



LIBERATING
FAITH STUDIES



JUSTICE
and the
PROPHETS

The Order of Service

- I. Bell tap or organ voluntary
as a signal for silence
- II. Singing
- III. The Apostles' Creed
- IV. Prayer, closing with the
Lord's Prayer in concert
- V. Singing
- VI. Calling roll of officers and teachers
- VII. Responsive reading
of the lesson text by school
- VIII. The Decalogue

The Lesson

- I. Organ interlude while
the classes are being arranged
- II. Class study of the lesson
- III. Warning bell — 5 minutes
- IV. Closing bell — silence

The Closing

- I. Singing
- II. Review and application
of the lesson
- III. Secretary's report
- IV. The Church School Creed
- V. Singing
- VI. Benediction

Editorial Staff

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— Lessons —

Rev. Lionell Merritt

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

The Church School Creed

I believe my A.M.E. Church School must grow and grow; and that I must make it a top priority to make it so. Every member a Christian, every Christian a worker, every worker trained so that a worker need not be ashamed. This we ask in Jesus' name.



Called to Accountability

Lesson Scripture: Amos 5

Focus Scripture: Amos 5:18-24

*Key Verse: Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream.
Amos 5:24 (NRSV)*

AMOS 5:18-24 (NRSV)

18 Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light;

19 as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake.

20 Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

21 I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

AMOS 5:18-24 (KJV)

18 Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord! to what end is it for you? the day of the Lord is darkness, and not light.

19 As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him.

20 Shall not the day of the Lord be darkness, and not light? even very dark, and no brightness in it?

21 I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies.

22 Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.

23 Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.

24 But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

INTRODUCTION

In this series of lessons we focus on justice: God's standards of justice. We discuss this not in an intellectual manner, but on a practical level, looking at the issues surrounding the practice of justice and injustice in the world. As you follow the discussion, look for these four main points.

First, how we treat poor and oppressed people matters to God. Secondly, God expects us to deal fairly and honestly with all people, irrespective of their social status, race, nationality, or religious outlook. Thirdly, the level of justice we practice determines how God accepts our worship. We cannot sincerely worship God whom we cannot see, while abusing the brothers and sisters we can see. Fourthly, the practice of justice is not always easy. Sometimes we have to pay a heavy price. It can cost us money and harm our relations socially and politically. At times, it can cost our lives. But still God demands it. Therefore, as Christians, we have no choice but to stand up for justice.

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sincerely worship
God whom we
cannot see,
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We must practice it and call out injustice where we see it.

In this first lesson in this quarter we will see that, as in our own lives, the call for justice starts with a call for accountability. As believers we must ensure our speech and behavior are in line with the standards set in the Bible. And as an extension of that, we must let others know when they are violating God's standards of justice. And, keeping silent when we see abuse and oppression is not an option. Look for these points as we work through the lesson.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

The prophet Amos, as God's messenger, found himself in a situation that some of us know well. The rich and middle-class people in Israel were practicing their religious rituals faithfully, or at least they felt so. At the same time, they were treating the poor and needy people badly, abusing them in so many ways. These privileged people were even looking forward to seeing the "day of the Lord" (v.18). This was the day or period when God would judge nations.

Of course the people in Israel expected on that “day” they would get a good report and blessings from God.

When God had enough of their hypocrisy, God stepped in through Amos to tell the people how wrong they were. The people’s horrible mistake was one many of us still make today. They had conveniently separated how they were abusing the poor from their worship rituals. God was having none of that. So, God through the prophet told the people what time it was.

In verses 21-23 the prophet delivered a stinging rebuke. God was tired of their religious shows and pretense. In fact, God was not even noticing them when they did their church services, ceremonies, and celebrations. God did not even want their offerings. The hymns they were singing were just meaningless noise to the Lord. The prayers they were offering to God were not going past the church ceilings. Such rituals could have no meaning when they were raping and oppressing the poor. So all the things they were doing

in the church were just self-serving. God was not interested.

But God did not leave them guessing. The Lord told them what they had to do if they really wanted to please him. And what God required was nothing hard. They simply needed to practice justice and right-living. How much of this did God want to see? A lot! The text noted it was to be like an ever-flowing stream. Other

versions use terms like *floods* and *rivers*. In other words, God wanted them to make a constant practice of treating people right. The Lord calls to us today with the same message. Treat people right!

Let us look at some people who, like Amos, stood against injustice and demanded that those in authority treat people right. The examples we noted were Caroline Mwatha Ochieng in Kenya and the Little Rock Nine in Arkansas.

SANKOFA

Caroline Ochieng’s case is recent. She died (was killed) in February 2019. According to published reports, Caroline



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was a tireless fighter against police brutality and illegal arrests in Kenya, and was involved in documenting these cases. Through her work, many cases of police abuse and illegal detention in Kenya were brought to the attention of the people and the international press. Even though she knew she was a target for harassment and harm, she fearlessly held the authorities accountable for the treatment of people they arrested and detained.

Along with others of like-mind, Caroline fought for the release from custody of many persons whose detention was considered illegal. But she did not restrict herself to fighting for fair treatment of detainees only. Caroline highlighted the social injustice and deplorable living conditions her people had to endure.

In the **Introduction**, we noted that the fight for justice can be costly. Caroline paid the ultimate price. She was about 37 years old when she disappeared. Her death has been covered in controversy. But whatever the circumstances of her

death, one thing is clear: she made a contribution to the practice of justice and fairness in her country. She did more than just talk. For persons interested in reading more about Caroline and her fight for social justice, check the article on [wikipedia.com](https://www.wikipedia.com). There are many good sources listed in the endnotes to the article.

CASE STUDY

Freedom fighters are not found only in Africa. American history has many cases of people who stood their ground and fought for justice.

Freedom fighters are not found only in Africa. American history has many cases of people who stood their ground and fought for justice. Among them are Melba Pattillo, Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, Minnijean Brown, Terrence Roberts, Carlotta Walls, Jefferson Thomas, Gloria Ray, and Thelma

Mothershed. These are the famous Little Rock Nine. In 1957, this courageous group of high school students challenged racial segregation in the public schools of Little Rock, Arkansas. As the events unfolded, these nine students soon became the focus of attention in the fight to open public schools to all students in

Arkansas. They did not know then that their stance for justice in the schools would spark a national movement to desegregate public schools throughout the United States.

There are some telling points to learn from the case of the Little Rock Nine. The first is the extent to which people will go to continue practices of injustice. What these students were seeking was legal. The U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954 had declared segregated schooling to be unconstitutional. Yet, when the students tried to enter a public school, they were confronted by blocked school entrances, gangs of protestors, soldiers, and the authority of the governor. This governor seemed bent on maintaining the status quo of the day. He showed no concern for the Supreme Court ruling. But the students, supported by some faith leaders and other fair-minded people, stood their ground. They decided not to bow to a system of segregation and social injustice.



They decided not to bow to a system of segregation and social injustice.

The courageous stance of the Little Rock Nine and their supporters drew both national and international attention. President Dwight D. Eisenhower could not ignore the situation. So he got involved in finding a solution. The protest by persons who wanted to maintain segregated schools was intense. The situation was flammable. The students had to be escorted to school by soldiers.

They braved the threats and verbal abuse which attacked them.

Because of their stance for justice in public school admissions, in 1958 Ernest Green became the first African American to graduate from Little Rock Central High School. The struggle started by the Little Rock Nine continued in the 1960's. By then the focus was not only on Little Rock. The movement for desegregation of public schools had spread throughout the country. Students of all races and classes today benefit from this movement that started in the late 1950's. The case shows what ordinary people can achieve when they take a stance for justice. Yes, the

struggle can be hard. But God demands it.

LIFE APPLICATION

The case of the Little Rock Nine should appeal to most of us. It got astonishing results. It was started by ordinary people who had a firm conviction of what was right. They did not need a political party or established religious institution to jumpstart their call for justice. Ordinary people acting on their convictions of right and wrong moved a nation to call for justice in school admissions. Considering this case should prompt us to ask ourselves some searching questions. Let each person consider these issues. On what is your sense of justice (right and wrong behavior and practices) based? It should be based on scripture. Remember, in the case of the Little Rock Nine, it was personal convictions that kept them going. They did not wait for a politician or political party to bring a solution.

