

# Journeys

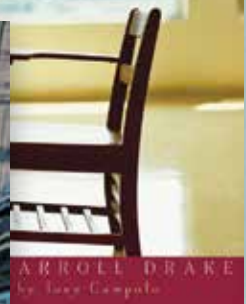
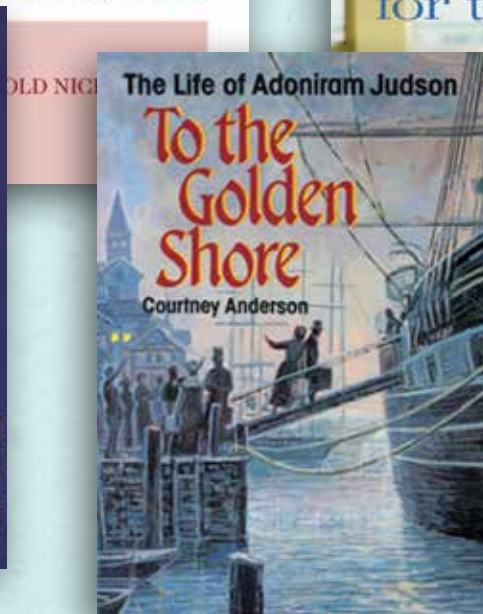
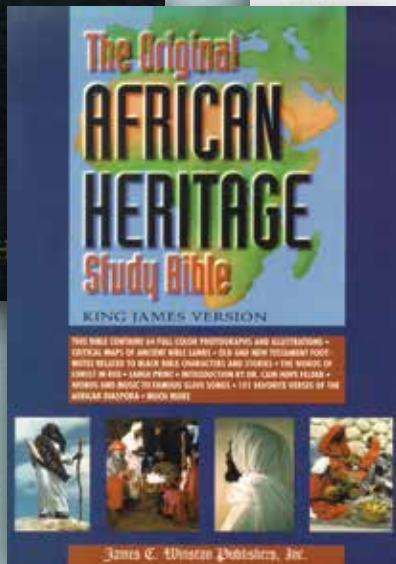
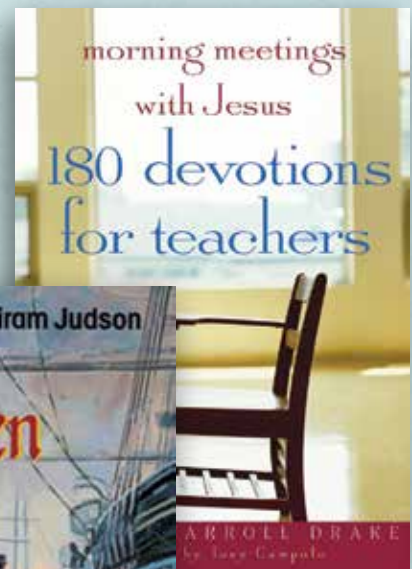
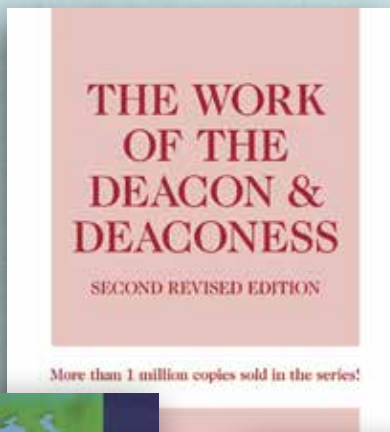
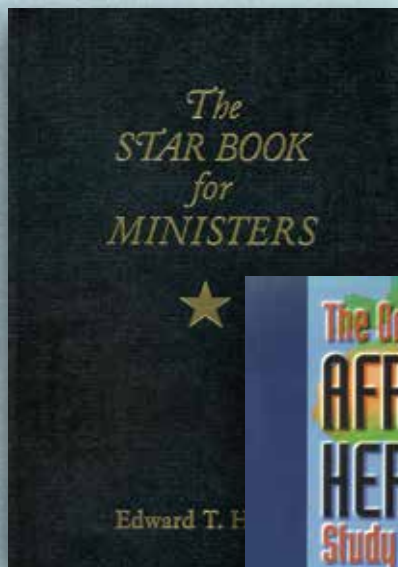
A person wearing a backpack and a blue hat is hiking through a forest with many trees and a ground covered in fallen autumn leaves. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting.

JUDSON BIBLE LESSONS | Fall 2024 | Vol. 4.1



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# Journeys

JUDSON BIBLE LESSONS | FALL 2024 | VOL. 4.1

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## About the Quarter

“Truth and Consequences” is an overarching theme for this quarter. How do we negotiate the deluge of competing agendas and voices that flood our day-to-day existence through news outlets, social media, entertainment, politics, and religion. Amid such a torrent, the question “What is Truth?” begs to be answered by those seeking to know and do “the right thing.” Fortunately, *I got a Guy for that!* Jesus promises that in him we shall know the truth and the truth will set us free. While there are many who will not come to the light because their deeds are evil, Jesus leads and guides all who truly live as his disciples. We will experience the consequences of our decisions as a collective community. Those who walk in the light more than ever need to point the way to truth and salvation and God’s love. Be the light. Be the salt. We can make a difference.

## About the Writers

**Erica Wimber Avena** is an Interim Ministry Specialist serving American Baptist and United Church of Christ congregations in the Connecticut region. She is a former General Board Member for American Baptist Churches USA and a former President of American Baptist Churches of Connecticut, and has served on numerous boards and committees and in leadership. She

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**May May Latt** was born and grew up in Burma (Myanmar). She earned an M.Div. degree from Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT) and later joined the faculty to teach the Old Testament. She also received a master’s degree from B.U.’s School of Theology and a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible from the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. Along with MIT, Latt has taught at Lisu Theological Seminary of Myanmar. She is the Metadata Analyst in Biblical Studies and Archaeology at Atla and the Minister at Milwaukee Myanmar Christian Church. She is married to Thomas R. Blanton IV, a scholar of New Testament and Ancient Religion. This quarter, May May contributed lessons 10 and 12 in the month of November.

**Yolonda Sanders** returns to *Journeys* as our newest writer. Yolonda earned a Ph.D. in organizational leadership from Indiana Wesleyan University. She is CEO of Yo Productions, LLC, and the co-founder of the Faith & Fellowship Book Festival. Her writing portfolio includes academic papers, novels, short stories, poems, and other creative works. In addition to writing, she enjoys teaching and, most importantly, spending time with her husband and other loved ones. Learn more about Yolonda and her works at [www.yoproductions.net](http://www.yoproductions.net). This quarter, Yolonda contributed lessons 6–9 for the month of October and lessons 11 and 13 for November.

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# BELOVED

## love's allusions

My beloved speaks and says to me: “Arise, my love,  
my fair one, and come away.”

—SONG OF SOLOMON 2:10

### Introduction

Rarely studied or used in worship settings, the Song of Solomon consists of romantic love poetry positioned in the Wisdom Literature section of our Bibles. Students will consider the juxtaposition of this book as part of the arc of scriptural narrative that considers what human love, fulfilled or unfulfilled, may tell us about divine love. Through poetry, the Song of Solomon tells a tale of romantic love and its longings, joys, and aspirations. Likewise, mystics have sought the divine—and found the divine seeking them in return. The poem celebrates beauty and joyfulness, more glorious than necessary, yet part of the experience of loving and being loved.

### Lesson Objectives

- To gain familiarity with the Song of Solomon and its interpretation.
- To reflect on the poetic lenses that we use to interpret Scripture.
- To consider what human love may illustrate about divine love.

### Song of Solomon 2:8-13 NRSV

8 The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. 9 My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. 10 My beloved speaks and says to me: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; 11 for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. 12 The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. 13 The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

## Into the Scripture

The opening line, a Hebrew idiom rendered into English, is something like “the song of songs,” which is for/by/to Solomon. The title “song of songs” means the best song—like “the Holy of Holies” means the holiest place, and “the King of Kings” means the king over all the others. Scholars doubt that Solomon authored the book, but there are good reasons for the attribution to Solomon: it obviously connects this book with the rest of the Wisdom tradition. Told primarily from the point of view of the female voice, it is found in the part of the Bible containing “Wisdom Literature” following the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Its placement highlights its connection with the book of Proverbs, much of which is directed to a young man by an older man, educating him as he comes of age. In Proverbs, we see the pursuit of wisdom likened to a man pursuing a woman in a garden. Some scholars have suggested that the final chapter, Proverbs 31 (about “the capable wife”), provides a segue to the Song of Solomon. In the same way, the book of Proverbs, also part of the Wisdom tradition, is attributed to Solomon in the first line: “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel” (Proverbs 1:1). Solomon is remembered in his life as a king who sought wisdom (e.g., 1 Kings 3:9-14). Solomon’s wisdom was a defining characteristic

of his reign. Solomon is also remembered in 1 Kings 4:32 for composing music, so the Song of Solomon is a fitting title in translation.

There are seven references to Solomon in the Song of Songs, but they refer to Solomon’s reign and influence as part of the context of the piece; his is not one of the voices

in it—e.g., the curtains of Solomon in 1:5, the litter (vehicle) of Solomon in 3:7, Solomon’s having a vineyard in 8:11, etc. Interpreters have used the lens of allegory to “spiritualize” this poetry, suggesting that it is an account of the relationship between

- God and Israel;
- Christ and the church; and



Solomon’s wisdom was a defining characteristic of his reign.

- Christ (*logos*, the divine word mentioned in the prologue to the gospel of John) and the individual believer.

However, the allegorical lens does not do justice to the full voice of the poetry in the Song of Songs. It is romantic love poetry, sometimes called lyric poetry, in that it is from the point of view of two private individuals—as opposed to heroic or epic poetry which celebrates heroic deeds or epic adventure. Much of it is celebratory and not necessarily meant to be taken literally in its metaphors.

In the final chapter, the woman’s voice affirms larger truths about love: it is stronger than death, and it cannot be purchased with money.

*for love is strong as death,  
passion fierce as the grave.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
a raging flame.*

*Many waters cannot quench love,  
neither can floods drown it.*

*If one offered for love  
all the wealth of one’s house,  
it would be utterly scorned.*

(Song of Songs 8:6b-7)

These are the only verses that comment on love generally—the rest is a reverie by turns describing the longing of the lovers for one another, their separation, and the joy of their reunion.<sup>1</sup> Christian mysticism emphasizes the soul’s longing for God, and its finding its





rest in God. *Ruhen in Gott: Eine Geschichte der christlichen Mystik* [Resting in God: A History of Christian Mysticism] analyzes the yearning for God as a centerpiece of Christian faith.<sup>2</sup>

Many of us know the Scripture in Matthew 7:7-8 and Luke 11:9-10, having sung the chorus: “knock and the door shall be opened unto you, seek and ye shall find . . .” These are themes that the Bible uses—seeking and finding God, the human attraction to the holy, and God’s longing for a people. What could people who are familiar with the vicissitudes of human love therefore also know about God’s love?

## Into the Lesson

The question of the purpose for this poem’s inclusion in the Bible is perennial. Since neither God nor Wisdom nor Christ is mentioned directly, the connections between love poetry and salvation history is left to the reader’s interpretation. Yet, the history of biblical studies bears generations of robust defenses of this book in our Bibles—just as it is.

The poetry serves its message: a sonorous tribute and celebration of human love. Poet Christian Wiman says this when he compares poetry to prose writing: “Prose is an altogether different order of experience, more public, less mysterious, less ultimately rewarding.”<sup>3</sup> As poetry, therefore, this poetic reverie invites us to imagine God’s love for us, our longing for God, and our finding, losing, and rejoicing again when we feel ourselves close to the divine. And human love—in its absence or in its presence—may inform our spiritual imagination. Like poetry, sometimes it speaks to us, sometimes we can read the words, but they may not hold the same meaning for us.

The themes of the Song of Solomon are twofold: (1) intense desire: seeking and finding, and (2) the joy of physical attraction. Human love is an accessible way to talk about the desires of the soul and spirituality. This poetry uses the language of love and points beyond human love in a way that allows us to make our own connections, feel our own longings, and search for ourselves.

### Her Voice (Verses 8-10a)

While history suggests allegorical ways to read the Song of Solomon, the song itself uses metaphors and similes to describe the delight that the lovers take in each other. They do not fit altogether into a visual whole; rather, they offer a series of images and similes. In verse 8, the female voice describes the approach of her beloved “leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.” His approach cannot be taken literally (otherwise he would be a giant), but for the one who waits for his arrival, he is larger than life. He is as a superhero to her. She says that he is like a gazelle or a young stag, suggesting strength, agility, and restiveness. He comes near, up to the windows, gazes through the lattice, and then speaks to her, inviting her to come away.



This poetic reverie invites us to imagine  
God’s love for us.



## His Voice (Verses 10b-13)

His invitation to her to come away is placed in the context of the fullness of time: “The winter is past, the rain is over and gone” refers to the end of the rainy season. The flowers of spring are appearing, the time of singing, including the singing of birds’ arriving across the whole land, not just for the lovers. While the moment may be fleeting, the timing is right. He goes on to place their union in the context of the blooming and fruiting of the natural world: “The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away” (verse 13). The fullness of time is implied in this invitation to union and new life. The invitation is the beginning of their life together.

Jesus’ invitation in the Gospels is to all who have felt themselves to be unworthy of the covenant with Israel. Jesus extends this invitation, finding faith in unlikely people, women, lepers, tax collectors, the poor. And in that invitation, we are welcomed into a joyful new life.

## The Language of Beauty: Black and Beautiful

The Hebrew word translated into English as “fair one” could just as easily be translated as “beautiful one.” Fair, in this case, means beautiful, not light in coloring. There is nothing to suggest in this text that the lovers are light-skinned. On the contrary, in 1:5, the female voice says, “I am black and beautiful,” using the same word. We learn that her darkened skin is a result of working in the vineyards. Her productivity in the vineyard and resulting darkened color is a point of pride for her, despite her brothers’ anger which sent her to be the keeper of the vineyards; she claims, celebrates, and revels in her own beauty. And her beauty in addition to being her own possession is a worthy gift for her to bestow upon her beloved.

This was translated by the RSV and others as “I am very dark, but comely”—as if to imply that a dark-skinned woman is unlikely to be beautiful. Modern translators have made a point of correcting this text error, confronting the implied racism.

## Into Discipleship

In September, this Scripture comes out of season, unless you are reading this in Australia, where the winter has just passed and spring is in fact beginning. For those of

us in other geographies, we can imagine this moment that the writer conjures in early spring, when the earth has thawed and absorbs the rain, venturing out into nature to encounter blossoming vines and fruit on the trees. Nature can seem to be more beautiful than imaginable, wilder, more awe-inspiring. There is a light-hearted expression used among those who have spent too much time online; they might say, “I need to touch grass” . . . meaning they need to take a break—breathe fresh air, clear their heads—go outside.

There is an ancient spiritual practice around beauty, which begins with the assumption that beauty is everywhere, but we are not always ready to notice it. So, we ask ourselves, what is stopping us from seeing beauty? This practice invites us to see beauty, but it may mean that some clutter needs to be cleared away—clutter in our minds preventing us from seeing it, clutter in the real world, too much of everything in the way of it. We must allow beauty to have its full effect on our souls, which is restorative, inspiring, delightful, joyous. If we have too many things and too much to do in front of us, we may not notice what is beautiful about any of it. Simplicity is a tool—by paring away excesses, we make an opening for splendor. If we are in a rut, we may not see the beauty around us. If we have a narrow understanding of aesthetics, we limit ourselves in our ability to see beauty in all its manifestations. Beauty is startling, stimulating, and soothing.



By paring away excesses,  
we make an opening for  
splendor.





Gregg Braden says this in *Secrets of the Lost Mode of Prayer*: “Beauty is more than things pleasing to our eyes. It is an experience of the heart, mind, and soul. . . . To find beauty in each experience, perhaps our role is less about creating it and more about recognizing that it is already here. Beauty is always present in all things. It may be found in places where we believe that beauty could never exist . . . . The power to see beauty is a choice—a practice.”<sup>4</sup>

I lead a monthly worship service in an assisted living facility near the church I serve. I go to a floor where people are in long-term care, most of them clear in their minds, but with profound physical challenges which prevent them from returning to independent living. Many of the windows face out onto a bay. When I asked them about the sunsets there, they all smiled, relaxed, and sat straighter in their chairs; it was a common experience of awe which they shared together. It was an ennobling shared experience. I saw their reverence and connection. I did not see the sunset; it was mid-morning—but I saw its reflection in their eyes and faces. Without ever seeing it, I know that it is beautiful by its effect on them. And I also saw that they are beautiful.

Beauty is all around us, hiding in plain sight: the stars in the night sky, a favorite waterfall, a tree, bird, or housecat. The practice of beauty also can be recognized through music and forest sounds, and in acts of kindness and benevolence. Its reflection is divine, its celebration is in the soul. God loves you just the same whether you notice the beauty of nature, engage in social justice work, or know the beauty of true love. A spiritual practice is a mindfulness practice to remind you of God’s love, God’s care for you and for the world, and that God’s blessing is available in every situation—although sometimes you need wait to let your eyes adjust to see.

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#### Notes

1. <https://yalebiblestudy.org/courses/ruth-song-of-songs-lamentations-and-esther/lessons/song-of-songs-part-1-video/>.
2. *Ruhen in Gott: Eine Geschichte der christlichen Mystik* 2021 [Resting in God: A History of Christian Mysticism], analyzes the yearning for God as a centerpiece of Christian faith.
3. Christian Wiman, *Ambition and Survival: Becoming a Poet* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2007), 73.
4. <https://medium.com/change-your-mind/the-spiritual-practice-of-finding-the-blessing-of-beauty-in-everything-74f6b4082d6d>; refer also to <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/3303.htm> (also: beautiful one, fitting, handsome, sleek).

## Closing Prayer

Loving God, you have sought us out, even as our souls yearned for you without finding you. Help us to know you even when we feel your absence, and to trust you when we are afraid. When we feel ourselves blessed, help us to be mindful of those in need of blessing, and to give thanks for your divine, providential love for the world. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

### ■ Into the Scripture

- Write your own wisdom literature by listing things you have learned in life. Would you use poetry or prose? Why?
- Which is your preferred allegorical reading of the Song of Solomon, and why?

### ■ Into the Lesson

- What has human love taught you about divine love, if anything? (The presence of love or the absence of love.)



- In a journal, list attributes that you find attractive. After you have written them down, ask yourself whether any of them could also be attributes of God.

### ■ Into Discipleship

- What are some simple things you can do to appreciate beauty in your everyday life?
- This week, keep a daily journal—making note of two or three things that brought you awe each day.

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “You Walk along Our Shoreline,” with organist Jimmy Abbington (*Lead Me, Guide Me, Second Edition* © 2013 GIA Publications, Inc.): <https://youtu.be/2dGIWCP5hlo?feature=shared>
- “The Summons” (words and music by John Bell): <https://youtu.be/GiXnbOORTAU?feature=shared>
- “Arise, My Love, and Come Away,” sung by Jorja Krause; performed by Wilshire Baptist Church; Jeff Brummel, director; Alissa Payne, piano: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZogqIVcUrM>

### Media Option

Supplement the lesson with *Yale Bible Study*: “Song of Songs” (Parts 1 and 2):

- <https://yalebiblestudy.org/courses/ruth-song-of-songs-lamentations-and-esther/lessons/song-of-songs-part-1-video/>
- <https://yalebiblestudy.org/courses/ruth-song-of-songs-lamentations-and-esther/lessons/song-of-songs-part-2-video/>





## Activity Ideas

- As a group, listen to “Arise, My Love, and Come Away” on YouTube. Reflect together on how the song speaks to you. What effect does lending music to the words have on their meaning for you? How is this the same as and/or different from popular songs about love?
- As a group, watch the short, seven-minute video on the Song of Songs by the Bible Project. Discuss the question of the purpose of including this book in the Bible. What does human love tell us about divine love?  
<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/song-songs/>

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year B Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

### Week of September 1, 2024

#### Sunday, September 1

Song of Solomon 2:8-13 and Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9;  
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 and Psalm 15; James 1:17-27;  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

#### Monday, September 2

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 144:9-15;  
Song of Solomon 3:6-11; 1 Timothy 4:6-16  
*Complementary:* Psalm 106:1-6, 13-23, 47-48;  
Deuteronomy 4:9-14; 1 Timothy 4:6-16

#### Tuesday, September 3

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 144:9-15;  
Song of Solomon 5:2-6:3; 1 Peter 2:19-25  
*Complementary:* Psalm 106:1-6, 13-23, 47-48;  
Deuteronomy 4:15-20; 1 Peter 2:19-25

#### Wednesday, September 4

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 144:9-15; Song of Solomon 8:5-7;  
Mark 7:9-23  
*Complementary:* Psalm 106:1-6, 13-23, 47-48;  
Deuteronomy 4:21-40; Mark 7:9-23

#### Thursday, September 5

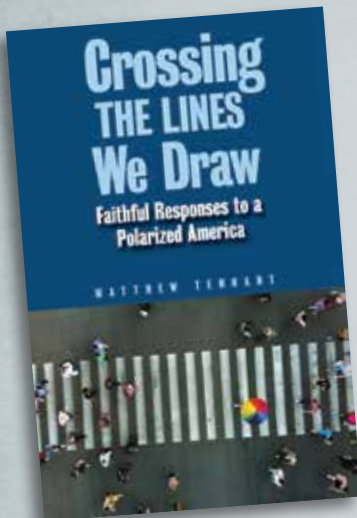
*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 125; Proverbs 1:1-19;  
Romans 2:1-11  
*Complementary:* Psalm 146; Isaiah 30:27-33;  
Romans 2:1-11

#### Friday, September 6

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 125; Proverbs 4:10-27;  
Romans 2:12-16  
*Complementary:* Psalm 146; Isaiah 32:1-8;  
Romans 2:12-16

#### Saturday, September 7

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 125; Proverbs 8:1-31;  
Matthew 15:21-31  
*Complementary:* Psalm 146; Isaiah 33:1-9;  
Matthew 15:21-31



## Crossing the Lines We Draw: Faithful Responses to a Polarized America

by Matthew Tennant

In a society increasingly divided along political, theological, cultural, and racial lines, the Christian church is not exempt. How can we respond to the division in the world around us when we are too often polarized ourselves? Tennant offers scriptural insights for developing strategies that will equip people of faith to cross the lines in meaningful dialog. \$16.99

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# WORTHY

## threshold of faith

But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

—MARK 7:28

### Introduction

The healing of the Syrophenician woman and the subsequent story of the healing of the man who was born deaf and unable to speak are illustrations of an important argument that Jesus was having with the Pharisees beginning earlier in this chapter. Jesus illustrates here in his own life what engaging in acts of faithfulness looks like, as he heals people while moving among them. The healings happen differently, but in each case the one healed is given a new lease on life, a threshold moment, and these stories are remembered and shared in our Gospels. Our Scripture begins and ends with Jesus seeking to keep his presence and his work in confidence—yet the word gets out.

### Lesson Objectives

- To learn how Jesus interacted with people who were outsiders to the Jewish community that he inhabited.
- To reflect on the nature of healing, and how being healed may create threshold moments.
- To appreciate the distinction that Jesus was making about what a life of faith looks like versus a life that only reflects an outward appearance of faith.

### Mark 7:24-37 NRSV

24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” 28 But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” 29 Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” 30 So she



went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. 31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” 35 And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

## Into the Scripture

The story of the Syrophenician woman and the healing of a deaf man is placed right after a conversation Jesus had with the Pharisees at the beginning of Mark chapter 7 regarding the laws of kashruth, the body of Jewish religious laws concerning the suitability of food and the fitness for use of ritual objects, etc. The Pharisees criticized Jesus for his allowing his disciples to eat without the ritual washing of hands, and Jesus charged them with “abandoning the commandment of God and holding to human tradition” (verse 8). Jesus emphasized his main point by calling the crowd to witness: he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the

things that come out are what defile” (verses 14-15). He is referring to their words and actions. Being careful to eat the right foods and do the ritual washing yet failing to care for those in need falls far short of meaningfully fulfilling God’s commandments. It is not enough to eat

and drink according to the law; fulfillment of God’s law needs to go further. Our Scripture today illustrates this principle.



“

Gentiles seem to warm to Jesus’ message more readily than his own people do.

Jesus encountered Gentiles occasionally in the Gospel narratives, and he encountered them as individuals, not in groups; each individual encounter highlights how his ministry and message are being received beyond the Jewish sphere. In many cases, the Gentiles seem to warm to Jesus’ message more readily than his own people do. These episodes underscore that those born outside of the covenant people may expect that God’s blessing is nevertheless extended to them as well. YHWH is a God who is a God of all, not just for some. These stories taken together contain important perspectives on the reception of Jesus beyond the children of Israel. This provides a

foundation for establishing the church among the Gentiles later.



- Jesus admired the conviction of the centurion who believed that Jesus' spoken word could heal his servant without Jesus' visiting him. "When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith" (Matthew 8:10).
- "A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans.) 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 4:7-10). Jesus was offering "living water"—that is, sustaining faith—to someone who was not a Jew. Subsequently, the woman in essence became an evangelist of sorts by enthusiastically witnessing to her community concerning the potential of Jesus' being the Messiah.
- Pilate was drawn into the dramatic events around Jesus' last days, and wondered who Jesus was to his own people. "Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, 'My kingdom does not belong to this world'" (John 18:33-36a). Jesus was

emphasizing to Pilate that his kingdom was not one that was a political threat to Pilate. He subsequently displayed concern for handing Jesus over to the crowd.

- The centurion guarding the cross bears witness to what he saw when Jesus died: "Certainly this man was innocent" (Luke 23:47). This is the observation of a non-Jewish witness to the Crucifixion. Most of the other witnesses to Jesus' death were Jewish.

Each of these encounters places Jesus alongside people who were not Jewish, giving us the outsider's view of him. As we turn our attention to his encounter and spirited conversation with the Syrophenician woman, she makes the case (and he agrees) that the covenant that the children of Israel have with God can be a covenant of blessing for all.

## Into the Lesson

Alongside Jesus' teaching ministry, he had a powerful ministry of healing. In these two encounters, we see Jesus extend his healing ministry to those outside of the children of Israel, illustrated by his actions, true fulfillment of the law. In Mark 7:24-30, a Syrophenician woman encountered Jesus and asked for his mercy. In Matthew's version of this story (see Matthew 15:22), she is described as a Canaanite. By identifying her as Syrophenician, Mark further defines her as being part of the Canaanites from the region of Syrophenicia, which is to the northwestern part of the region in the vicinity of the



Jesus extends his healing ministry to those outside of the children of Israel.



city of Tyre. In this encounter, Jesus was persuaded to heal her daughter because of her knowledge of his identity, the nature of his work, and the true meaning of mercy.

