of worship in ways that went far beyond the role that the National Cathedral plays in the United States. It was a cause for great celebration when the temple was completed after seven years of construction. This week's passage tells us about that celebration. The completion of the temple was a great milestone in the life of Israel. Such milestones need to be marked and celebrated, and the people did so. Maybe you have participated in a church's celebration of completing a construction or renovation project. If so, you may have some sense of what the people who marked the completion of the temple experienced.

Our Scripture passage focuses on a corporate celebration, but we can have cause for individual praise and thanksgiving, too. We are sometimes blessed to mark a milestone in our personal walk of faith. When we do this, celebration is in order. Celebration is one way to show our appreciation for what God has done for us.

Studying

Our passage opens with a declaration that the work on the temple was completed. It had been a massive project, but now a building stood in Jerusalem that reflected the glory of the God who was worshiped there.

The Chronicler accords due credit to Solomon as the builder of the temple, but he previously emphasized David's contributions to its construction through the gathering of materials (1 Chr 22). David had also accumulated much wealth to be given to the temple (1 Chr 29). Solomon places that accumulated wealth in the temple treasury (1 Chr 5:1).

Our Scripture passage gives attention to Solomon's moving the ark of the covenant to the newly constructed temple. David had previously brought the ark to Jerusalem with much pageantry (1 Chr 15–16), placing it in a tent he had prepared for it (15:3). It remained there until the events recorded in today's text.

Solomon assembles the leaders of the people to prepare to move the ark to the temple. The tent that housed the ark was in a part of Jerusalem known as Mount Zion. After David conquered Jerusalem, he fortified the area, and it became known as the city of David (Knoppers, 605). Solomon is about to move the ark to its new home in the temple.

According to 1 Kings 6:38, the temple was completed in the eighth month of the year. The gathering of the leaders to prepare to move the ark took place during the festival that occurred in the seventh month of the previous year, so we can assume that great preparation went into the event (Selman, 318).

The festival of the seventh month is the feast of booths or tabernacles. The biblical writers may have wanted to connect the moving of the ark to the temple with the wilderness traditions honored by the festival of booths. For this reason, the returning exiles dedicated the altar in the temple ruins at the festival of booths (Ezra 3:4). They may have done this to correlate the

date of the dedication of the altar with the date of the temple dedication (Selman, 318).

The people's leaders participated in the procession of the ark to the city of David, arriving at the newly constructed temple. But Levites alone had the responsibility of actually carrying the ark.

Levites belonged to the tribe of Levi and functioned as assistant priests. David had previously decreed that only Levites could carry the ark. This was in accordance with what the law said in Numbers 4:1-15. It was necessary to treat the ark with appropriate respect. The priests and Levites evidently shared in bringing the worship vessels to the temple.

"All the congregation of Israel" (v. 6) was also involved in the procession. This is a way of saying that all the people participated in bringing the ark to the temple. The procession of the ark was a true community event.

The people joined Solomon in offering sacrifices to God. The altar was in the courtyard of the temple, and that is where the people would have offered sacrifices (Redditt, 206-207). Solomon and the people offer innumerable sacrifices to celebrate this occasion.

Priests rather than Levites carry the ark into the most holy place, also called "the inner sanctuary of the house" (v. 7), because only priests were allowed to enter this part of the temple complex. The priests place the ark in the most holy place under the outstretched wings of the cherubim. The wings of the these angelic beings provide a cover for the ark, probably symbolizing God's protection of the sacred box.

The Chronicler tells us about the poles that the priests used to carry the ark into the most holy place. In describing their length, he says they were so long that their ends protruded from beneath the overarching cover



In the most holy place he made two carved cherubim and overlaid them with gold. The wings of the

cherubim together extended twenty cubits: one wing of the one, five cubits long, touched the wall of the house, and its other wing, five cubits long, touched the wing of the other cherub; and of this cherub, one wing, five cubits long, touched the wall of the house, and the other wing, also five cubits long, was joined to the wing of the first cherub. The wings of these cherubim extended twenty cubits; the cherubim stood on their feet facing the main hall. (2 Chr 3:10-13)

provided by the wings of the cherubim. The poles were not necessary once

the ark was set in place, but they were evidently viewed as holy, which required leaving them where they were. Besides, Moses had said that they should remain in place (Exod 25:15, but see Num 4:8; Japhet, 578).

The Chronicler says of the poles, "they are there to this day" (v. 9). He says this despite the fact that by the time the Chronicler wrote, the poles, along with the rest of the ark, had long ago been lost in 587 BC when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. The Chronicler found this statement in his source, 1 Kings 8:8. For some reason he decided not to remove this detail.

The Chronicler also says that the two tablets Moses placed in the ark were the only objects in it. This underscores the central role that God's covenant with Israel at Horeb (another name for Sinai) played in the people's lives.



9:4.

In the intertestamental period, traditions developed of the ark containing other sacred objects with deep symbolic value. We see this, for example, in Hebrews

Understanding

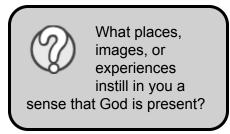
What can we learn from the dedication of the temple in which Solomon led the people to participate? First, we should mark significant milestones in our pilgrimage of faith. The completion of the temple was an important accomplishment in Israel's history. Solomon and the people had worked toward this goal for a long time. Finishing the task was cause for celebration. When we try to know and do God's will in our individual lives and the life of the church, we will experience milestones. These milestones may be obvious, like completing a building project or reading through the Bible in a year. Or they may be subtle, like growing in spiritual community or developing deeper trust in God. In any case, we should acknowledge and celebrate our milestones.

Second, all of us should participate in the church's celebrations. Solomon initiated the temple celebration, but he didn't celebrate alone. The people and their leaders all celebrated. When the church marks a significant milestone, the entire church community should celebrate. When an individual marks a significant milestone—baptism being an obvious one the entire church family should mark the occasion.

Third, we should remember that the presence of God is the reason for our celebration. Today's passage gives attention to bringing the ark of the covenant into the newly constructed temple. The ark was a symbol of God's presence in the temple and among the people. We don't have this kind of symbol in our church buildings, although a cross might remind us of the presence of Christ and a dove or flame on a banner might remind us of the presence of the Holy Spirit. With or without such reminders, we know that God is with us and that God's presence is the true cause for celebration.

What About Me?

• How can we be more aware of our blessings? We must be aware of our blessings before we can celebrate them. It is helpful to develop a routine of regularly taking stock of our blessings and thanking God for them.



The blessing we need to thank God for may be as obvious as Solomon's completed temple. It may also be as subtle as a slight increase in our ability to forgive. Whatever the nature of the blessings we receive, we can develop an awareness of them so we can praise God for them.

- How can we better participate in the life of the church? We want to celebrate milestones in our individual lives. But we also want to celebrate the congregational milestones that our family of faith experiences. We need to participate regularly in the life of the church so that we will be present for the celebrations that occur there. How can we increase our commitment to share in everything that our church body experiences?
- How can we become better aware of God's presence? God is with us and among us. We trust that this is a fact, but we can always grow in our awareness of God's presence. What steps can we take to attune ourselves more to God's presence? How can our lives demonstrate that we are always in God's presence?
- How can we develop and maintain a celebratory perspective? Life brings its share of trials and struggles, but it is also filled with blessings. At the heart of our blessings lies the relationship we have with God through our

Lord Jesus Christ. If we will open our lives to the implications of that greatest blessing, we will develop the grace to give thanks in all things.

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The Glory of the Lord



2 Chronicles 7:1-10

Central Question

How do I respond to God's glory?