Next, consider what you do when a course of action suggested in scripture

conflicts with other godly principles. For instance, Jesus taught us to love our enemies. That is great. But how do we show that love when the enemy is guilty of injustice? Does one principle take priority over the others; or do you find a way to reconcile them? Also, consider your feelings when someone whom you consider guilty of an offense is set free “on a technicality.” Is it justice that a rapist

is set free because a police officer did not read him his rights in the proper way? And, where do you place the hand of God in those cases? Is God an innocent bystander; or is the Lord working out a different form of justice?

Your answers to such issues will guide you in your understanding of the complexities surrounding the issue of justice. Then you will fully appreciate what the prophet felt and saw. The issue of justice can be complex at times. But we thank God for Jesus. He will help us to figure it out.

“The issue of justice can be complex at times. But we thank God for Jesus. He will help us to figure it out.”

QUESTIONS

1. In your own words, what does justice mean to you?
2. What three issues in your community are screaming for justice?
3. How can we ensure that justice is done in and through our church?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

The Closing Song: "I'm Amazed" by the

Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir.

(When we reflect on God's amazing love for us, it promotes humility in our hearts.).

Prayer: Dear God, I thank you for your perfect demonstration of humility through Jesus Christ. I know I need your Holy Spirit to help me to walk in such humility. Strengthen me in this aspect of my life, so I may please you. This I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**February 24–March 1**

Monday	Zephaniah 1:14-18 (The Coming Day of the Lord)
Tuesday	Amos 5:1-3, 16-17 (Judgment Coming to the Nation)
Wednesday	Amos 5:4-5, 14-15 (Seek the Lord, Establish Justice)
Thursday	Amos 5:6-7, 10-13 (Injustice Leads to Ruin)
Friday	Genesis 1:4-9; Amos 5:8-9 (Lord of Creation and Judgment)
Saturday	Hosea 2:14-23 (God Loves All Peoples)
Sunday	Amos 5:18-24 (Justice for the Poor and Distressed)

A PRAYER FOR JUSTICE

Lesson Scripture: Habakkuk 1

Focus Scripture: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 12-14

Key Verse: Why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they? Habakkuk 1:13b (NRSV)

HABAKKUK 1:1-4, 12-14 (NRSV)

Habakkuk 1:1-4

- 1 The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.
- 2 O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?
- 3 Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.
- 4 So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

12-14

12 Are you not from of old, O Lord my God, my Holy One? You shall not die. O Lord, you have marked them for judgment; and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment.

13 Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing; why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?

14 You have made people like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler.

HABAKKUK 1:1-4, 12-14 (KJV)

Habakkuk 1:1-4

- 1 The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see.
- 2 O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save!
- 3 Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention.
- 4 Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.

12-14

12 Art thou not from everlasting, O Lord my God, mine Holy One? we shall not die. O Lord, thou hast ordained them for judgment; and, O mighty God, thou hast established them for correction.

13 Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?

14 And makest men as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things, that have no ruler over them?

INTRODUCTION

Like the first lesson, this lesson looks at justice, God's brand of justice. But it goes a step beyond where Amos went. Here the prophet pleads with God for answers to the mess he saw around him. In a way, we can say that Habakkuk's central theme is anchored in verses 1-2. Here he asked the question, "How long?" How long must the violence and injustice go on while you, Lord, seem to do nothing? How long must innocent people suffer at the hand of the privileged few? How long will these government systems of deep corruption and abuse of the poor continue? How long; how long; how long?

We all know this situation. Like Habakkuk, we have at times thrown our hands in the air and asked that very question. But, what you must focus on here is the nature of God's response. Look for what it revealed about Habakkuk. Also pay attention to the doctrine of concurrence that is reflected in the passage. Finally, there is an unwritten lesson in the text. Habakkuk saw God as almighty. Habakkuk knew that only God could bring the solutions that he needed. This is the angle we use in the application sections.



Habakkuk knew that only God could bring the solutions that he needed.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Habakkuk chapter one is written in what is often referred to as a "prophetic complaint." In these cases, the prophet is seen as complaining and even arguing with God. Other instances of this are found in Genesis 18, Numbers 11, and Jeremiah 12. So what was Habakkuk's complaint? We see it in verses 2-4. Basically he complained that everything he saw was a mess. Injustice was widespread. Pain

and suffering were the order of the day. And although he had prayed about it and reminded God about this situation, God had done nothing to correct it. So with a voice of frustration, the prophet did what any Christian would do. He asked God "How long?" But God's response surprised Habakkuk. God let him know that the Lord had seen the corruption and injustice.

Yes, God had made a note of it. And God had planned a solution. God was going to use the horrible, ungodly nation of Babylon to discipline Judah. Habakkuk wanted a solution, but not that one.

How could a sweet, loving God use a corrupt, ungodly, cruel nation like Babylon to correct a God-blessed nation like Judah? Can evil be used to bring about

good? That is the heart of the concern in the doctrine of concurrence. This is not the only case where the doctrine is reflected. Other instances are in Genesis 50, Jeremiah 27, Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. Note that when God responded to Habakkuk, instantly Judah was not that bad. Here we see another principle of comparative righteousness. What Habakkuk said to God was something like this. "I know we are bad and things are not as they should be. But compared to those heathens we are not that bad. Further, God, have you taken into account that if you allow those barbarians to destroy us, their false gods would get the glory? Where would that leave you, oh great God? Don't you have a more acceptable solution? After all, you are the great almighty God."

We know those arguments very well. We use them when comparing religions, political parties, and individual behaviors. We can use harsh terms and arguments to describe the people and behaviors we hate. But for the people and institutions we love who do wrong, we use softer language and make excuses. This is something to consider.



He saw God as being fully capable of bringing solutions where other persons and systems had failed

SANKOFA

In the **Introduction**, I mentioned an unwritten underlying principle in the text: Habakkuk's hope for a solution to the injustice was in God. He saw God as being fully capable of bringing solutions where other persons and systems had failed. The government in Kenya embraced this mindset a few years ago. We saw this in a posting on October 16, 2018 on BBC online ([https://www.bbc.com/news/world-](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45863819)

[africa-45863819](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45863819)). In that article, Kenyan Joseph Warungu explored how the Kenyan authorities were now looking to the Bible for solutions to the corruption and abuses that were running wild in the country.

The Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC) had embarked on programs to teach biblical and Christian principles on a national scale. Previous efforts to curb high public debt and mismanagement of public funds, corruption, scandals, and the activities of criminal cartels had failed. Therefore, the EACC decided to look to the Bible and the teaching of Christian principles as a solution.

We can question some points in the article. Nevertheless, a bright light shone through the move by the EACC. At times

the only real hope for solutions to injustice is in God, and the principles God has set for us.

CASE STUDY

It is truly amazing, when we consider the confusion that surrounds the role of the church and prayer in national affairs in America today. To get a glimpse of how far the nation has drifted, look at the proclamation on the first National Day of Prayer. Here are the first three paragraphs of that proclamation (March 30, 1863).

“Whereas, the Senate of the United States, devoutly recognizing the Supreme Authority and just Government of Almighty God, in all the affairs of men and of nations, has, by a resolution, requested the President to designate and set apart a day for National prayer and humiliation.

“And whereas it is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with **assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon**; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, **that**

those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.

“And, insomuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole

We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God.

People? We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. **But we have forgotten God.** We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and

enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, **too proud to pray to the God that made us!**”

We have highlighted a few parts to draw attention to the underlying sentiments. After you get past the legal jargon you will notice three points. Like Habakkuk, the Senate and the President of the day recognized God as the Supreme Ruler. The blessings of peace and prosperity flowed from God. Second, as a nation we suffer dire consequences when we forget God and put our faith in our own righteousness and efforts. Third, the path to real peace, prosperity, and justice is in sincere prayer and repentance. This is the same mindset Habakkuk displayed.

LIFE APPLICATION

In this section, the first point to consider is that it is not religious treason to question God. At times we will hear things that do not make sense to us. At other times we will challenge ideas of how things should be.