This conversation is surprising in that the woman at first seems to be the one convincing Jesus of his own position. When she came to him, begging him to cast the demon out of her daughter, he said, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (verse 27). “The children” here means the children of Israel; Jesus places the emphasis of his work on fulfilling tradition. And he compares her to a dog, which is a derogatory slur. Undeterred in her quest, she answers him continuing his metaphor (children and dogs) to support his larger purpose of blessing the world: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (verse 28). And in her answer, Jesus recognizes that she fully understands his identity, his work, and what he embodies. Without laying a hand on her or her daughter (who was not present), he declared that the demon had left her daughter. The woman is representative of those who live in the surrounding area, and she secured his blessing for her household. Of course, when she arrived home, she found her daughter well.

This text, read on its own, leaves open interpretive questions about what is at stake in this exchange. Did she teach Jesus who he could be to the Gentiles? Did he reconsider how he was thinking about his ministry to those outside of Israel? Who benefits by highlighting the relationship between Jesus and those who are outside the community? Would you read his answer differently if you are Jewish or if you are Christian? These are good questions for reflection, which the text leaves open. And these are questions at the root of some of the larger themes in the New Testament. What is the nature of Jesus as Messiah? Who is he for?

In Mark 7:31-37, a deaf man is healed by the power conveyed in proximity to Jesus. The restoration of hearing (ability to listen) and speech confirms that the Good News was extending to the peoples who live around Israel. This was a private moment between Jesus and the man brought to him for healing. Jesus took him away from the crowd, put his fingers in the man’s ears, and said, *Ephphatha*, which means “be opened.” There are very few Aramaic phrases in the Gospels; they occur in Matthew and Mark only. The others are also private moments with Jesus, including the following:



## Jesus recognizes that she fully understands his identity.

- Mark 5:41: “*Talitha cum*” is Aramaic for “little girl, get up,” which Jesus said when he raised her from the dead—the daughter of the leader of the synagogue.
- Mark 14:36: “*Abba*” is voiced when he was praying to God in the Garden of Gethsemane. “Father, for you all things are possible . . .”
- Mark 15:34: “*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani*” is an Aramaic quoting of Psalm 22:1—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These are among his last words on the cross.

The Aramaic underscores that the writer is quoting the very words of Jesus who spoke in Aramaic, not in the Greek which is used for the New Testament writings. Both the touching of his ears and the spittle on the tongue underscore Jesus’ closeness to the man.

This private moment ends with Jesus’ ordering the healed man to tell no one, “But the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it” (verse 36b). The man and those who witnessed his healing clearly did not comply with Jesus’ request that they keep this to themselves. It was shared, resulting in Jesus’ ministry’s becoming widely known. How could it be otherwise? Like others that Jesus healed, wherever they went, people who knew and loved them would see their healing and be witnesses to their recovery. With the healing miracles and the popular focus they brought to Jesus, he was bound to come to the attention of the authorities. How the authorities handled this popular healer is the story that Mark’s gospel goes on to tell.



## Into Discipleship

### The Door

“What does it mean if your door is open or closed?” she asked. I pause to carefully consider my reply to this sensible workplace inquiry. What does it mean if the Senior Minister’s door is open or closed? What should it mean? What might it mean?

Of course, I would like to say my door is always open to her or to anyone who comes seeking me out; but in truth, the noise from the preschool (just steps away from my door) echoes, and distracts me more than I want to admit. I love children. Yet, it is hard to concentrate with the boisterous voices. Specifically, the first Tuesday after Labor Day is the hardest day of the year. It is the day when youngest children say goodbye for the first time on their first day of school. A small person equipped with a new backpack and a change of clothes, excited for the start of their new school, encounters the separation threshold. If my door is open, I am vulnerable to this emotional moment; however it goes, I become a witness to the mixed feelings of the child, the emotional caregiver, the puzzled sibling who says goodbye and turns ready for the next errand—the shopping, the dry cleaning—knowing they will be back for their rattled sibling.

This leads me to remember my children’s early years, my own mixed feelings sending them to school, the

importance and anguish of these thresholds which only seem to escalate as time moves forward, bringing longer separations and greater distances. Usually, I begin my morning with the door open, and at some point, I realize I have already closed it, so I can steward my emotional energy into other areas.

Luther wrote his *95 Theses* and left them on the Wittenburg Castle Church door—a door which was open to him, a threshold where conversation began, where important words were left, retrieved, and ideas shared. He spent his ministry at that church and fully occupied that space for discourse. But the church’s door in Rome slowly swung shut on Luther. Luther and Germany began their own church, accountable to their own people.

### Threshold Moments

A threshold moment is a moment that marks a new beginning, a moment that is irreversible, a new way of making connections in the world. Historically, threshold moments are times when something new appears and changes everything that comes afterwards. Historically, we can say that examples of threshold moments include the first cities that appeared in previously agrarian societies, the advent of innovative technologies such as bronze and iron ore, the invention of antibacterial drugs, the printing press, the Reformation, etc. But



threshold moments can also be small moments in our lives, after which we can look back and see that everything changes.

The two people who encountered Jesus in our Scriptures today had threshold moments with him, in that healing restored them to the lives that were being taken from them by disease. The Syrophenician woman also provides a threshold for those who are born outside of the children of Israel to inherit the blessing of their promise as well. Spiritual communities always have insiders and outsiders. Spiritual communities tend to be formed by a core group of deeply committed people at a given moment in history, and then seek to accept and invite new people in going forward. However, in Jesus' day, he kept noticing faith in people who were far outside the obvious normative insiders—and Jesus welcomed them. These are threshold moments which allow a new kind of person to find a spiritual home in this tradition.

In your community of faith, who are the people you do not expect to join you? Why not? What would have to change for them to find a spiritual home among the current insiders? Is the door open or closed?

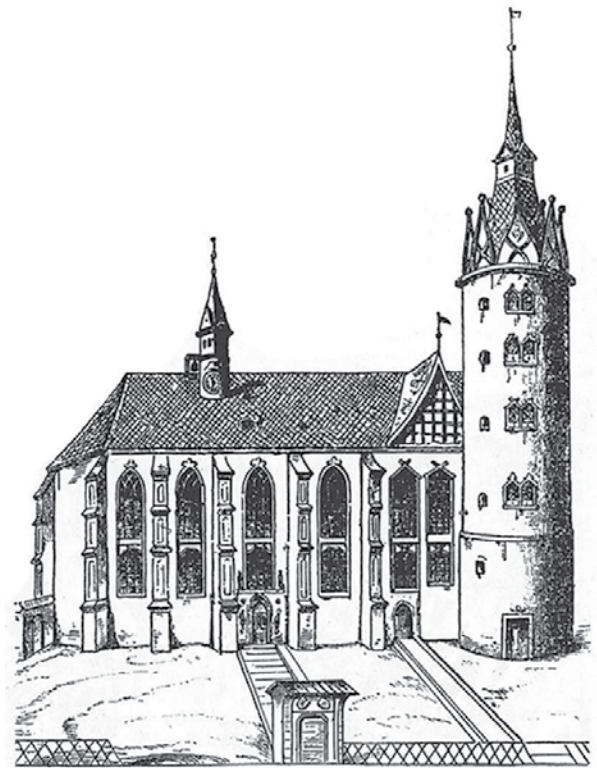
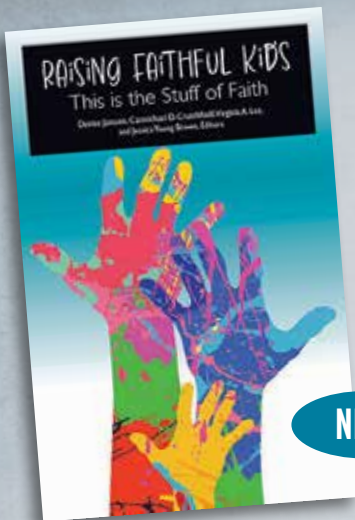


Illustration of Wittenberg Castle Church by Lucas Cranach the Elder in 1509. Public Domain. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All\\_Saints%27\\_Church,\\_Wittenberg#/media/File:Schlosskirche\\_Wittenberg.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Saints%27_Church,_Wittenberg#/media/File:Schlosskirche_Wittenberg.jpg)



## Raising Faithful Kids: This Is the Stuff of Faith

Edited by Denise Janssen, Carmichael D. Crutchfield, Virginia Lee, and Jessica Young Brown

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## Closing Prayer

O God, in your wisdom you call a people to yourself in every place and time. Jesus affirmed that disciples could be raised up from stones; your power to effect change is immense, and we stand in awe. We are grateful to be among those whom you call disciples. Open our hearts and minds to the people, the circumstances, and the places to which you call us, and bring us through your thresholds that we may walk confidently in faith, celebrating your healing love. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

### ■ Into the Scripture

- Jesus illustrates in this text true fulfillment of the law, which is the conversation Jesus had with the Pharisees at the beginning of chapter 7. What do you think is the most important thing about being a person of faith?

- How do you translate faith into action? Journal about times when you feel you did not do it well, and times when you did.

### ■ Into the Lesson

- The Syrophenician woman adapted and used the language that Jesus was using to make a case for her daughter's healing. What have you had to learn and use to achieve healing either for yourself or for a loved one?
- Think of a time when you or a loved one recovered from an illness. What were your feelings right afterwards? Whom did you tell? What would have happened if you told no one about the recovery, as Jesus suggested to the man he healed?

### ■ Into Discipleship

- Do you think there is a relationship between our willingness to change ourselves and our ability to create change in the world?
- Who do you think are the people most likely to be excluded from your spiritual community? What can you do to include them?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “Beautiful Things,” performed by the Michael Gungor Band: <https://youtu.be/gpOPkzplHRw?feature=shared>
- “Thou Art Worthy,” performed by Terry MacAlmon (live worship from Trinidad and Tobago): <https://youtu.be/m0d0c-MKDAU?feature=shared>
- “Jesus, Remember Me,” performed by the Taizé Community: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r6tVReXsioM>





## Media Option

Suggest using any ABCUSA communications regarding work among marginalized people. Here is an example—“Onetime banker finds path as pastor and refugee advocate”: <https://divinity.yale.edu/news/onetime-banker-finds-path-pastor-and-refugee-advocate>

## Activity Ideas

- In this text, Jesus is illustrating an answer to the conversation he had with the Pharisees about what true religion looks like. For Jesus, it had less to do with ritual washing and more to do with healing. Discuss with your group what is most important about being a person of faith. How is that shown in your life today?
- Watch the short video about “Design Patterns” from the Bible Project. Discuss the design patterns that Jesus interrupts in this Scripture. <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/design-patterns-biblical-narrative/>

## Devotional Scriptures Year B Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost Week of September 8, 2024

### Sunday, September 8

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23 and Psalm 125; Isaiah 35:4-7a and Psalm 146; James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

### Monday, September 9

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 73:1-20; Proverbs 8:32–9:6; Hebrews 11:29–12:2

*Complementary:* Isaiah 38:10-20; Joshua 6:1-21; Hebrews 11:29–12:2

### Tuesday, September 10

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 73:1-20; Proverbs 11:1-31; Hebrews 12:3-13

*Complementary:* Isaiah 38:10-20; Joshua 8:1-23; Hebrews 12:3-13

### Wednesday, September 11

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 73:1-20; Proverbs 14:1-9; Matthew 17:14-21

*Complementary:* Isaiah 38:10-20; Judges 15:9-20; Matthew 17:14-21

### Thursday, September 12

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 19; Proverbs 15:1-17; Hebrews 11:17-22

*Complementary:* Psalm 116:1-9; Joshua 2:1-14; Hebrews 11:17-22

### Friday, September 13

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 19; Proverbs 19:24-29; James 2:17-26

*Complementary:* Psalm 116:1-9; Joshua 2:15-24; James 2:17-26

### Saturday, September 14 (Holy Cross)

Numbers 21:4b-9 and Psalm 98:1-5 or Psalm 78:1-2, 34-38; 1 Corinthians 1:18-24; John 3:13-17

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 19; Proverbs 21:1-17; Matthew 21:23-32

*Complementary:* Psalm 116:1-9; Joshua 6:22-27; Matthew 21:23-32



A threshold moment marks a new beginning.

# IDENTITY

## who do you say that I am?

He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”

—MARK 8:29

### Introduction

The Gospels are written to introduce us to the story of Jesus of Nazareth—particularly for those who were not eyewitnesses to his life and ministry. The question of Jesus’ true identity was an issue in his day, as well as in our own. In this lesson, participants will be encouraged to reflect on Jesus’ questions to his disciples about who he is, as well as the implications of Jesus’ identity for modern-day disciples. Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Then he asked them, “Who do *you* say that I am?” This leads us to reflect on our identity in light of his identity.

### Lesson Objectives

- To reflect on the question of the identity of Jesus as presented in the gospel of Mark.
- To understand the placement and the centrality of the question of Jesus’ identity.
- To consider what Jesus’ identity implies for his disciples, then and now.

#### Mark 8:27-38 NRSV

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28 And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29 He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” 34 He called the crowd



with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

## Into the Scripture

### Beginnings

The gospel of Mark is the shortest and the earliest of the four Gospels: scholars estimate the date of composition to be around the year 65-73 CE. It is likely that at the time it was written there were still many people living who remembered Jesus’ life and/or had personal acquaintance with the apostles and people directly influenced by them. For example, those who were in their twenties during the year 33 CE when Jesus died would be in their mid-fifties or early sixties at the writing of this gospel. The earliest material in our Bibles are selections from Paul’s letters: 1 Thessalonians (51 CE), Philippians (54–55 CE), and 1 Corinthians (53–57 CE)—predating Mark’s gospel by more than a decade.<sup>1</sup>

The Gospels in our New Testament are unique by comparison with other literature of their day but have

some similarities to the Greek literary form of *bios*, or ancient biography, which focus on giving an account of the public life of celebrated historical figures.<sup>2</sup> Mark is part of the Synoptic Gospels tradition, each telling the story of Jesus’ life using the same general outline. Matthew and Luke both

begin with the Nativity story; however, the beginning of Mark is the following:

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,  
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way,*

“

The gospel of Mark is  
the shortest and the  
earliest of the four  
Gospels.

*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;  
make his paths straight,’”  
so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,  
proclaiming a baptism of repentance  
for the forgiveness of sins  
(Mark 1:2-4).*

Immediately in Mark, the question of the identity of Jesus is raised and its first answer comes in his connection with the ministry and prophecies of John the Baptist, who said, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me” (Mark 1:7a). John the Baptist was well-known and very popular in the first century, likely with a larger early following than Jesus himself. This serves to introduce Jesus to a wider



audience who may know John already and who are learning about Jesus.

## Endings

Mark's ending leaves the most unsaid. Ending the gospel in chapter 16 with the empty tomb, the young man who greeted the women who had come there with burial spices told them to remember what Jesus told them—but the women fled the area in fear. This fear-filled ending allows for the first generation of interpreters and listeners to fill in the details of what comes later with their own knowledge of these events and experiences. The other gospels each give examples of Jesus' post-Resurrection appearances to witnesses. By contrast, John's gospel concludes thusly: "There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (21:25).

In Mark 16:7, the young man or angel who greeted the women at the tomb urged them to remember what Jesus had told them already, asking them to recollect his teaching: "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." And so, as the gospel ends, the readers and listeners are urged as well to think back to what we already know, and what he told us about the time in the future when we will need to live with faith ahead of understanding.

Right before the events of our Scripture section, the disciples did not understand fully who Jesus is as he fed the four thousand and healed a blind man. Peter may have been blind to Jesus' identity in the next part of the story, but although this man may have been physically blind, his healing reveals Jesus' identity.



## Into the Lesson

"Preach the Gospel at all times; when necessary, use words"—popularly attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi.

### Who Do *They* Say that I Am?

Jesus had been preaching and demonstrating who he is by his healing ministry and miracles; in this passage, he moved from actions which reveal his identity to private conversation with his disciples. Our section is framed one verse previous (verse 26), in which Jesus sent a blind man (now healed) away to his home, ordering him not even to go into the village where he might reveal the healing that Jesus had done for him. Jesus' identity in this part of the gospel continues to be revealed and then questioned again.

Jesus is and has been many things to many people. Answering the question of Jesus' identity is a theme running through this gospel. In chapter 8—the central chapter of Mark's sixteen-chapter exposition—this question is raised pointedly. Leading up to this with the miracle of the feeding of the four thousand (compare Matthew 15:32-38), his identity is implied by his actions; however, we see the question of Jesus' identity raised openly as Jesus questioned his disciples.



*Meshia* means "a savior" in Hebrew . . . but it could mean a spiritual or a political savior.

He asked his disciples what people were saying about him. This is a question about what other people are saying—the gossip and buzz of the day. They told him that at the time, some said John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others one of the prophets. These are answers that you and I would not suggest unless we were also Jewish and living before the destruction of the second Temple. One of the critical things people struggled to understand at the time that Jesus lived and shortly after his death was the question of his identity: prophet, rabbi, political leader, or other? Sometimes, in the moment it can be hard to understand what is going on, even if you are right there to witness it.

### Who Do *You* Say that I Am?

Only after they discussed what outsiders were saying about Jesus' identity did Jesus then turn to the disciples and ask them, "Who do *you* say that I am?" This was directed at his disciples, those who were closest to him, who had insight into his identity by contrast with what the others were saying about him.

Peter is the one who answered, "You are the Messiah." The word *Messiah* in Hebrew (*Mesiah*) does not have a straightforward translation in English. Some Bibles translate it "Messiah" (Hebrew); others say "Christ" (Greek). The word *Mesiah* means "a savior" in Hebrew . . . but it could mean a spiritual or a political savior. The Jews at this time had political interest in supporting a revolutionary liberator. The Messiah is the head of a military uprising; he could be someone we would call a general, using political and military might to offer a final solution—someone who solves the political problem of his day by any means necessary. But we know that that is not the kind of leader that Jesus wanted to be.

When Peter said, "You are the Messiah," there was nuance in his answer—Peter could mean a political Messiah, which is not Jesus' agenda. Jesus clarified this, saying that "the son of man" (which is what Jesus calls himself in the Gospels) would undergo great suffering, would die, and would rise again. Peter began to object, but Jesus rebuked him, emphasizing the nature of his identity as well as what it means to be one of his disciples: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:35). This is Jesus' spiritual path as well as the spiritual path of his disciples—turning the tables, spiritually, is how Jesus identifies his disciples.



## Who do we say that Jesus is?

When Peter rebuked him, Jesus rose to him and countered with "Get behind me, Satan"—because Peter had not set his mind on "divine things." Peter was looking at the short-term "human things," and Jesus was playing a long game—preparing himself and his followers to take up a cross for the sake of blessing the world.

David Bartlett talks about how this passage can be read in one of two ways. The usual way to read it is that Jesus was testing Peter and his disciples, asking them to identify who Jesus really is. And Peter passed this test by answering the rhetorical question accurately. It was a big moment for Peter. A second way to read it is that Jesus was coming into his own identity and was turning over his immediate options as he gathered strength to take on his work in the world—in the same way that you might ask a friend to reflect with you on your own identity when considering a major life decision. The distance between what others say about Jesus and what his disciples know about him helps the Gospel's readers and hearers reflect on the question, who do we say that Jesus is?

### Into Discipleship

#### Who *Are* You?

We began with the question of Jesus' identity and end with the question of his disciples' identity. It is easy to think that an early gospel would be the most factually accurate. However, it takes time to get a full account of any big event. For example, a couple of days after September 11, we did not know who had piloted the planes, who was dead, who was displaced or just missing, or even why it happened and who was responsible. Here in the United States, we were not sure if there were other concurrent attempted hijackings for several days. In





time, we were able to piece together the full narrative of what happened. But in many ways, there are those who still lack closure.

Families have gone on with their lives without their loved ones; Guantanamo still holds suspects. The war on terrorism has changed leaders and territories several times since those days; the memorials have only just been completed. Many more have died in the war that has followed. The view of events on the days after it happened and what we know today is quite different. Today, we know different things. We have more facts and perhaps less passion since the news is no longer fresh.

In a comparable way, grasping a sense of Jesus' identity has been going on for two thousand years. It is the question at the center of Jesus' trial in Jerusalem: "Pilate asked [Jesus], 'Are you the King of the Jews?'" (Mark 15:2a). Jesus' identity is like getting a sense of something really big, very close-up for those alive at the time. In some ways, it is harder for the people involved to gain perspective than it is for those who can stand back and get the long view. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29b).

As Jesus called the crowds to join his disciples in his final teaching, he said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:34b-35). Jesus identifies his disciples by their willingness to

follow him. In *The Road to Daybreak*, Henri Nouwen said, "Everything in me wants to move upward. Downward mobility with Jesus goes radically against my inclinations, against the advice of the world surrounding me, and against the culture of which I am a part."

The path of discipleship requires renewed discernment in every stage of life. Discipleship can begin (or not) at any moment with the decisions we make and our actions in the world. It often means that a less-obvious form of success may be the path that leads to real fulfillment, deep joy, and blessing—just as Jesus' journey to the Cross was a way to bless the world.

In John's gospel, Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). This is an example from the natural world about how nature is renewed in an organic cycle of fruiting, dying back, and regrowth. This cycle is promulgated by a single grain of wheat. It is the way of the Cross and the natural order of things . . . which leads us back to the question of identity. Are we a part of this? Is Jesus' story also the story of our lives? When Jesus asks "Who do you say that I am?" it is only when you have your answer that you can answer the next question of who you will therefore be.

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#### Notes

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dating\\_the\\_Bible](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dating_the_Bible)
2. [https://webpages.scu.edu/ftp/cmurphy/courses/ilm-nt/workbook/02\\_nt-genres.pdf](https://webpages.scu.edu/ftp/cmurphy/courses/ilm-nt/workbook/02_nt-genres.pdf)

## Closing Prayer

O God, you know us better than we know ourselves; we are awed by your glory and your care for us. We give thanks for the gift of your Son, Jesus, for his message, and for the gift of his life. Renew us today in discipleship that in being blessed as we are, we may be a blessing to others. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

### ■ Into the Scripture

- Mark's gospel begins by introducing Jesus' connection with John the Baptist. What does this connection emphasize about Jesus' identity?
- Mark's gospel ends with the angel at the tomb encouraging the women to remember what Jesus told them when he was alive. What stands out to you about Jesus' identity when you think back on what you already know about him?

### ■ Into the Lesson

- Why would the disciples answer that people are saying that Jesus could be John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets?
- Why did Jesus rebuke Peter?

### ■ Into Discipleship

- What does "taking up your cross and following Jesus" mean to you? Can you think of a time when taking up a cross became a positive thing?
- What does Henri Nouwen mean when he talks about the "downward mobility" of the Cross? Under what circumstances would you advocate for downward mobility?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- "El Shaddai," performed by Amy Grant: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aw7i0b3jh50>
- "Son of the Living God," performed by SANCTUARY Worship, featuring Breona Lawrence, Emoni Wiggins, and Lindsay Boyko: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-JAA3bac3I>
- "Wanting Memories," performed by Sweet Honey in the Rock: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vW2TpW4gCt8>

#### *Lyrics:*

"I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me  
To see the beauty in the world through my own eyes  
I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me  
To see the beauty in the world through my own eyes  
You used to rock me in the cradle of your arms  
You said you'd hold me till the pains of life were gone  
You said you'd comfort me in times like these and  
now I need you  
Now I need you, and you are gone  
I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me  
To see the beauty in the world through my own eyes  
Since you've gone and left me, there's been so little  
beauty  
But I know I saw it clearly through your eyes  
Now the world outside is such a cold and bitter place  
Here inside I have few things that will console  
And when I try to hear your voice above the storms  
of life  
Then I remember all the things that I was told  
I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me



To see the beauty in the world through my own eyes  
 I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me  
 To see the beauty in the world through my own eyes  
 I think on the things that made me feel so wonderful  
     when I was young  
 I think on the things that made me laugh, made me  
     dance, made me sing  
 I think on the things that made me grow into a being  
     full of pride  
 I think on these things, for they are true  
 I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me  
 To see the beauty in the world through my own eyes  
 I thought that you were gone, but now I know you're  
     with me  
 You are the voice that whispers all I need to hear  
 I know a please, a thank you, and a smile will take me far  
 I know that I am you and you are me and we are one  
 I know that who I am is numbered in each grain of sand  
 I know that I've been blessed again, and over again  
 I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me  
 To see the beauty in the world through my own eyes  
 I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me  
 To see the beauty in the world through my own eyes”  
 (Source: LyricFind  
 Songwriter: Ysaÿe M. Barnwell  
 “Wanting Memories” lyrics © Barnwell’s Notes, Inc.)

## Media Option

Listen to “Wanting Memories” by Sweet Honey in the Rock and read the lyrics. Discuss how memory informs what we see in the world and how we see it. What does the lyric “I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me, to see the beauty of the world through my own eyes” mean to you? What does it mean for someone reflecting on Jesus’ identity?

## Activity Idea

Watch the first nine minutes of this brief video about “The Gospel of Mark.” Discuss the two questions that David Bartlett identifies as the main questions of this gospel: (1) Who is Jesus, and (2) what does it mean to say who Jesus is? How do we answer these questions today?

<https://yalebiblestudy.org/courses/the-gospel-of-mark/lessons/who-is-he-who-are-we-video/>

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year B Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

### Week of September 15, 2024

#### Sunday, September 15

Proverbs 1:20-33 and Psalm 19 or Wisdom of Solomon 7:26–8:1; Isaiah 50:4-9a and Psalm 116:1-9; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

#### Monday, September 16

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 73:21-28; Proverbs 22:1-21; Romans 3:9-20  
*Complementary:* Psalm 119:169-176; 1 Kings 13:1-10; Romans 3:9-20

#### Tuesday, September 17

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 73:21-28; Proverbs 25:1-28; Colossians 3:1-11  
*Complementary:* Psalm 119:169-176; 1 Kings 13:11-25; Colossians 3:1-11

#### Wednesday, September 18

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 73:21-28; Proverbs 29:1-27; John 7:25-36  
*Complementary:* Psalm 119:169-176; Isaiah 10:12-20; John 7:25-36

#### Thursday, September 19

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 1; Proverbs 30:1-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5  
*Complementary:* Psalm 54; Judges 6:1-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

#### Friday, September 20

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 1; Proverbs 30:18-33; Romans 11:25-32  
*Complementary:* Psalm 54; 1 Kings 22:24-40; Romans 11:25-32

#### Saturday, September 21

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 1; Ecclesiastes 1:1-18; Matthew 23:29-39  
*Complementary:* Psalm 54; 2 Kings 17:5-18; Matthew 23:29-39



# WISDOM

## words that matter

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?  
Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?