Scripture

2 Chronicles 7:1-10

1 When Solomon had ended his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. 2 The priests could not enter the house of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD's house. 3 When all the people of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the LORD on the temple, they bowed down on the pavement with their faces to the ground and worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever." 4 Then the king and all the people offered sacrifice before the LORD. 5 King Solomon offered as a sacrifice twenty-two thousand oxen and one hundred twenty thousand sheep. So the king and all the people dedicated the house of God. 6 The priests stood at their posts, the Levites also, with the instruments for music to the LORD that King David had made for giving thanks to the LORD—for his steadfast love endures forever whenever David offered praises through their playing. Opposite them the priests sounded trumpets, and all Israel stood. 7 Solomon consecrated the middle of the court that was in front of the house of the LORD, for there he offered the burnt offerings and the fat of the offerings of well-being because the bronze altar Solomon had made could not hold the burnt offering and the grain offering and the fat parts. 8 At that time Solomon held the festival for seven days, and all Israel with him, a very great congregation, from Lebo-hamath to the Wadi of Egypt. 9 On the eighth day they held a solemn assembly, for they had observed the dedication of the altar seven days and the festival seven days. 10 On the twenty-third day of the seventh month he sent the people away to their homes, joyful and in good spirits because of the goodness that the LORD had shown to David and to Solomon and to his people Israel.

Reflecting

I was attending a conference. One of the speakers made a great impression on me, so I asked her to join my wife and me for dinner. We had a nice dinner and good conversation. Later that evening, my wife said, "There is something about her." I am sure there are many ways to try to name that "something," but one way is to say that the speaker bore something of the glory of the Lord



The Hebrew word *qabod* is related to the idea of weightiness, whether literal or figurative. It is usually

translated "glory" and indicates value or worth. Someone or something that has glory is abounding in honor and reverence, almost to a degree that it is terrifying (see Exod 24:17).

in her life. It seemed obvious to my wife and me that God was with her.

Have you ever experienced the glory of the Lord? Maybe it was in a powerful worship service. Perhaps it was a beautiful encounter with nature. Maybe you experienced a sacrificial act of service on the part of God's people or noticed something in the way someone lived. We can experience God's glory in a vast number of ways because God can reveal God's self to us however God chooses to do so. Some of those ways will be obvious. Others will be subtle.

The question may not be whether God will reveal God's glory to us. It may be whether we are attuned to perceive and to receive it. How alert are we to the glory of God? How ready are we to respond when we experience it?

Studying

In the verses leading up to our passage, Solomon has guided the people to finish building the temple. The priests set the ark of the covenant in the most holy place and lead the people in praising God (2 Chr 5:11-14). At that point, God's glory fills the temple (5:14). Solomon then dedicates the temple (ch. 6). As part of this ceremony of dedication, he offers a prayer (vv. 12-42).

Today's passage opens at the conclusion of Solomon's prayer. As he finishes, fire comes down from heaven and consumes the sacrifices that have been offered. God again fills the temple with God's presence as an answer to Solomon's prayer (see 5:14; 6:41-42). It is not clear what sacrifices are consumed. The last ones mentioned are those offered as the ark of the covenant was being transferred from the city of David to the temple (5:6). Maybe the Chronicler assumes that additional sacrifices were prepared (Japhet, 610).

The fire from heaven might remind us of similar events in the Bible. For example, we might recall the event on Mount Carmel when God rained down fire from heaven to consume Elijah's sacrifice (1 Kings 18:38). We might also think of the heavenly fire consuming the burnt offering when the priesthood of Aaron was inaugurated (Lev 9:24).



David built there an altar to the LORD and presented burnt offerings and offerings of well-being. He

called upon the LORD, and he answered him with fire from heaven on the altar of burnt offering. (1 Chr 21:26)

Perhaps the most significant parallel is God's raining of fire from heaven to consume David's offering in 1 Chronicles 21:26. David decreed that the temple would be built on that very site (1 Chr 22:1). The fire coming down on both occasions underscores God's approval of the temple site.

Not only does the fire consume the sacrifices; the glory of the Lord also fills the temple. We aren't told how the glory of the Lord is made known, but we might find a clue in an earlier passage. In chapter 5, the glory of the Lord filled the temple after the ark of



O Thou, whose glory shone like fire, Within the ancient temple walls.

Grant us our heart's sincere desire: Thy presence in these sacred halls.

—George A. Warburton

the covenant was placed in the most holy place (5:13-14). In that instance, a

cloud indicated that the glory of the Lord had come. We are also told that the cloud prevented the priests from ministering in the temple. Something similar happens in today's passage (7:2). We might assume that the Chronicler again envisions a cloud that represents the glory of God filling the temple.

The point is that God makes God's presence in the temple known in an obvious way. When the people see the fire and the glory, they prostrate themselves on the pavement in front of the temple and worship God. They give thanks for God's covenant faithfulness (v. 3; see Ps 137).

Solomon and the people offer sacrifices. When the ark of the covenant was brought to the temple, the biblical writer says that Solomon and the people offered innumerable sacrifices (5:6). Now we are told that they offer an astronomical number of sacrifices—so many that the altar can't contain them. They have to offer them in the middle of the courtyard in front of the temple. Solomon therefore has to consecrate the middle of the courtyard so it will be an appropriate space for offering sacrifices. The large numbers indicate how seriously Solomon and the people take the dedication of the temple.

The text emphasizes that "all Israel" is with Solomon for the ceremonies that take place (7:8). This doesn't necessarily mean that every Israelite is present but rather that all of Israel is represented in the gathering. This same point is made by the note that the people came from the area encompassing "Lebo-hamath to the Wadi of Egypt." The people came from all the territory between the northernmost and southernmost points in Solomon's kingdom.

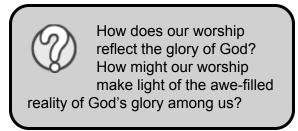
At the beginning of the account of the temple dedication, it was noted that the events occurred "at the festival that is in the seventh month" (5:3), in other words, the feast of booths or tabernacles. We might have assumed that the celebration of the temple's dedication coincided with the dates of the festival of booths, but that is not the case. The Chronicler now clarifies that the people "had observed the dedication of the altar seven days and the festival seven days" (7:9). So the Chronicler differentiates between the festival of temple dedication and the feast of booths. The solemn assembly occurred on the eighth day of the festival of booths.

The closing verse of our passage emphasizes the people's celebratory mood as they return home following the back-to-back observances of the temple dedication and the feast of booths. They are joyful because of all that God has done for them and for David and Solomon.

Understanding

What can we learn from the glory of the Lord filling the temple after Solomon and the people finished constructing it? First, the glory of the Lord is a gift from God. God makes God's self known where and how God chooses. In our passage for today, God makes it clear that God approves of the temple. But that doesn't mean that the people's actions determined the Lord's actions: it is still God's choice, not ours. We should be grateful when God chooses to reveal God's glory, especially in an obvious way. How can we demonstrate our gratitude for God's revelation of God's glory?

Second, worship is an appropriate response to an experience of God's glory. When the people at the temple dedication saw the glory of the Lord, they fell before God in worship. They also offered many sacrifices. In other words, they offered their lives to God.



We should celebrate the fact of God's presence among us and offer ourselves to God in worship. We should also offer ourselves to God in service to others. What are some ways we can offer ourselves to God in response to a revelation of God's glory?

Third, God reveals God's glory in different ways. Our passage reports one story about how God does this, and the Bible tells many other stories about God's glory being revealed in obvious and even spectacular ways. The Bible also speaks about God's glory being revealed in a still, small voice. The Gospel of John even speaks of God revealing God's glory through the crucifixion of Jesus. How can we be alert to whatever ways God chooses to reveal God's glory?