Such confusing messages could come when we read scripture, hear sermons, or get prompting in our spirit. When this happens, we must feel free to follow Habakkuk's example and express our surprise and confusion. Where we can, we should ask questions and seek explanations. James 1:5 tells us that God will grant wisdom when we ask sincerely.

When discussing issues in religion,

politics, and family life, we must be on our guard for comparative righteousness. The actions of one person, church organization, president or political party should not become acceptable because others are worse. Remember, God's standards are absolute, and God can grant mercy and grace to whomever God chooses. Therefore, when considering people or events, we must try to step outside our biases. Make an effort to see things, people, and events as God sees them.



Make an effort to see things, people, and events as God sees them.

The lesson gives a good springboard to consider the doctrine of concurrence. It will help us in our understanding of events we see in the world around us. Spend some time to consider how God may use evil people and situations to bring good to other people. I often use the example of Rahab and the spies Moses sent to check out the

Promised Land. As a prostitute, Rahab was obviously a sinner. Yet, through her cooperation, the spies were saved. Was God in that? I am sure you can find modern-day examples to consider. For instance, is God complicit in the elections of public officials who can be seen to lack moral grounding? These are matters which will help you to form a position on

the doctrine of concurrence.

start to feel hopeless?

QUESTIONS

1. Give one matter of injustice that you have asked or would like to ask God, "How long will this injustice last?"
2. Why do you think God allows injustice to stand for a while?
3. How long can you wait for a solution on a matter of injustice before you

CLOSING DEVOTION

Prayer: Dear Father, I see you as the provider of all good things and the fountain of true justice. Give me the patience to follow your plans to bring justice to those situations that concern me. And when I am to be part of the solution, guide me in what I have to do. In the name of Jesus Christ I pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

March 2-March 8

Monday	Job 19:1-7 (Job's Cry for Justice Frustrated)
Tuesday	Deuteronomy 32:1-4 (The Rock's Work Is Justice)
Wednesday	Jeremiah 5:14-19 (God's People Ravaged for Sin)
Thursday	Habakkuk 1:5-11 (Chaldeans to Ravage the Nation)
Friday	Habakkuk 1:15-17 (The Destructive Character of the Enemy)
Saturday	Isaiah 10:12-14 (Assyrians Punished for Arrogance)
Sunday	Habakkuk 1:1-4, 12-14 (Why, Lord, Does Injustice Prevail?)

CONSEQUENCES FOR INJUSTICE

Lesson Scripture: Habakkuk 2

Focus Scripture: Habakkuk 2:6-14

Key Verse: “Alas for you who build a town by bloodshed, and found a city on iniquity!” Habakkuk 2:12 (NRSV)

HABAKKUK 2:6-14 (NRSV)

6 Shall not everyone taunt such people and, with mocking riddles, say about them, “Alas for you who heap up what is not your own!” How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge?

7 Will not your own creditors suddenly rise, and those who make you tremble wake up? Then you will be booty for them.

8 Because you have plundered many nations, all that survive of the peoples shall plunder you—because of human bloodshed, and violence to the earth, to cities and all who live in them.

9 “Alas for you who get evil gain for your house, setting your nest on high to be safe from the reach of harm!”

10 You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life.

11 The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.

12 “Alas for you who build a town by bloodshed, and found a city on iniquity!”

13 Is it not from the Lord of hosts that peoples labor only to feed the flames, and nations weary themselves for nothing?

14 But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

HABAKKUK 2:6-14 (KJV)

6 Shall not all these take up a parable against him, and a taunting proverb against him, and say, Woe to him that increaseth that which is not his! how long? and to him that ladeth himself with thick clay!

7 Shall they not rise up suddenly that shall bite thee, and awake that shall vex thee, and thou shalt be for booties unto them?

8 Because thou hast spoiled many nations, all the remnant of the people shall spoil thee; because of men’s blood, and for the violence of the land, of the city, and of all that dwell therein.

9 Woe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of evil!

10 Thou hast consulted shame to thy house by cutting off many people, and hast sinned against thy soul.

11 For the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it.

12 Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and stablisheth a city by iniquity!

13 Behold, is it not of the Lord of hosts that the people shall labour in the very fire, and the people shall weary themselves for very vanity?

14 For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

INTRODUCTION

This lesson is a natural follow up to **lesson two**. Recall how God's initial response to Habakkuk surprised Habakkuk. The prophet wanted God to step in and do something about the injustice in Judah. However, he could not tolerate God's plan to use the Babylonians (Chaldeans) in the solution. The prophet could not see the wisdom in God sending a nation that was less righteous than Judah to punish Judah. So, the focus shifted from the injustice in Judah to the character of the nation which would humble Judah.

Habakkuk therefore prepared himself to hear God's justification for the prophecy. He really wanted to hear God justify the apparent contradiction. What Habakkuk did not realize was that God had only shared with him part one of the resolution. In part two, the conquering Babylonians would pay for their own ungodliness.

But the answer God gave in chapter two contained much more than a prophecy of punishment for the Babylonians. In God's response, we find heavy principles of godliness which still apply today.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

In explaining the divine plan to Habakkuk, God used a series of woes. In scriptures, woes are declarations or predictions of judgments and the punishments flowing from the judgments. We find other examples of woes in Isaiah 5, Matthew 23, and Luke 6. In short, the woes said Babylon would be punished. We could add, this prophecy came true (reference Daniel 5). Let us take a quick look at the woes.

The first is in verses 6-8. The Chaldeans were thieves, murderers, and extortionists who had raided and robbed many nations. This was ungodly, so their judgment and punishment was just. In verses 9-11 is another woe. The leader of Babylon and his people had an insatiable lust for wealth. They went after

wealth in whatever manner pleased them. They were also dishonest with no regard for decency. God could not ignore this.

In verses 12-14 we see that the Chaldeans won cities through murder and corruption. Their philosophy of life was *might was right*. Therefore, they had no regard for what was right. If they saw something or some place they wanted,



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they just took it. God had noted this. Also see in verse 14, one of those evergreen principles of God: whatever people do in the earth, “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God.” Please note this for further reference. This thought is expanded in verses 15-17. The mighty Chaldeans who had taken advantage of so many people will be taken advantage of (punished) by God. Finally, in verses 18-20 the Lord called the Babylonians to account for their worship of themselves and of false gods. The chapter ends emphasizing the supremacy of Jehovah God.

SANKOFA

In the text, what God showed Habakkuk was that the reign of the Chaldeans was only for a time. God had a calendar with set times and dates. Nations rise and are mighty for a while. Then they collapse. This was (and to some extent still is) very evident in Africa. Consider western Africa.

In the thirteenth century we saw the mighty Mali Empire. This empire lasted from around 1230 to 1670, although for all intents and purposes it started to decline around 1400. When the Mali Empire fell, another empire rose up. This was

the Bamana Empire from 1712 to 1862. Some thought this would have lasted forever. But that too declined and made way for the Toucouleur Empire (1848 – 1893). All of this we note to make one point. Nations and empires rise and fall. Therefore, we should not become unduly alarmed when we see leaders of nations talking and acting with arrogance. In God’s diary, the date for their downfall is fixed.



“The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God.”

CASE STUDY

Probably the best case of long-term injustice in America was the slavery of Africans and people of African descent. It was an extremely difficult period for the slaves. Of course, there were exceptions. But no one can reasonably deny the dehumanization of black people that occurred in America

during slavery (1619 to 1860). The people who were forced to labor on the tobacco, rice, and cotton plantations were considered only three-fifth of a human. They were abused in all forms: raped, humiliated in the worst ways, and denied education.

At the height of the tobacco and cotton industries in America, people could not

see any end to slavery. In the minds of most persons, slavery was there to stay. Therefore, most slaves accepted it and tried to adjust to it as best they could. But as in the case of the atrocities of Babylon, God saw and took note. God knew it would last for a time only. And so through the work of people like President Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Harriet Stowe, slavery was dismantled. The time set by God came.

Today, people in casual conversation refer to the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments without appreciation for the injustices they sought to correct. Nevertheless, in the context of this lesson we have something even greater to appreciate. Whatever the circumstances, God is always in control. As with Habakkuk, sometimes God's intervention to address injustice may seem a long way off. However as "the just" who must live by faith, we can take comfort in the fact that nothing escapes the attention of God. Leaders and empires will last for a time. But, at the time God appoints, they will be no more. We therefore have hope that the injustices we see around us will not last

forever. Justice will prevail.