—JAMES 4:1

### Introduction

The book of James has a unique voice in the New Testament, echoing Jesus' sayings and emphasizing the importance of fulfilling the whole law. Although it uses common vocabulary as the Apostle Paul does, James uses these words to make different theological points. Giving the book the chance to speak on its own terms opens a vein of Wisdom Literature in the manner of the book of Proverbs, informed here by the tradition of Jesus and his apostles' teaching. The book invites us into deep reflection and personal interrogation of our own motives, desires, and wants. Reflections on this book offer us the opportunity to, as James says, "draw near to God, and God will draw near to you."

### Lesson Objectives

- To understand the basic historic controversies surrounding the book of James.
- To set an intention to read James on its own terms.
- To identify what wisdom looks like in our own lives.

#### James 3:13-18; 4:1-3, 7-8a NRSV

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. . . . 1 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within

you? 2 You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. . . . 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

## Into the Scripture

The letter of James is one of few books in the New Testament whose role in shaping the early church and its place in the canon of biblical literature has long had strong support. Although there have been later historical controversies related to this book, it has a unique voice on its own terms—continuing the important tradition of Jewish Christianity and the sayings attributed to Jesus and his disciples. The letter can be read as a collection of teachings much like the book of Proverbs—part of the Wisdom tradition. James is named for Jesus’ brother who is the leader of the early church in Jerusalem until the destruction of the Second Temple and the dispersion of the Jews in the year 70.

### The Apostle Paul: Faith or Works?

Both Paul and James write about faith and works. They are often read as if they are in dialogue (or disagreement) with each other, but there is little evidence that they



were aware of each other’s writings as they use the language of “faith” and “works” to make different theological points. In Romans and Galatians, Paul uses the language of substitutionary atonement (forgiveness), declaring that humanity is justified through faith. “Life in Christ is lived ‘through faith for faith’ (Romans 1:17).”<sup>1</sup> Paul argues against

the “Judaizers” who claim that Christians must also follow the Jewish law. Instead, Paul teaches that Christ’s redemption is sufficient and that although believers

“

Faith (true religion for James) is made evident in works.

may follow Jewish law if that is their context, it is not a requirement in other contexts.

James, on the other hand, uses the language of “faith” and “works” to distinguish between true religion and false religion—one of his main themes. Faith (true religion for James) is made evident in works. For James, Jesus points the believer to God through the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus is a true interpreter of the Old Testament (e.g., James 2:1). For James, there was no distinction between Judaism and Christianity, likely because it is written in a Jewish context. Brevard Childs writes the following:

Paul and James are addressing different questions from very different perspectives. Paul is asking about the relation between the divine and the human in acquiring salvation. James is asking about the relation between the profession of faith and action consonant with it . . . they are addressing different theological dimensions of the divine nature and the Christian life.<sup>2</sup>



## Martin Luther: Faith or Works?

At the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther famously took issue with the book of James, calling it “an epistle of straw”—taken not on its own terms, but as part of Luther’s argument against the Roman Catholic practice of the selling of indulgences and charging a tax for what God has freely given (grace). Luther argued that God’s grace is free to all, therefore the selling of indulgences (monies collected for the benefit of those who had died, aiding their way in the afterlife) was contrary to Scripture and divine revelation. Some of the New Testament (including Paul’s epistles) seem to support Luther’s argument explicitly, while James’s does not. Luther said this:

In a word[,] St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.<sup>3</sup>

In his criticism, Luther is relegating James to a lesser status from the other books but *not* rejecting it. He says in his introduction to the letter, “I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God.”<sup>4</sup> He preached on James at least five times during his career, expressing appreciation for its teachings and its place in the canon of biblical literature.

## Into the Lesson

James is often read according to its objectors—as a refute to Paul’s “justification by faith alone” argument in Romans 3:28, and Martin Luther’s objection to its use for supporting the selling of indulgences. However, reading it on its own terms allows the text to speak in its own voice. James’s voice is unique in the New Testament, inviting us into the teaching tradition which is consonant with the words of Jesus in the Gospel traditions, who in turn are informed by the Old Testament “law of life.” James’s subject is the pursuit of wisdom, which is also how the book of Proverbs opens. The prologue to the book of Proverbs reads as follows:

*The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity; to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young—let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill, to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction (Proverbs 1:1-7).*



The selling of indulgences was contrary to Scripture and divine revelation.



James is writing in the style of the wisdom tradition in the Old Testament. For James, wisdom is not revealed entirely by the tongue—that is, by what we may say—as much as wisdom is revealed in our lives (our works, or what we do). For James, these two areas cannot be separated. The common expression “do as I say and not as I do” has no place in James’s teaching.

### Chapter 3, Verses 13-18

The first part of chapter 3 encourages self-control when it comes to how we use our words. What follows are two explanations of wisdom, each revealed in our lives rather than in our words:

- In verse 13, James builds on the previous admonitions to control our speech, saying that “good works” reveal who is genuinely wise regardless of what they may say. “Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom” (verse 13). Bitter envy and selfish ambition do not lead us into wisdom; rather, they lead to disorder and “wickedness” of every kind.
- Verse 17 reads, “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” Wisdom “from above” is a higher form of wisdom than what the world may esteem. And this wisdom is recognizable by what we do. Specifically, “the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (verse 18, NRSVUE). The highest form of wisdom is evident by the peacemakers.

While these sayings share common language with Paul’s fruits of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22, et al.), they are more in line in terms of their meaning with the sayings of Jesus. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount begins with the beatitudes, which include “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9). And Jesus’ teaching ministry is one that seeks to reinterpret and fulfill the law—while Paul’s project includes interpreting the law for communities which include Gentiles who are not part of Judaism. Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?” (Matthew 7:16).

Living in peace is a huge accomplishment, which must be valued and defended by many people at the same time to stay in place—although it may not look like anything more than a quiet and modestly prosperous community. The value of peacemaking is contrasted with conquering political leaders. A peaceable kingdom is prophesied in Isaiah 65:25: “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox; . . . They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.”

### Chapter 4, Verses 1-3, 7-8a

This chapter begins by identifying the root of conflict (of all kinds) with inward conflicts. James continues to build his argument to make the point that the failure to achieve peaceable living begins within the human heart, and not between people. He emphasizes the importance of self-control, specifically bridling the tongue (see James 3:2-3).

James locates the problem internally: it lies in an individual’s not wanting or valuing the things that he or she claims to want. Again, echoing Jesus’ words, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Matthew 7:7). Jesus drills down on our motivation and, in the manner of the Wisdom tradition, points out that what we pursue and ask for in our lives has a direct corollary to what we receive. Verse 8 reminds us that if we draw near to God, God will draw near to us. While James uses the language of the devil and evil, it is for the purpose of contrasting disorderly living with the pursuit of God.



The failure to achieve  
peaceable living begins  
within the human heart.



## Into Discipleship

A *New York Times* article reported that “Of the past 3,400 years, humans have been entirely at peace for 268 of them, or just 8 percent of recorded history.”<sup>5</sup> It goes on to say that at least 108 million people were killed in wars in the twentieth century alone, and that the number of those killed worldwide throughout history may be as high as 1 billion people. Worldwide, the facts reveal that humanity is far more practiced at living with war than at living at peace. At the beginning of 2024, there were ten major conflicts happening around the world—including in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Diplomatic resolutions are gravely needed.

James implies that conflict in the world ultimately begins in internal conflicts which we (or others) have not resolved. What do we want? For what do we spend our time working? How do we spend our free time? The way we spend our lives reveals our values. The point is often made in stewardship campaigns that a review of a bank statement or checkbook register reveals exactly what our values are—no matter what we might say to the contrary. Yes, and it also reveals that many of us work hard to make ends meet, which underscores the importance of security and modest prosperity—both of which are peace dividends.

“Freedom is not free” is an expression used to describe sacrifice during times of crisis. Inscribed on the Korean

War monument in Washington, D.C., it serves to underscore that freedom is a value that needs to be pursued and won repeatedly. “Jesus said . . . , ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’ They answered him, ‘We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, “you will be made free?”’” (John 8:31-33).

“Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed’” (John 8:34-36). When Jesus said, “You shall be free,” the people proudly asserted, “We are free.” But they were not. Jesus, seeking to break through to them, said that if the Son of Man made them free, they would be free indeed. There is freedom politically, and then there is freedom personally. They had not focused on their own slavery to sin and its quagmire . . . of course, this requires self-awareness. It takes attention to see it and intention to change it.

James echoes the sayings of Jesus, who refused the role of a political Messiah and embraced, instead, the mantle of a spiritual Messiah. The spiritual Messiah of course is the one who can make deep change; politics can change governments and rulers, but it cannot change human hearts.

Helen Keller put it this way: “Many persons have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not

attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.”

Albert Schweitzer put it another way when he said, “One thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought out and found how to serve.”

What is your wisdom? What values are you leaning into in this season of your life? Whatever it is, James would say show it in your life. That is the only way to make wisdom real.

#### Notes

1. Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 439.
2. *Ibid.*, 442.
3. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume 35: Word and Sacrament I*, E Theodore Bachmann, ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1960), 362.
4. *Ibid.*, 395.
5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/06/books/chapters/what-every-person-should-know-about-war.html>

“

What we receive is a direct corollary to what we pursue and ask for in our lives.

## 8 Questions Jesus Asked: Discipleship for Leaders

by Daniel M. Cash and William H. Griffith

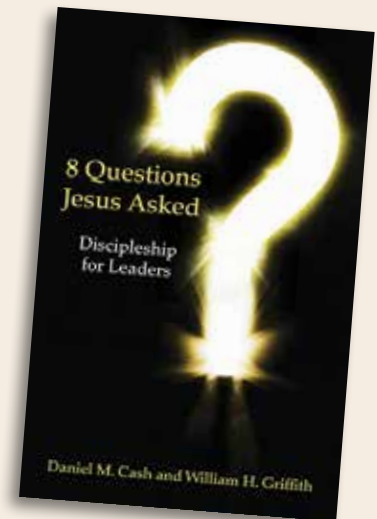
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## Closing Prayer

O God of wisdom, we ask for the gift of your wisdom as we discern your ways and our next steps in our lives. We pray for wisdom to discern how to manage difficult situations in our lives, the people and circumstances which perplex us. We pray for your wisdom when we deal with injustice in all its forms and pray that we may be agents of peace in our households, in our communities, and in the wide world. We pray for wisdom for our church leaders, worldwide and local. We ask for your wisdom that not only enlightens but also guides our steps in our daily walk with you. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

### ■ Into the Scripture

- What are the different matters which Paul and James address with the language of “faith and works”?
- What does it mean to read the Bible “on its own terms”? Why is that important?

### ■ Into the Lesson

- What is the harvest of righteousness for James (see James 3:18)?

- Why does James focus so much on motivation (see James 4:1)?

### ■ Into the Discipleship

- Journal your own wisdom which you have gained from life experiences (e.g., never leave for tomorrow what you can do today; etc.). Spend some time reflecting on how your own wisdom and rules to live by came to you, and what, if any, is important to share with others.
- What values are you leaning into now in your life? If they have changed for you, how have they changed over time? And what made them change?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “Prayer of St. Francis,” performed by Sarah McLachlan: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agPnMxp5Ooc>
- “Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God,” posted by Ben Thomas, @ CMML Fall Conference 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FH2c7RJmSA>
- “Order My Steps in Your Word,” performed by GMWA Women of Worship, © 2014 Aleho International Music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmzCyxHIYoI>

### Activity Ideas (at least two for a small group)

- Invite your group to have a debate about which is more important: to have faith or to engage in good works. Assign sides and ask participants to debate from one side or the other. They can support their



“FREEDOM IS NOT FREE” engraved on the Washington, D.C., Korean War Veterans Memorial, with reflecting pool in front. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:KoreanWarMemorialFreedom.JPG>

arguments from the book of James and/or from Paul's letters if they desire. Discuss and debrief the experience afterwards. What part of the tension between faith and works is compelling to you now? Why?

- Invite participants to write down their own wisdom: list the top five or top ten life lessons by which you live. Share with the group and discuss. Note any which have support from Scripture.

## Baptist Connections

- Church of the Brethren has been a partner denomination to the American Baptist Churches USA for many years, sending delegates to our biennial meetings and partnering with Baptist congregations on a multitude of projects. The Brethren are part of what is known as the historic peace churches. Here is a sampling of some of their current peace resources:
  - <https://www.brethren.org/peacebuilding/heritage/>
  - <https://www.brethren.org/peacebuilding/peace/>
  - <https://www.brethren.org/peacebuilding/co/>
- Brethren Volunteer Service project listings offer adults the chance to go and work on a peace project for as long as one year. <https://www.brethren.org/bvs/projects/>
- *Shine* Sunday school curriculum supports helping children and youth to learn skills to be peacemakers. <https://shinecurriculum.com/>

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year B Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost Week of September 22, 2024

#### Sunday, September 22

Proverbs 31:10-31 and Psalm 1;

Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22 or Jeremiah 11:18-20 and Psalm 54; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

#### Monday, September 23

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 128; Proverbs 27:1-27; James 4:8-17

*Complementary:* Psalm 139:1-18; 2 Kings 5:1-14; James 4:8-17

#### Tuesday, September 24

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 128; Ecclesiastes 4:9-16; James 5:1-6

*Complementary:* Psalm 139:1-18; 2 Kings 11:21-12:16; James 5:1-6

#### Wednesday, September 25

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 128; Ecclesiastes 5:1-20; John 8:21-38

*Complementary:* Psalm 139:1-18; Jeremiah 1:4-10; John 8:21-38

#### Thursday, September 26

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 124; Esther 1:1-21; Acts 4:13-31

*Complementary:* Psalm 19:7-14; Exodus 18:13-27; Acts 4:13-31

#### Friday, September 27

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 124; Esther 2:1-23; Acts 12:20-25

*Complementary:* Psalm 19:7-14; Deuteronomy 1:1-18; Acts 12:20-25

#### Saturday, September 28

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 124; Esther 3:1-15; Matthew 5:13-20

*Complementary:* Psalm 19:7-14; Deuteronomy 27:1-10; Matthew 5:13-20



The way we spend our lives reveals our values.

# PROVIDENCE

## for such a time as this

... as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

—ESTHER 9:22

### Introduction

The book of Esther is a compelling story about a woman who uses her circumstances and connections in the diaspora to bless her people. The story emphasizes reversals, the humble Esther ascending to queen, and the villainous Haman losing his place in court and being executed for his treachery on the very gallows he had constructed for someone else. At the end of the story, Mordecai writes that their sorrow had been turned into gladness and their mourning into a holiday—and that they would mark this holiday going forward with feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor. The book provides an opportunity to reflect on the themes of God’s abiding providence in all circumstances, and our call to do what we can, in such a time as this.

### Lesson Objectives

- To appreciate the seldom-studied book of Esther, and to learn about “diaspora tales.”
- To consider the theology of God’s providence and our call to have compassion for those who are suffering.
- To understand that God can work in the unique circumstances of our lives.

#### Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 NRSV

1 So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. 2 On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, “What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” 3 Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. 4 For we have been sold, I and my people, to be



destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.” 5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?” 6 Esther said, “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. . . . 9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high.” And the king said, “Hang him on that.” 10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated. . . . 20 Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, 21 enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, 22 as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

## Into the Scripture

The book of Esther is named for its heroine, who was a Jewish woman living in the Persian Diaspora dated to about the late fourth or early third century BCE.<sup>1</sup> In Hebrew, her name is Hadassah—but in the Greek, it is translated as “Esther,” which is a cognate for *Ishtar*, the Babylonian goddess of love and war. In Latin her name is Hester.<sup>2</sup> The similarity of the name *Esther* to Ishtar underscores her connection with the Persians, and her ability to step into leadership for the sake of her people.

Called “the scroll” by Jews, the book of Esther belongs to a literary genre in the Old Testament called “diaspora tales.” Bible scholar Ellen Davis says, “It may be . . . more helpful to start by identifying this as a diaspora tale, one of several biblical stories that depict Jews in a foreign court, negotiating Gentile power structures, as did Daniel and Nehemiah—and before them Joseph.”<sup>3</sup> Diaspora tales describe a Jewish life away from their larger community. In each case, the heroes or heroines find themselves in a position to save their community because they have been able to thrive among foreigners, negotiating with Gentiles and using



The book of Esther  
affirms that God works  
in history.

their power for the benefit of the larger community in their time of need. These stories have been important historically, especially during times when Jews have been scattered away from the land of Israel/Palestine.

Like in the Song of Songs, God is never mentioned in the book of Esther. The Song of Songs uses a series of allegories to interpret or “unlock” its meaning. In Esther,

however, the text invites us to reflect on how God’s purposes are at work in human life. In Esther 4:14, her Uncle Mordecai, under whose care she had grown up, asked her to reflect on the providence of her position and what she could do for her people; he asked, “. . . Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” Following this admonishment, she agreed and she and Mordecai worked together to create an indirect plan to convince the king to save their people by setting up a series of banquets for him with opportunities for conversation. Confronting the king this way meant Esther was risking her life if the king refused her, but she prevailed and when he found favor with her, the story ended in celebration.

The book of Esther affirms that God works in history, and even among people who are morally ambiguous such as a Persian king. Esther also challenges us to trust in God’s providence even when God seems to be absent, and when we may feel disconnected; we are reminded that God’s redeeming work continues in all circumstances. Christians may remember these words from Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

Ellen Davis goes on to say that “the book of Esther is a key biblical instance of the genre . . . ‘Hidden Transcripts.’ This is the kind of speech that people in power are never supposed to hear. It emerges from the underside of domination, in out-of-the-way places such as slave quarters, prisons, ghettos, and townships. Hidden transcripts are in languages (such as Hebrew) that are not generally spoken by those in power and may be viewed with contempt. Nonetheless, they are artful.”



The Esther scroll uses imaginative details and flourishes to tell a compelling story and has an affinity with the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel) who also envision God’s deliverance from Israel’s national enemies. Esther’s story describes one instance of the realization of that vision. Furthermore, Esther can also be linked to the psalms of deliverance such as Psalm 124, which many churches will read today (along with today’s verses from Esther).

*If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—let Israel now say—*

*if it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, . . .*

*Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth.*

*We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped.*

*Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 124:1-2, 6-8)*



Esther can also be linked to the Psalms of deliverance such as Psalm 124.

## Into the Lesson

### Drama

The book of Esther is a page turner, including familiar storytelling devices such as a villain, a king, a kind uncle, a noble heroine, and a looming disaster. Esther and Mordecai conspired to prepare banquets to give Esther an opportunity to be heard by the king, but she demurred at first when the king asked to hear her request. Three times the king asked to hear her, even offering half of his kingdom to her, and the third time—typical of folktale style—she spoke. Chapter 7 is the turning point when Esther had gained the king’s full attention. Choosing the right moment, she made her case.

Esther pleaded for her own and her people’s lives, embracing her own identity openly and petitioning for justice for the children of Israel. She said, “For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated” (Esther 7:4a). In the biblical tradition of women who plead for the lives of others, Esther’s actions resembled Abigail’s pleading before King David (see 1 Samuel 25:23-31), and the woman of Tekoa’s pleading before Absalom (see 2 Samuel 14:4-17). Esther spoke truth to power, reminding the king that he would be dishonored if this injustice were to come to light. Hyperbolically, she said that if her people had merely been sold into slavery, she would keep her peace, but to kill them outright was too great an injustice.

Once Esther was heard, the power balance was redistributed; Haman was revealed as the villain he was for having orchestrated treachery against the Jews. He now pleaded for his life before the queen, and this is construed as a possible assault on her in the king’s own palace. In verses 9-10, the king’s guard, Harbona, recommended that the punishment Haman had prepared for Esther’s uncle Mordecai instead be used for Haman himself. So, justice was served when Haman was executed on the very gallows he prepared for Mordecai. Christians may hear an echo of Matthew 7:2 (NRSVUE): “For the judgment you give will be the judgment you get, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.”

Ultimately, the book ends with Mordecai’s recording these events for the benefit of the Jews in the other provinces and establishing an annual festival to commemorate the liberty of the Jews: “. . . as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday” (Esther 9:22). This

festival, Purim, continues to be celebrated in Jewish communities in our day. The Purim holiday leans heavily into the joyousness evident at the end of the book of Esther and includes costumes, special foods, exchanges of gifts, and donations to the poor.<sup>4</sup>

### Deliverance

“Turning sorrow into gladness” is strongly associated with the Messiah and deliverance—Isaiah 61:3; Jeremiah 31:13; Psalm 30:11; James 4:9 and Matthew 5:4: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Furthermore, the book of Esther echoes important themes in the story of the Exodus, including the instructions Moses gave to the children of Israel to leave Egypt: “and the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so they let them have what they asked” (Exodus 12:36a). Moses, Joseph, Daniel, and Esther each led their people to freedom in the context of their particular lives.

While many characters in Esther appear as stock characters, their flatness contrasts with Esther’s character arc (i.e., the transformation or inner journey of a character over the course of a story). Esther’s story begins with her entering the king’s harem as one beautiful woman among many beautiful women there. But it was when her Uncle Mordecai asked her to lean into her identity as part of the children of Israel (see 4:13-14) that she distinguished herself, ascended to the position of queen, and freed her people.

While Esther saved her people, she remained queen of Persia. Biblical scholar Carolyn Sharp highlights some of the storyline of Esther which is not necessarily resolved: “In saving her people, Esther has simultaneously consolidated her political power (by taking on



Esther pleaded for her own  
and her people’s lives.





the role of Queen) and moved irrevocably into diaspora from which there is no return. She has become fully vested as Queen of Persia and queen of paradox.<sup>6</sup> Esther remained in power in Persia and was instrumental in elevating Mordecai to honor (see Esther 10:2). But we end the book while they were still in the diaspora, living harmoniously in the Gentile world. The story of the life of Esther stops short of full restitution and an ultimate move back to the land of Israel. Instead, this book celebrates what faithful living looks like in the diaspora—for such a time as this.

**Diaspora:** the dispersion or spread of a people from their original homeland.

## Into Discipleship

### For Such a Time as This

Esther is a book which encourages feet on the street, witnessing on behalf of those suffering injustice, highlighting particularly the importance of speaking up on behalf of those who do not have a voice. While circumstances have certainly changed since the days of Esther, the fact of human suffering continues. We need to continue to reconsider the kinds of social-justice ministries we offer to ensure that they are meeting today's needs. Innovation in social justice has a huge upside potential.

Early in the book of Esther, Mordecai said to his niece, "If you keep silence at such a time as this," reminding her that if relief did not come from her or her family, silence may be catastrophic to her people, and

she would have lost her opportunity to make a difference (see verse 14a). And so, Esther and her Uncle Mordecai worked together to create a plan that would allow her to be heard by the king.

Mordecai's most quoted line from this book occurs early in the story when he says, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esther 4:14b). Knowing when to speak and when to keep silence (see Ecclesiastes 3:7b) and knowing how to speak persuasively are explored in this book. These issues are at the heart of many social ministries. Caring ministries usually focus specifically on those in need, but occasionally, it is possible to speak up and change institutional or systemic injustice.

There is a story often told in social-justice ministry circles that a couple was hiking and came to a body of water and were shocked to find a baby floating in it. So, they jumped in, rushing to help, and they worked hard to save the baby. Once they had the baby safe on shore, they were surprised to find another one floating in the water, followed by more and more. They called their friends together to help to get the babies out of the water, and while they were working to save everyone, one person spoke up and said, "Why don't we go upstream to find out why all these babies are being put in the water in the first place?" In social-justice work, sometimes just getting through the current crisis is often hard enough, but sometimes, we need to look upstream and see what we can do to stop the problems at the source.

While solutions need a both-and approach (both compassion for those suffering and advocacy to curtail

the circumstances), the distribution of resources often feels in the moment like an either-or problem. They could not physically work upstream and downstream at the same time. Social-justice work and relief work need to be done in partnership—each informed by the other, with good people working in both areas. The book of Esther emphasizes the importance of gauging when to speak up or speak out on behalf of someone who is suffering—to be most effective.

It also emphasizes that like Esther, we may find ourselves in a moment for which our circumstances have uniquely prepared us. Being an effective advocate and creating positive change in the world requires specialized knowledge of how things go off the rails, and being part of the solution often comes most authentically from

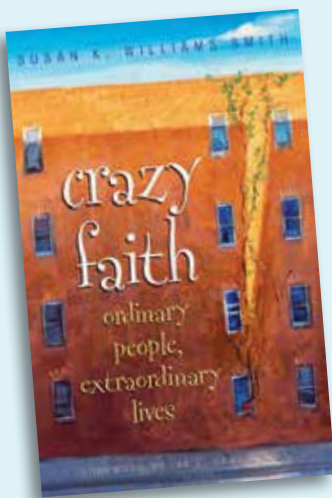
those who have some direct experience of the problem. Each of us experience injustice in some form, and each of us has capacity to reflect on what we know of injustice and what compassion for those suffering looks like. Esther encourages us to embrace the moment in which we find ourselves, for who knows? Perhaps we have journeyed to this moment for such a time as this.

#### Notes

1. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV* (Introductory note) (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 707.
2. Ibid.
3. Ellen Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 380.
4. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Purim>
5. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Character\\_arc](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Character_arc)
6. Carolyn Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).



Social-justice work and relief work need to be done in partnership.



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## Closing Prayer

Gracious God, perhaps we have been gathered here today for such a time as this. Help us to discern our way forward, that we may help to bring compassion and alleviate suffering in the world. Help us to find the words needed, the compassion required, and courage like Esther to speak truth to power and defend those in need. You have turned our sadness into gladness in the work of our Lord, Jesus Christ, in whose name we give you all thanks and praise. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

### ■ Into the Scripture

- What do “diaspora tales” have in common?
- “For such a time as this” is a hallmark of the book of Esther, meaning that this is a way for her to leverage her privilege for the support of others. Which privileges does Esther leverage to help her people?

### ■ Into the Lesson

- What had Haman done that was so villainous?
- Look up some of these references of turning sorrow into gladness: Isaiah 61:3; Jeremiah 31:13; Psalm 30:11; James 4:9; and Matthew 5:4. Why does the Bible refer to this concept in so many different eras? Journal your answer. Can you think of other Scriptures that reflect this thought?