What About Me?

• What expectations do we have about how God reveals God's glory? God revealed God's glory in an obvious way at the temple dedication. Should we

expect all such revelations to be that obvious? Could such an expectation have a detrimental influence on our faith? Or do we not expect God to reveal God's glory at all? Why might we not expect God to make the divine presence known? How could we find an appropriate middle ground where we expect to experience God's glory but don't need it to be obvious?

- Can we prepare ourselves for profound spiritual experiences? In a sense, the people at the temple dedication had prepared themselves for the possibility that they would have such an experience. First, they were faithful to build the temple. Second, they gathered for the temple dedication, so they were present when God revealed God's glory. Can we prepare ourselves for profound spiritual experiences? Or are such experiences totally God's gift and outside our ability to influence? Could the truth lie somewhere between the two extremes?
- What is the value of obviously powerful spiritual experiences? Are we wrong to assume that a spiritual experience must be obvious and powerful to be real? What do we do when we don't seem to have profound spiritual experiences? What does it say about our faith if we expect or demand such experiences in order to follow God? How can we develop a faith that appreciates such experiences but doesn't depend on them?

Resources

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Unit 4: Awaiting Christ

Theologian Henri Nouwen once said, "Waiting is a period of learning. The longer we wait, the more we hear about him for whom we are waiting" (209). The four weeks leading to Christmas, called Advent, provide a sacred space in which to wait, to learn, to expect, and to prepare for the coming of Christ. God-made-flesh arrived on earth in all the ways the world never expected. Born as a baby to a young woman, nestled in a stable in Bethlehem, Jesus changed everything even from his first moments in this world.

In this unit on "Awaiting Christ," we will explore some of the earliest Old Testament prophecies concerning this Messiah to come. By connecting these texts with the New Testament account of Jesus's birth, these lessons invite participants to consider the difference Christ's coming makes, how we might prepare for his coming, what comfort his coming brings, how we share such good news, and what actually happens when Jesus appears.

We share the experience of waiting for a Savior with people who have come before us. Historical contexts have changed since those earliest days, but the realities of injustice, violence, and suffering—the reasons people first longed for a Messiah—remain the same.

How might we wait this year with deep longing and hopeful expectation for one who comes to save, reconcile, and make new? What might we learn anew about Christ in this season of Advent?

For those who have celebrated the birth of Christ for many years, these lessons provide a contemporary lens through which to interpret familiar words anew. Participants will be equipped with meaningful study, reflection, questions, and conversations to make these waiting weeks significant. For it is in this season of waiting that we remember the one whose coming brought the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. And that is good news indeed!

Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery* (New York: Doubleday, 1981).

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A Great Light



Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 1:26-33

Central Question

What difference does the coming of Jesus make?

Scripture

Isaiah 9:2-7

2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. 3 You have multiplied exultation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. 4 For the voke of their burden and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. 5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. 6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Great will be his authority, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Luke 1:26-33

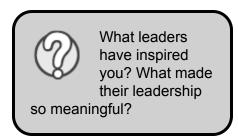
26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Reflecting

Every four years the United States searches for a new leader. Each new election season seems to last longer than ever, as parties and people seek to listen and learn from a variety of candidates auditioning for the role of president. As a result, each election season renews the country's desire to talk about what we want in that leader.

Are we looking for one who will cut our taxes or relieve our student loans? Do we want the president to strengthen our military or reduce defense spending? Should they focus more on jobs or trade? Civil rights or a stronger economy?

Everyone has opinions, some of them fiercely held and loudly proclaimed. And while nearly everyone agrees that American politics has become unconventional, the basic question of what we are looking for in a leader is as powerful as ever, even if our country is fully divided on the answer!



Thankfully, Christians have a yearly appointment with this question, and it promises to be far less contentious than American political infighting. Every Advent, we set aside time in worship and study to explore again the type of Messiah and Savior that we seek.

What sort of leader are we expecting? What characteristics should this leader sent from God possess? In a time and place long removed from a monarchy, what does it mean to call Jesus our "King"? What difference

does the coming of Jesus make? In today's lesson we explore ancient words of expectation that paint a picture of a leader sent to save, to liberate, and to inaugurate a new kingdom of peace and justice.

Studying

Today's lesson explores two messages from God, one spoken by the prophet Isaiah and one spoken by an angel in the Gospel of Luke. In both passages, we hear words that shape expectations of who the Messiah will be and how he will lead the people.

Today's passage from Isaiah is part of what scholars call First Isaiah (Isa 1–39). Composed before the Babylonian exile, this section of the book tells the story of the prophet Isaiah and his commitment to the people of Israel. This part of Scripture focuses thematically on the role of Jerusalem and the place of Jerusalem's monarchy in leading Israel.

In these early chapters of Isaiah, we can tell that the prophet regards the kings of Judah as great. Time and time again, Isaiah refers to these kings as powerful and divinely chosen. Both here and in chapter 11, he anticipates the Davidic king with exalted titles and wide-reaching claims about what this king will accomplish.

The sense of expectation makes this passage all the more interesting. Isaiah 9 opens with a word about "those who were in anguish" (v. 1). This is likely a reference to the campaigns of Tiglath-Pileser, the king of Assyria, whose armies had conquered the regions around Israel. But even in this time of anguish, Israel has hope. Isaiah speaks



During the lifetime of Isaiah, the Assyrian Empire conquered many Near Eastern nations,

including the following: Philistia (734 BC), Damascus (732 BC), Moab (c. 730 BC), Edom (724 BC), and Israel (723 BC).

of the promise of a new king, likely King Hezekiah, who would soon come to Judah's throne.

Celebration and excitement abound with the coming of Hezekiah, in part because his rule ensured that the Davidic line of kings would continue. The Israelites believed God appointed King David and those who followed in his line. With the rise of a new king, darkness would give way to light (v. 2). Greatness and joy and harvest would increase (v. 3). The language in

verse 6, referring to "a child...born for us," reflects the ancient understanding that God chose any king who ascended to leadership.

Into a culture of crisis, foreign occupation, and war, the birth of such a child gives assurance of hope. The people will be reminded again that God's care for them continues for another generation. A new leader will reign in their interest. He will be one of "great authority and...endless peace.... He will establish and uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time onward and forevermore" (v. 7). The hope is clear: the heir of this royal line will bring new life to God's rule for the good of the people.

It's no surprise, then, that the names given to such a leader are exuberant and hope-filled. Thanks in part to the beloved movement in Handel's *Messiah*, these words affirming the child to come simply leap off the page: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (v. 6). In the minds of millions of us who find ourselves humming this tune every



George Frederic Handel (1685–1759) composed *Messiah* in 1741. The first few movements of his

oratorio lift messianic prophecies from Isaiah, Haggai, and Malachi to set the stage for the story of Jesus's birth. The words here come from his song "For Unto Us a Child Is Born."

Advent, these words speak directly and prophetically of the coming King born in Bethlehem: Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It can be challenging for Christian readers and interpreters of Isaiah, especially during the season of Advent, to remember the original context of this prophecy. These words must first be heard within their historic context as expressions of hope invested in a new—yet quite ordinary—Davidic king.

Within the mystery of how God moves and works through Scripture, however, we who celebrate the birth of the Christ child this season find fresh meaning in these promises. For centuries Christians have found in these words the hope of God in Christ. They reveal God at work in all things and at all times, relentlessly committed to the justice and peace that come finally and fully in the person of Jesus.