LIFE APPLICATION

The text calls to our attention that the just shall live by faith. As God's people, we must firmly embrace that, even when we cannot see a solution for an injustice, God has it covered. Yes, we may have to endure hardships from time to time. However, these difficulties must not depress us. Look at the woes in the text and consider how they may or may not apply to you. It is easy to see how they apply to others. One of the sins of the Babylonians was haughty pride. In the privacy of your own meditations, think whether this applies to you. Here is how you can do that.

Consider that such pride is a crime. And, you have been accused by a neighbor of having too much. See yourself on the witness stand being your defense-in-chief. What arguments could you bring to convince a jury of people who know you that the accusation is baseless? Then, leave the witness stand and become the judge. What is the verdict?

Some people resort to violence as a means to end the injustice they see.



Whatever the
circumstances, God
is always in control.

This is the basis on which many terrorist groups are formed. What are your views on using violence (as in wars) to break cycles of injustice? Consider again that was the method God used to bring the relief that the prophet saw. Does God do the same thing today? Something to think about!

QUESTIONS

1. Why would God use terrible people to bring a solution to a case of injustice?
2. Can you give two examples of where God might have done this in your life experiences?
3. Some church leaders justified the

practice of slavery in the days of slavery. What similar situation can you see today (e.g. church leaders justifying wrong)?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

The Closing Song: “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands”

As you sing this song, you may want to insert some current names to emphasize that God is aware of the actions of those persons. And, that ultimately they will answer to God.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to maintain our faith in you in the face of injustice. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

March 9-March 15

Monday	Psalm 130 (Wait for Divine Intervention)
Tuesday	Ezekiel 33:1-9 (Pay Attention to the Sentinel)
Wednesday	Matthew 25:41-46 (The Risk of Ignoring the Needy)
Thursday	Habakkuk 2:1-5 (The Righteous Live by Faith)
Friday	Habakkuk 2:15-17 (Violence Leads to Destruction)
Saturday	Habakkuk 2:18-20 (Compare an Idol With the Lord)
Sunday	Habakkuk 2:6-14 (You Reap What You Sow)

CORRUPT LEADERS

Lesson Scripture: Micah 3-6

Focus Scripture: Micah 3:1-2, 9-12; 6:6-8

Key Verse: What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

MICAH 3:1-3, 9-12; 6:6-8 (NRSV)

Micah 3:1-3

1 And I said: Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice?—

2 you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones;

3 who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron.

9-12

9 Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity,

10 who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong!

11 Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the Lord and say, “Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.”

12 Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

6:6-8

6 “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit

MICAH 3:1-3, 9-12; 6:6-8 (KJV)

Micah 3:1-3

1 And I said, Hear, I pray you, O heads of Jacob, and ye princes of the house of Israel; Is it not for you to know judgment?

2 Who hate the good, and love the evil; who pluck off their skin from off them, and their flesh from off their bones;

3 Who also eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them; and they break their bones, and chop them in pieces, as for the pot, and as flesh within the caldron.

9-12

9 Hear this, I pray you, ye heads of the house of Jacob, and princes of the house of Israel, that abhor judgment, and pervert all equity.

10 They build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity.

11 The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the Lord, and say, Is not the Lord among us? none evil can come upon us.

12 Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of the forest.

6:6-8

6 Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old?

7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit

of my body for the sin of my soul?”

8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

of my body for the sin of my soul?

8 He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

INTRODUCTION

Micah is a prophet who cherished a deep love for his country. The intimate language he used in the **Lesson Scripture** shows us this. Micah grieved for his people. He wrote at a time when Judah was still benefiting from a past period of great economic prosperity. But the benefits did not flow fairly to all sectors of the society. (Maybe this is a familiar scene for some of us.) The rich landlords, many of whom had profited from the prosperous times, displayed boundless greed. They robbed the poor and did whatever they could to maintain and increase their wealth. The injustice which was widespread at that time is the focus of Micah’s discourse in the **Lesson Scripture**.

Further, and to Micah’s disgust, these rich people were aided and supported by corrupt judges in the courts. And they



Micah’s concern was for the social ills of the day.

had partners among the lying prophets (religious leaders) in places of worship. All of this created tensions in the society. These tensions could not be ignored. Pay attention to the prophet’s declaration in verse 8. Only a person filled with the power and spirit of the Lord can speak truth to the powerful ruling class in the way Micah spoke. Micah also makes this statement at verse 5. This showed his confidence in speaking as God’s mouthpiece. Note also that at that time Judah was sliding deeper into idolatry. Yet Micah does not focus on this. (This was the focus of Amos and Hosea.) Micah’s concern was for the social ills of the day.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

These notes point for the most part to the printed passages of the **Lesson Scripture**.

In the **Lesson Scripture**, we see a prophet expressing God's outrage at the injustice in the society. At some points the anger is cutting. Maybe this is because the persons who practiced the injustices included the religious leaders (the prophets). They were supposed to reflect God's justice, not ignore and/or corrupt it. Micah made use of striking hyperbole (exaggerated comparisons). This is not unique to Micah.

We see instances of it also in Ezekiel 34 and Zephaniah 3. Note, too, the courtroom drama format in the text. This legal-like presentation was used as well by other prophets like Isaiah (Chapters 3 and 41), Hosea 4, and Malachi 3.

In Micah 3:1-2 the prophet made it clear who he was addressing. He screamed at the deceiving prophets, "Isn't it you who were expected to know and practice justice?" Then, in verse 9, he called out the leaders of Israel and Judah, Jacob's descendants. These people were flooding the society with habitually gross, immoral behavior. Their behaviors showed they

hated justice and fairness. Instead they loved corruption, bribes, and bloodshed.

In the courts, the judges gave the verdicts people wanted if the people paid the right price. The prophets did the same. They "prophe-*lied*" (gave false prophecies for money). And, in this odd scenario, these leaders still pretended to worship God. They went through the religious rituals faithfully. What's more,

they claimed special favors from God. Despite the abuses and oppression they laid on the poor, they still saw themselves as God's favorite people (verses 3:11-12). But God had a surprise for them.

In Micah 6:6-8 we find declarations that echoes throughout the scriptures. What God really desires

from the faithful is not elaborate rituals and sacrifices. Long worship services by unfaithful people do not impress God. God wants obedience to God's commandments. Indeed, our worship has no meaning unless it flows from sincere hearts which want to obey God's rules of honesty, justice, and love. This principle

What God really desires from the faithful is not elaborate rituals and sacrifices... God wants obedience to God's commandments.

is fundamental to all religious activities. Therefore, we see it in both the Old and New Testaments (1 Samuel 15; Psalms 15, 24, 50, and 51; Hosea 6 and Matthew 9).

SANKOFA

In the **Lesson Scripture** we saw the secular and the religious leaders of Micah's day walking together down the streets of injustice. They walked hand in hand as they abused and oppressed the majority of the population. This caught God's attention and God showed Micah that the Lord would step in to end the injustice. Again we make the point that no system of injustice can last forever. God would not allow that.

Unfortunately, this situation of religious leaders supporting systems of injustice did not stop in Micah's age. We had a shining example of the same in South Africa during the apartheid period. In that era (1948 – 1994), some prominent church leaders used the scriptures to justify that system of injustice. They

supported the government and were silent on the atrocities unleashed on the majority black population. After the system collapsed, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission confirmed what people had suspected for decades. Witnesses who appeared before the Commission gave heart-wrenching testimonies of the draconian measures the authorities used to eliminate opposition and keep the majority population in subjection.

The Lord raised up people with the courage and foresight to believe that the days of institutionalized injustice would come to an end in South Africa.

Given the support which the government and rich ruling class had both within the country and internationally, it was difficult to see an end to apartheid. Yet God did what God is good at doing. The Lord raised up people with the courage and foresight to believe

that the days of institutionalized injustice would come to an end in South Africa. Bit by bit, often at great personal sacrifice, the activists for justice chipped away at the system of injustice. And then it happened. Freedom came to South Africa in 1994. The systematic oppression of the majority ended.