### ■ Into the Discipleship

- Who do you know who is currently living away from their community? What kinds of support do they need?
- What can you do to leverage support for those in need in your community? Which authorities will you need to address and what would be an effective approach?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- Handel’s 1718 “Esther Oratorio HWV 50b,” Hebrew version Concerto Köln conducted by Shalev Ad-El: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gi2iHYXaoGA>
- “Oratorio Ester—The Salvation of Israel by Esther,” by Cristiano G. Lidarti (music) and Rabbi Jacob Raphael Saraval (libretto). Score edited by Israel Adler with the assistance of David Klein. Modern World Premiere 2000—Gala Concert. Produced by The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, The Jewish Music Research Centre, Tel-Ad Jerusalem Studio: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8O69tS2wVFc>





- “Your Love Never Fails,” performed by Hadassah\_ZA:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8kDZbJJG1w>

## Media Options

Consider using these resources to bring the Esther story alive at your church through VBS or Sunday school.

This would make a wonderful intergenerational activity.

### **Vacation Bible School “Esther” play/script:**

- <https://www.magnifyhimtogether.com/2019/03/26/vacation-bible-school-esther/>
- <https://www.magnifyhimtogether.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ESTHER-VBS-Script.pdf>

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year B Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost Week of September 29, 2024

#### **Sunday, September 29**

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 and Psalm 124;  
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29 and Psalm 19:7-14;  
James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

#### **Monday, September 30**

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 140; Esther 4:1-17; 1 Peter 1:3-9  
*Complementary:* Psalm 5; Zechariah 6:9-15; 1 Peter 1:3-9

#### **Tuesday, October 1**

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 140; Esther 5:1-14;  
1 John 2:18-25  
*Complementary:* Psalm 5; Zechariah 8:18-23;  
1 John 2:18-25

#### **Wednesday, October 2**

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 140; Esther 8:1-17;  
Matthew 18:6-9  
*Complementary:* Psalm 5; Zechariah 10:1-12;  
Matthew 18:6-9

#### **Thursday, October 3**

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 26; Job 2:11–3:26;  
Galatians 3:23-29  
*Complementary:* Psalm 8; Genesis 20:1-18;  
Galatians 3:23-29

#### **Friday, October 4**

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 26; Job 4:1-21; Romans 8:1-11  
*Complementary:* Psalm 8; Genesis 21:22-34;  
Romans 8:1-11

#### **Saturday, October 5**

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 26; Job 7:1-21; Luke 16:14-18  
*Complementary:* Psalm 8; Genesis 23:1-20; Luke 16:14-18



Esther encourages us to embrace the moment in  
which we find ourselves.

# FORTITUDE

## remaining spiritually unbroken amid life's chaos

Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity,  
and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.

—PSALM 26:1

### Introduction

Sometimes, we face unimaginable losses in life. In Job, we find a powerful lesson on how to maintain integrity and faith while navigating life's most challenging moments. His resilience in the face of adversity gives hope, reminding us that even when everything seems to crumble around us, our faith can anchor us through life's most severe storms. Psalm 26 illustrates a heartfelt plea for justice and righteousness that resonates with our own struggles for such. No matter what, we must hold fast to values and trust that our belief and faith in God will ultimately result in greater strength, hope, and righteousness.

### Lesson Objectives

- To acknowledge negative feelings as opposed to stuffing them and learn to process such feelings in a healthy way.
- To reflect on the significance and struggle of maintaining integrity and trust during difficult circumstances.
- To apply the lessons learned from Job and Psalm 26 to develop strategies for facing adversity with resilience and faith.

### Job 1:1; 2:1-10 NRSV

1 There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. . . . 1 One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. 2 The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come

from?” Satan answered the LORD, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” 3 The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.” 4 Then Satan answered the LORD, “Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. 5 But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” 6 The LORD said to Satan, “Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.” 7 So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. 8 Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. 9 Then his wife said to him, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.” 10 But he said to her, “You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

## Psalm 26 NRSV

1 Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering. 2 Prove me, O LORD, and try me; test my heart and mind. 3 For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you. 4 I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites; 5 I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked. 6 I wash my hands in innocence, and go around your altar, O LORD, 7 singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and telling all your wondrous deeds. 8 O LORD, I love the house in which you dwell, and the place where your glory abides. 9 Do not sweep me away with sinners, nor my life with the bloodthirsty, 10 those in whose hands are evil devices, and whose right hands are full of bribes. 11 But as for me, I walk in my integrity; redeem me, and be gracious to me. 12 My foot stands on level ground; in the great congregation I will bless the LORD.

## Into the Scripture

We glean from Scripture that before having lost everything, Job had a good life until the hailstorm of trouble hit him. Whether he built his wealth himself or it was inherited, the bottom line is that Job, his wife, and his children were among the elite of Uz. Job’s reputation was impeccable! He was a godly man who walked upright before God and others. Job’s character was recognized not

only by God but also by Satan. So, the devil, being the accuser that he is (see Revelation 12:10), argued that Job’s devotion to God was because God had blessed Job with everything he could ever want (see Job 1:9-11). A key detail to note is that God was the first to mention Job’s name, not Satan (see Job 1:8). Thus, chapter 1 of Job reveals that God essentially highlighted Job to Satan. Satan then, with God’s permission, took everything that Job had.





Today's passage comes after Job lost all he had—his children and all his wealth. In chapter 2, we see a repeated pattern that occurred in chapter 1 with God highlighting Job to Satan and permitting Satan to go even further. In chapter 1, Satan was allowed to take away Job's possessions but not to touch his body (see Job 1:12). Satan claimed that Job had not cursed God because nothing was done to Job's body. Once again, being the accuser, Satan said, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face" (Job 2:4-5). This time, God permitted Satan to afflict Job's body but not take his life.

We can surmise that Satan's goal, in general, was to stir up trouble. When God asked from where Satan came, he replied, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it" (Job 2:2). In 1 Peter 5:8, we are given the following instructions: "Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." Thus, we see that Satan was not gingerly walking "to and fro" simply to get fresh air. He had a destructive purpose. Job was not the target until God mentioned him as such. When that happened, Satan's goal was to turn Job away from God. When taking away Job's children and possessions was not enough, Satan turned to Job's body.

Even Job's wife had had enough of the affliction. Job's children were also her children. Job's wealth loss affected her standard of living as well. Even when Job's body had sores on it from head to toe, his wife was affected as well. Such would have interfered with their intimacy and even prevented them from consoling

one another with a simple hug after all they had endured. Unlike Job, she was ready to do just as Satan had desired. She wanted Job to "curse God, and die" (Job 2:9). Job did not understand what was happening to him any more than his wife did. Yet, he rebuked her, calling her speech "foolish" (Job 2:10). He pointed out that we must navigate both the good and the bad that come our way. Despite all his internal and external pain, Job had determined within himself that he would not sin against God. Satan lost the bet!

Like Job, the words in Psalm 26 reveal that David had suffered injustice. He pleaded to God for vindication. Whatever had happened to David was beyond his control to remedy himself. He acknowledged trusting the Lord and declared that he would not turn away from God. "I walk in faithfulness to you. . . . I walk in my integrity" (Psalm 26:3b, 11a). The dedication of Job and David to God in hard times shows their love for, trust in, and commitment to follow God even when not understanding the circumstances God allowed in their lives. Job was not privy to the dialogue between God and Satan, but Job knew that God had permitted the situations (see Job 2:10). Similarly, David knew that his life was in the hands of a powerful, all-knowing God to whom David pleaded his case.



God permitted Satan to afflict Job's body  
but not take his life.

## Into the Lesson

Although today's passage in Job begins in chapter 2 of Job, the beginning of the second chapter replays the scene in the first of Satan's appearing at a heavenly meeting and God's offering Job to Satan. This is where most of us may struggle—why would God allow repeated attacks on Job? Why did God even allow the first attack? In a world where we like things to make sense, we may rationalize God's permission to Satan as God's knowing that Job would never turn away from God because of God's omniscience.

Or, we may say that God was testing Job to build his character and loyalty even more because, ultimately, God blessed Job with more than he had previously. We may even theorize that God might have sought to humble Job for some reason to remind Job of his dependency on God. Those explanations sound good, but the truth is that we simply do not know.

Not knowing can be difficult to accept, especially because our just God allowed such injustices to occur. Not only did the injustice occur to Job, but also to his entire family. Did God have to allow Satan to kill Job's children? Would eliminating Job's livelihood not have been enough? The extent of the injustices seems contrary to the nature of a just God, so it can be difficult for us to reconcile God's nature with the realities of life. We cannot be too spiritual to admit that what happened was unfair.

Despite Job's referring to his wife's speech as foolish (see Job 2:10), perhaps she deserves more grace. This woman had lost multiple children that she bore. She had to be riddled with grief, so her words may have been foolish, but they were also spoken from her pain. When we are hurt, we sometimes speak things that align with our feelings but not our faith. Job's failure to sin sometimes gives the appearance of a superhuman/super-spiritual being.

Although Job did not curse God directly, in the very next chapter, we see that he cursed the day he was born (see Job 3:3). In later chapters, we find that Job questioned God about his suffering. Mrs. Job's outburst and Job's later responses are varying ways that people deal with pain, indicating that there is no one way to process our experiences when life hurts.

All of us have gone through something in life that we cannot explain. It does not matter that our losses may not have been to the extent of Job's. No matter the level, pain hurts. We must be careful not to dismiss what others feel because they have not suffered to the visible

extent of someone else. A mother who loses a child in the womb via miscarriage has the right to grieve just as the mother who loses a child post-birth. People who lose their jobs, have multiple diagnoses of illnesses, or cannot break the cycle of issues (e.g., debt, addiction, divorce) in their lives—no matter how hard they try—feel pain, and may question God or even curse a day that God ordained.

The key to processing pain is not getting stuck in the place of trying to rationalize it. We can theorize until we exhaust all possibilities, but there is only one aspect we will know for sure—God allowed it. Think about your "it." Some may have several "its." Whether you are at the beginning of your pain journey, in the middle, or learning to navigate life despite "it," you will have unanswered questions.

### Enter Faith . . .

Faith helps build a resilient mindset to trust God even when we have trouble understanding God or feel like God has been unfair. We can look at the end of Job's story and see that God restored his possessions and gave him more children (see Job 42:12-13), but that does not mean Job forgot about his previous children. Although we will not forget the situations that occur, hopefully, we will not feel the depth of the pain as intensely over time.

Through faith, we build spiritual muscles that help us reconcile our feelings with the facts of life without poisoning our perspective about God. We must believe that God has a purpose for whatever God allows and



We sometimes speak things that align with our feelings but not our faith.



be okay with accepting that God has no obligation to disclose anything to us. Maybe we will understand our “its” better “by and by,” as the hymn claims. Maybe we will not. We have insight into what happened in Job’s situation, but he did not.

A critical aspect of faith is to give yourself grace for imperfect responses. If you are a person who can experience hardship and have an immediate response to bless the Lord, congratulations! You have tapped into a realm that most do not enter when initially faced with trouble. Even Job slipped by cursing the day he was born. Have grace for those who need a little more time to have more faith than feelings when first introduced to a life upset. Such does not mean that they love God any less. They are simply displaying their human nature. God is patient and loving. He may be the only one who ever knows the purpose of our pain. He is also the only one who can help get us through it. Pray as David prayed in Psalm 26:1a, “Vindicate me, O LORD.” In God’s appointed time, God will. For some, the reality is that the appointed time may not be on this side of eternity.

## Into Discipleship

Faith will help us through our feelings, but it is not an easy process. One trick of Satan’s is that when we respond in our feelings (such as cursing God or a day God made), we feel condemnation and may think that we have messed up to the point of no return. That is a lie!

Remember, God made you. Nothing you do or that happens to you will surprise God. God cannot be caught

off-guard. He knew how Job’s wife would advise him. God knew Job would go all spiritual initially and then sink into depression. God knew the details of whatever David experienced, which prompted him to write Psalm 26. It may feel like God is unjust, but the fact is that God is loving and forgiving. God is aware of our emotional threshold for pain. When we make it to the other side of a situation that felt like it would destroy us, we have exhibited resilience. Getting there is possible but not easy.

First, acknowledge what you experienced and how such experiences make you feel. Do not let others dictate the rightness or wrongness of your pain. You feel what you feel. Do not deny your feelings or gloss over them for the sake of appearing spiritual. God knows your heart. You can maybe fool other people, but you will not trick God. By not being authentic, you will deny yourself access to the complete healing only available through God. You may wish to share your feelings with a trusted therapist. Or you may do as David did and write about them. However you process your feelings, do so in a healthy way so as not to add to your issues by introducing other elements that will complicate matters, such as misusing substances as coping mechanisms.

Once you have had a chance to evaluate your feelings, repent if your reaction went off-center. Do not sit in guilt. God is a God of restoration. He will not turn away from “a broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17). One bad reaction does not necessarily have to lead to additional bad reactions. If subsequent negative



responses occur, repent each time. God will not abandon you. He will wait patiently until you return to Him.

After repenting, re-center your trust in God. Job made a great point that we cannot accept the good from God and not the bad. Faith is not needed when everything goes our way. Faith helps us hope when faced with hopelessness. Thus, if we did not have any struggles in life, we would not know faith. Faith allows us to see beyond what is in our immediate sight. Faith helps us bless God when it may feel like God is not moving (or moving fast enough) on our behalf.

David began the psalm begging for vindication and ended it saying, “I will bless the LORD” (Psalm 26:12). The actions David declared he would take during the psalm (e.g., avoid associating with the wicked and singing praises) model for us how to get to a place of repentance. We must be mindful of those with whom we associate while in our pain. Surround yourself with

realistic, faith-filled people who will not side-eye you or bring you before the modern-church Sanhedrin based on your initial response but who will lovingly pray with and for you to get back to a trusting place in God.

When you are back in this place of trust in God, stay there if you can. If you cannot because feelings come and go, repeat the process to get back there. Sometimes, our faith journey and the building of resilience is not a single event. We may have to repeat a class one or more times. Again, give yourself grace. Do not compare your handling of experiences to the way others handled theirs. You are a different person. Although your journey may be shared with others, such as both Job and his wife experiencing grief, you are only responsible for your response.

---

#### References

<https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/psalm-26/>

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Satan-accuser.html>

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“

Faith helps build a resilient mindset to trust God.



### Living a Job Faith: From Tried to Triumphant by Paige Lanier Chargois

“*Living a Job Faith* shows readers the benefit of engaging the biblical narrative with the narratives of our lives and communities and vice versa. Chargois drinks deeply from the wisdom of this literature and invites others to do the same.”

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## Closing Prayer

Dear God, we admit that we do not always understand why you allow certain things to happen in our lives or the lives of others. Still, help us trust you and not depend on our need to understand but on your goodness despite what we see. We repent of times when our response to trouble could have been better. Thank you for being patient with us. Our resilience reflects our willingness to depend on you to help us navigate through whatever life brings our way. Thank you for being there no matter how we may feel. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

### ■ Into the Scripture

- How do these passages encourage believers to remain steadfast in their faith despite trials?
- Explore the parallels between Job's experiences and the advice given in 1 Peter 5:8 regarding the devil's tactics. How does Job's story exemplify the struggle against spiritual warfare?

### ■ Into the Lesson

- What response would you give to someone who asks why bad things happen to good people?

- How do we reconcile the concept of a just God with the extent of Job's suffering?

### ■ Into Discipleship

- Reflect on the dangers of self-condemnation and the importance of extending grace to oneself in times of struggle.
- Explore the cyclical nature of faith and resilience. How does the passage illustrate that faith is not a one-time event but a continuous journey of trust and surrender?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- "Strength," performed by John P. Kee and The New Life Community Choir: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCARr6WTSFU>
- "Can't Give Up Now," performed by Mary Mary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBXbkgLnKCQ>
- "My Soul Has Been Anchored in the Lord," performed by Douglas Miller: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nw\\_hp9WAY2Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nw_hp9WAY2Y)

### Media Options

- Plan a Movie Night to watch and discuss *Just Mercy*, "a 2019 American biographical legal drama film co-written and directed by Destin Daniel Cretton and starring Michael B. Jordan as Bryan Stevenson, [and] Jamie Foxx as Walter McMillian . . . . It explores the work of young defense attorney Bryan Stevenson who represents poor



people on death row in the South. Featured is his work with Walter McMillian, who had been wrongfully convicted of the murder of a young woman” (Wikipedia).

- **Book:** *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*, by M. Scott Peck. “Published in 1978, [this] is Peck’s best-known work . . . It is . . . a description of the attributes that make for a fulfilled human being, based largely on his experiences as a psychiatrist and a person” (Wikipedia). He discusses in depth how aspects of discipline, love, and grace can help us overcome life’s difficulties. Publisher Simon Schuster, 1978 (with multiple reprints).

## Activity Ideas

- Encourage the participants to reflect on a personal experience of suffering or hardship, writing about their initial reactions, how they acknowledged and processed their emotions, and how faith played a role in their journey of resilience.
- Even when life presents challenges, there will always be reasons to thank God. Instruct participants to create a gratitude journal. Each day or week, they must write something positive for which they can thank God, no matter what is happening in their lives.

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year B Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

### Week of October 6, 2024

#### Sunday, October 6

Job 1:1; 2:1-10 and Psalm 26; Genesis 2:18-24 and Psalm 8; Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

#### Monday, October 7

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 55:1-15; Job 8:1-22; 1 Corinthians 7:1-9  
*Complementary:* Psalm 112; Deuteronomy 22:13-30; 1 Corinthians 7:1-9

#### Tuesday, October 8

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 55:1-15; Job 11:1-20; 1 Corinthians 7:10-16  
*Complementary:* Psalm 112; Deuteronomy 24:1-5; 1 Corinthians 7:10-16

#### Wednesday, October 9

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 55:1-15; Job 15:1-35; Matthew 5:27-36  
*Complementary:* Psalm 112; Jeremiah 3:6-14; Matthew 5:27-36

#### Thursday, October 10

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 22:1-15; Job 17:1-16; Hebrews 3:7-19  
*Complementary:* Psalm 90:12-17; Deuteronomy 5:1-21; Hebrews 3:7-19

#### Friday, October 11

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 22:1-15; Job 18:1-21; Hebrews 4:1-11  
*Complementary:* Psalm 90:12-17; Deuteronomy 5:22-33; Hebrews 4:1-11

#### Saturday, October 12

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 22:1-15; Job 20:1-29; Matthew 15:1-9  
*Complementary:* Psalm 90:12-17; Amos 3:13-4:5; Matthew 15:1-9



Do not sit in guilt. God is a God of restoration.



# ASSURANCE

## confidence in an understanding God

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

—HEBREWS 4:16

### Introduction

The writer of Hebrews 4:12-16 highlights the power of God's Word, describing it as a sharp, double-edged sword that delves into and divides the deepest realms of our being. The writer assures believers that nothing can remain concealed from God, as God's Word unveils the thoughts and motives of the heart. Furthermore, this passage presents Jesus Christ as a compassionate High Priest who empathizes with our weaknesses, having experienced the full spectrum of human trials and temptations. Believers are urged to approach God's throne with confidence, assured of receiving mercy and grace in times of need. The Scripture serves as a reminder of God's constant presence, God's understanding of our struggles, and God's willingness and readiness to extend compassion and assistance to all who seek Him.

### Lesson Objectives

- To realize the transformative power of God's Word.
- To recognize the depth of God's knowledge and awareness of our struggles and vulnerability.
- To explore ways to approach God's throne with confidence, cultivating assurance about God's accessibility, presence, and compassion.

### Hebrews 4:12-16 NRSV

12 Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. 14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as

we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

## Into the Scripture

“In a passage that sets a chilling warning immediately before a great comfort, it is God and the audience’s relationship with him that unites the disparate sections. He, ever judge, can also be experienced as the giver of grace.”—Amy L. B. Peeler

The author of Hebrews remains a mystery, although many scholars speculate that the apostle Paul could have penned this book. Specifically, the writer mentions Timothy in Hebrews 13:23, whom we know was a companion and mentee of Paul’s. Paul mentions Timothy in other books he wrote. Some examples of Paul’s shout-outs to Timothy can be found in Romans 16:21, 1 Corinthians 4:17, Colossians 1:1, and others. In fact, Paul wrote two letters in the New Testament (i.e., 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy) directly to his protégé. So, it is understandable why scholars lean toward Paul as the author of Hebrews. However, one should not let the uncertainty or speculation of authorship be a critical

factor. The author of the book is not as important as the message.

The author knew he was writing to a Christian audience by addressing them as “brothers and sisters” (Hebrews 3:12). The audience had clearly heard the Gospel previously (see Hebrews 2:3), so the writer was not introducing them to God the Father or the Son. Rather, the writer created a metaphor to help them better understand the power of the God in which they believed

and reassured them of God’s accessibility to them and assistance for them.

The writer starts by sharing that the Word of God is so sharp that it “divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow.” Humans are made up of a body, soul, and spirit (see 1 Thessalonians 5:23). While we know our bodies are our physical beings, the difference between our souls and spirits is not always profoundly

“

Our souls will remain  
alive even when our  
bodies die.

understood. The soul is the essence that gives us life. Our souls will remain alive even when our bodies die.

The spirit is the essence that connects us with God. Connecting our spirit with God is a choice. We can reject connecting with God, allowing our spirits to then lead us into situations and behaviors contrary to God’s will. Or, we can choose to respond to God’s spirit—the Holy Spirit—and not be drawn to the things of our flesh. When we choose to connect with the Holy Spirit, we then produce works that represent God. (See Galatians 5:16-26.) Like joint and marrow, the soul and spirit are connected in ways that humans have difficulty distinguishing. Yet, the Word of God, all by itself, can divide the two. God’s Word alone produces action.

After describing the power of God’s Word, the writer reminds us that God sees us. Again, this can be scary, but it should also bring comfort in knowing that we will never experience anything that is outside of God’s knowledge. We then are assured of Jesus’ ability to relate to our struggles, illustrating his divine connection with our humanity. Thus, when we pray and express our pain, we must not fear that we will be misunderstood. We are encouraged to seek God’s throne—where we will “receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).





The passage gives great assurance that we are not alone in whatever trials we face. Life will be filled with many ups and downs. Sometimes, the down moments may make us feel like we are alone. We are not. Jesus is not a distant bystander. He is an active participant in our struggles. When we try to conceal our actions or thoughts from God, we are simply delaying our own deliverance. God sees and knows all, but God will not force Himself upon us. We are to go to God. When we do, we can have the confidence that God is ready and willing to receive us and help us.

## Into the Lesson

The imagery of God's Word's being a sharp, double-edged sword and dividing elements that we cannot fully articulate reveals the transformative and renewal impact of Scripture in our lives. Not only is God's Word powerful, but it is also living and active, superseding human limitations and speaking directly to our souls. The Word of God is not merely a collection of ancient texts but a dynamic force that continues to speak to us today, revealing God's truth, convicting us of sin, and guiding us on the path of righteousness. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God's Word convicts, comforts, and challenges us, shaping our minds and hearts according to God's will.

No sin can be hidden from God. Whether we sin in deed or in thought, God, being omniscient, knows all. The sobering reality of this passage might frighten or embarrass some of us when we think about our darkest and deepest secrets. Every person has done something

that they wish they had not. We may have even done something that no other earthly human being knows. It is humbling to know that the act concealed from humankind is revealed to God. We can understand that God sees our actions—but knowing that God sees our thoughts as well can be unsettling.

It is easy for us to mask what we think from others. We can put a smile on our faces and compliment someone on a hairstyle or outfit while really thinking that the new hairdo or attire does not do that person any favors. If our tone sounds sincere, the person will take our compliment to heart and go about their day, never the wiser to how we really feel—unless we tell someone else our true thoughts and such gets back to the original person. But God does not have to wait until we reveal anything before God knows it. Every negative, foul, or destructive thing that comes to our minds is known by God.

We should have a deep appreciation of God's omniscience and intimate knowledge of our struggles, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities. We are reminded that God sees and understands us completely, knowing the hidden secrets of our hearts and offering His love and grace to us unconditionally.



God's Word convicts, comforts, and challenges us, shaping our minds and hearts according to God's will.



Jesus is our compassionate High Priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses and understands the full range of human experiences. His humanity and divine nature make Jesus the perfect mediator between God and humans because he empathizes with our struggles and offers grace and mercy in our time of need. Through Jesus' experiences of temptation and suffering, we gain insight into his deep compassion and ability to relate to us, inspiring us to approach the throne with confidence and trust.

As we rest in the fact that Jesus is our High Priest, we cannot forget his sacrificial death on the Cross. Through his shed blood, Jesus bridged the gap between humans and God and humanity, reconciling us to God and offering us forgiveness and redemption. His death and resurrection opened the way for us to approach God's throne of grace boldly, knowing that we are welcomed as beloved children of God.

In verse 16, we are invited to boldly approach the throne of grace with confidence. This is a call to intimacy and communion with God, where we can find everything we need in God's presence. God's grace is abundant and freely available to all who seek God. Sometimes, we keep secrets from others because of fear that if they discover something we have done or said, they will abandon us. We never have to fear this happening with God. Recall that God knows everything about us (see Hebrews 4:13). Yet, God still wants to be in a relationship with us.

The enemy may want to convince us that this invitation for relationship is a single offer, but it is not. No matter how many times we may fall short, we can always go to God. Whether you have sinned willfully or unintentionally, do not let shame or guilt prevent you from going to God. The instinct is to hide after we sin. Recall how Adam and Eve hid in the garden after sinning (see Genesis 3:8). God asked Adam where he was, not because God did not know but out of a desire to have Adam to reveal what happened.

The same is true with us. We regret when we do wrong, not because we are informing God, who wants us to confess and acknowledge our wrongdoing, promising grace, mercy, and whatever we need. To receive God's transformative and restorative power requires action on our part. We must engage openly and honestly with God, apply the truths of Scripture to our lives, and draw nearer to God with trust and assurance in God's unfailing love and grace.

## Into Discipleship

Applying spiritual principles in our daily lives, such as regular Scripture study and prayer, can deepen our relationship with God and cultivate spiritual resilience. Such will help foster a strong faith journey, increasing our confidence to approach God about everything in life. When we truly know that God loves us and that Jesus advocates for and identifies with us, we do not have to be ashamed or afraid to go to God.

Approaching God with confidence while also being vulnerable highlights the dynamic interplay between trust and authenticity in our relationship with God. Vulnerability with God involves opening our hearts completely to God and laying bare our fears, doubts, and insecurities. Approaching God with confidence requires our reliance on God's character, faithfulness, and unchanging love for the children of God. This unwavering trust empowers us to boldly approach God's throne of grace, assured of God's willingness to hear and respond to our prayers.

Together, confidence and vulnerability forge a pathway to deeper spiritual growth and transformation as we navigate the complexities of our human experiences with honesty, humility, and unwavering trust in God's unfailing love and grace. Both confidence and vulnerability are easily understood at a superficial level, but let us dive deeper into how to cultivate such in our relationship with God.