In Luke 1, we once again hear the proclamation of a new leader sent by God to change everything. Here, of course, we're explicitly dealing with the birth of Jesus. In Luke 1:26-33, the Gospel writer picks up this thread from

Isaiah's words to ancient Israel to connect the old hopes with the coming of a Messiah long foretold.

As the story begins, God sends the angel Gabriel to Galilee to the town of Nazareth (v. 26). There, he appears to Mary, a young woman engaged to Joseph, a man from the lineage of David. Gabriel's conversation with Mary connects the birth of Jesus with the long line of rulers who preceded him, neatly tying the thread of Joseph's Davidic lineage to the new life that will come.

Gabriel begins with a word of both affirmation and connection: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!" (v. 28). We have to wonder what Mary is thinking when she meets Gabriel. No doubt she is scared and a little confused.

The angel continues, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus" (vv. 30-31). The angel promises, "Of his kingdom there will be no end" (v. 33). Jesus's rule will endure forever, unlike that of any other Davidic king.

It is clear that Jesus will be a unique heir to the throne of David. First, Gabriel announces that Mary's son will be "the Son of the Most High." In addition, as the story unfolds, we learn that Mary will conceive this son while still a virgin (vv. 34-35).

Gabriel's announcement to Mary heralds something different yet familiar. Her story involves the fear of an unexpected pregnancy, the giving of the child's name, the connection with the house of David, and the promises of greatness, peace, and an endless kingdom, all brought through the child's life. These things form a bridge connecting the Assyrian threat in Isaiah's life, the life of this young woman, and a future under the care of the one who will be called Jesus.

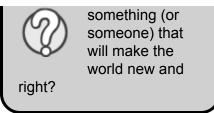
Understanding

Isaiah's and Luke's announcements of one who will come to bring peace, justice, and righteousness may give hope to the people who need peace. At the same time, this vision may threaten those who withhold peace.

Thousands of years later, our culture hasn't changed much. Many people still long for a new order, a new leader, a new king, and a

Where in our culture do we hear promises of

new sense of being in the world. For such people, these biblical promises are promises of new life. One is coming who will overthrow the way things are and bring about something new.



To be honest, most of us hunger for this type of reorientation, renewal, and transformation. Sadly, we are not always wise in where we look for it. We are infatuated with inventions like the computer, the smartphone, and whatever else might be just around the corner, vowing to change everything. We gravitate toward politicians who promise change, even if that means dismantling the establishment.

As followers of Jesus, we must keep our eyes focused on his all-consuming light rather than the flashes of lightning we see from time to time in our political, economic, or cultural worlds. Every bit of distraction we find in the "lightning"—the politicians, the things, the careers—can confuse our loyalties.

We might imagine that a president can save us, that a heap of money can bring peace, or that violent retribution can bring justice. But lest we forget the promises of Isaiah and Luke, we are reminded this Advent season that the one we wait for is no less than God made flesh. Jesus's kingdom will know no end, and he fulfills these true and abiding promises. He is the King who will truly bring "endless peace...sustain[ed] with justice and righteousness now and forever" (Isa 9:7).

What About Me?

- Do you find yourself fearful amid change? When the status quo of work, home, church, or community shifts, how do you handle the inevitable feelings of disorientation? What might it mean to see such changes as movements of God? We can draw courage from Mary, who in the face of destabilizing change said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord" (Luke 1:38). What might it take for you to welcome change as Mary did?
- Where do you hunger for more peace, justice, and righteousness? No matter how faithful we are, how put together we may be, or how much we know, every one of us has places in our lives that need more peace, justice,

and goodness. What are those places for you? How does your relationship with Christ bring peace, justice, and righteousness to them?

• How might you live as one changed by the light? There is a hymn that proclaims, "Christ is the world's light, Christ and none other, born into darkness, he became our brother." If you have been transformed by Christ and his light, how might you become a beacon of that light for those around you? What are ways, even today, that you can be light in a darkened world?

Resources

Susan Ackerman, "Isaiah," The New Interpreter's Study Bible, ed. Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003).

David R. Adams, "Luke 1:26-38: Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1*, ed. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 15–19.

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Prepare the Way



Micah 5:1-5a; Luke 3:3-6

Central Question

How can I prepare for the coming of Christ?

Scripture

Micah 5:1-5a

1 Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek. 2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. 3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. 4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth, 5a and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 3:3-6

3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Reflecting

As a mama of little ones, I became quite familiar with the greatest hits of Disney-Pixar's film repertoire. Chief among the favorites in my household is the 2006 animated film *Cars*, which follows the adventures of rookie race car Lightning McQueen. En route to drive in the Piston Cup championship, Lightning gets lost and winds up in Radiator Springs, a sleepy little town in the middle of the desert.

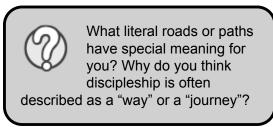
In the misadventures that led him there, Lightning ripped up the only road in town and then was taken to the county jail to atone for his mistake. The next morning, the local cars are at the courthouse having a rousing debate about Lightning's fate, when feisty lawyer Sally encourages community service as Lightning's penance. She rallies the audience in a call and response, saying, "What do we want him to do? Fix the road! Why? Because we are a town worth fixing!"

Aside from the road that Lightning McQueen ripped up, another road forever shaped the landscape of Radiator Springs. That road was the interstate. Some forty years prior to the movie's setting, the interstate cut through the desert landscape, bypassing the town. Without regular traffic and visitors, Radiator Springs fell into disrepair. Stores closed, young cars moved away, and those who remained felt left behind in every possible way. For Mater, Doc, Sally, and the rest, the interstate highway made them feel less than, left out, unequal, and overlooked.

On this second Sunday of Advent, we look at another road from another landscape. This road, though, is the opposite of the interstate that avoided Radiator Springs and left its residents to fend for themselves. This is a road of equal access, of making right what our world gets wrong. It is a road that asks us to prepare for the one who is to be born in Bethlehem, bringing peace and reconciliation.

Studying

Taken together, our two texts for this week paint a picture of a leader who is to come at the end of a long wait. This leader will be great, bringing peace, establishing justice, providing security, and enabling salvation.



Both passages also tell us that we must do our part to prepare for this leader's coming.

We turn first to the prophet Micah. A contemporary of Isaiah, Micah lived at the end of the eighth century BC. In Micah's time, the Assyrian Empire ruled the ancient Near East. They had already plundered the northern kingdom of Israel, and many Israelites had been deported as a result. The fate of the southern kingdom of Judah was precarious, as the Assyrian King Sennacherib campaigned throughout their territory.



King Sennacherib ruled Assyria from 705 to 681 BC. He was known for his conquests, plundering and

destroying dozens of cities in Babylon and Judah. His invasion of Judah (701 BC) is described in 2 Kings 18–19. Sennacherib later put down a Babylonian rebellion in 698 BC, which led to the total destruction of Babylon.

Given such dire circumstances, the people of Israel, both north and south, faced extreme hardship. Displaced from their homes and lacking sufficient resources, the people of Israel and Judah experienced anxiety and fear. The poor were the greatest victims of the occupation, forced to surrender their lands to the Assyrians' plundering. These people had already been exploited and demoralized. Fear of being forgotten by the God who promised the people of Abraham both land and a future loomed large.

It might come as no surprise that Micah often speaks of doom and destruction. But in chapters 4–5, a spirit of hope emerges and encircles the people, as Micah imagines a new leader who will rebuild after the horrors of Sennacherib.

Coming from Bethlehem, Micah says, this ruler will represent the modest and humble roots of his village. The new king will be a champion of the poor and an advocate for justice. Bethlehem was no ordinary place, though. It was also the birthplace of King David, and Micah's announcement of a future leader connects this coming leader to David's dynasty. Shepherding his flock, he will bring about peace and security for all the people (vv. 4-5). His strength will be shown through service.