Today, we give God thanks for leaders like Steve Biko, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Ahmed Kathrada, Dorothy Adams (of AME heritage), and Victoria Mxenge and her husband. They trampled their personal fears to stop a privileged few from trampling on the rights of the majority. Through them, God proved once again that God will not allow any system of injustice to continue indefinitely. These liberators were not perfect people. Yet, they did a perfect job to pull down systems of injustice similar to what Micah wrote about.

CASE STUDY

For a similar case in American history, we can look at the period of the Confederacy (especially the 1860's). Here again, many church leaders were in step with the elite plantation owners and merchants. They locked hands and hearts to suppress and oppress the working-class people. History's accounts show where preachers used the Bible to justify the practice of slavery. Some called it a "necessary evil." Others went further to argue that black

people would be slaves even in heaven. They used Bible accounts like the one with Noah and Ham to justify this twisted thinking.

As in the days of Micah, people who called themselves God's servants became props for a system of exploitation of poor people. And, their support for slavery and the unjust practices associated with it was not soft or casual. One professor

of American Religious History (Harry Stout) put it this way; he noted, "If you pull the church out of the whole equation, it's highly likely that there never would have been a Civil War." We can debate the degree of truth in that statement. However, it still powerfully conveys a startling truth. The church, God's institution

to which people should look for truth and justice, had become part of the problem rather than the solution. Did this apply to the whole church? Of course not! As we know, it was mainly the church in the southern part of America. This is the same type of charge Micah filed against the prophets of his day.



History's accounts show where preachers used the Bible to justify the practice of slavery.

We must appreciate this truth to understand why the Confederate flag is still a symbol of pain for many African Americans. As Carol Kuruville wrote in *HuffPost* online (6/22/2015), “Black activists and many others consider it (the Confederate flag) a symbol of oppression and a reminder of a government that longed to keep black people in chains forever.” In line with Micah 6, truth shone through the dark days of slavery. That section of the church which was in error came to recognize and admit the error. In 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention formally apologized for its role in “condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systematic racism in our lifetime.”

Why did we refer to these matters? Was it to point an accusing finger at a section or denomination of the church? Far from that! We used this case to convey three truths. First, the alliance between rich people and the prophets (church leaders) which Micah saw in his day, repeated

itself down through history. We may even see traces of it today. Second, the way God brings about the end to injustice is not always pretty. Sometimes, it is by peaceful civil resistance as with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement. But at other times it is bloody, as was the case with the American Civil

...we must appreciate that while we do not live in a perfect society, yet we must be deeply grateful for the freedoms and liberties we now enjoy. To do otherwise is to disrespect the people God used to fight for those freedoms.

War. Third, we must appreciate that while we do not live in a perfect society, yet we must be deeply grateful for the freedoms and liberties we now enjoy. To do otherwise is to disrespect the people God used to fight for those freedoms. Are you grateful? How do you show it?

LIFE APPLICATION

As believers we naturally put high value on justice, kindness, and humility. When we speak of these values in the abstract in discussions, we have no problem. The challenges come, however, when we try to apply the ideas to daily life and our position on certain issues. Use this lesson to assess your position on things like the treatment of undocumented immigrants.

Likewise, consider your attitudes to ex-convicts, and the rights of the unborn. I readily agree that these are complex issues. Yet, our sense of justice demands that we have a position on each matter.

For example, ask yourself to what extent should former convicts have their civil rights restricted. Should they be allowed to vote after their release from prison? And, what about their access to government jobs and contracts? Many of us feel that other things being equal, they should be allowed to take part in all activities in society. Your own sense of justice will determine how you vote and who you support when such matters are put in the public domain for decisions.

In a similar vein is the matter of the treatment of undocumented immigrants. Is it just that these people have reasonable access to health care in times of need? Consider the extent to which your sense of justice moves you to help them when you can. In this context, remember that many slaves got freedom and started a

better life because people with a sense of justice helped them through the Underground Railroad. And, note that at that time it was illegal to offer such assistance.

Finally, think about how you show support for leaders who live up to your idea of decency. One of the best ways to demonstrate hatred for corrupt leaders is to openly show appreciation for just leaders. The gifts we present to pastors and other leaders in appreciation events can be fuel for them to keep on the right track. Therefore, we must not overlook the importance of events like Pastor's Appreciation Day. And, within our means, we must participate.

On the other hand, we should be equally quick to show our disgust for corrupt leaders whether in the church or in politics. This is where we need to consider our involvement in public protest and the signing of petitions of condemnation. But, note we must be consistent. We cannot demand justice when our favorite leader is in office, and



Finally, think about
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be silent when other leaders are there. From the Bible we see that God was very fair in this respect. When the heathen nations violated God's commandments, God chastised them. When the chosen people Israel were guilty of ungodliness, the Lord also punished them. Therefore, as believers we cannot be partisan in our calls for justice.

QUESTIONS

1. How can we respectfully call to account those leaders who we think have failed to live up to God's standards of fairness?
2. How do you detect when a person in ministry is "prophe-lying" (i.e. giving false prophecy)?
3. The text seems to suggest that how we treat people is as important as or even more important than religious rituals. How do we reflect this in our daily living?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Show appreciation for our freedom in Christ and in our society by singing "Victory in Jesus" or "Free, Free, Free, I've Been Set Free."

Prayer: Father, I thank you for the freedoms I enjoy today and for the people you moved to fight for them. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

March 16-March 22

Monday	Psalm 146 (The Lord Acts Justly)
Tuesday	Isaiah 5:18-24 (The Results of Social Injustice)
Wednesday	Isaiah 11:1-5 (Justice Actions by the Expected Messiah)
Thursday	Micah 3:5-8 (Prophets Fail on Their Watch)
Friday	Micah 6:1-5 (Remember God's Righteous Actions)
Saturday	Micah 6:9-16 (Cheating and Violence Will Be Punished)
Sunday	Micah 3:1-3, 9-12; 6:6-8 (God Requires Justice for All)

LEADING JUSTLY

Lesson Scripture: Malachi 2-3

Focus Scripture: Malachi 2:1-9; 3:5-6

Key Verse: If you will not listen, if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I will send the curse on you. Malachi 2:2 (NRSV)

MALACHI 2:1-9; 3:5-6 (NRSV)

Malachi 2:1-9

- 1 And now, O priests, this command is for you.
- 2 If you will not listen, if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I will send the curse on you and I will curse your blessings; indeed I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart.
- 3 I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and I will put you out of my presence.
- 4 Know, then, that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may hold, says the Lord of hosts.
- 5 My covenant with him was a covenant of life and well-being, which I gave him; this called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of my name.
- 6 True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in integrity and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity.
- 7 For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.
- 8 But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts,
- 9 and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction.

MALACHI 2:1-9; 3:5-6 (KJV)

Malachi 2:1-9

- 1 And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for you.
- 2 If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith the Lord of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart.
- 3 Behold, I will corrupt your seed, and spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your solemn feasts; and one shall take you away with it.
- 4 And ye shall know that I have sent this commandment unto you, that my covenant might be with Levi, saith the Lord of hosts.
- 5 My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear wherewith he feared me, and was afraid before my name.
- 6 The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity.
- 7 For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.
- 8 But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of hosts.
- 9 Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law.

3:5-6

5 Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

6 For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.

3:5-6

5 And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the Lord of hosts.

6 For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.

VOCABULARY

- **Immutable** – Does not change.

INTRODUCTION

In the last lesson we saw how God filed charges against the rich ruling class people and the prophets. In this lesson, we see the same case being filed against the priests. To grasp the heart of this lesson, and see its implications in life today, we must understand the role of the priests in Malachi's society. An open hint is in verse 7. In normal day-to-day life, the people went to the priests for counseling and instructions in godly living. The priests were the source of knowledge for matters of worship and interpersonal relationships. And, they administered the sacrifices. We know that the sacrifices were a major part of



This meant living lives of faithfulness, honesty, and integrity.

the people's worship relations with God. In short, the priest performed the role of God's communication director for the people. The priests spoke for God. Both God and the people expected them to take these duties seriously. This meant living lives of faithfulness, honesty, and integrity.