Vulnerability with God begins with acknowledging our humanity and the limitations of our understanding. We do not have to be all or know it all. Vulnerability allows us to be fully known and loved by God,



God's grace is  
abundant and freely  
available to all.



experiencing God's grace and compassion in our deepest moments of need. We willingly express our most private emotions and concerns to God without reservation. This may involve confessing our sins and shortcomings, expressing our doubts and struggles, or laying bare our hopes and dreams.

In doing so, we allow God to see us as we truly are, without pretense, and invite God to work in and through us to bring about healing, transformation, restoration, and renewal. Remember, God already knows. God simply wants us to share our thoughts as a sign of trust in God. Confidence requires a firm belief in God's sovereignty and goodness. Hebrews 4:16 encourages us to "approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (NIV). This confidence is rooted in our trust in God's character and promises, knowing that God hears our prayers and will respond according to God's perfect will. As we deepen our understanding of who God is and cultivate a personal relationship with God through prayer and communion, our confidence in approaching God grows stronger.

Vulnerability and confidence in our relationship with God empower us to understand the need for grace

and resilience. In vulnerability, we acknowledge our dependence on God and our need for God's sustaining grace. We experience God's love, grace, and presence in significant ways by inviting God into the depths of our hearts, allowing God to heal our wounds, comfort our sorrows, and strengthen our faith.

We learn to trust God's faithfulness and goodness, even amid life's uncertainties and challenges. In confidence, we rest in the assurance of God's steadfast love and faithfulness. Together, vulnerability and confidence enable us to approach God with honesty, humility, and trust, knowing that God welcomes us with open arms and invites us into a deeper intimacy with God.

One way to be both vulnerable with God and have confidence in God is to pray. Prayer requires trust in God's love, compassion, and faithfulness. It involves letting go of our need to control outcomes and surrendering ourselves completely to God's will and purpose for our lives. This may be challenging at times, especially when we are facing uncertainty or adversity, but it is in these moments of vulnerability that we can experience God's presence and peace in real and tangible ways.

## Closing Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for being there for us, even when we have failed to acknowledge your presence. You know us better than we know ourselves, and because of this, we want to completely surrender our entire being to you. Thank you for saving us. Give us a desire to follow you wholeheartedly. Thank you for your love, grace, and mercy for us that never fails. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

### ■ Into the Scripture

- What implications does the division between soul and spirit, as described in Hebrews 4:12, have for our spiritual growth and understanding?
- What significance does the concept of mercy and grace hold for believers, and how do these attributes of God affect our understanding of God's character?

### ■ Into the Lesson

- In what ways does God's intimate knowledge of our weaknesses and vulnerabilities offer comfort and reassurance in our faith journey?

- How does the assurance of God's unconditional love and grace challenge our tendency to hide or conceal our shortcomings?

### ■ Into Discipleship

- What barriers or fears might prevent individuals from fully embracing vulnerability in their relationship with God?
- What role does the community play in supporting individuals as they navigate vulnerability and confidence in their relationship with God?

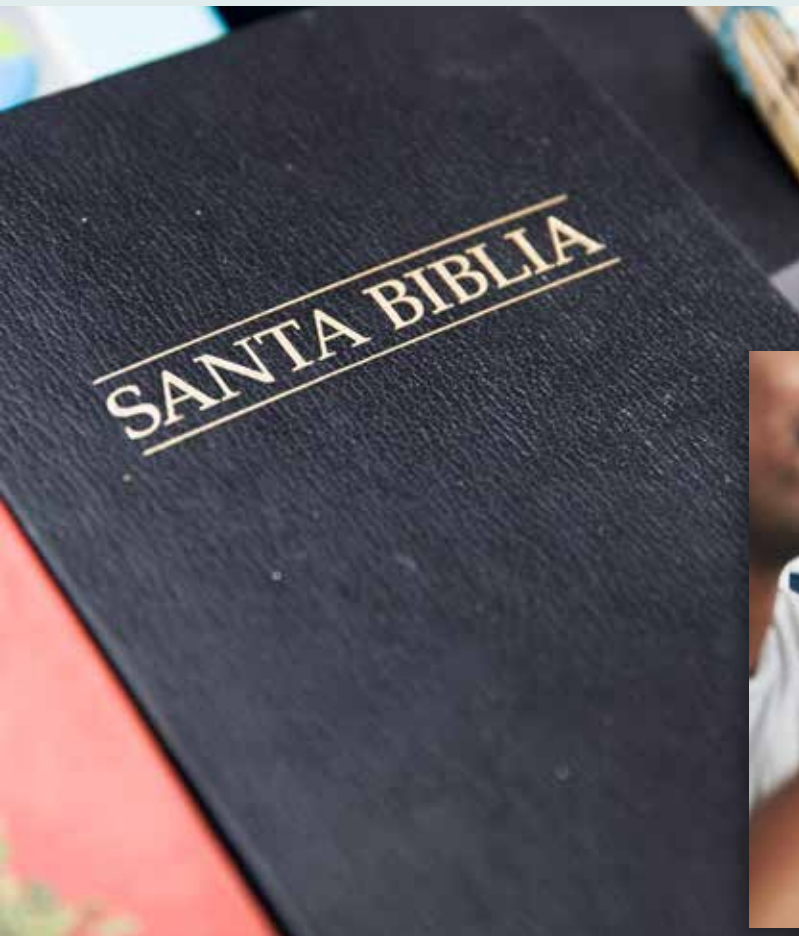
## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- "Gracefully Broken," performed by Matt Redman (featuring Tasha Cobbs): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJNR0lxbIP4>
- "Freedom," performed by Jesus Culture (featuring Kim Walker-Smith): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKxeZsZvp7E>
- "You Make Me Brave," sung by Amanda Cook: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Hi-VMxT6fc>

### Media Options

- **Book:** *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul*, by R. Kent Hughes, Crossway Publishers, 2015.
- **Inspiration Poem:** "Hope' Is the Thing with Feathers" by Emily Dickinson
  - 1 "Hope" is the thing with feathers—
  - 2 That perches in the soul—
  - 3 And sings the tune without the words—





4 And never stops—at all—  
 5 And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—  
 6 And sore must be the storm—  
 7 That could abash the little Bird  
 8 That kept so many warm—  
 9 I've heard it in the chilliest land—  
 10 And on the strangest Sea—  
 11 Yet—never—in Extremity,  
 12 It asked a crumb—of me.

Use this resource to discuss the metaphors in the poem: <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/hope-is-the-thing-with-feathers>

## Activity Ideas

- Invite participants to write a personal prayer inspired by Hebrews 4:16, expressing their feelings, struggles, and desires for God's mercy and grace.
- Organize a prayer walk outdoors, where participants can reflect on the Scripture passage while walking silently or praying aloud, focusing on different aspects of the passage as they move through different locations.
- Set up prayer stations with different prompts, inviting participants to pray individually or in groups, focusing on themes of confidence in prayer, receiving mercy and grace, and seeking God's help in times of need.

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year B Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost Week of October 13, 2024

#### Sunday, October 13

Job 23:1-9, 16-17 and Psalm 22:1-15; Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 and Psalm 90:12-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

#### Monday, October 14 (Canadian Thanksgiving Day)

Joel 2:21-27 and Psalm 126; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Matthew 6:25-33  
*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 39; Job 26:1-14; Revelation 7:9-17  
*Complementary:* Psalm 26; Obadiah 1:1-9; Revelation 7:9-17

#### Tuesday, October 15

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 39; Job 28:12-29:10; Revelation 8:1-5  
*Complementary:* Psalm 26; Obadiah 1:10-16; Revelation 8:1-5

#### Wednesday, October 16

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 39; Job 32:1-22; Luke 16:19-31  
*Complementary:* Psalm 26; Obadiah 1:17-21; Luke 16:19-31

#### Thursday, October 17

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35b; Job 36:1-16; Romans 15:7-13  
*Complementary:* Psalm 91:9-16; Genesis 14:17-24; Romans 15:7-13

#### Friday, October 18

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35b; Job 37:1-24; Revelation 17:1-18  
*Complementary:* Psalm 91:9-16; Isaiah 47:1-9; Revelation 17:1-18

#### Saturday, October 19

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35b; Job 39:1-30; Luke 22:24-30  
*Complementary:* Psalm 91:9-16; Isaiah 47:10-15; Luke 22:24-30



We rest in the assurance of God's steadfast love.

# SOVEREIGN

## divine wisdom surpasses human understanding

Praise the LORD!

—PSALM 104:35c

### Introduction

Today's passage of Scripture covers God's response to Job, illustrating God's omnipotence and omniscience beyond human comprehension. In this passage, God presents to Job a series of unanswerable rhetorical questions, highlighting the wide gap between God's knowledge and our limited human perspective. God knows intimate details about every facet of the world and how our lives are crafted together that we will never comprehend. We must recognize God's sovereignty. We will never fully understand God as a sovereign Being. Understanding God is not a prerequisite to trusting God. Recognizing God's sovereignty is crucial, not just as an act of submission but as a foundation for our faith.

### Lesson Objectives

- To acknowledge God's sovereignty and our human limitations.
- To recognize the care and detail God invests in God's creation.
- To explore reconciling unanswered questions with unwavering faith.

### Job 38:1-7, 34-41 NRSV

1 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: 2 "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? 3 Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. 4 Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. 5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? 6 On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone 7 when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" . . . 34 "Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? 35 Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, 'Here we

are? 36 Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? 37 Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens, 38 when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together? 39 Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, 40 when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? 41 Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?”

## Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c NRSV

1 Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, 2 wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent, 3 you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind, 4 you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers. 5 You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. 6 You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. 7 At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight. 8 They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them. 9 You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth. . . . 24 O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. . . . 35 Praise the LORD!

## Into the Scripture

Our reading today begins four chapters shy of the end of Job’s account. At the beginning of the book of Job, we see Satan attending a heavenly meeting and God offering Job to Satan. This scene occurs twice in chapters 1 and 2. The first time, God only permitted Satan to destroy all that Job had—a job that Satan completed with the utmost diligence. Everything, including Job’s children and livestock, was destroyed.

When such was insufficient to turn Job away from God, Satan came back in chapter 2, this time receiving permission from God to afflict Job’s body without the power to take Job’s life. From chapters 3 to 37, we see Job slip into depression, cursing the day he was born (see Job 3:1), and, as though his self-loathing was not enough, Job’s three friends took turns questioning him and accusing him of somehow causing his circumstances. Job defended himself without swaying his friends’ opinions. Chapter 38 is when God finally speaks



Understanding God is  
not a prerequisite to  
trusting God.

to Job. In our modern-day vernacular, the more accurate description is that God checked Job!

Unlike those in our society who may check others for self-gratifying reasons, God put Job in his place,





proving a point to Job and his friends: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” (Job 38:2). In other words, God said there was a bunch of talk without accurate information to support what was said. God then asked Job a series of questions he could not answer. Scripture gives us no insight into how Job felt in chapter 38, but it is not unreasonable to suppose that he could have been offended. After all, he knew that he had suffered unjustly and, then, his friends berated him.

When God finally showed up to speak on Job’s behalf, instead of first defending Job, God put Job in his place. God’s motive was not to embarrass Job but to illuminate the limited capacity of human knowledge. No matter how much Job tried, he would never be able to explain his circumstances or anyone else’s because there are aspects of the world and humanity that are incomprehensible to humans.

God’s questions to Job were a way of humbling God. In the last chapter, God severely admonished Job’s friends, stating that they had not spoken the truth about God or Job. God was so upset with Job’s friends that God instructed Job to intercede for them and then God would not deal with them according to their foolishness. The book of Job closes with God’s blessing Job beyond what he had suffered. The book of Job leaves many unanswered questions, such as why God allowed Job’s suffering in the first place. Although we are never told why, the book encourages us to trust God through difficult times—who is never unaware of what happens to us. Although God may be silent for a while, God will speak and restore us at the appointed time. Our job is to continue trusting in God.

We are reminded of God’s sovereignty in Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c. The writer creates a vivid picture of

God’s power. The strongest or most fit human cannot “stretch out the heavens” or “set the earth on its foundations.” God is the Creator and sustainer of the earth and has taken great care to design all aspects of humanity. Our world is woven together not by accident of some scientific combustion but by divine intention. The poetic descriptions of God’s power highlight a stark contrast between the wisdom and power of God versus that of humanity. The psalm provokes us to worship and be in awe of God. In fact, the passage ends with the following instruction: “Praise the LORD!”

## Into the Lesson

Some of us may have had childhood or teenage experiences of being put in our place by parents who let it be known that we did not run them or the household—they did! Like a loving parent, God made it clear to Job that God was the boss! Period. It would have been nice if God’s first words after such a long silence would have been gentler—since God was the reason why Job had experienced suffering in the first place—but, instead, God came with tough questions.

While it may seem harsh for God to come at Job in that manner, there is a blessing of God’s emerging that we must not miss. Job 38 reveals that God spoke “out of the whirlwind” (verse 1). Some versions use the term “storm.” We all face storms of life, although, hopefully,



God is the Creator and sustainer of the earth and has taken great care to design all aspects of humanity.

not to the extent that Job did. Nevertheless, we should find comfort in the fact that God does not leave us alone in our storms. The silence of God throughout most of the book cannot be explained, but we know that everything has a season (see Ecclesiastes 3:1). When the season of Job's suffering had ended, God appeared.

The silence of God during our suffering can be difficult for us to comprehend. We may struggle emotionally and intellectually knowing that God is omnipresent but feeling a distancing of God from our situation. It is natural to wonder why and question God. However, we must also be content with the possibility of never receiving answers. That is a difficult pill to swallow, and we may find ourselves asking how we can truly trust God amid silence when we need God most.

God's silence is not equivalent to human silence. We must be careful not to equate human ways to God. We have all had people not return a call or text or be there for us in our time of need. Such actions create distrust for individuals; consciously or unconsciously, we build walls to keep those persons at a distance. We must remember that God's ways are not like ours. God's silence is not because God neglects us or is unconcerned about our suffering. Our best guess of why God allows suffering will only be speculation. We must separate feelings from faith. Even when it feels like God is not with us, our faith reminds us of God's presence. God will never leave or forsake us! (See Hebrews 13:5.)

God can handle and answer all our questions. We cannot answer God's. Imagine how intricately the world has been fashioned together. Even the eclipse in the United States on April 8, 2024, exemplified God's magnificence. Why do the stars not fall from the sky at night? Or why does the rain stop instead of pouring from the clouds continuously and flooding the earth? Although scientific advancements help shed light on some unknown aspects of our world, such answers pale in comparison to God's wisdom, power, and knowledge.

Even the best artificial intelligence programs cannot match the intelligence of the world's Creator. As technological developments increase, so does the danger of human autonomy. As Christians, we must always recognize and appreciate God's sovereignty. When we learn to rely on God, we alleviate the unnecessary stress of trying to figure things out independently. We should save our brain power and let God do what God does best—be God! God does not need our help.



## God's silence is not equivalent to human silence.

The psalmist outlines a beautiful poem of praise that reminds us how awesome our God is. Reread the passage, allowing yourself to visualize the descriptions and actions ascribed to God—who is clothed in “honor and majesty.” When we honor other humans, we hold them in high esteem and say nice things about them based on their actions. Those are compliments, but no designer on earth can design honor and majesty. Although God is a spirit, the very nature of God's being is honorable and majestic. God does not have to have any exceptional achievement to receive honor or majesty. Those words describe God and make up the essence of God's character.

Our God is “wrapped in light.” When we spend time with God, we reflect the Father's light. Recall that Moses' face shone after spending time with God on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 34:29). Despite not knowing God's reasons for allowing suffering in our lives, we can still trust God—who is the only being with all the answers. In trusting God, we should praise God. Our praise will confuse the enemy!

### Into Discipleship

Between chapters 38 and 41, God's questions confirmed to Job that God was in control. Like Job, we have limited knowledge of all things. When Job did speak again in chapter 42, he acknowledged his lack of knowledge and repented. As we navigate our questions about life and God, we should heed and imitate Job's response—recognize our limitations and humble ourselves before God.



Humility is an essential aspect of our relationship with God. In our human relationships, know-it-all irritate us. Think of someone in your life whom you refuse to engage in specific conversations with because no matter what you say, they will know much more than you ever could about the situation. It does not matter if their “knowledge” lacks supporting facts. Remember how you feel when encountering someone who knows everything while truly knowing nothing. Avoid making God feel like that in your approach. This is not to say that you cannot ever question God. Just understand that God is not obligated to answer you; trust God anyhow.

Trust in God is the cornerstone of maintaining our faith in Him. We cannot have faith in anyone we do not trust. Some people lose trust in God and instead want to rely on themselves. Do you know the number of hairs on your head? Can you step into the next day to prepare yourself for what is ahead? Surely, the answer to both questions is “no.” However, God knows the exact number of hairs sprouting from your scalp. He even knows the ones that have fallen out! When it comes to tomorrow or any days ahead, God has already fashioned those days.

Some experiences ahead will be joyful. Others will involve suffering. Either way, trust that the God who formed and knew you in your mother’s womb has prepared you for whatever awaits you. God wants our trust. We must know that God is present even when appearing silent. God did not appear to Job until chapter

38, but God knew everything that had happened. Likewise, nothing is happening in your life that escapes God’s purview. Though perhaps silent now, God will not be silent forever.

In trusting God, praise God. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, we are instructed to give thanks in everything. This does not mean that we give thanks for everything. God is not ignorant. He knows that we will not have only pleasant experiences in life. He does not expect us to give thanks *for* everything, but we can give thanks *in* everything. This simply means that we have a heart of gratitude, even while suffering. We can thank God for being with us. We can thank God for knowing the outcome, as well as for simply keeping us clothed and in our right minds—as some situations we face test our sanity. Some people do not make it mentally through what we have experienced. We must thank God for keeping us. No matter how bad our situations are, they could always be much worse.

Understand that God’s purpose for allowing suffering is not because God is out to get us. That is not God’s nature. God loves us and only wants what is best for us. Some suffering we experience is not a result of anything we have done; it is a consequence of living in a fallen, sinful world. Nevertheless, take comfort in knowing that we have a God who cares. God is our advocate and will only allow trouble to last for so long. Should you have people who falsely speak against you as Job’s friends did to him, remember God has your back!



## Closing Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for being omniscient and omnipresent. Knowing that nothing that happens to us will ever catch you by surprise brings us peace. Help us trust you when life's circumstances make trusting difficult. Keep us from being guided by our feelings so that our faith may lead us in you and your Word. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

### ■ Into the Scripture

- Why might God choose to “check” Job rather than defend him immediately when God finally spoke in chapter 38?
- How does the depiction of God as the Creator and sustainer of the universe in Psalm 104 influence our response to personal suffering or challenges as depicted in Job?

### ■ Into the Lesson

- How can believers reconcile the emotional difficulty of God's silence during suffering with the theological understanding that God's silence does not equate to absence?
- Discuss the implications of viewing God as inherently “wrapped in light,” “honor,” and “majesty.” How does this perspective affect our relationship

with and response to God during times of personal challenge?

### ■ Into Discipleship

- Describe a personal experience where acknowledging your limitations before God deepened your faith.
- In what ways can questioning God be healthy, and when does it become a barrier to trust? How can we balance our natural curiosity and doubts with faith and trust God's plans?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “Sovereign,” performed by John P. Kee and the New Life Community Choir:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3rYn1cy2UA>
- “Omnipotent God,” performed by Isabella Melodies:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hUCBDFfahI>
- “Praise Him in Advance,” performed by Marvin Sapp:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvganA6nrf0>

### Media Options

- **Book:** *The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person*, by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, 2012, Schocken Publishers. “Kushner teaches us about what can and cannot be controlled, about the power of faith when all seems dark, and about our ability to find God.”—Amazon
- **Book:** *Everyday Glory: The Revelation of God in All of Reality*, by Gerald R. McDermott, 2018, Baker Academic. “This book recaptures a Christian vision



of all reality: that the world is full of divine signs that are openings into God's glory."—Amazon

## Activity Ideas

- Lead a discussion where participants can share personal experiences related to times when they felt that God was silent in their lives, like Job's experience, and what they learned from those times.
- Encourage participants to write a poem or short reflection inspired by the imagery and themes in Psalm 104, focusing on the majesty and creativity of God as Creator.
- Have participants compare different translations of Job 38 or Psalm 104. Discuss how various word choices and phrases affect their understanding of the texts and themes.

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year B Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

### Week of October 20, 2024

#### Sunday, October 20

Job 38:1-7, (34-41) and Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Isaiah 53:4-12 and Psalm 91:9-16; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

#### Monday, October 21

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 75; Job 40:1-24; Hebrews 6:1-12  
*Complementary:* Psalm 37:23-40; 1 Samuel 8:1-18; Hebrews 6:1-12

#### Tuesday, October 22

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 75; Job 41:1-11; Hebrews 6:13-20  
*Complementary:* Psalm 37:23-40; 1 Samuel 10:17-25; Hebrews 6:13-20

#### Wednesday, October 23

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 75; Job 41:12-34; John 13:1-17  
*Complementary:* Psalm 37:23-40; 1 Samuel 12:1-25; John 13:1-17

#### Thursday, October 24

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 34:1-8; 2 Kings 20:12-19; Hebrews 7:1-10  
*Complementary:* Psalm 126; Jeremiah 23:9-15; Hebrews 7:1-10

#### Friday, October 25

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 34:1-8; Nehemiah 1:1-11; Hebrews 7:11-22  
*Complementary:* Psalm 126; Jeremiah 26:12-24; Hebrews 7:11-22

#### Saturday, October 26

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 34:1-8; Job 42:7-9; Mark 8:22-26  
*Complementary:* Psalm 126; Jeremiah 29:24-32; Mark 8:22-26



## Still A Mother: Journeys through Perinatal Bereavement

Edited by Joy M. Freeman and Tabatha D. Johnson

More than 1 million women suffer fetal loss each year, yet most will struggle to find words to share their grief or describe their experience. Chaplains Freeman and Johnson share their own experiences and collect the stories of others who have sustained such loss, helping to equip pastors, congregations, family, and friends in ministering more compassionately to mothers who grieve. \$15.99

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# PERSISTENCE

## faith that refuses to quit

Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.”

—MARK 10:52a

### Introduction

Mark 10:46-52 presents the transformative story of Bartimaeus, a blind beggar whose life was forever changed by his encounter with Jesus. Jesus met Bartimaeus on his way to Jerusalem. Despite others' attempts to discourage him, Bartimaeus was persistent in his quest to connect with Jesus. Jesus' willingness to heal Bartimaeus demonstrates his compassion toward those who suffer and diligently seek him. Sometimes, our faith makes us look crazy, and others may not understand it. Still, we learn from Bartimaeus that crazy faith can also lead to crazy miracles. Today's Scripture illustrates physical healing and provides spiritual insight into the power of persistent, unashamed faith.

### Lesson Objectives

- To explore the role of faith in our relationship with God.
- To reflect on personal transformation resulting from faith.
- To recognize the difference between having faith in God and having faith in specific outcomes.

### Mark 10:46-52 NRSV

46 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” 48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” 49 Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” 50 So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51 Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” 52 Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.



## Into the Scripture

Today's passage begins with Jesus' leaving Jericho and going to Jerusalem. Accompanied by his disciples, Jesus had shared with them three times what would happen to him when they made it to Jerusalem (see Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33). Based on their responses, one can surmise that the disciples did not fully comprehend all that Jesus shared. For example, after the third explaining his imminent death, James and John were more concerned with the honor they would receive, causing the other disciples to bicker with them (see Mark 10:37, 41). Jesus had a lot on him, knowing he was literally walking to his death and trying his best to prepare the disciples for what was to come. During this journey, they came through Jericho, where Jesus encountered a blind man named Bartimaeus.

As those with disabilities can be stigmatized and marginalized in our current society, the same was true in biblical days. As a blind person, Bartimaeus was considered a social outcast, sitting on the roadside begging for money. Although he did not have physical sight, Bartimaeus had spiritual insight to recognize and acknowledge Jesus as the "Son of David." The disciples traveling with Jesus struggled to understand the fullness of his essence. Yet, the blind beggar had a clear vision of Jesus without consistently being in his presence.

Bartimaeus wasted no time calling out to Jesus, refusing to let others' orders for silence keep him quiet. After he was directed to shut up, he cried out even louder. Bartimaeus's persistence and plea for Jesus to have

mercy on him worked in his favor. Jesus, who had been traveling, "stood still" and called Bartimaeus to him (verse 49). When asked what Bartimaeus wanted Jesus to do for him, Bartimaeus requested to see again. The word *again* implies that Bartimaeus had seen previously. We are not told what happened to his sight, but we can infer from Scripture that Bartimaeus knew the difference between having eyesight and being blind, and he sought restoration.

“

The disciples did not fully comprehend all that Jesus shared.

Jesus had been on a mission to get to the Cross when he stopped to answer Bartimaeus's plea. Jesus' action demonstrates his care for those who are considered the least in society. Imagine how many people had passed by Bartimaeus without so much as giving him a pleasant greeting. Additionally, we know from the Scripture that a large crowd was following Jesus to Jerusalem. There is no indication that the crowd traveled in silence. Thus, we can suppose that people engaged in various conversations without being scolded. However, when Bartimaeus called out to Jesus, he was ordered to be quiet.

Jesus was in tune with the needs of those around him. Just like when the woman with the issue of blood touched the hem of his garment, and he discerned her touch from that of the crowd (see Mark 5:30-31), Jesus heard Bartimaeus call his name, and he answered. Bartimaeus took off his cloak before going to Jesus. According to Matthew Henry, this action by Bartimaeus signifies that "he cast away every thing that might . . . hinder him in coming to Christ." We should do the same.

Matthew Henry also notes that "those who would come to Jesus must cast away the garment of their own sufficiency, must strip themselves of all conceit." The writer of Hebrews 12:1 instructs us to "lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us" (NKJV). Bartimaeus set his pride aside and sought help despite the discouragement he received from others. Jesus granted his request, noting that Bartimaeus's faith



brought about his transformation and the restoration of his sight. If you unleash your faith, what possibilities exist for Jesus to work in your life?



## Into the Lesson

Mark introduces Bartimaeus as a “blind beggar” (verse 46). There is no perspective in which this introduction is flattering. Think about those you have seen on the side of the freeway with their signs and buckets. These individuals are not likely to be well-dressed but, rather, have unkempt appearances. Such was Bartimaeus. As if being poor was not bad enough, he was blind. Most of us would not appreciate being introduced by our least-favorable attributes. Because we live in a broken world, no shortage of conditions can impact us.

Drug-addicted child. Adulterous spouse. Jobless. Terminal illness. The list of possible issues is never-ending. Whatever plagues each of us, we would still rather someone simply use our name instead of telling our business during introductions. The writer of Mark kept it all the way real: *blind beggar*. However, we learn from Bartimaeus’s story that how we begin a situation is not as important as how we end it. In just a few short sentences, Bartimaeus went from blindness to sight.