The people must have been astonished and grateful when they heard this vision of a shepherd king born in Bethlehem. Mother Israel will give birth to a new king—and with him will come a new way of living and a new peace to blanket a land rife with injustice. God will use lowly Bethlehem and a humble shepherd to do great things.

As Christians read and interpret the words of the Old Testament prophets during Advent, we must remember the immediate historical contexts in which they were first written. At the same time, we can't help looking toward Jesus, the shepherd King born in Bethlehem to bring security and peace to the world.

In the New Testament, a wild-haired, locust-eating prophet named John announces Jesus's coming. Luke 3 begins with a list of Roman and Jewish leaders whose government created the setting for John and his prophetic ministry. John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, receives a word from God while in the wilderness. He goes forth to proclaim this word throughout the region of the Jordan River (vv. 2-3).

Known for his ascetic lifestyle and fiery preaching in the Judean wilderness, John the Baptist spoke to a particular people in a particular context. In the spirit of the prophets who preceded him (including Micah), John understood the needs of his people. They were oppressed by the brutal rule and policies of Tiberius Caesar and Herod Antipas. They longed for God to deliver Israel again.

We might summarize the message of God that John delivered in a single word: "Prepare!" "Prepare" was the daily sermon John preached as he readied the people to welcome the coming Messiah. Preparing the way, he preached in the wilderness around the Jordan River, exhorted the people of Israel, and called them to repent of their sins and be baptized (v. 3).

In one message, John quotes the words of Isaiah, another memorable prophet. All three Synoptic Gospels appeal to this passage from Isaiah 40 to interpret the meaning of John the Baptist's ministry. Let us, however, remember these familiar words in their original context so that we can understand them more fully.

Written to comfort the people of Judah after years of oppression and exile, Isaiah 40 proclaims the coming of a second exodus. This time, rather than crossing the sea to freedom, they will cross the desert. They will return from their exile in Babylonia to the homeland long ago promised to their ancestor Abraham. This will require a new highway, "the way of the Lord," where valleys are filled and mountains are leveled to make a broad, straight path (Luke 3:3).

John connects these ancient words with the coming of the Messiah, the one in whom all creation will be reconciled to God and to itself. For John, the Lord's highway is one that the Lord himself will take to arrive home with his people. We must not forget, however, that John still has a challenging message for his hearers about what preparing this road will entail. They must practice justice (Luke 3:10-14), producing fruit that demonstrates they have changed

their hearts and lives (Matt 3:8). This is the road that we ourselves must travel as we welcome the coming King.

Understanding

To a war-torn nation, Micah's promise of peace must have sounded like a lifeline. To an oppressed and occupied people, his promise of a fresh start with a new leader must have felt like a weight lifted off their shoulders. John's vision of the Lord's highway must have brightened the eyes of those whose paths were full of potholes of depression, valleys of sin, and mountains of poverty.

Both of today's passages remind us of Israel's long struggle against forces that would oppress and even destroy them. But what does this have to do with Christmas?



And the crowds asked him, "What, then, should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two

coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." (Luke 3:10-14)

On our Advent journey, all of us are called to put ourselves into places of suffering.

Perhaps we suffer by remembering the harder times of life: the weeks and months following the death of a loved one, the cancer treatment that stretched on endlessly. Even if our lives have been relatively free of grief or loss, we can learn from those who have experienced such suffering. We will certainly become more compassionate if we do.

We take on the darkness of Advent because Christmas promises light, peace, justice, and an end to hopeless suffering. Can you imagine what this promise must have sounded like in the ears of those who had long felt forgotten and trampled upon?



How does our cultur away from suffering and darkness, especially during

this season?

This Advent, let us not be afraid to experience the darkness, the long season of waiting, and the

solace of preparation. Then, when the Christ child is born, we may exult in God's salvation.

What About Me?

- Do seasons of waiting make you impatient? When life demands that you wait —for a promotion or an answer or a dream to be realized—do you find yourself wondering if God has forgotten you? Are you fearful that a resolution will never come? What habits or practices enable you to make meaning of the waiting?
- When have you felt most prepared for a new season in your life? Perhaps it was your biggest presentation at work, the day your child was born, or when a parent or grandparent finally passed away after a long illness. What made you feel ready to step into that moment? As you reflect back on the experience, what did you do to prepare? How might that experience shape your journey through Advent this year?
- In what aspects of life do you long for the Advent promise of salvation? John the Baptist proclaimed that after the way of the Lord is prepared, "all flesh will see the salvation of God" (Luke 3:6). What areas of your life are most in need of saving? Where are you hungry to be released from what binds you? How will you prepare to welcome salvation into the dark corners of your life?
- The birth of Christ makes real the Advent promises of hope, peace, joy, and love. No matter who you are, what you do, or how you vote or pray or love, the gifts that arrive with Christ are for all people. Not one of us is exempt from this promise or from its realization, no matter what. This profound truth takes time and readiness to accept and embrace. How will you celebrate these gifts this Advent season, and how will you extend them in the spirit of Jesus to the people you encounter?

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They Will Dwell Secure



Ezekiel 34:11-16; Luke 3:7-14

Central Question

What is the comfort of Christ's coming?

Scripture

Ezekiel 34:11-16

11 For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will sort them out. 12 As shepherds sort out their flocks when they are among scattered sheep, so I will sort out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. 13 I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them into their own land, and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. 14 I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. 16 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strays, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Luke 3:7-14

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the

coming wrath? 8 Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 9 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." 10 And the crowds asked him, "What, then, should we do?" 11 In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" 13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

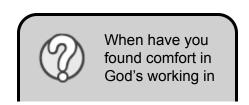
Reflecting

In her book *The Liturgical Year*, Sister Joan Chittister refers to a Peruvian wall hanging that a friend gave her. It is an Advent calendar of sorts, but instead of stale chocolate or cheap trinkets found in many Advent calendars from big-box stores, this one tells a story.

At the top of the hanging is a pastoral scene: a small town of palm trees and shacks. Below it are thirty small pockets, each one to be opened on the days leading to Christmas. The thirty treasures are all pieces that fill the scene above. She says this about the unexpected treasures:

Some of the pieces are of benign and beautiful things; some are not. There are bumble bees and angels, wild animals and dry straw, a branch-laden peasant man and a weary-looking woman. But there at the end of the days, as common as all the rest of the items in the scene, is the manger, the sign of the One who knows what life is like for us, who has mixed His own with ours. Now, we can see, all our expectations have been worth it. (60)

I feel a great deal of comfort knowing that the God of the universe would come and dwell among us in days, moments, and towns as ordinary as the ones we live in. Reflecting



on this truth, we explore themes of comfort and security on this third Sunday of Advent. We serve a God who promises to find us the ordinary moments of life?

when we are lost, care for us when we are wounded, and restore us when we need rescuing.

Studying

We begin this week with the prophet Ezekiel, who rose to importance as a respected voice among other refugees in Babylon in the early sixth century BC. He was eccentric yet strategic, always insisting that he spoke the words of the Lord.

Ezekiel was a visionary. He proclaimed judgment upon Judah and even foretold Jerusalem's destruction. Along with these harsher words, however, came words of consolation and restoration. Even as he predicted the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel lamented the city's impurity. He demanded that people recognize God's condemnation of their actions and the fate that awaited them.