In Malachi's day it was obvious that priests had fallen away from the high standard set by Levi (the father of the priesthood). Rather than lead people to healthy relations with God, the priests were turning people off from God. The people were turning their backs on God and the priests joined them. It is always a sad day when the people we look to for strong and godly leadership fall into ungodliness themselves. As we see too many times in our society, the blind can lead the blind to destruction. This lesson has painful modern-day parallels.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Once again, we see a courtroom presentation in Malachi's writings. God put the priests and people on trial for their sins against God. And what were the charges? First, the people had showed disrespect for God's name, and refused to honor God as they were instructed. Second, they offered low-grade sacrifices. They knew that when they made a sacrifice it should be from their best. Rather than do this faithfully, they offered God their rejects: animals that were stolen, crippled, and/or diseased. Third, they disrespected the altar and the consecrated places of worship. We will say more on this in the other sections. Fourth, they disrespected their marriage vows. This meant they were guilty of infidelity and casual divorce. This forced God to declare God's hatred for divorce. Fifth, they robbed God of the stipulated tithes and offerings. Note that tithes and offerings were binding obligations in that society.

To support the charges, Malachi, as God's attorney, compared the attitudes and behaviors of the priests with those of Levi, the father of the priesthood.

...you would recall that Levi served God faithfully. He honored God, gave godly instructions to the people, and lived a life of integrity.

In contrast, you would recall that Levi served God faithfully. He honored God, gave godly instructions to the people, and lived a life of integrity. Also, Levi was faithful and upright in administering the sacrifices. Therefore, he turned many people to God. The priests of Malachi's day were failing on each of these.

The reference to Levi was probably also for another purpose. It should have prompted the priests to recall how God dealt in the past with unfaithful priests (e.g. Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10). Since God is immutable (does not change), it was no surprise that the Lord promised to punish the corrupt priests of Malachi's day, just as he had done before. Yet, in God's ever-flowing mercy, God opened the door to repentance. God's call of, "Return to me, and I will return to you" (3:7) still stands for all who would accept it.

SANKOFA

Today, priests and pastors do not administer sacrifices as was done in Malachi's day. Apart from that, our expectations of them are similar to what was demanded of early church leaders. As it was then, the clergy's conduct is

of crucial importance. God still expects priests to exhibit good character. It is on this quality that the world is judging priests and pastors. As it was in Malachi's day, so it seems to be today. From both within and without the church community we hear horror reports of clergy misconduct. Some of the reports are chilling. In a published report, Archbishop Charles Palmer-Buckle of Accra, Ghana addressed the issue. Indeed, the mere headline of the article is telling. It read, "Ghanaian Archbishop Says Church Has Failed Africa." (See <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/ghanaian-archbishop-says-church-has-failed-africa> - October 14, 2009.) Archbishop Palmer-Buckler was not on the fringes of the Catholic Church with an axe to grind. He was, as the reporter put it, "...widely considered to be among the heavyweights of his generation in the African hierarchy (of the Catholic Church)."

So what did the archbishop say? In summary his view was "...practicing Catholics are often as guilty of corruption and violence as everybody else, he says simply, 'We have failed.'" As you

would expect, such a report from within the church admitting shortcomings of the church got heavy media coverage. It was widely circulated. When it comes to abuses by clergy, we have seen improvements. Still, there is a lot of work to be done.

You can see further details at the link above.

CASE STUDY

So we do not appear to be focusing unfairly on the Catholic Church, we also looked at the issue of clergy abuse within the AME Church. To get an appreciation, consider an article published in the AME's *The Christian Recorder* online site. The article appears under the name of the editor, Mr. John Thomas III, with the date, October 30,

2017. It has the title, "#MeToo in God's House: Reflecting on Sexual Harassment and Assault in the AME Church." Here is the third paragraph of that article.

"Since the mid-1990s, the Connectional AME Church has openly addressed issues of sexual harassment and assault in our churches. This perspective, however, has been from



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a legal perspective stemming from several costly lawsuit judgments. A clear sexual misconduct policy and procedure is now codified in *The AME Book of Doctrine and Discipline*. While the Church may be legally covered, the culture that aids and abets sexual harassment and assault continues to be pervasive and widespread. Sadly, yet unsurprisingly, the #MeToo hashtag and stories proliferated on the pages of AME clergy and laywomen. I also thought about my friends who were impacted (sic) by sexual harassment and assault who were unable to speak out.”

What did it say? The problem of clergy misconduct is a problem in the AME Church as well. And if you follow church news sites, you will see it is a problem in all major church denominations. Some law firms now have departments that specialize in cases involving abuse by the clergy. Millions, if not billions, of dollars are being paid out in judgments and settlements. It is a sad picture. In the **Introduction** we mentioned that one of Malachi's charges against the priests, was their disrespect for the altars and consecrated places

of worship. Unfortunately, this charge stands today. Much of the abuse, which is coming to light, occurred where? Yes, that is true: in the sacred spaces of the church. Dear Lord, have mercy on us!

LIFE APPLICATION

This question of abuse by the clergy is a thorny matter. It calls on us to examine many related issues. One of these is how to approach accusations of such abuse.

Each believer must consider his or her own stance. When you hear an accusation of abuse what do you do? Do you automatically believe the alleged victim and condemn the alleged culprit? Alternatively, do you dismiss the accuser and sympathize with the person who is accused? There is a third position. That is, to listen to the accusations, demand an inquiry, and make a decision based on the available evidence. Which of the three positions do you take?

In considering this, think about the pain each party will suffer. If the accusation proves to be true, and we do not give comfort to the accuser, we increase the pain that person suffers. The reverse is also true. If the accusation turns out to be a hoax, and we immediately vilify



Dear Lord, have
mercy on us!

the accused person, we could ruin the life of an innocent person. Think about your position, so that when these issues arise you can take a principled stance. You will also want to make this a matter of prayer and meditation, and be open to call for your church to have a clear policy on these matters. Too many churches scramble to come up with a policy after the fact.

Further consider this fact: respect is given where respect is demanded. As believers we cannot demand that the public respect our places of worship, when we treat our sanctuaries with little or no respect. We must be part of the movement to make our sanctuaries sacred places of worship. Hence, the activities which we allow in the sanctuaries must be restricted and monitored. When people come to our sanctuaries they should feel a sense of safety and serenity. In the dedicated holy spaces, people should be inspired to pray and seek the Lord. Consider what you can do to make or keep your church sanctuary a consecrated place of worship. If we respect our sanctuaries, others will be

inclined to follow our example.

Some observers believe that based on the sad tales of clergy abuse we see, oversight procedures should be set up in all congregations. Do you agree? The thinking is that such safeguards protect both the congregation and the clergy. For example, all church expenditures must be authorized by persons other than the clergy. This means the priest

or pastor cannot sign checks alone. Some congregations insist that pastors do not conduct counseling sessions alone either. Maybe you want to have these are matters discussed in your church if they are not already addressed.

In these matters there are no hard and fast rules. As believers, we must be ready to

do our part to minimize the incidents of clergy abuse in our churches. This is not optional. God demands it. Always keep in mind that each case of clergy abuse weakens the overall image of the church of Jesus Christ. And, as in Malachi's time, it will be in our time. God will judge abuse and injustice. One final word! Although we have focused on clergy, the comments apply with equal force to all persons in

 We must be part of the movement to make our sanctuaries sacred places of worship.

leadership in the church.

QUESTIONS

1. In your own opinion, is the level of sexual abuse in the church greater today than in former generations? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Why is God using people outside the church (lawyers, journalists, and social groups) to expose these incidents of abuse among Christian leaders?

3. What can church members do to ensure these incidences of abuse in the church are reduced or stopped?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Close the session with, “Lord, Prepare Me to Be Your Sanctuary”

Prayer: Dear God, we pray for purity and upright leadership in the body of Christ. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

March 23-March 29

Monday	Psalm 50:1-15 (Offer Sacrifice of Thanksgiving to God)
Tuesday	Leviticus 22:17-25 (Bring Acceptable Offerings to the Lord)
Wednesday	Malachi 1:11-14 (God’s Name Is Great Among Nations)
Thursday	Malachi 2:10-16 (Be Faithful to One Another)
Friday	Malachi 2:17–3:4 (Messenger of Judgment Coming)
Saturday	Malachi 3:7-12 (God’s Blessings and Delights Await)
Sunday	Malachi 2:1-9; 3:5-6 (Leading in Troubled Times)

GOD'S JUST SERVANT

Lesson Scripture: Isaiah 42

Focus Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-9

Key Verse: Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. Isaiah 42:1 (NRSV)

ISAIAH 42:1-9 (NRSV)

1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

2 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;

3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

4 He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

5 Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:

6 I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,

7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

8 I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.

9 See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

ISAIAH 42:1-9 (KJV)

1 Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles.