Assuming that Bartimaeus had once had sight due to his request to “see again,” Jesus’ healing of Bartimaeus shows his restorative power. Not only do we live in a broken world, but some situations hurt us. Be it mentally, physically, emotionally, or spiritually, life can be so overwhelming that we lose something. Something happened to cause Bartimaeus to lose his sight. Yet, he lost his sight without losing his faith. Bartimaeus had a stubbornness about him. He did not care what anyone said to or about him. He refused to let anyone get in his way of seeking Jesus. When life hurts us, our faith is the

most dangerous thing we can lose. Without faith, we become hopeless. Hopelessness leads to despair, which, in turn, will lead to destruction for us and others.

God responds to our faith. The writer of Hebrews tells us that it is impossible to please God without faith (see Hebrews 11:6). Note that the book of Hebrews had not been written when Bartimaeus encountered Jesus. Still, Bartimaeus’s actions certainly embodied the notion that “anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6, NIV). Bartimaeus’s plea to Jesus is proof that he believed in Jesus, earnestly sought Jesus, and believed that Jesus would reward him.

It is important to note that although Jesus granted Bartimaeus’s request, it was not because Bartimaeus had faith in his eyesight. Bartimaeus had faith in Jesus. It is easy to become discouraged when we ask God for something specific but are not granted our request. We must be careful not to come to God with the answer of how God should show faithfulness in our lives. Our faith should not be in a desired outcome but solely in God to do what is best. Faith tells us that when we cannot see how a situation is working out for our good, we know it is because God’s Word tells us such (see Romans 8:28). If we believe in the Word, we can continue having faith no matter what we see.

True faith is not seen physically. True faith is rooted in spiritual sight. Bartimaeus demonstrated this by his acknowledgment of and reverence for Jesus, whom he



Faith should not be in a desired outcome but  
solely in God.

could not physically see. Again, his faith was *in* Jesus. Of all the things he could have asked Jesus, he asked him for something that, on the surface, would seem impossible. Bartimaeus had the spiritual fortitude to know that if anyone could grant his request, Jesus was the one.

Earlier in Mark, we see Jesus heal a Bethsaida man from blindness (see Mark 8:22-25). In this instance, Jesus used saliva and touched the man's eyes. We see no indication in today's passage that Jesus laid a hand on Bartimaeus. He simply spoke the words, and Bartimaeus received his sight. There may have been someone in the crowd who witnessed the earlier miracle of the Bethsaida man's healing and expected to see Jesus do the same thing.

Such an erroneous expectation further supports having faith in God rather than for something specific. Such faith allows God to determine what God will do and how God will do it. Faith is not looking at someone else's situation and expecting God to move similarly. We must be persistent in faith, but that persistence is in pursuing God and having faith in God's sovereignty to do what God wants, when God wants, and trusting that God *always* has our best interest in mind.

## Into Discipleship

Persistent faith requires setting aside pride. If Bartimaeus had been too full of himself to seek Jesus, he would have never received healing. Bartimaeus approached Jesus with the mindset that he had nothing to lose. The absolute worst-case scenario would have been that he asked Jesus to restore his sight, and Jesus said, "No." Then, his situation would have remained the same. Bartimaeus was already an outcast. He was not ashamed to cry out to Jesus despite the opposition received from others.

Pride hinders our breakthrough. Pride is not necessarily the outward manifestation of our thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought. It can be a subtle disposition that separates us from God. An example of subtle pride would be coming to God with the mindset that God owes us or that we deserve our request rather than having a mindset of grace. We have suffered some kind of injustice in life, which can cause feelings of unfairness. We must remember that God is fair. Life is not. Thus, we must avoid letting anything we experience create a wall between our faith and God. Pride leads us

to believe that we have all the answers and know exactly what God *should* do. Faith leads us to believe that what we see or understand about our situations is not equivalent to the Divine perspective.

Persistent faith also requires boldness. Undoubtedly, people thought Bartimaeus looked foolish, calling out to Jesus the way he did. Again, he set aside his pride, but he also displayed boldness. He knew that Jesus did not come through Jericho especially to see him. Surely, he was aware that others were in conversation with Jesus. Yet, Bartimaeus boldly cried out, causing Jesus to divert his attention from other conversations and delay his journey to engage with him.

Are you bold enough to continue seeking the Lord no matter how things appear? Can you be courageous enough to believe in God's ability to intervene in certain situations even when others consider matters a lost cause? Will you trust God and stand up bravely for God although society increasingly turns away from God? Persistent faith does not care about fitting in with



Persistent faith does not care about fitting in with the crowd but is bold enough to risk being ridiculed in pursuit of an encounter with the Lord.





the crowd but is bold enough to risk being ridiculed in pursuit of an encounter with the Lord.

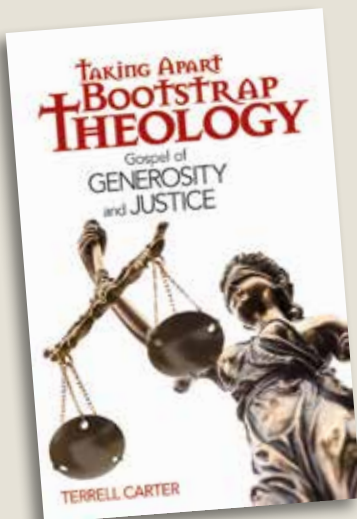
Cultivating persistent faith does not require much. Well, not much, according to Jesus. Giving up our right to be right and being courageous will bring much discomfort to the flesh. Spiritually, Jesus said that we simply need faith the size of a mustard seed to move mountains (see Matthew 17:20). According to *Britannica.com*, a mustard seed is around 2.5mm or 0.1 inch in size. That is smaller than the tip of your fingernail. Yet, such a small amount is all it takes to see miracles. People have difficulty believing that something so small can produce great results.

Do not let what others say or think stand in the way of your seeking God. Bartimaeus would still be blind if he had listened to the sneers of those around him. Be crazy enough to believe that God hears you among the many voices in the crowd. God knows your voice and cares about your situation. God is a restorer and a healer. Diligently seek God and believe, as the Word states, that God will reward you.

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#### Resources

*Holman Study Bible (NKJV)* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2013).  
<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/matthew-henry/Mark.10.46-Mark.10.52>  
<https://www.britannica.com/plant/mustard>



## Taking Apart Bootstrap Theology: Gospel of Generosity and Justice

by Terrell Carter

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## Closing Prayer

Dear Lord, we confess that sometimes we struggle with our faith. We want persistent faith and believe in you even when others think we are crazy. We bring our mustard seed to you. Help us believe that such is enough to see you do miraculous things. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

### ■ Into the Scripture

- Jesus paused his journey to respond to Bartimaeus’s plea for mercy. What does this tell us about Jesus’ priorities and his sensitivity to individual needs?
- How does the concept of “spiritual blindness” apply to us today, and in what ways might we be “blind” in our understanding or faith?

### ■ Into the Lesson

- What does Bartimaeus’s restoration from blindness suggest about Jesus’ power and willingness to intervene in our lives?

- How can believers maintain faith in God’s sovereignty and goodness, especially when outcomes are uncertain?

### ■ Into Discipleship

- In what ways do societal or external voices influence our faith, and how can we overcome these as Bartimaeus did?
- What does Bartimaeus’s story tell us about the potential for transformation in seemingly impossible situations?

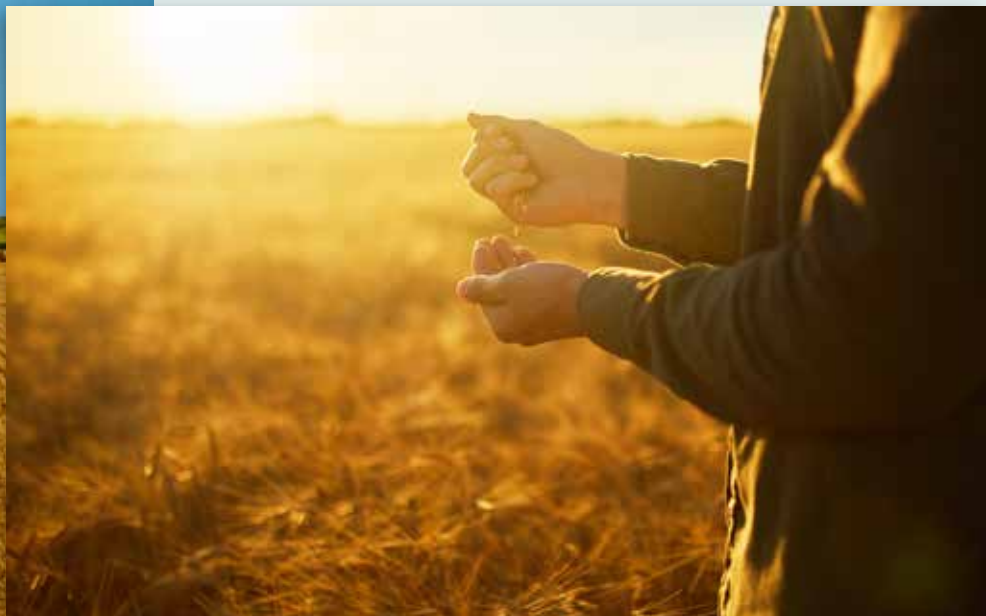
## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “Way Maker,” performed by Sinach:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4XWfwLHeLM>
- “Open the Eyes of My Heart,” performed by Paul Baloche:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViBNqNukgzE>
- “Your Name Is Power,” performed by Rend Collective:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqAmWSfRUqM>

### Media Option

**Book:** *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*, by N. T. Wright, 2015, published by IVP. “*The Challenge of Jesus* poses a double-edged challenge: to grow in our understanding of the historical Jesus within the Palestinian world of the first century, and to follow Jesus more faithfully into the postmodern world of the twenty-first century.”—Wright



## Activity Ideas

- Before class, have a question box where participants can anonymously place their questions/concerns about their struggles with faith. Use these questions to facilitate a class discussion.
- Put participants in pairs where each person will take turns being blindfolded. (You will need to provide enough blindfolds.) Participants should navigate a simple obstacle course to understand the challenges that Bartimaeus faced due to his blindness. Allow participants to discuss their experiences after this exercise and relate to Bartimaeus's experience.
- Divide the class into two teams and have them debate the following question: "Is faith alone sufficient to receive healing from God?" Use Bartimaeus's story and other Scriptures as the base for debate on both sides. Discuss.

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year B Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

### Week of October 27, 2024

#### Sunday, October 27

Job 42:1-6, 10-17 and Psalm 34:1-8, (19-22);  
Jeremiah 31:7-9 and Psalm 126; Hebrews 7:23-28;  
Mark 10:46-52

#### Monday, October 28

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 28; Isaiah 59:9-19; 1 Peter 2:1-10  
*Complementary:* Psalm 119:17-24; Exodus 4:1-17;  
1 Peter 2:1-10

#### Tuesday, October 29

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 28; Ezekiel 18:1-32; Acts 9:32-35  
*Complementary:* Psalm 119:17-24; 2 Kings 6:8-23;  
Acts 9:32-35

#### Wednesday, October 30

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 28; Ezekiel 14:12-23;  
Matthew 20:29-34  
*Complementary:* Psalm 119:17-24; Jeremiah 33:1-11;  
Matthew 20:29-34

#### Thursday, October 31

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 146; Ruth 1:18-22;  
Hebrews 9:1-12  
*Complementary:* Psalm 119:1-8; Exodus 22:1-15;  
Hebrews 9:1-12

#### Friday, November 1 (All Saints Day)

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9 or Isaiah 25:6-9 and  
Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

#### Saturday, November 2

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 146; Ruth 2:10-14;  
Luke 10:25-37  
*Complementary:* Psalm 119:1-8; Numbers 9:9-14;  
Luke 10:25-37



God knows your voice and cares about your situation. God is a restorer.



# RESILIENCE

## powerful women

Then [Naomi] started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.

—RUTH 1:6-7

### Introduction

The book of Ruth opens with the resilient woman, Naomi, who followed her husband to a foreign land due to a famine in the land of Judah; then she became a widow, a childless mother, and a foreign mother-in-law in Moab. Today's lesson will focus on the female characters in the book: Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth. These women represent women refugees in general, and the power of their resilience will be compared with current women refugees under climate change.

### Lesson Objectives

- To gain knowledge of the house of the mother in ancient culture.
- To pay attention to the female characters and their power of resilience in the book.
- To study the resilient power of women in the face of famine/climate change.

### Ruth 1:1-18 NRSV

1 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. 3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives;

the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, 5 both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. 6 Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. 7 So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. 8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. 10 They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” 11 But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, 13 would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.” 14 Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 15 So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” 16 But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. 17 Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” 18 When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

## Into the Scripture

Although the book is identified by the name “Ruth,” the book opens with an Israelite family that left Bethlehem in the land of Judah to go to Moab, due to the famine in the land. Everyone in this family was honored by having been named in the Bible—none was left unnamed; a man named Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, their two sons Mahlon and Chilion, and their two daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth.

Naomi’s immediate family members were Ephrathites, meaning Israelite people from Bethlehem. Elimelech brought his wife and his two sons to Moab to escape the

famine in the land. Although we do not clearly see in the text about Naomi’s willingness to come to Moab, as she was a wife and the mother, she must go with her husband to Moab for the family to survive. The mother and two sons were relocated to the new land by the decision of her husband, the father of the family.

### Famine

The famine in the land of Israel was so common in the Bible, and the word *famine* (*rā’āb* in Hebrew) appears about a hundred times in the Old Testament. According to our Christian canon, the book of Ruth is followed by

the book of Judges, saying, “In the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1); therefore, before the time of judges in the book of Ruth, there are three times when famine occurred (in Genesis 12:10-20; 26:1-11; and 41:53-57).

All the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—faced the famine in the land of Israel. In the famine episodes involving Abraham (see Genesis 12:10-20) and Isaac (see Genesis 26:1-11), both of their wives, Sarah and Rebekah, were beautiful and attractive in their appearances but controlled by their husbands, calling them as their sisters in order for themselves (Abraham and Isaac) to escape from the hostility of their foreign lands, Egypt and Gerar. The relocation of the families due to famine was supposed to be good; however, women were mistreated by their husbands for the families’ well-being.

Naomi’s story is different; she was not mistreated by her husband. Although the book opens with the male-dominant culture of the people of Israel, the males in the book died in the new land, and all the women were left without male leadership. The famine in the land caused Naomi to relocate to a foreign land without her consent, just like Sarah and Rebekah, but Naomi’s suffering contrasts with them since she was left as a widow, a childless mother, and a foreigner in Moab. Moreover, Orpah was left as a childless mother and a widow, but eventually she disappears from the story; Ruth was left as a childless mother and a widow, and became a foreigner in the land of Israel. The famine had caused these women to be in a vulnerable situation.

## Widows

Widows in the ancient Israelite culture fell under the control of some men, such as a surviving son, a brother, a father, an uncle, or any other male kinsman. For the widow Naomi in the foreign land, there was no son left for her, and no possible kinsmen of hers or



her husband’s. Finally, Naomi decided to leave Moab and return to her own land; but she encouraged her daughters-in-law to go back to their mothers’ houses in the hope of marrying again in their land of Moab. The bitter experience of Naomi during the famine, followed by her relocation and the death of her immediate family in Moab, resulted in her name being changed from Naomi (meaning “pleasant”) to Mara (meaning “bitter”) in Ruth 1:20. Therefore, even in the ancient biblical time, women have suffered in so many ways due to natural disasters.

## The House of the Mother

Widows in the Old Testament were usually advised to return to their fathers’ houses (see Genesis 38:11; Leviticus 22:13). The phrase “the house of the mother” occurs only four times in the Old Testament: Genesis 24:28; Ruth 1:8; and Song of Songs 3:4 and 8:2. The widows Orpah and Ruth were advised to return to the houses of their mothers by Naomi, in Ruth 1:8a, 9a: “Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, ‘Go back each of you to your mother’s house. . . . The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.’” There are two reasons for the widows to return to the house of the mothers: (1) to find security; and (2) to attempt to negotiate a marriage. Since these two widows, Orpah and Ruth, had no sons left to take care of them, going back to their mothers’ houses was the first step to have current security;



All the women were left without male leadership.



the next step was to allow themselves to find long-term security in their new husbands' homes.

Naomi encouraged her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers' houses three times in verses 8-14. (1) Verse 8 reads, "Go back . . . to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you." (2) Verse 11a reads, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me?" (3) Verse 12a reads, "Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband." All these three times, Naomi persuaded them that they would be better off in their mothers' houses than following her back to the land of Judah, which was uncertain for any of them at that point.

Orpah listened to her mother-in-law and returned to her mother's house. Although we do not know anything about Orpah after she returns her mother's house, it is certain that the house of the mother can surely give her short-term security, and a chance to find long-term security in her new husband's home. On the other hand, Ruth resisted Naomi's demand, and followed her to go to the land of Judah, where she knew that she would become a foreigner without any confirmed security in the new land.

## Into the Lesson

### Resilient Power of Women

Famine is usually caused by drought; in other words, it is connected to climate change in the twenty-first century. According to the International Organization of Migration (IOM) in the United Nations (UN), climate change disproportionately burdens women; since it destroys livelihoods, "women are more exposed to the risk of being left behind and trapped in dangerous environments while also expected to taking care of family and household responsibilities, when men migrate to seek better livelihood opportunities."<sup>1</sup> In 2009, a UN article about women in poverty pointed out that although women predominate in the world's food production (50 percent to 80 percent), 70 percent of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty are women.

In urban areas, 40 percent of the poorest households are headed by women. Why? Because women do not have opportunities to own land in general; women own less than 10 percent of the land.<sup>2</sup> When women are pressured to migrate for the families' sustainability to live elsewhere during famine and climate disasters, they often face risks during their migration. In the recent



## Orpah and Ruth were advised to return to the houses of their mothers.

era, migrant women are often forced to return to their homeland or are trapped and unprotected during their migration. They face some other risks, such as abuse, discrimination, exploitation, gender-based violence, and human trafficking.

Naomi was a woman who was not left behind in Judah when the famine hit the land but who might be pressured to migrate for the family's sustainability to live in Moab. When the men in her family died, she seemed trapped and unprotected in the foreign land. For Naomi, the woman in ancient times, marriage and sons were the only sources for the security and value of women; thus, her demand of her daughters-in-law to find husbands in their homeland was a legitimate demand. That demand to her daughters-in-law expresses Naomi's power of resilience: she was not afraid of going home alone and sustaining herself back in her home country. At the same time, she was resilient to allow her daughters-in-law to go back to their mothers' houses, to get married, and to rely on their new husbands and their sons for their own security.

Orpah and Ruth, who were Moabites but married to Ephrathites (Israelites) from Bethlehem in Judah, might have faced the difficulties of inter-ethnic marriage in their homeland. In the Old Testament, Moabites and Israelites had conflicts since the monarchical period. First Samuel 14:47 reads, "When Saul had taken the kingship over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side—against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom . . . ; wherever he turned he routed them." In the time of David, David asked the king of Moab to grant asylum for his parents in 1 Samuel 22:3-4, but



later David fought against the Moabites and forced them to pay heavy tribute in 2 Samuel 8:2.

With these racial biases, Moabites were considered enemies of the Israelite community (see Deuteronomy 23:3-6 and Isaiah 25:10). As Moabites, Orpah and Ruth were resilient women who not only had their inter-ethnic marriage in their homeland, but also decided to go along with their mother-in-law to the foreign land of Judah, where they would become foreigners or even enemies in the eyes of the people of the land.

Orpah first went with Naomi on the way to Judah without any hesitation. When Naomi told them to go back to their mothers' homes, they wept loudly. The text mentions twice that "they wept aloud" in Ruth 1, verses 9 and 14. "They wept aloud" describes that neither Orpah nor Ruth would like to leave Naomi alone. Thus, it would be wrong to accuse Orpah of leaving Naomi and choosing her own biological mother instead of her mother-in-law. Instead, Orpah the Moabite woman had listened to her Israelite mother-in-law, and Orpah's going back to her mother's house was not by her own choice. The love of Orpah to Naomi could have been seen in her actions ("they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law") in Ruth 1:14.

Ruth, who might have faced the same difficulties in her inter-ethnic marriage as Orpah, still clung to her mother-in-law. She was stubborn and resilient in dealing with inter-ethnic relationships. All these things that happened to Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth were the consequences of famine, relocation, and migration. The

article entitled "Women in Climate" from the Nature Conservancy reads, "Women challenge existing power structures and traditional notions of what climate action entails. Crucially, women take an intersectional approach, building inclusive, trust-based, and resilient networks that center the knowledge and perspectives of diverse community-led and structurally excluded groups."<sup>3</sup>

This article recalls Ruth in that she was resilient in networking and building inclusive community with people who were hostile to her own ethnic identity throughout ancient history. The resilient power of Ruth was expressed in her action and words when she said to her Israelite mother-in-law, "your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried" in Ruth 1:16d-17a. The consequences of the famine for these three women were enormous, but their resilient power against these consequences empowers all of us.

## Into Discipleship

### Listening to Naomi

Oftentimes, we do not listen to the voices of vulnerable people or do not listen enough to them, especially to women in situations of suffering. We also critique them quickly and give our opinion on their situation. We do not learn how to listen to others' voices or tend to forget to hear from others. Naomi, the victim of the famine and the refugee/immigrant of Moab, spoke and cried loudly in the text.

## The Voice of Naomi in Ruth 1

**Verses 8-9:** Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law,

“Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.”

**Verses 11-13:** Naomi said,

“Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of **the LORD has turned against me.**”

**Verse 15:** [Naomi] said [to Ruth],

“See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

**Verses 20-21:** Naomi said [to the women in the town of Bethlehem],

“Call me no longer Namoi, call me Mara, for **the Almighty has dealt bitterly** with me. I went away full, but **the LORD has brought me back empty**; why call me Naomi, when **the LORD has dealt harshly with me**, and **the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?**”

There are two things we hear in the voice of Naomi: blessing and lament. The blessings were to her two daughters-in-law, which show that Naomi cared about her daughters-in-law and loved them like they were her own daughters, calling them “my daughters” three times in verses 11-13. She gave them the blessings of the God of Israel; and yet her daughters-in-law/[her] daughters were still Moabites, who did not worship the God of Israel. Naomi knew that “the hand of the LORD (the God of Israel) is not too short to save” (see Isaiah 59:1) or to give security for her daughters/the Moabite daughters-in-law. Her blessings express the wholeness of the family in which there is no boundary of ethnic division.

Along with blessings, we also hear her lament in the voice of Naomi. Naomi’s lament recalls the popular lament by the righteous Job (Job 3), in which Job said, “Why is light given to one in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it does not come, . . . Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in? . . . I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest; but trouble comes” (Job 3:20-21, 23, 26). Just like Job, Naomi lamented, too, and you will see her laments printed in **purple** in the text box (above). However, unlike Job, who could not bless his friends

during their time together, Naomi still could give the blessing of her God to Orpah and Ruth during her most painful moment.

There are many women like Naomi today who, on the one hand, are giving blessings to their loved ones to have brighter futures even in their own difficult time—but on the other hand, who themselves have lost their futures, and lament . . . feeling as though God turned God’s face away from them. According to a 2024 refugee



We must open our hearts,  
welcome them, and give  
them hospitality.



population feature by UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), among Ukrainian refugees, 45 percent are women and 33 percent are children; among refugees from Afghanistan, 48 percent are women and 45 percent are children; and among refugees from Myanmar, 50 percent are women and 49 percent are children. Apart from these war refugees, there are 32.6 million environmental migrant refugees in 2024.<sup>4</sup>

We must pay attention to their laments; we must hear their voices; then we must open our hearts, welcome them, and give them hospitality, so that we all shall see the glory of God revealed on the earth. Because of God, who acts through the famine in the land of Judah, and in the death of Naomi’s husband and sons in a foreign land, we could hear Naomi’s blessings and lament loudly and clearly. God’s action came through the resilient woman Naomi’s lament in verse 13 so that

Ruth came into the picture; and later Naomi’s despair became the hope of the nation; the famine that they faced in the beginning became a feast in the end by the covenantal son named David, the descendant of Ruth (see Ruth 4:13-22). Resilience empowers a movement from lament to hope and a famine to a feast. The blessing of God shall be to all people. Amen.

#### Notes

1. <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/gender-migration-environment-and-climate-change>
2. <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/women-in-shadow-climate-change> by Balgis Osman-Elasha, “Women . . . in the shadow of climate change.”
3. <https://www.nature.org/en-us/what-we-do/our-priorities/tackle-climate-change/climate-change-stories/womenonclimate/#:~:text=Women%20challenge%20existing%20power%20structures,led%20and%20structurally%20excluded%20groups>
4. [https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/environmental\\_migration\\_and\\_statistics](https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/environmental_migration_and_statistics)



Resilience empowers a movement from lament to hope and a famine to a feast.

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## Closing Prayer

Dear providential God, we thank you for watching over us and providing all our needs. We know that in life there will be times of scarcity and times of plenty. Whatever comes our way, we know you will provide and protect, nurture and guide us in the way that we should go. Great is your faithfulness! Help us to trust a known God in times of uncertainty, remembering that Christ is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

### ■ Into the Scripture

- Do you have any other thoughts on “the house of the mother” in ancient times and in contemporary times?
- The book of Ruth begins with a terrible situation for the women, but ends with a joyful event, like the book of Job. Please discuss what are the similarities and differences between these two books.

- What is your understanding of the natural disasters, such as famine, fire, strong wind, and so on, that occurred in the Old Testament?

### ■ Into the Lesson

- Whatever gender you identify with, please put yourself in the position of one of these characters: Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth. What kind of action will you take to become a resilient person?
- Please pick one resilient woman in the Bible: Will you be able to make her your role model so that you can shine God’s light into the world?
- Why do women suffer more in climate change, global warming, and natural disasters?