Within the section of Ezekiel sometimes called the "book of consolation" (chs. 25–48), chapter 34 uses the imagery of shepherds to contrast the behavior of Judah's leaders with the behavior of God. Ezekiel accuses these Judahite leaders of padding their own bellies and lining their own pockets at the expense of the weak. In 34:1-10, he has harsh words for these shepherds who have scattered rather than tended God's flock. Judah's leaders didn't merely commit acts of injustice; they omitted acts of justice by refusing to heal, seek out, strengthen, or care for their sheep. Their poor leadership resulted in the scattering of the flock—an allusion to God's people now scattered and deported from the land of Judah.

Today's passage continues Ezekiel's metaphor of a shepherd with sheep. Unlike the greedy, self-focused leaders of verses 1-10, these verses depict the Lord as a shepherd who tends the beloved flock. God seeks them out, rescues them, gathers them, and leads them. God brings them to lush



The enduring metaphor of God as shepherd and God's people as sheep gives us the language of

"pastor," which is simply the Latin word for "shepherd." "Pastoral care" thus reflects the work of God, who brings back, binds up, heals, strengthens, feeds, and gives rest. In John 10:11, Jesus describes himself pastureland and creates a safe place for them to rest. Verse 16 sums it up well: "I will seek the lost, and I will bring as a good shepherd who "lays down his life for the sheep."

back the strays, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak."

By contrasting Judah's leaders with God, Ezekiel paints a picture of a God who holds nothing back to bring all of Israel into the fold. "I myself will search for my sheep and sort them out," God says (v. 11). To the people of Israel exiled to a distant land, surely these were words of great comfort.

After such restorative and comforting language, verse 16 introduces a sharp contrast: "But the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed [my sheep] with justice." This warning reminds us of God's displeasure with the failed leaders described in verses 1-10. These leaders have acted unjustly toward God's people, and God will not excuse their actions.

In Luke 3, John the Baptist also denounces sinful, unjust behavior. Following upon his words about the coming Messiah (vv. 1-6), John holds nothing back in a fiery address to those who have come to be baptized.

"You brood of vipers!" John cries (v. 8). What a way to capture people's attention! Like countless prophets who preceded him—including Ezekiel—John uses blunt and ominous language to announce judgment upon those who have not been faithful to God. He critiques these descendants of Abraham mainly because they seem to believe that their lineage alone makes them acceptable before God. But one's genealogy means nothing. If all God needed was offspring, God could raise up children of Abraham from the stones on the ground (v. 8).

John makes clear the need to repent, to turn away from barren lives that produce nothing worthy of God and toward transformed lives that bear fruits of God's love. What if his hearers choose not to produce good fruits? Then, he says, like unfruitful trees they "will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (v. 9).

It isn't difficult to hear urgency and fear in the people's voices as they ask, "What, then, should we do?" (v. 10; see vv. 12, 14). John answers by calling them to justice, compassion, and caring for those who live without life's most basic necessities. If you have clothing or food to spare, he says, then give to those who have none. The same tactic applies even (or especially) to people with a measure of power over others, such as tax

collectors and soldiers: don't exploit, don't cheat, don't harass, and don't abuse your power (vv. 11-14).

This is a stirring message for anyone who hears it. John's call to justice reaffirms that what matters most to God isn't the life we inherit



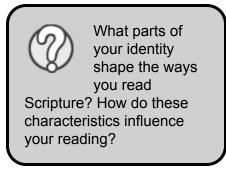
from our parents but rather the one we create by our godly deeds. The life John describes involves working for the mutual good of all people. Through such a life, all God's children enjoy the security of knowing their most basic needs will be met within the community. By leading such lives, we prepare the way for Christ to come.

As hard as this word may be to hear in this final week before Christmas, we're reminded that "there is no getting to Bethlehem and the sweet baby in the manger without first hearing the rough prophet in the wilderness call us to repentance" (Beach-Verhey, 69). In a community of mutuality, valleys are filled and mountains are lowered. The world is transformed as we join the Messiah in his work of renewing, reconciling, and redeeming the world.

Understanding

It can be a challenge for readers today to approach these ancient words without imposing our own stories onto them. To be honest, we can never separate our own identities and perspectives from the stories we read.

For example, if our lives are marked by relentless struggle and challenge, the Lord's promise in Ezekiel to rescue the scattered sheep, feed them, lead them, and give them rest sounds comforting. On the other hand, if our lives are largely free from such struggles, the challenging words from John the Baptist may make us who have plenty uncomfortable.



Whatever our circumstances, the coming of Christ as the embodiment of love, peace, and joy is good news for all of us. Every one of us can find comfort in the knowledge that there is one who shoulders the burdens we so

often try to carry ourselves. Regardless of our circumstance or need, we all need to hear a message like that! The peace Christ brings has the power to bind us more closely to God and to one another. Christ's people walk the road of life together. No one needs to walk it alone.

This Advent season, where shall we find comfort in the coming of Christ? What promises in these passages bring us relief, and what warnings make us uneasy? No matter the lens through which we read Scripture, may the God of all comfort strengthen us this year.

What About Me?

- What does comfort look like for you? In an age of increasing anxiety, how do you define "comfort"? Does comfort look small, like the everyday gifts of a warm blanket, a quiet cup of coffee, or a meaningful use of your time? Or are you one for whom comfort can only be found in major shifts: the start of a new job or the end of a dysfunctional relationship? Where do you find comfort in your life of faith?
- Our world's promises of security can be deceiving. Do an Internet search for "security" and you'll find millions of web pages addressing national security from internal and external threats; home security through alarm systems, cameras, and fences; financial security; digital security; and more. Any of these forms of security can be breached, of course. That's what makes them different from the security we find in God's promise to be our shepherd or in John's call for us to show justice to one another.
- Our good deeds grow out of our love for God in Christ. Christians have debated for centuries about the relationship between right beliefs and right practice. When we read today's text from Luke, that issue springs to the fore. We might read John's stern warnings and worry that our "fruits" (v. 8) are inadequate to our profession of faith. With opportunities to give and serve on every corner this Christmas season, we might be tempted to feel guilty that we're not doing enough to serve others. But be reminded that the fruit of which John speaks grows out of our love for God and our trust in God's comfort and strength. When we are connected to God through Christ, we can't help but share that overwhelming love with those around us.

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Wonderful, Joyous News



Luke 2:8-20

Central Question

How do I share in the good news of Christmas?

Scripture

Luke 2:8-20

8 Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, 19 and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

Reflecting

In February 1984 a group of techies, entertainers, and designers got together for a one-time event called "TED"—for Technology, Entertainment, Design—to share ideas that emerged at the intersection of these three fields, such as the debut of the Apple Macintosh computer and the Sony compact disc. By 1990, their motto of "ideas worth spreading" had broadened far beyond the scope of technology, entertainment, and design. Throughout the 1990s, annual TED conferences showcased speakers from fields including science, philosophy, music, religion, philanthropy, and psychology.

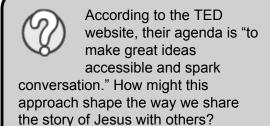
Today, "TED Talks" are among the most viewed content on the Internet, garnering well over a billion hits. More than 2,500 videos on all sorts of topics are available. Notable voices in countless fields and over 100 languages share their ideas in talks of eighteen minutes or less. TED is now

a global community, welcoming people from every discipline and culture who seek a deeper understanding of the world. We believe passionately in the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and, ultimately, the world.... In fact, everything we do...is driven by this goal: How can we best spread great ideas? ("Our Organization")

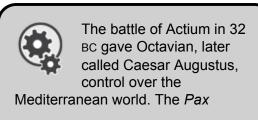
Two thousand years ago, the greatest story ever told was first announced to a forgettable group of shepherds on a hilltop at night. It was news that, like TED, aimed "to change attitudes, lives and, ultimately, the world." From that news, a global community with the power to change everything has emerged to welcome people of all kinds.