2 He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street.

3 A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth.

4 He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law.

5 Thus saith God the Lord, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out; he that spread forth the earth, and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein:

6 I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles;

7 To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.

8 I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.

9 Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare: before they spring forth I tell you of them.

INTRODUCTION

As believers we love to see justice in our societies. Naturally, we desire to see and support leaders who promote justice, and take steps to punish and stop acts of injustice. But, as we saw in previous lessons, this was not the case among the Israelites in the times addressed by Micah and Isaiah. In that era, injustice was prominent. The poor and the oppressed people would have wondered daily when injustice would die. Their hearts longed for times of peace, justice, and fair play.

This is where this lesson starts. God obviously saw what was happening and was not happy. God had a plan to address the situation.

As we saw before, God set appointed times for events to unfold. Therefore, God used the prophet Isaiah to share the plan with the suffering people. From that angle, see the **Lesson Scripture** as God's call to enduring hope. In essence, Isaiah told people not to lose hope. The justice they desired would come. And although those days were set in the

future, the people could be assured that justice would prevail. So, whatever else you see in this lesson, see it as a lesson of giving hope to people who desperately needed hope. As you work through the lesson, consider the importance of hope to people in desperate situations.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Read this section with the **Introduction's** comments in mind. Against the background of injustice, God promised God's people a just servant. Unlike the corrupt leaders of that day, this servant would bring true justice. He would not be sidetracked from or forced off his mission to establish justice. The servant's rule would

shine throughout the whole earth (verses 1-4). His mission would be to bring spiritual freedom and insight to all people (verse 7).

Then God gave the people a reason to believe in this vision. It was coming from someone in whom they believed, from God the almighty creator. This is the same God who made heaven, the earth,



In essence,
Isaiah told people
not to lose hope.

and humankind (verse 5). The message came from the same God who had proven worthy of their praises and honor (verse 8). So on the basis of that authority, the prophet made a call for justice and noted how God would bless the people if they would commit to a path of right living (verse 7).

In verse 9, God reinforced the vision of hope. The people had to understand that what had happened in the past and was happening at that time would eventually pass. The injustice would not last forever. Also, in this verse we see one of the distinguishing features of godly prophecies. It is revealed way in advance. Therefore, when it is fulfilled people know it had to come from a divine source.

One thing believers can say about God is that God keeps God's promises. In Isaiah 42, we have the promise, and in the New Testament we see its fulfillment. Indeed, Palm Sunday is the day we formally celebrate that fulfillment. Without doubt we know that Jesus Christ is the servant promised in Isaiah 42.



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SANKOFA

For persons living in cozy western countries, it is easy to underestimate the power of hope in the lives of people. To understand the importance of hope, sometimes we need to listen to people who survived extreme hardships only because of the hope they had. The people of Liberia, Africa gave us good examples of that. They showed that African people are strong people who can endure anything as long as they have hope.

In *The Sayon Town Journal* (February 14, 2017) we saw some of these persons. The report highlighted how hope kept some ordinary people like Haynes Lewis and Nora Tabab going. They had endured one of the most brutal civil wars of modern times. It lasted fourteen years and when it ended in 2003, almost a quarter of a million persons had died. During that time, people had lives of misery. They had no running water, no electricity, no streetlights, no schools. The infrastructure (roads and utilities) was in ruins. The rich people had fled

the country. People had to find a living however they could.

What's more, thirteen years after the war had ended, people were still struggling to find a life of normalcy. Lewis and Tabab shared how they lived through 26 years without electricity. But they had hope. The day after some electricity was restored, Mr. Lewis rushed out to buy a TV, a fan, and an electric bulb. He spent almost a quarter of a year's income. This was money he had saved in the hope electricity would come back some day. Ms. Tabab had a similar story of living in hope. This is the same type of hope Isaiah's message of the coming Messiah must have awakened in the people. If you appreciate that, you will appreciate why God sent the message.

CASE STUDY

Do we have parallels of the power of hope in American history? Sure we do! Probably the most popular stories are in the era of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. What immediately jumps out at us is the "I Have

a Dream" speech. Dr. King, as Isaiah did centuries before, cast a futuristic vision. He looked beyond the racism, the high unemployment and underemployment of his people, to a day when there would be equality and justice. We can note that this is the same vision the framers of the American Constitution saw: a society in which freedom and justice were alive and seen daily. The framers did not want a society like England with a privileged few lordling over lower classes.

“Do we have parallels of the power of hope in American history? Sure we do!”

Because of the injustices in America at that time, the 1950s were troubled years. Despite a Supreme Court ruling (Brown vs. Board of Education), some privileged people were determined to keep the status quo of injustice. But activists like Dr. King would have none of it. So the pushback came. What kept activists and their supporters going? Hope! In the "I Have a Dream" speech, we see parts of the vision of hope. Dr. King saw an America where his people were on "a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of

material prosperity.” But Dr. King flatly refused to accept that the “bank of justice is bankrupt.” Instead he cast the vision of an American society that had moved from a “dark desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice.” He saw a day when his people would enjoy “the riches of freedom and the security of justice.” And what did that vision do? It fueled a movement that forced landmark social laws like the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1995, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That is the power of a powerful, positive vision. That is what God gave to the suffering people of Isaiah’s day: a vision of justice that helped them to endure injustices. Today, as in Isaiah’s day, we need such a vision to get us through these troubling times.

LIFE APPLICATION

This lesson asks us to do some serious reflection of our view of Jesus Christ. Isaiah gave a clear description of the character and mission of the servant who would be the eternal icon of justice. Passages like Matthew 12:1-21 and

Luke 4:17-21 confirm that Jesus Christ is that servant of justice. Therefore, each person must consider the extent to which he or she sees Jesus Christ as the stream from which justice flows to us. If we accept this, then we know how we should view any injustice we see around us. Believers walk in the assurance that any injustice will last for a limited time only. If we accept this view, let us look at how

it motivates us to get involved in reasonable calls for justice. On the other hand, if we hold alternate views, let us examine those views and how they fashion our responses to the injustices in our society.

Following from that first assessment, consider how God may deal with injustices in your society. In the **Lesson Scripture**,

God, through the Holy Spirit, worked through Isaiah to call out injustice and give the people hope. How do you think God works today when the Holy Spirit is available to all believers? Then, personalize the question. To what extent are you open to being a modern day “Isaiah” for God? Something to seriously



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Jesus Christ.

think about! Remember, God does not always call the ‘qualified’ but qualifies those God calls. You may want to make this a point of prayer and meditation.

Finally, consider your preparedness to pay a price for justice. In the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the activists paid high prices. Some were beaten, made to face vicious dogs, had their homes torched, and otherwise victimized. Yet the movement continued. Why? Because the people were prepared to pay the price to see justice in society. Today, we enjoy the fruits of that courage and determination. We are proud of them. We call them heroes. Note that leaders like Dr. King were supported by thousands of ordinary people. They made the difference through protests. Consider what future generations will say about

our desire for justice and our resolve to fight for it.

QUESTIONS

1. What is your response to the statement, “God loves poor people and hates rich people?”
2. What is your response to the statement, “Prayer can push God to speed up his solutions to a crisis?”
3. How do you know when God wants you to be part of a solution to injustice?