### ■ Into Discipleship

- Will you practice having patience in listening to others’ voices?
- Have you ever had an experience like Naomi’s in your life?
- Will you share that experience? Will you look for any help by refocusing in praying to God? Do you think meditation will help?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “Anchor for the Soul,” performed by J. Brian Craig (lyrics listed with recording): [https://youtu.be/f\\_zsktjo3B4?feature=shared](https://youtu.be/f_zsktjo3B4?feature=shared)
- “How Great Is Our God,” performed by Chris Tomlin: <https://youtu.be/KBD18rsVJHk?feature=shared>



- “Through the Storm,” performed by Yolanda Adams: [https://youtu.be/\\_3VYlv207Wc?feature=shared](https://youtu.be/_3VYlv207Wc?feature=shared)

## Media Options

- **Video:** “Book of Ruth Summary: A Complete Animated Overview” (Visual and Audio), The Bible Project, seven minutes: <https://youtu.be/0h1eoBeR4Jk?feature=shared>
- **Poem:** “Mother to Son,” written by Langston Hughes and recited by Viola Davis: <https://youtu.be/5L-kKxePGqA?feature=shared>

“Well, son, I’ll tell you:  
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.  
It’s had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor—  
Bare.  
But all the time  
I’ve been a-climbin’ on,  
And reachin’ landin’s,  
And turnin’ corners,  
And sometimes goin’ in the dark  
Where there ain’t been no light.  
So, boy, don’t you turn back.  
Don’t you set down on the steps.  
'Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.  
Don’t you fall now—  
For I’ve still goin’, honey,  
I’ve still climbin’,  
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.”

## Activity Idea

**Movie Night:** There are multiple versions of the book of Ruth in movie form. Preview the selections on YouTube and choose a movie or excerpts that can be shared and discussed. Focus attention on the cultural dynamics at play between genders and the old and young. Do producers of the movies share different opinions in their presentations? Discuss the difference in the gender dynamics. Which presentation do you think is more realistic, and why?

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year B Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

### Week of November 3, 2024

#### Sunday, November 3

Ruth 1:1-18 and Psalm 146; Deuteronomy 6:1-9 and Psalm 119:1-8; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34

#### Monday, November 4

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 18:20-30; Ruth 2:15-23;

Romans 12:17-21; 13:8-10

*Complementary:* Psalm 51; Deuteronomy 6:10-25;

Romans 12:17-21; 13:8-10

#### Tuesday, November 5

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 18:20-30; Ruth 3:1-7;

Acts 7:17-29

*Complementary:* Psalm 51; Deuteronomy 28:58–29:1;

Acts 7:17-29

#### Wednesday, November 6

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 18:20-30; Ruth 3:8-18;

John 13:31-35

*Complementary:* Psalm 51; Micah 6:1-8; John 13:31-35

#### Thursday, November 7

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 127; Ruth 4:1-10;

Romans 5:6-11

*Complementary:* Psalm 146; Numbers 36:1-13;

Romans 5:6-11

#### Friday, November 8

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 127; Ruth 4:11-17;

Hebrews 9:15-24

*Complementary:* Psalm 146; Deuteronomy 15:1-11;

Hebrews 9:15-24

#### Saturday, November 9

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 127; Ruth 4:18-22;

Mark 11:12-14, 20-24

*Complementary:* Psalm 146; Deuteronomy 24:17-22;

Mark 11:12-14, 20-24



# ATONEMENT

## once and for all

So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

—HEBREWS 9:28

### Introduction

Hebrews 9:24-28 emphasizes the ultimate and definitive sacrifice of Jesus for all humankind. In the Old Testament, priests repeatedly entered the sanctuary yearly to sacrifice animal blood as temporary atonement for sin. However, Jesus entered heaven once and for all, sacrificing his own blood to atone for the sins of all who accept him. Jesus' sacrifice is permanent. His act on the Cross cannot be undone or outdone. This single act fulfills the Old Testament sacrificial system and establishes a new covenant of eternal salvation. Jesus will return, but the next time he does, he will not atone for sin. Instead, his purpose is to complete the salvation process for those who await him.

### Lesson Objectives

- To compare the Old Testament sacrificial system with the new covenant established by Christ.
- To discuss the concept of atonement and how Christ's sacrifice fulfills this.
- To reflect on how understanding Christ's sacrifice can deepen our personal faith and belief.

### Hebrews 9:24-28 NRSV

24 For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. 25 Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; 26 for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, 28 so Christ, having been

offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

## Into the Scripture

The late contributor to Sermon Writer (an exegetical website), Richard Niell Donovan, wrote this of Hebrews: “The author identified neither himself nor the people to whom he was writing. However, the book’s content, including the frequent references to the Hebrew Scriptures, makes it clear that he was writing to Jewish Christians who were sorely tempted to leave the Christian church and revert to Jewish worship.”

Although the writer of Hebrews is unknown, some biblical scholars believe that the apostle Paul wrote this book due to the mention of Timothy in Hebrews 13:23, whom Paul mentored. Those who do not attribute authorship to Paul claim that the style and thematic emphases differ from Paul’s other writings. For example, Paul always identified himself in his letters. Another reason some scholars reject the idea of Paul’s authorship is based on Hebrews 2:3, where the writer claims to have received secondhand knowledge about salvation. We know from Acts 9 that Paul had a personal encounter



with the Lord, which has come to be known as the Damascus Road experience. Regardless of the author’s anonymity, the writer of Hebrews was clearly knowledgeable about old customs of sacrifices and the new sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf. This passage in Hebrews is crucial in understanding the theological transition from the Old Covenant,

characterized by repeated animal sacrifices, to the New Covenant, which is marked by the singular, definitive sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The passage begins by highlighting Christ’s divinity. Unlike the earthly priests who entered the tabernacle constructed by man, Jesus entered heaven, a place

“

Christ’s sacrifice surpasses  
and fulfills the ancient  
practices.

humans did not build, and no living person has seen. This alone separates Jesus from earthly priests, as the writer refers to him as the “great high priest” earlier in the book. “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess” (Hebrews 4:14, NIV).

Understanding the historical and cultural context of the Jewish sacrificial system is crucial to grasping the significance of today’s passage. The Old Testament sacrificial system, detailed in Leviticus, involved complex rituals performed by priests, culminating yearly in the Day of Atonement, known as Yom Kippur. On this day, the high priest would enter the Most Holy Place in the Tabernacle to offer sacrifices for the sins of the people. This yearly ritual symbolized the need for atonement and purification. The Epistle to the Hebrews uses this imagery to illustrate how Christ’s sacrifice surpasses and fulfills the ancient practices. Addressing Jewish Christians tempted to revert to old religious practices due to external pressures and doubts, the author reassures them that Christ’s priesthood and his sacrifice are superior and final, providing complete atonement and direct access to God.



Hebrews 9:24-28 summarizes the essence of Christian theology, presenting Jesus Christ as the ultimate high priest who, by entering the heavenly sanctuary and offering himself as a once-for-all sacrifice, fulfills and transcends the Old Testament sacrificial system. This passage assures believers of salvation, underscores the sufficiency of Christ's atoning work, and instills hope for his promised return. Understanding this passage within its historical, cultural, and theological context deepens the appreciation of the transformative nature of Christ's sacrifice and its implications for Christian faith and practice.

Just as humans die once and face judgment, Christ's one-time death was sufficient to take away the sins of many. When Christ returns, it will not be to deal with sin again but to bring salvation to those eagerly awaiting him. This reinforces the belief in the completeness of his atoning sacrifice and the hope of ultimate redemption.

## Into the Lesson

Hebrews 9:24-28 contrasts earthly and heavenly realms, specifically the sanctuaries. The earthly sanctuary is a "mere copy" (verse 24) of the heavenly sanctuary. Similarly, the earthly priests' yearly sacrifices lacked the authoritative and definitive power of the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus made to atone for our sins. This passage of Scripture illustrates the unmatched power of Jesus, the "great high priest" (Hebrews 4:14), from any other who had been given the priestly title.

Recall that the Israelite priests came from the tribe of Levi. In Deuteronomy 18:1-2, Moses shared a message from God, explaining that "the Levitical priests, the whole tribe of Levi, shall have no allotment or

inheritance within Israel. They may eat the offerings by fire that are the LORD's portion, but they shall have no inheritance among the other members of the community; the LORD is their inheritance, as he promised them" (NRSVUE). Jesus, as the Great High Priest, broke this tradition as he descended from the tribe of Judah (see Matthew 1 and Revelation 5:5). The significance of the difference between Levitical priesthood and Jesus' priesthood is that such demonstrates Jesus' ability to override the Law. The earthly rules of priesthood did not apply to him.

In verse 27, we are reminded of human mortality and our inevitable judgment. The sobering reality of these reminders is that we all are accountable to God. Although he did not profess to be a Christian, former Apple founder and CEO Steve Jobs made a statement that underscores the theological significance of the Christian faith: "Death is a destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it." Just as we are guaranteed to die, Christ's sacrifice also comes with guarantees. First, unlike the yearly animal sacrifices required in the Old Testament, Jesus only had to die once to pay for sin. Second, with his death comes the promise of his return for those "eagerly waiting for him" (verse 28). Jesus' promises to return for believers should instill hope in us. We should be encouraged to live with an eternal



We should be encouraged to live with an eternal perspective.



perspective. This life is not all there is to our existence. For believers, the best is truly yet to come!

Additionally, knowing that Christ is now in the heavenly sanctuary, interceding on our behalf, should give us great assurance. We have an advocate in Jesus that not even the best, high-priced attorneys can provide for those they represent. “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12, NKJV). No earthly being can restore a right relationship between us and the heavenly Father. Only Jesus can do that. He died for us once, but he continues to intercede for us. His intercession is not a one-and-done event. He will keep interceding for us until he comes to take us to our heavenly home.

The finality of Christ’s sacrifice means that believers no longer need to live in fear or uncertainty about their salvation. Under the Old Covenant, the high priest entered the Most Holy Place annually on the Day of Atonement to offer sacrifices for the sins of the people. Priests repeated this ritual yearly because the blood of animals could not fully atone for human sin (see Hebrews 10:1-4). These repeated sacrifices highlighted the insufficiency and temporary nature of the Old Covenant system. Believers under this system could never be entirely sure that their sins were permanently addressed and may have experienced guilt and fear.

The Day of Atonement was to address sin committed in the previous year. Put yourself in that mindset momentarily and imagine that you could only repent of sin once a year. Pretend that every January 1, you must repent for sins committed the previous year. Now, imagine you transgress on January 2, but you must wait 364 days before you can repent again. Consider the feelings that this imaginative scenario evokes. The emotional and mental turmoil would be agonizing. However, Hebrews 9:24-28 assures us that Christ’s sacrificial death was sufficient to deal with sin completely and permanently.

Jesus’ sacrifice was not merely symbolic as the earthly priests’ rituals were. His death eradicated the power and penalty of sin for those who believe. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). #MicDrop

## Into Discipleship

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

(Romans 6:23, NKJV)

Let the above verse sink in for a moment, focusing on these words: “The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Our Scripture for today’s lesson supports what Paul wrote in Romans 6:23. Believers can and should live with assurance and confidence, knowing that our salvation is secure in Jesus. This assurance is not based on our own efforts but on the unchanging promise of God.

If you struggle with guilt over past sin, rest in the assurance of Jesus’ single sacrifice that atoned for anything you have done or will do. To help with struggles, consider beginning each day by reflecting on today’s Scripture and saying a prayer of thanksgiving for Jesus’ work on the Cross. No matter what others say, if you are a believer, you can have peace and not struggle with guilt.

Remember that, depending on our transgressions, we will have earthly consequences. Some of those consequences may even be severe, such as incarceration, divorce, or loss of employment. Our society requires justice. However, earthly justice pales in comparison to heavenly justice. It may very well be too late to amend



We have ample  
opportunities to share the  
truth of the Gospel.



past wrongs, but if you have breath in your lungs, it is not too late to seek the security of salvation that Jesus provides. If you have not yet done so, there is no better time than the present.

We may also use today's lesson to better our discipleship. We live in a world where many people do not yet know Jesus. We have ample opportunities to share the truth of the Gospel with an unbeliever. While the Gospel should be shared with our words, we first want to ensure that our actions testify of the Christ in whom we claim to believe. For example, avoid giving in to earthly practices for spiritual answers, such as seeking psychics and palm readers, or even focusing on astrology. While these may sound far-fetched, some professed Christians flirt with these means, especially the astrology signs. If you have ever heard Christians describe their personality or temperament according to their birth sign (e.g., Sagittarius, Leo, etc.), such inadvertently attributes power over us that should be powerless. As Christians, astrology should not lead us—rather, it should be the Holy Spirit. When we do not walk by the Spirit, then we fulfill the lust of the flesh (see Galatians 5:16).

Additionally, we improve our discipleship by striving to live in a way that reflects Christ's love, sacrifice, and intercession in *all* areas of our lives. It should not only be church folk who know we are saved. Our behavior and demeanor on our job and interactions with others should reflect that we are believers. This reflection does not mean that we will never mess up. We are human. We will always mess up *something*.

Reflecting Christ in our behavior means we make a valid attempt to represent him in all facets of our lives. Our relationship with Christ is not pigeonholed to Sunday morning or other times of collective Bible study. Use today's lesson to walk in freedom. The Son has set you free (see John 8:36). Do not use your freedom as an excuse for a cover-up for wrong (see 1 Peter 2:16). Remember that Christ died for us all. Our illustration of faith serves as a witness to others. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15b, NIV).

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#### References

<https://www.logos.com/grow/who-wrote-hebrews/>  
<https://sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary-old/hebrews-924-28>

## Closing Prayer

Lord, we thank Jesus for being the Great High Priest. We acknowledge and appreciate that Jesus is like none other. Thank you for the sacrifice that was made for us. We look forward to returning with Jesus the day he comes back for believers. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

### ■ Into the Scripture

- How does the transition from the Old Covenant's atonement system of repeated animal sacrifices to the New Covenant's atonement through Jesus' singular sacrifice enhance your understanding of just how powerful the eternal nature is of the blood Jesus shed for our sins?

- The writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as the "Great High Priest." Compare his priesthood with that of earthly priests. How does Jesus' priesthood impact the believer's relationship with the heavenly Father in ways that earthly priesthoods cannot?

### ■ Into the Lesson

- Hebrews 9:27 reminds us of our mortality and inevitable judgment. How should this reality influence the way we live our daily lives? What actions or attitudes might change as a result?
- How does the finality of Christ's atoning sacrifice alleviate fears or uncertainties about our salvation?

### ■ Into Discipleship

- Reflecting on Jesus' sacrifice and intercession can help us overcome guilt over past sins. How can daily prayer and thanksgiving reinforce the assurance we have in him?
- As noted in the lesson, we should avoid seeking answers for our lives through spiritual means such as psychics. How can relying on the Holy Spirit instead strengthen our faith and discipleship?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- "The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power," performed by Andraé Crouch and the New Christ Memorial Church Choir & Friends:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FQCWMOmfio>
- "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood," performed by William Cowper:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISB37YyoesY>
- "Oh Happy Day," performed by The Edwin Hawkins Singers:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJohGa66FJM>

### Media Options

- **Book:** *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, by F. F. Bruce, 1990, William B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- **Book:** *Hebrews: Race to Glory (LifeGuide Bible Studies)*, by James Reapsome, 2001, InterVarsity Press.





## Activity Ideas

- Provide time for individual meditation on Hebrews 9:24-28. Encourage participants to journal their thoughts and feelings about Christ's sacrifice and how it impacts their faith.
- Compare Hebrews 9:24-28 with related Scriptures, such as Leviticus 16 (Day of Atonement) and Romans 3:23-26. Discuss similarities and differences.
- Allow participants to share personal testimonies of how understanding Christ's sacrifice has impacted their lives.

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year B Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

### Week of November 10, 2024

#### Sunday, November 10

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17 and Psalm 127; 1 Kings 17:8-16 and Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

#### Monday, November 11

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 113; Genesis 24:1-10; 1 Timothy 5:1-8

*Complementary:* Psalm 94; Ruth 1:1-22; 1 Timothy 5:1-8

#### Tuesday, November 12

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 113; Genesis 24:11-27; 1 Timothy 5:9-16

*Complementary:* Psalm 94; Ruth 3:14-4:6; 1 Timothy 5:9-16

#### Wednesday, November 13

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 113; Genesis 24:28-42; Luke 4:16-30

*Complementary:* Psalm 94; Ruth 4:7-22; Luke 4:16-30

#### Thursday, November 14

*Semi-continuous:* 1 Samuel 2:1-10; 1 Samuel 1:21-28; 1 Timothy 6:11-21

*Complementary:* Psalm 16; Daniel 4:4-18; 1 Timothy 6:11-21

#### Friday, November 15

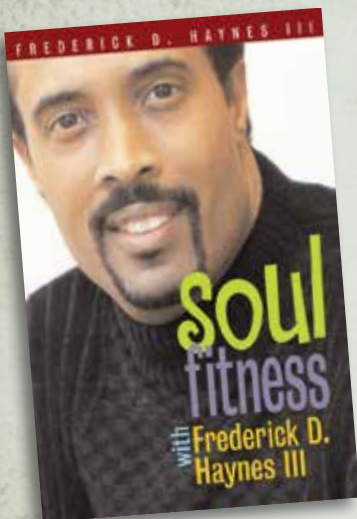
*Semi-continuous:* 1 Samuel 2:1-10; 1 Samuel 2:18-21; Colossians 2:6-15

*Complementary:* Psalm 16; Daniel 4:19-27; Colossians 2:6-15

#### Saturday, November 16

*Semi-continuous:* 1 Samuel 2:1-10; 1 Samuel 3:1-18; Mark 12:1-12

*Complementary:* Psalm 16; Daniel 4:28-37; Mark 12:1-12



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# BEWARE

## new beginning

Then Jesus began to say to them,  
“Beware that no one leads you astray.”

—MARK 13:5

### Introduction

After the pandemic in 2020, we have heard about wars, forest fires, earthquakes, tornadoes, storms, food shortages, monetary inflation, and so on. Many Christians believe that the end of the world is near; Jesus is coming back soon; and the rapture is about to happen—although no one knows the time yet. Christians are worried—worried for us and others; and we wonder who would be saved at the end of the world. This lesson will address some of our wondering questions: “Is it really the end of the world? or will there be any ‘world’ left on earth at all when Jesus comes back?”

### Lesson Objectives

- To familiarize ourselves with Apocalyptic literature and its genre.
- To motivate ourselves to be faithful to God and patient for God’s timing.
- To encourage people who are worried about the future/the end of the world.

### Mark 13:1-8 NRSV

1 As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” 2 Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” 3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4 “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” 5 Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. 6 Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8 For nation will rise against

nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

## Into the Scripture

Apocalyptic literature is a literary genre which characterizes supernatural events in the present time to predict God’s judgment and the eschatological salvation in the future. Christians believe that the eschatological salvation includes death, resurrection, and judgment, but that is just an eschatology for an individual person. It has broader meaning that the existing power of one empire will be overthrown; then there will be a new empire on earth—the reversal of the dominant power.

The idea of apocalypticism and eschatological salvation is not a new thing. Earlier studies of the Apocalyptic literature are dated from 250 BCE to 250 CE with a narrative framework of God’s revelation. The transcendent reality of the revelation is embodied in a contemporary culture and social-political setting, to which prophets have foretold the coming of disasters as God’s judgment;

however, there will be redemption and restoration for the community of God.

Although apocalypticism began in the early Israelite religion with the idea of the Day of the Lord or the Day of Judgment, the Hellenistic period became the peak time of Apocalyptic literature. Some of the books in

the Old Testament contain apocalyptic speech, such as Isaiah 24–27, Zechariah 9–14, the book of Daniel, and so on. Today’s study on the gospel of Mark recalls many apocalyptic literatures from the Old Testament (i.e., Micah 3, Daniel 12, etc.).

### Apocalyptic Judgment

Mark 13:1–3a utilizes a beautiful literary structure to describe the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

- A — Jesus came out of the Temple.
- B — “Look, Teacher, what large stones.”  
{Disciple to Jesus}

“

There will be redemption  
and restoration for the  
community of God.

- C — “What large buildings!” {Disciple to Jesus}
- C’ — “Do you see these great buildings?” {Jesus to the disciple}
- B’ — Not one stone will be left here upon another . . . {Jesus to the disciple}
- A’ — Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the Temple.

The chiasmus structure portrays the enormous size of the Temple so that the disciple seems awed and in wonder about it. This temple is called the “Second Temple” or “Herod’s Temple.” When the exiles came back from Babylonia in sixth century BCE, Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple, which is the Second Temple. Zerubbabel’s temple was replaced by this magnificent structure in the time of Herod. The project of building the Temple was one of the largest construction projects in the first century CE. Herod was interested in making his name great through the big building project; he carried out these large building projects by collecting taxes from the people. The Temple of Jerusalem became Herod’s masterpiece.







## Herod Versus Jesus

When Jesus answers the disciple about these large stones and large buildings, his words are painful to hear: “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” A and A’ in the chiasmus structure (previous page) portray that Jesus left the Temple and sat opposite it. This is a prototype of sitting opposite of the treasury in Mark 12:41-44, in which Jesus watched many rich people and the poor widow bringing money to the treasury, then he called his disciples for private lessons. Mark 12 gives the scene inside the Jerusalem Temple. After Jesus left the Temple, there is the same scene that Jesus sat opposite the Temple and gave a private lesson to his disciples Peter, James, John, and Andrew.

Mark 12:41—inside Herod’s Temple—opposite the treasury  
Mark 13:3—outside Herod’s Temple—opposite the temple

It is obvious that Jesus did not like material things inside and outside the Temple; additionally, the Temple and its businesses were according to the will of Herod. Since Jesus predicted that Herod’s Temple was going to be thrown down, it became Herod versus Jesus, which recalls the Exodus narrative—where we all know that it was Pharaoh versus God.

In the Exodus narrative, the Israelite people were anxious and argued against Moses for not continuing their journey to the Promised Land. Likewise, the gospel of Mark describes that four of Jesus’ disciples seemed to be so anxious and worried that they wanted to know the time and the sign of the Temple’s destruction. These four disciples might consider that the time of the Temple’s destruction is the end of the world; their nation would

collapse, and their kingdom would be gone without Herod’s Temple.

Jesus knew about their anxiety and worry which rely on the material things as the kingdom of God on earth; therefore, instead of answering about the time and sign of the destruction of the Temple, Jesus wanted them to be aware of their faith that no one would lead them astray. Their faith would carry on when the Jerusalem Temple was thrown down, and the new beginning happened.

## Into the Lesson

### Beware

The warning of Jesus to the disciples is significant in Mark 13:5—that there will be false leaders, false messiahs, and false prophets to appear in Jesus’ name (cf., 13:21-22); then they would lead the disciples into wrongdoing. Mark 13 has a focus on Jesus’ concern about the temptation that his disciples would face in a near future; therefore, it mentions the word “beware” twice, in verses 6 and 9; the phrases “be alert” twice, in verses 23 and 33; and “keep awake” twice, in verses 35 and 37.

In the time of the Old Testament, the word “beware” in Exodus 23:20-22 has the opposite meaning. The promise was that God would send an angel in front of the people, guarding their way to the Promised Land. “Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not; for



Their faith would carry on when the Jerusalem Temple was thrown down.

he will not pardon your transgressions: for my name is in him” (verse 21, KJV). The word “beware” is used for the angel of God, who led the people into the land. While saying to beware of an angel for God’s name is in him, Exodus 32 describes Aaron’s making of a golden calf. The people took out their gold rings and brought them to Aaron; then he made an image of a calf, and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (see verse 4). The people of Israel still worshipped other gods although there was the warning, “Beware of [an angel], and obey his voice.”

Just like Exodus, Daniel 12 mentions the rise of an angel, Michael. He is a great prince and a protector of the people. In the time of anguish, the angel Michael would deliver the ones who were found in the written book, that means the ones who were found were aware of the angel’s coming. Daniel tied this concept with the resurrection of the dead, saying, “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2). Therefore, ones who were alive and dead were to beware of the angel’s coming and be faithful to God, and they shall have everlasting life (see Daniel 12:1-3).

In the Old Testament time, God sent angels or prophets for God’s people to have salvation and resurrection. In the New Testament time, Jesus, the Son of Man, was with his disciples; therefore, “beware” in Mark 13 is to watch out for all false things around them, which can confuse them about who their messiah is, causing them to lose their faith and to turn away from Jesus. By focusing on Jesus’ saying and teaching, and being faithful in worshipping God, they would see the new beginning even in the time of “birth pangs,” such as the time of the Temple’s destruction, wars among nations and kingdoms, and various kinds of natural disasters.

### New Beginning

In the Apocalyptic literature, the pain of childbearing is used metaphorically for the suffering of the citizens to dispute and challenge their imperial rulers, but at the same time to endorse the divine power of God. It is definitive that each mother has different levels of pain in her childbearing. Apart from the pain, childbearing is the most dangerous life-threatening event for every pregnant woman. When the labor is underway, contractions happen, the cervix gradually opens, a mother is in such pain; and the pain can increase until the baby is



## God sent angels or prophets for God’s people to have salvation and resurrection.

born. Including the mother with tremendous pain, the whole family is eagerly waiting for the time of joy to see the newborn baby—a new life.<sup>1</sup>

What does “the end of the world” mean? The end of the world is always the birth of a new beginning. Jesus said in Mark that there are lies, rumors, wars, earthquakes, and famines, which are just the beginnings of the birth pangs, and “the end is still to come” in Mark 13:7. In Revelation 22, John teaches that the end is near; it is near in that it is already here—Jesus’ death and resurrection have already taken place; however, Jesus himself does not know when he will return (see Mark 13:32-22). Evangelical Christians’ interpretation of Jesus’ return is linked with the end time, which is, in other Christian terms, called the “rapture” or being “left behind.” This interpretation was reflected in the novel or the movie *Left Behind*.

Barbara Rossing, the renowned scholar of the book of Revelation, who was asked by Peter Jennings in *ABC World News* about why *Left Behind* theology was so dangerous, said that “God is coming to heal the world, not to kill millions of people . . . God loves the world, and God will never leave the world behind.”<sup>2</sup> The return of Jesus Christ is to build the kingdom of God on earth with love and care, hope and healing, without separation of the family, nor division among people. Therefore, we should beware of the differing theologies preached by false prophets and leaders, so that we will see the new beginning in Jesus’ return.



## Into Discipleship

How is your morning usually? Are you rushing to get everything ready for the family for the day? Are you worried about how the day will go? Are you nervous about your work? The daily routine for one to survive is exhausting in general; in the meantime, we know that we need to take care of ourselves. When we do not have any exercise, the day goes wrong. The person who has worked seven days a week for years wakes up every morning with anxiety; plans for the day are in her head; and she rushes out of bed without getting enough sleep.

Knowing that exercise helps but implanting it in her daily schedule sometimes wears her out; so, all negative emotions, such as anger, desire, exasperation—and so on—take over God’s blessing of a beautiful and joyful life. Why do we work more than we are supposed to? Some might say, “Well, I was asked, so I did.” Others might say, “This is America, the land of opportunity; working hard can make us fulfill our American dreams.”