Studying

Today's passage is among the most familiar texts in all of Scripture. We pick up the story just after Luke's account of the birth of Jesus. In those first seven verses of Luke 2, the Gospel writer sets the scene for Jesus's birth.



Luk e offers details about



the time and place of Jesus's birth: leaders

romana, or "Roman peace," became the way of life throughout the region. For some, this "peace" brought relative security, a common language and currency, and new opportunities for citizenship. For others, however, it brought military occupation, taxation, poverty, and the displacement of people whose lands had been conquered. This was the social context of Jesus's birth.

locatio

ns, and governmental decrees. He situates the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, a land ruled by Roman oppression under Caesar Augustus, to a poor family with little worldly standing. These details provide a frame for Jesus's story. They highlight how it connects to his Jewish past, is hopeful for a peaceful future, and is downright revolutionary for oppressed people who throughout all time have been seen as last, least, and lowly.

The announcement of Jesus's birth comes to the most unlikely recipients: a group of shepherds. Allusions to King David's childhood notwithstanding, shepherds in Jesus's world were not held in high esteem. On the contrary, they were commonly seen as dishonest, lazy, and irreligious. They were assumed to be all too eager to lead their flocks into lands that were not their own. Luke's depiction of Jesus as one who brings good news to the poor, the lowly, the outcast, and the oppressed continues in the announcement of his birth to people such as these.

We shouldn't be surprised that the shepherds were scared. Can you imagine what that must have been like? You're spending a dark night on a faraway hillside when a great light interrupts you and an angel declares, "Do not be afraid!"

The angel's message is "good news of great joy for all the people" (v. 10). And such good news, the angel reminds the shepherds, isn't reserved only for the Israelites or for those who live in a certain country or for those in power. Rather, the Messiah is born for all people. God's grace for all God's beloved children has burst into the world on a dark night in Bethlehem.

For anyone familiar with the writings of prophets like Isaiah and Micah, these words of fulfillment are instantly recognizable. The long-awaited child has been born for the sake of these shepherds. He is the "savior," the one who is "born this day in the city of David" and who is "the Messiah, the Lord" (v.

11). After generations of hope, expectation, and longing for one to appear and change everything, the Messiah has finally come.

Furthermore, this Savior will be found in the humblest of places. Look for him, the angel says, "wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" (v. 12). God as a baby lying in a manger—can you imagine a stronger contrast to power, prestige, and honor?

As soon as the angel delivers his message, he is joined by "a multitude of the heavenly host" that erupts in praise to God (v. 13). Then, as the heavens become quiet and the world returns to normal, the shepherds immediately start on their way (v. 15). They don't hesitate to go and see for themselves that this good news has come true.

Everyone responds to Jesus's birth differently. The shepherds search for the baby and then tell everyone they meet about him (vv. 15-17). Mary quietly reflects upon all that has happened to her (v. 19). Everyone who hears the shepherds' report is amazed (v. 18).

The theme of these responses is found in verse 20: everything happened "just as it had been told them." The angels were right. The prophecies were fulfilled. The Christ child was born.

With this divine announcement, not only has a baby been born, but good news has been shared. And the news continues to be shared even today.

Jesus's life prompts people to tell about the good news of the Messiah long promised, of God becoming human in Jesus, and of Jesus's resurrection. It is news that, time and time again, changes everything.

As we retell this story, let us not forget that the birth of Christ was nothing short of scandalous. It is the story of God entering the human story in the most vulnerable way possible. It is the story of a blessed birth tucked away amid animals and dirt and a manger. In this scandalous story, the first to receive the good news are forgotten and marginalized peasants.

This was a Savior unlike any other. He proclaimed a kingdom like none we have ever known and directs us to a God who stops at nothing to show love to all people. It's no wonder that Mary had to consider these things carefully!

On this Christmas Eve, may we not move too quickly to the joy of tomorrow morning. Instead, let us sit and marvel at this unexpected, transformative, life-giving, love-displaying good news.

Understanding

Often lost in the hurry and familiarity of this season is the transforming reality of Christmas. The one God's people have awaited for generations has come. The God of the universe enters the human story as a tiny, helpless baby.

Best of all, in contrast to the oppressive kingdom into which he was born, Jesus will be a new kind of King ruling a new kind of kingdom in which the good news extends to all. No one is excluded from God's redemption—not shepherds, wise men, lepers, tax collectors, the religious elite, women, Samaritans, or prostitutes.

Christ the Savior has come for all people. This profound truth is the foundation on which our Christian faith is built. Yet somehow it is quickly lost amid other concerns and priorities that demand our attention. How can we proclaim this good news to the world if we fear reaching out to others? How can we share the love of Jesus if we are focused only on ourselves?

At least part of the answer is to be like Mary and consider the reality that God, through Jesus, is working on behalf of *all* people. What would happen if we followed the road to Bethlehem and opened wide our churches, our homes, and our hearts to everyone? Keeping in mind that God first shared the good news of Jesus with



people who had long been overlooked and oppressed, to whom should we go today and proclaim the news that there is a Savior? What would it mean for us not only to tell them that God loves them but to show them as well?

May the good news of that holy night come to life anew for each one of us this Christmas!

What About Me?

• The Christmas story demands a response. For many people, the best parts of the Christmas holidays are the traditions that surround them. This might include baking cookies with your grandchildren, hosting a Christmas party for your friends or your Sunday school class, or decorating the tree with your beloved. There's no doubt that Christmas traditions are among the most meaningful traditions many people practice each year. But if all we do is participate in grand traditions each Christmas, then we miss a vital moment for spiritual growth and renewal. This growth comes from letting the hope, peace, joy, and love born anew each year bathe our lives and propel us outward to a world that needs good news.

- The good news of Jesus's birth upends conventions and expectations about God. If we learn nothing else about God through the birth of Christ, we should learn that God is a God of surprises. God acts in ways that upend our expectations, not least our expectations about who is included and who is excluded. Even so, we can be assured that God's voice is often like that of the angel's to the shepherds, saying, "Do not be afraid." Even when God is at work in disorienting ways, we can trust that, in God, we are never alone and need not be afraid.
- What does the good news of Jesus's birth mean to you? The news of Jesus's birth was good for the shepherds, the Jews, the Gentiles, and the oppressed. Two thousand years later, is the news still that good? How does a poor baby born on the other side of the world ages ago affect your life in the twenty-first century? What makes this news worth sharing?

Resources

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The Lamb of God John 1:19-20, 24-34

Central Question

What happens when Jesus appears?

Scripture

John 1:19-20, 24-34

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed and did not deny it, but he confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ... 24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, "Why, then, are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" 26 John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandal." 28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. 29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' 31 I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." 32 And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is

the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' 34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One."

Reflecting

As a fairly new pastor, I struggled sometimes with "impostor syndrome," the fear that someone will figure out you don't actually know what you're doing. As a young woman who was pregnant in the first year of my pastorate, I got my share of raised eyebrows and double takes when I arrived at the hospital or funeral home or a wedding as "the pastor."

One of the most beautiful ways for spiritual formation to take place is to let your insecurity lead you closer to the Lord. Natural hypersensitivity can become an asset; it makes you aware of your need to be with people and it allows you to be more willing to look at their needs.

—Henri Nouwen

Yet time and time again in those early years, I took great solace in the stories

of those who came before me: other women who felt called to new roles, new parents who bravely navigated the demands of ministry and parenthood, and churches that took holy risks for the sake of the gospel. The stories of those who came before me have prepared the way for my story, as I trust that my story prepares the way for those who will come after me.