Discipleship in today’s Scripture is the following:

(1) We should take care of ourselves as we are made in the image of God. Material things (great buildings, large stones, and the temple) can give us anxiety, and make us forget to take care of ourselves, so that we can be easily persuaded by false religious leaders during such difficult times like economic crisis, social uncertainty, and political instability;

(2) Waiting patiently and faithfully for God’s timing helps us to see the new beginning. All things happening right now in this world are just the beginning of the birth pangs. It can get worse eventually, but keep hope faithfully for the new beginning with joy like anticipating a newborn baby after the birth pangs; and

(3) The apocalyptic future is partly a mystery; but we know that time stretches into eternity. The world will change and continue along God’s trajectory. And the Creator is always in control. We are invited to participate in the ever-evolving kingdom of God on earth.

## Take Care of Yourself

When we hear of wars, rumors of wars, nations against nations, kingdoms against kingdoms, earthquakes, famines, wildfires, storms, and so on, we need to beware, be alert and alarmed by taking care of ourselves. We cannot be like dogs running in chaos when coyotes howl. Like Peter, James, John, and Andrew, we Christians focus on disasters and the end of the world, but Jesus focuses on our human selves, saying, “Beware that no one leads you astray.” Jesus’ focus calls us to prepare ourselves for God’s kingdom. We need to pay attention to our bodies when we need rest, reduce anxiety when disasters are around, deny our desires for material things, so that we see the beautiful handiwork of God.



## Wait Patiently

Pastor Elisabeth Johnson once wrote in the *Working Preacher* series about the “End of the Age,” based on Mark 13:1-8, 24-37. We are not the first to struggle with staying awake and prepared. The Scripture verses state that his disciples failed to be present with Jesus during the event of Jesus’ passion narrative. A day of Jesus’ passion begins with the evening of the Passover meal, in which each of his disciple says to Jesus, “Surely not I?” Even with these rhetorical questions from the disciples, one of them had betrayed him.

The first failure of Jesus’ disciples occurred in the evening of the round table of the Passover meal. The second failure of them was at midnight in the Garden of Gethsemane, in which Peter, James, and John, three of the four disciples in the text, were asked to stay awake and pray with him. However, whenever Jesus returned, they were asleep. Then Judas arrived with Roman soldiers and arrested Jesus. The third failure happened with Peter at cockcrow.

After Peter denied Jesus three times, he came to realize that Jesus had predicted it; and the fourth failure was at dawn, when the chief priests and scribes brought Jesus in front of Pilate for the trial; Jesus stood alone. None of his disciples was there to be on his side and watch the trial.<sup>3</sup> This is the lesson where Jesus’ disciples had no patience to wait—they, all together, missed the new beginning of Jesus’ resurrection. When we wait patiently and faithfully, we will see the birth of a new beginning.

## The Apocalyptic Future

The new beginning always starts with one’s end. We have learned that in the Old Testament time, the prophets in the eighth century BC, such as Amos, Isaiah, and Joel, described that the end was near. The earth was broken, torn apart, violently shaken; the earth quaked, and the heaven trembled, but God would restore and rebuild the cities with God’s faithful people (see Amos 9; Isaiah 24–25; Joel 2).

After eighth century BC, prophets such as Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Malachi appeared in the sixth century BCE and again mentioned the end time (see Ezekiel 7:2-3; Zechariah 14:1-5; Malachi 4:1-3); however, the end only led to a new beginning. The dry bones live again in Ezekiel 37; there shall be continuous days and light and with living water in Zechariah 14:6-10; God returns to the faithful ones (see Malachi 3). The ends that are mentioned in the Old Testament continue in the New Testament. For the end time, Jesus says in Mark 13:32, “But about that day or hour [of the end] no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” What Jesus knows is to encourage his disciples to beware and be faithful to enter the new beginning (see Mark 13:8).

### Notes

1. <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/617ff1e56615fb3318000012/lisa-hackneyjames-a-long-labor>
2. Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York City: Basic Books, 2005).
3. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/end-of-the-age-2/commentary-on-mark-131-8-24-37-2>

## A Peculiar Church: Practicing Baptist Theology

by Jonathan A. Malone

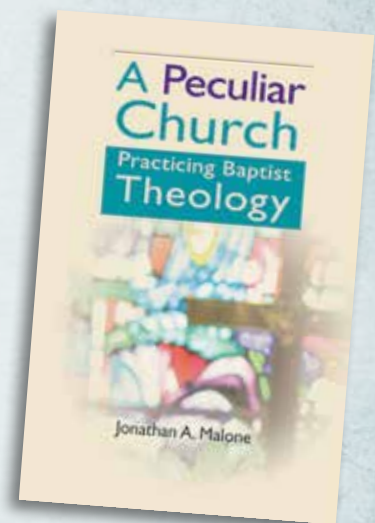
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## Closing Prayer

God of eternity, our future is forever in your hands. Because we know you love us unconditionally and have given us eternal life through our Savior, Jesus Christ, we do not fret what is to come. Whatever abounds, we will be still and know that you are God. Our eternal well-being is secure. He who is the beginning and the end, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, the Almighty gives us the victory. Hallelujah! Amen.

## Reflection Questions

### ■ Into the Scripture

- Should the fishermen like Peter, James, John, and Andrew be worried for the falling of the temple, large buildings, and large stones? If yes, then why?

- Why did Jesus say “beware” since he did not even know the end time himself?
- What does “the end of the world” mean to you?

### ■ Into the Lesson

- When the time comes with all sorts of temptation, what will you focus on?
- Do you focus enough on yourself to remember that you are the image of God, or do you consider that paying attention to yourself is very selfish?
- What is your understanding of the concept of rapture?

### ■ Into Discipleship

- How do you demonstrate your faithfulness to God?
- Do you think you have enough focus on God, giving time to worship and pray to God?
- If no, then will you look for any help to refocus on God?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- “We Shall Behold Him,” performed by Sandi Patty: <https://youtu.be/KZ3H3lg9NZM?feature=shared>
- “Jerusalem,” performed by John Starnes: [https://youtu.be/pvej6Hudp\\_k?feature=shared](https://youtu.be/pvej6Hudp_k?feature=shared)
- “We’re Marching to Zion,” performed by Jim Hill: <https://youtu.be/4-EUg3LVj6s?feature=shared>

### Media Options

- **Book:** *Envisioning the Reign of God*, by Debra J. Mumford, 2019, Judson Press. “What we believe about the kingdom of God deeply affects how we relate to the world we inhabit here and now. In this new book, professor and scholar Debra Mumford takes the Christian study of ‘last things’ (eschatology) and makes it practical for pastors and church leaders today. ‘Eschatology is not just about how humanity will be judged on the last day,’ she argues, ‘but how we live our lives every day. . . . Eschatology is not simply about our ultimate destruction but rather how we construct and conduct our human existence daily.’”



■ **Book:** *In God's Time: The Bible and the Future*, by Craig Hill, 2002, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. "Author Craig C. Hill encourages Christians both to take seriously and to think sensibly about the hope of God's ultimate victory. His book includes chapters on the nature of the Bible, the history of prophecy, the meaning of apocalyptic writings, the interpretation of Daniel and Revelation, the expectations of Jesus, and the hopes of the early Christians."—Amazon

## Activity Idea

Do what so many never do—share your understanding of eschatology and how you received your formation on the topic. Understand that there are varying opinions. Do not let this be a time of arguing but, rather, of hearing one another. **What are three truths you all can agree on** despite very different opinions of timelines and sequences of events? What is it we all share in faith and belief concerning God and eternity?

## Devotional Scriptures Year B Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost Week of November 17, 2024

### Sunday, November 17

1 Samuel 1:4-20 and 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Daniel 12:1-3 and Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:11-14, (15-18), 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

### Monday, November 18

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 3; 1 Samuel 3:19-4:2; Hebrews 10:26-31

*Complementary:* Psalm 13; Daniel 8:1-14; Hebrews 10:26-31

### Tuesday, November 19

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 3; Deuteronomy 26:5-10; Hebrews 10:32-39

*Complementary:* Psalm 13; Daniel 8:15-27; Hebrews 10:32-39

### Wednesday, November 20

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 3; 1 Kings 8:22-30; Mark 13:9-23

*Complementary:* Psalm 13; Zechariah 12:1-13:1; Mark 13:9-23

### Thursday, November 21

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 132:1-12; 2 Kings 22:1-10; Acts 7:54-8:1a

*Complementary:* Psalm 93; Ezekiel 28:1-10; Acts 7:54-8:1a

### Friday, November 22

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 132:1-12; 2 Kings 22:11-20; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

*Complementary:* Psalm 93; Ezekiel 28:20-26; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

### Saturday, November 23

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 132:1-12; 2 Kings 23:1-14; John 3:31-36

*Complementary:* Psalm 93; Daniel 7:1-8, 15-18; John 3:31-36



Keep hope faithfully for the new beginning with joy.



# FACTS

## divine identity and ultimate truth

Jesus [said], “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”

—JOHN 18:37b

### Introduction

John 18:33-37 highlights a crucial moment when Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate. As Pilate questioned Jesus about his kingship, Jesus redirected the conversation, revealing a kingdom “not of this world.” This passage delves into the heart of Jesus’ identity and mission as he stood accused by the Jewish leaders. The kingship of Jesus is characterized by humility and sacrificial love, juxtaposed to other oppressive regimes. This passage helps to deepen our appreciation of Jesus’ unique role as King and inspires us to live out his teachings with renewed commitment and clarity while we embrace the truth of his divine kingdom and kingship.

### Lesson Objectives

- To differentiate between earthly authority, as exemplified by Pilate, and divine authority, as exemplified by Jesus.
- To explore how Jesus’ humility and composure during his trial serve as an example for handling persecution and challenges.
- To reflect on how viewing our identities through the lens of eternity influences our priorities and values and identify risks associated with seeking validation from the world rather than God.

### John 18:33-37 NRSV

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” 34 Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” 35 Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” 36 Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my

kingdom is not from here.” 37 Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

## Into the Scripture

Jesus was on trial! Earlier in John 18, he had been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane after being betrayed by Judas. The entire series of events was not a surprise to Jesus. In John 13:18-30, Jesus foretells what is to come of him. In fact, during the Last Supper that Jesus shared with the disciples, he said to Judas, “What you are about to do, do quickly” (John 13:27b, NIV). In John 18, Judas, leading a group of Roman soldiers, government officials, and Pharisees, came to the Garden to fulfill what Jesus already knew he would do. Jesus went peacefully.

Our lesson today takes place during his trial when Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor (John 18:28). Before seeing Pilate, Jesus had been before the Jewish leaders and questioned by Caiaphas, the high priest. Once he was before Pilate, the governor initially tried to get the people to judge Jesus themselves, but they refused because they did not have the authority to execute him. Only Roman officials could sentence someone to death. The Jews wanted Jesus dead, and the only way to ensure that would happen would be if Jesus

were found guilty before government officials. John wrote that their objection “took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die” (John 18:32, NIV). In other words, while the people thought they were acting autonomously to kill Jesus, their actions aligned with the plan that

had already been laid out and spoken of by the prophets. The prophet Isaiah wrote the following of Jesus:

“He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like

“

Jesus was in complete control despite how the situation seemed.

one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:3-5, NIV).

The point here is that Jesus was in complete control despite how the situation seemed.

Pilate’s questioning of Jesus—asking if he was the king of the Jews (see John 18:33)—carried significant implications. Kings were chosen by God and anointed. We see this practice and process established when Samuel anointed Saul as Israel’s first king. “Now the day before Saul came, the LORD had revealed this to Samuel: ‘About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him ruler over my people Israel’” (1 Samuel 9:15-16b, NIV). Anointing was a long-established practice of the Jews and symbolized the person’s God-given approval and authority. Jesus





never had this kingship authority formalized yet referred to a kingdom (see John 3:3; 18:36). Any claim to kingship could incite a rebellion among the people.

Jesus' declaration that his kingdom is not of this world points to the nature of his mission. Jesus, unlike earthly kings who wield power through military and political forces, obtained his authority through God the Father directly, which makes his kingdom indestructible. This passage also highlights the tension between earthly and divine authority. Unlike with Pilate, Jesus' authority is rooted in truth and sacrificial love. Jesus came to testify to the truth, and those who align themselves with his truth recognize his voice and follow him. When we embrace the truth of Jesus' divine kingdom, we live out his teachings with commitment and clarity. Jesus knew who he was and was secure in his mission. When we know him, we, too, can be secure in him and what God has called us to do.

## Into the Lesson

Jesus' humility serves as an example of how we should handle persecution. The accusations of the people against him did not deter him from what he had set out to do. When brought before the Jewish leaders and government officials, he maintained his composure and remained confident.

Jesus was so focused that when Pontius Pilate noted that Jesus' own people and the chief priests had handed him over to Pilate, Jesus did not respond to that comment. His response was to reveal insights about his kingdom. Then, when asked if he was a king, Jesus said he came into the world to "testify to the truth" (verse 37). Jesus was indeed the King of the Jews. As Dr. Tony Evans pointed out in his study Bible, Jesus was

King of the Romans as well. However, his kingdom did not stop with a group of people. Jesus was and is the King of the entire world.

Although not part of the lesson, verse 38 helps connect today's passage to postmodern-day contexts. In John 18:38a, Pilate asked, "What is truth?" People are still asking this question to this very day. New religious ideas constantly emerge because people are searching for the truth. Postmodern thought is founded on the belief of relative truth. With the postmodern ideology, truth continually changes. What may be true today for someone may not be true tomorrow.

Furthermore, everyone creates his or her own truth. Notice that in our current-day vernacular, people tend to say something to the effect of, "This is my truth." When Jesus said that he came to testify of the truth, he spoke of an eternal truth that remains consistent across time and cultures. The writer of Hebrews reminds us of Jesus' unchanging nature (see Hebrews 13:8). Although people may put their own spin on the Lord's statutes or justify their own shifting "truths," the truth Jesus represents is *the* truth, now and always.

Additionally, John 18:33-37 presents an opportunity for us to reevaluate our models and understanding of power and authority. We tend to equate these concepts with dominance or control. We tend to be impressed when people of specific titles indicate their greatness



The truth Jesus represents is *the* truth,  
now and always.



(e.g., CEO, mayor, chief financial officer). We might ooh and ah when we see the luxury cars such individuals drive or envy their financial freedom. Those in these positions, if not careful, will let the power and influence of others inflate their egos. This type of attitude is in direct contrast to how Jesus carried himself.

While nothing is wrong with people having obtained certain career levels and financial success lawfully, Jesus models true leadership and authority for us. While he was “famous” for his miracles, by the time we get to chapter 38 in John’s gospel, some of the same people who supported him previously were lobbying for his execution. People are fickle. When we rely on the world’s system for authority, we place ourselves in a position where the very people who gave us power can also take it away. Jesus knew that his authority did not come from humanity. Therefore, when he spoke of his kingdom and the truth he came to represent, he could do so with legitimate authority. No matter what they said or did, no Jewish leader, person, or Roman governor could remove him from his position.

Today’s passage ends with Jesus saying, “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (verse 37d). When we align with his truth, we become participants in his kingdom. Jesus brings his transformative power through us to a dying and sin-filled world. We must all be introspective and evaluate if we have aligned with his truth. Just as Pilate had a choice to set Jesus free or sign off on his execution, we also have a choice. We can choose to accept Jesus and his truth or reject him.

Jesus will never force himself on us to accept him. He wants us to embrace his truth on our own accord. When we embrace his truth, we will hear his voice. We can then identify as his sheep and, as such, hear his voice (see John 10:27). When we align with and stand on truth, we can more easily resist the temptation to be mesmerized by worldly systems and what they offer. The worldly kingdoms we live in pale compared to the divine kingdom we will experience when Jesus returns for us.

## Into Discipleship

*“As in other parts of the Gospel, John communicates some of the most important messages about Jesus’ identity by enacting them in the story instead of stating them outright.”*—Susan Hynen



The very fact that you exist illustrates your importance.

Jesus’ response to Pontius Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world displays his conviction that his purpose exceeded worldly definitions and expectations. One key takeaway we learn from Jesus’ response is that the world does not define us. Our true identity is not found in titles, money, or accolades but in the purpose that God the Father has handcrafted for us. When we let the world define us, we then become slaves to the world and increase the risks that we will stray from his truth to please the world.

Think about someone famous who professed Christianity when first gaining popularity in the public eye. As time continued, it became increasingly difficult to recognize that the person even knew Jesus. In such cases, we can assume that the person was sincere about the profession of Christ, but the lure of fame, power, and money slowly turned his or her heart away. This is the danger of allowing the world to define us. We should not strive to feel important. The very fact that you exist illustrates your importance. God would not have created you if God did not have a purpose for you. When you are secure in your identity through God, it becomes easier to resist the self-serving, manipulative identities the world offers. Such a person does not need external validation.

Jesus said that everyone who belongs to the truth listens to his voice (see John 18:37). This statement implies a communal aspect of identity. Belonging to truth means that we are part of a community that values and seeks truth. Believers do not cultivate identities in silos. We do so in relationship with Jesus and in fellowship with his other followers. Such communal connections encourage us to seek and maintain relationships that reinforce our



identity in Christ, thus supporting our spiritual growth. This point does not imply that we can never associate with people who do not know him. Instead, when we consider that iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 17:17), we must not neglect fellowship with other believers.

Having a kingdom that is not of this world points to the eternal and spiritual dimension of Jesus' identity and mission. We then learn to view our identities with an eternal perspective. When we know that the world or its material goods cannot make or break us, we look past the temporal nature of the world in which we live. Nothing in this world lasts forever, but the kingdom of God does.

Jesus knew who he was, so he was not swayed by the accusations against him. Sometimes, people may attack us. While such attacks hurt and are fundamentally unfair, we must not let anything untruths spoken disrupt our peace. The enemy will always be on his job. His purpose is to "kill, steal, and destroy" (see John 10:10). Sometimes, that may mean he uses someone we know.

Earlier in John, we see that Judas betrayed Jesus. Judas is a prime example of how worldly lusts can draw us from the truth. In Matthew's account, he shared that Judas hanged himself after betraying Jesus (see Matthew 27:5). Betraying Jesus seemed like a great idea at first, but in the end, the act brought destruction and despair.

Likewise, you will encounter many forces that will attempt to define you. However, remember that the world's pleasures are fleeting because the pleasures are rooted in a temporal system. However, the kingdom of God is eternal. It will last forever. You will not have to worry about losing yourself when you base your identity on what God says about you and align with the truth.

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## Closing Prayer

Dear God, thank you for Jesus, who endured suffering and pain so that we may have a chance to live in freedom. Because he was secure and never wavered from his mission, we can have security in our identity through him. Help us to resist the temptation to define ourselves according to the world's criteria. Just as Jesus stayed focused, we want to remain focused on who we are through him. Amen.

## Reflection Questions

### ■ Into the Scripture

- How does understanding the events leading up to Jesus' trial, such as Judas's betrayal, influence your perception of his control over the situation?
- How does Jesus' knowledge of his mission and secure identity influence our understanding of our purpose and calling?

### ■ Into the Lesson

- Jesus' humility during his trial is a model for us when we face persecution or accusations. What practical steps can we take to emulate his composure?
- What does it mean to align ourselves with Jesus'

truth and to hear his voice? How can we evaluate whether we live according to his teachings (i.e., eternal truth) rather than embracing relative truth?

### ■ Into Discipleship

- Why is cultivating our identity within a community of believers important?
- What challenges might we face in prioritizing the truth of Jesus' teaching over societal truths, and what do we risk when we fail to align with Jesus' truth?

## Resources

### Songs to Consider

- "He Reigns," performed by Newsboys:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8R9ZPT2T-I>
- "King of Kings," performed by Hillsong Worship:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Of5IcFWiEpg>
- "Lord, I Lift Your Name on High," performed by Rick Founds:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=felLV8tO9UI>

### Media Options

- **Book:** *The Death of the Messiah, From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels, Volume 1*, by Raymond E. Brown, 1998, Yale University Press.
- **Book:** *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus (Revised & Updated)*, Audible Audiobook by Lee Strobel, 2016, Zondervan.





## Activity Ideas

- Divide the class into groups to discuss and provide examples of relative versus absolute truth. How can they tell the difference? Have each group share their insights with the class.
- Set aside time for participants to reflect on how they have let the world define their identities. How do the worldly definitions contrast with how God defines them? If comfortable, allow participants to share and seek encouragement and guidance from their peers. Be prepared to pray with any participant who desires to do such. You may also pair up participants with one another and encourage them to pray for each other.
- Encourage each participant to write down a personal commitment they want to make in response to the lesson, such as a specific action to align more closely with Jesus' teachings.

## Devotional Scriptures

### Year B Twenty-seventh Sunday after Pentecost

### Week of November 24, 2024

**Sunday, November 24 (Reign of Christ)**  
 2 Samuel 23:1-7 and Psalm 132:1-12, (13-18);  
 Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 and Psalm 93; Revelation 1:4b-8;  
 John 18:33-37

### Monday, November 25

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 63; 2 Kings 23:15-25;  
 Revelation 11:1-14  
*Complementary:* Psalm 76; Daniel 7:19-27;  
 Revelation 11:1-14

### Tuesday, November 26

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 63; 1 Samuel 17:55-18:5;  
 Revelation 11:15-19  
*Complementary:* Psalm 76; Ezekiel 29:1-12;  
 Revelation 11:15-19

### Wednesday, November 27

*Semi-continuous:* Psalm 63; 2 Samuel 2:1-7;  
 John 16:25-33  
*Complementary:* Psalm 76; Ezekiel 30:20-26;  
 John 16:25-33

## YEAR C

### Thursday, November 28 (Thanksgiving Day, USA)

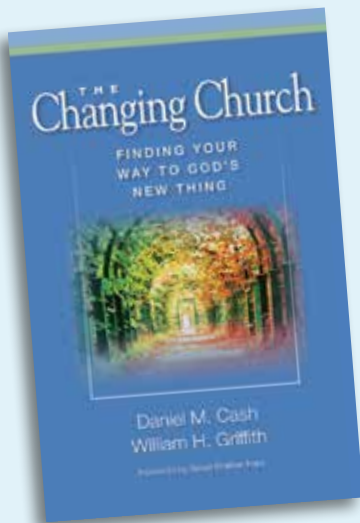
Psalm 25:1-10; Nehemiah 9:6-15; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11;  
 Joel 2:21-27 and Psalm 126; 1 Timothy 2:1-7;  
 Matthew 6:25-33

### Friday, November 29

Psalm 25:1-10; Nehemiah 9:16-25;  
 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

### Saturday, November 30

Psalm 25:1-10; Nehemiah 9:26-31; Luke 21:20-24



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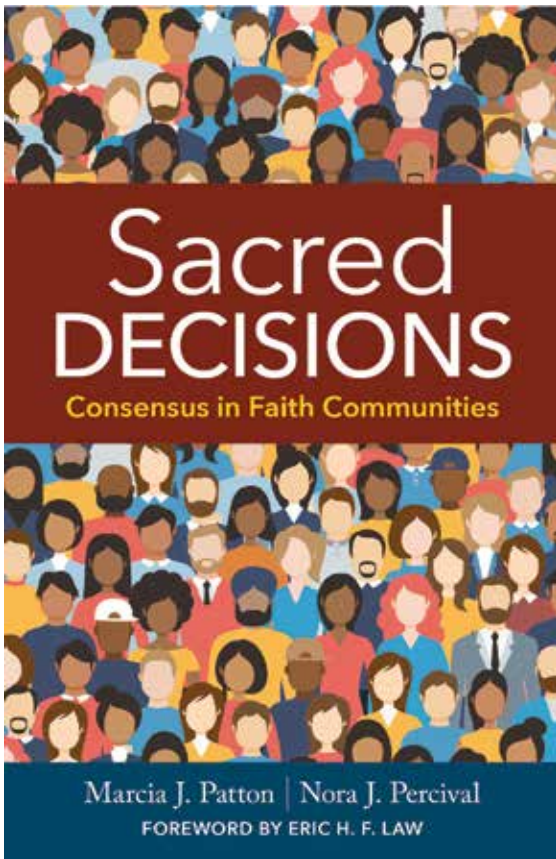
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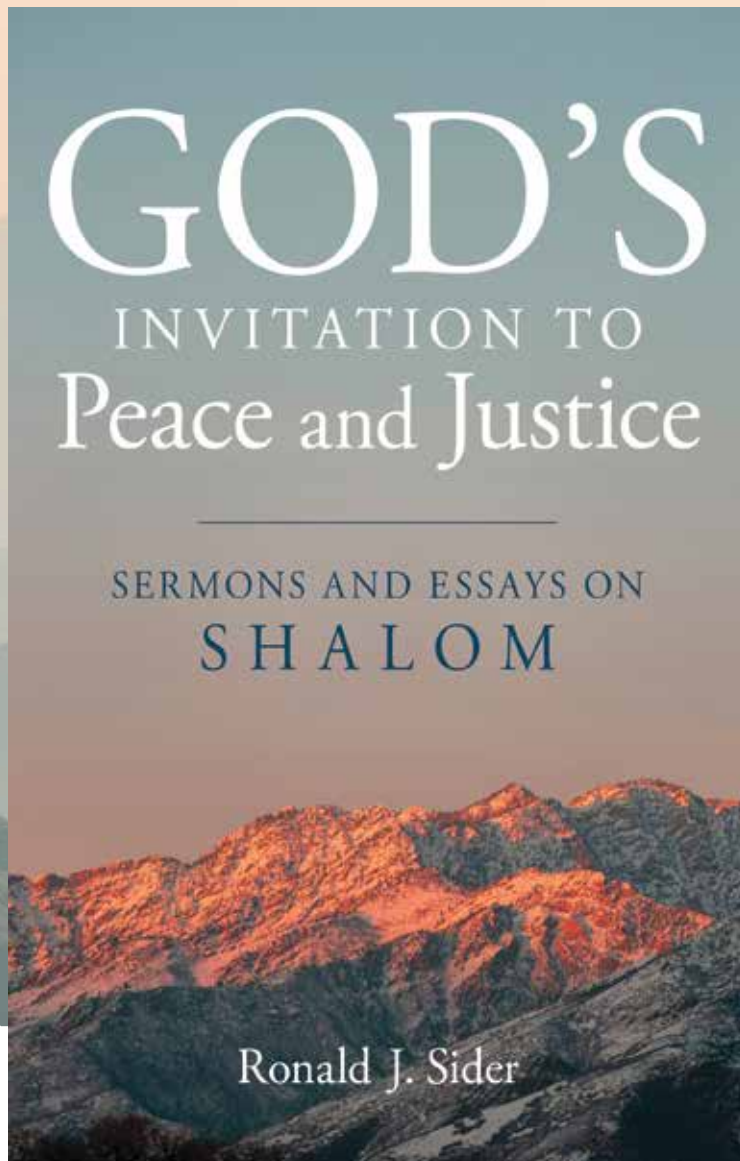
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