Our concluding passage for this unit tells the story of John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus. John called others to baptism, to turn away from the life they had led so that God might do a new thing in their midst.

Some thought John was an impostor. Though his authority was questioned, he remained sure of the witness he bore: that Jesus Christ was the Son of God who comes to change everything.

This week, we'll explore the significance of who and whose we are. We'll seek to appreciate the power of story to bear witness to God's work in our lives now and in our waiting that continues even after love is born in Bethlehem. Finally, we'll reflect on Christ himself, whose coming has inspired countless stories of hope, peace, joy, and love.

Studying

We conclude this unit with John the Baptist's words that witness to and affirm Jesus. You may remember that we heard the words of John from Luke as he called the people to prepare the way for Jesus's arrival.

The familiar words of John 1:1-18 frame Jesus's birth in cosmic terms. Jesus is the "Word" that existed in the beginning and that came into the world through God; through him all things came into being. John the Baptist came to testify and bear witness to this Word (vv. 1-8).

We meet John again in today's text. He is the first person to give testimony in the Fourth Gospel to Jesus's identity and mission. This testimony comes when religious leaders from Jerusalem send envoys to investigate John. The religious establishment has questions about John's identity. Their question—"Who are you?"—punctuates their exchange with John (vv. 19, 21, 22). It also foreshadows the more significant question of Jesus's identity that will soon emerge in the text.

This foreshadowing is evident from John's first response: "I'm not the Christ" (v. 20). This simple statement makes a telling contrast to the "I am" statements that Jesus makes throughout the Gospel of John. Even the language of "testimony" connotes that John is on trial. This also hints at what Jesus will face at the end of his life.

The Jerusalem leaders want to know who John is and by what authority he baptizes. The figures they propose—the



The "I am" sayings in John:

"I am the bread of life." (6:35)

"I am the light of the world." (8:12)

"I am the gate." (10:9)

"I am the good shepherd." (10:11)

"I am the resurrection and the life." (11:25)

"I am the way, the truth, and the life." (14:6)

"I am the true vine." (15:1)

Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet—imply a powerful claim to authority. The promised Messiah was the king of the line of David whom Jews expected would one day come to establish justice. And many hoped Elijah, who was taken bodily into heaven in a whirlwind in 2 Kings 2:11, would return to begin a new age (see Mal 4:5). Finally, "the prophet" is probably a reference to the prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15) of end-times speculation.

Instead, John redirects the Jerusalem authorities' line of questioning. Rather than answer their questions about himself, he tells them about Jesus. The authorities had questions about John, but John insists that Jesus is the one they are waiting for, even though they don't yet recognize him. "I'm not worthy to untie the strap of his sandal," John claims (v. 27).

After his exchange with the Jerusalem authorities, we read of an exchange John has with two of his disciples the next day. Beginning in verse 29, John's message shifts from a negative claim about his own identity ("I am not the Messiah" [v. 20]) to a positive assertion of Jesus's identity ("Here is the Lamb of God..." [v. 29]). In John's Gospel, Jesus has not yet spoken a single word. These words of witness from the Baptist, however, provide a meaningful testimony to whoever hears.

In these verses, John makes three assertions about who Jesus is and what he does. John first announces that Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (v. 29). This statement reflects various Old Testament images: the Passover Lamb, for example, or the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (see Isa 53:7).

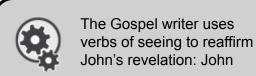
The title "Lamb of God" points to Jesus's role as redeemer. But John's statement isn't about individual human sin as such. Rather, Jesus has come to deal with "the sin of the world": the collective brokenness of all humanity.

John further states that Jesus is greater even though he came after John (v. 30). Rather than considering himself greater by virtue of seniority, John insists that Jesus "was before me." This is yet another reminder of the timeless nature of Christ, who was there in the beginning and is, from eternity, linked to God.

John's final claim is his strongest. In verse 31 he finally answers the question the Jerusalem elites asked about his own authority. John says he baptizes so that Jesus "might be revealed to Israel." His ministry aims to point the people of God toward the one they have been waiting for.

How, though, did John know that Jesus was the one, especially since John didn't recognize him at first? God had told him, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit" (v. 33). When John sees the Spirit rest upon Jesus, all of his claims are confirmed.

John's concluding word of witness
—"I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One" (v. 34)—
implies that John's hopes have been



confirmed. "I have seen," John seems to say, "and thus I know...."

John bears witness to the Christ who was long awaited, the Christ whose coming—and eventual death and resurrection—changes everything. Jesus is the promised one. He will be sought

"saw Jesus coming" (v. 29); John said of Jesus, "Look!" (v. 29); John "saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove" (v. 32); and, finally, John says, "I have seen and testified that this one is God's Son" (v. 34).

and found by generation upon generation. He is the one who points us to the God of all time.

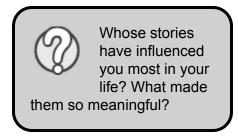
Understanding

John the Baptist is the first person in the Fourth Gospel to bear witness both to who Jesus is and to why he matters. Countless people, churches, and societies since John have done the same thing. They have sought to tell the story of the God who became flesh in Jesus and, in so doing, transformed human history.

But it can be hard to take someone else's experience at face value. We have to see for ourselves, to experience our own transforming encounter with Jesus. We hear John's claim that Jesus "takes away the sin of the world," and yet we still experience the world's brokenness every day (v. 29). Epidemics spread through regions, war dismantles societies, corrupt governments take advantage of the weak, ordinary people struggle to love one another. The world's sin is inevitable, and many thus ask, "What exactly has Jesus done? I'm still waiting here!"

A text like this one invites us to consider the power of story, of testimony. It shows us what can happen when we proclaim the truth despite the world's counterarguments. The coming of Christ changed everything. He is the light of the world, and we seek to follow this light each day.

How, then, can we bear this witness to the world? What does our testimony of Christ and his transforming work sound like? What does it look like as people observe the way we conduct our lives? If we wonder about the meaning of Christ, where should we look for guidance?



This week's lesson challenges us to reflect not only on who Jesus is but also on who we are in relation to him. May the questions we ask and the conversations we share lead us to a deeper knowledge of Jesus Christ our Lord.

What About Me?

- *Identity matters*. To follow in Jesus's way, we must understand who he is. This week's passage reminds us of the importance of who we are, what makes us unique, and how we are similar and different from one another. What has shaped your identity? How are those influences still at work in your life? Most important, does who you are influence your relationship with God?
- Your story has the power to shape lives. John's testimony of Jesus had a direct influence on those he encountered. The same is true with our own stories. One of the most powerful experiences we can have is to hear someone else's story and feel a sacred "me too!" rise up within us. Sharing our stories binds us together and gives us the courage to trust that we don't walk the road alone. Find some way in the coming year to tell your story to others.
- We can know Christ and sense his presence even in the waiting. Advent has passed, and the season of Christmas will soon give way to Epiphany. Soon we will start waiting once more for the birth of Christ. For many of us, waiting breeds uncertainty or even anxiety. Even so, times of waiting can be some of the most formative times for theological insight. In these waning days of Christmas, if you find yourself feeling incomplete or empty, still waiting for the hope, peace, joy, and love of Christ, take solace in knowing that God is with you even while you wait.

Resources

Alexandra R. Brown, "John 1:19-28: Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 1*, ed. Cynthia A Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 21–25.

Greg Garrett, "John 1:29-42: Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 261–65.

William E. Hull, "John," The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 9, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville TN: Broadman, 1970).

^{——. &}quot;John 1:29-34: Exegetical Perspective," 27–31.

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