CLOSING DEVOTION

Prayer: Dear Father, the source of all true justice, open my eyes and heart to your messages about social and economic justice. And give me the strength and wisdom to play my role in addressing injustices around me. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

March 30–April 5

Monday	Hebrews 11:29-35 (Faith Heroes Acted Justly)
Tuesday	Matthew 21:1-11 (Your King Comes Humbly)
Wednesday	Mark 11:15-19 (House of Prayer for All Nations)
Thursday	Luke 11:42-44 (Neglect Justice at Your Peril)
Friday	Matthew 12:15-21 (Jesus, God’s Servant Messiah)
Saturday	Isaiah 42:10-17 (God Will Not Forsake the People)
Sunday	Isaiah 42:1-9 (God’s Servant to Establish Justice Everywhere)

RESURRECTION HOPE

Lesson Scripture: Mark 16; 1 Corinthians 15

Focus Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 12-14, 20-23, 42-45

Key Verses: If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. 1 Corinthians 15:19-20 (NRSV)

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-8, 12-14, 20-23, 42-45 (NRSV)

1 Corinthians 15:1-8

1 Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand,

2 through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,

4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,

5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.

7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

12-14

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?

13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised;

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-8, 12-14, 20-23, 42-45 (KJV)

1 Corinthians 15:1-8

1 Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand;

2 By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.

3 For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;

4 And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:

5 And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve:

6 After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep.

7 After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles.

8 And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.

12-14

12 Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?

13 But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen:

14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.

20-23

20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

21 For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being;

22 for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

42-45

42 So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable.

43 It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.

44 It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.

45 Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

14 And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.

20-23

20 But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.

21 For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.

22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

23 But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming.

42-45

42 So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption:

43 It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power:

44 It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.

45 And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit.

INTRODUCTION

As noted before, this series of lessons focuses on the subject of justice. For today's lesson, we look at the links between justice and our celebration of Easter. Therefore, as you work through the lesson, look for these links.

We also address a related issue: how belief in the afterlife influences how we live, and our funeral service traditions. Psychologists tell us we cannot live

beyond our beliefs. In other words, our beliefs about what happens after death set the tone for our earthly goals, and the effort and resources we commit to achieve those goals. As Christians, we must be firm in our belief of eternal life and eternal rewards. If we are not, then as the Apostle Paul rightly observed, "We are more to be pitied than anyone else in the world."

Please follow closely as we look at examples of how a belief in the afterlife

impacts the lives of traditional Ghanaians. Briefly, we also touch on the effect that belief had on the icons in the American Civil Rights Movement. All of this set the stage for us to examine our own convictions about Christ's resurrection and the impact it has on our life and work for God.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

To fully appreciate Paul's' teaching in the **Lesson Scripture**, we must consider the audience to which it was first addressed. This audience included Greeks. At that time, Greeks believed that the soul was immortal (i.e. it did not die). So, we can say they did believe in some form of resurrection. However, they could not embrace the idea of a physical bodily resurrection. As is true for some people today, the Greeks found it hard to see a person who was physically dead getting up and walking out of the grave. Therefore, we can see in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul's arguments to push his audience past the limitations they were inclined to put on the resurrection of Christ.



They saw and had encounters with the resurrected Christ. It was no secret.

Paul started this argument with a reference to his previous teachings on salvation. He laid this basis to show how the resurrection story was but an extension of the Gospel message which they had already received and accepted. Then, Paul made the bold assertion that Jesus Christ whom they knew had died, was buried, and then rose again. And how did Paul know this? Many people could testify to its reality. They saw and had encounters with the resurrected Christ. It was no secret. There were many eyewitnesses.

In verses 9-12, Paul justified his own qualifications to preach and teach the gospel message. He himself had a personal encounter with the risen Christ. And this Christ called and equipped him to do what he was doing. In verses 12-19, Paul exposed the heart of his argument. He showed why belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ is so crucial to the message of salvation. Only a risen Christ can offer salvation. Only a risen Christ can give meaning to the gospel message. Without a living

Savior, Christianity was meaningless.

The Apostle then moved forward to show in verses 20-23 what the resurrection means to the believer. Christ's resurrection is the bedrock of the believers' hope for a better life. This is the life free of injustice. Christ's resurrection is God's assurance to all believers that they, too, will rise after death to a life in the Kingdom of justice. But how will all this happen? Paul explains in verses 42-45. Our natural human bodies, when compared with our spiritual bodies, are broken and weak. These broken, weak, physical bodies are buried in the earth. Then, as Christ did, we will rise from death with whole, strong, eternal bodies. That is how it will happen. That is what Easter is all about: God's assurance of life after death.

SANKOFA

In the West African country of Ghana, as in many other countries, various religions compete for the attention of the people. Although Christianity is now the

dominant religion, some of the traditional religious practices are still rooted among the people. In all the significant religions there, belief in the afterlife is common.

The traditional Ghanaian sees death as a transition point when a person moves from this plane of living to the higher stage of life. And the funeral services reflect this. Traditional Ghanaians hold firmly that the spirits of deceased persons

journey to join the spirits of the ancestors. This is the reason why the elaborate funeral services are so important. This belief extends to the idea that if the funeral rites are done properly, the deceased person will have a smooth transition and a warm welcome among the ancestors. On the other

hand, when the funeral rites are botched, the deceased persons miss the great welcome of the ancestors.

Even further, some Ghanaians still believe that in the second stage of life, the spirit of the deceased person helps to protect and guide relatives. Some of us will have difficulties with this

“ Our natural human bodies, when compared with our spiritual bodies, are broken and weak.”

idea. However, despite the various ways in which Ghanaians celebrate their dead, one thing is certain: they hold strong beliefs in the afterlife. This is the same belief the Apostle Paul points to in the set scriptures.

CASE STUDY

The legend of Deaconess Rosa Parks has a special place in American history. Her contribution to the fight for social justice is remarkable. Many have wondered what made this special giant of a woman tick. What was her motivation? Some of us believe that her famous quotes give a great hint of the answer to that question.

One such quote reflected her view of life after death. She is quoted as saying this: “Differences of race, nationality, or religion should not be used to deny any human being citizenship rights or privileges. Life is to be lived to its fullest so that death is just another chapter. Memories of our lives, of our works and our deeds will continue in others.” Do you see the big hint? Yes, it is right there: “...death is just another

chapter.” In other words, when we die, that is just the end of chapter one. There is another chapter. Some people may even say that a better chapter comes after death.

How did this view of life and death propel Deaconess Parks through the tough days of the Civil Rights Movement? Another of her quotes gives the answer. She said this: “I have learned over the

years that when one’s mind is made up, this diminishes fear; knowing what must be done does away with fear.” Only a person with a solid view of life and death and the life *after* death can take such a position.

Therefore, our views of life and what happens after death determine how we live. If we see life as one dimensional, then we can just “eat drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” With such a mindset, we live in constant fear of losing life. We naturally run from anything that will threaten life.

On the other hand, when we see this earthly life as just the first chapter of life, we are more open to living fully. We take



The legend of Deaconess Rosa Parks has a special place in American history.

steps to follow our convictions. Our view of death, therefore, sets the framework for our lives. It explains Rosa Park's stubborn stance for justice. It explains Apostle Paul's endurance to preach the gospel in the face of daunting perils. Likewise, it will also explain the positions we take for justice, spreading the gospel message.

LIFE APPLICATION

In this lesson we discussed matters relating to life, death, and the resurrection. Most probably the discussions sparked thoughts of your own death and afterlife. At first glance, these are not the thoughts we usually associate with Easter. Easter is about joyous celebrations, Easter eggs, bunnies, and special food and drinks. But that is just the point. For believers, our sense of joy at Easter should reach beyond the clouds. And, this should happen not because of food and drink and Easter eggs. It should flow naturally, because we can view death with joy. Unlike the unbeliever, we see death as a mere

transition point. It will bring us closer to what we always wanted: eternal life in a kingdom of justice and glory.

So, let each believer examine his or her view of death. Consider how your views agree with the core message of the text. If you find agreement, then you will truly rejoice in Easter celebrations. If your views do not agree, you must make this a point of study and prayerful meditation. Also

consider discussing the matter with a minister or trusted mature Christian.

But our sense of high joy should not be restricted to the celebration of Easter. Therefore, consider the events and occasions when you appreciate the doors to eternal life which Christ's resurrection opened.

Consider regular Sunday services. Then, think about the quality of Bible studies and corporate prayer meetings. Finally, reflect on your private devotions. In some of these you must find occasions to draw joy from your position in Christ's body of believers. Reflecting on scriptures like Ephesians 1:5-6 and 2 Peter 1:2-4 will

Finally, reflect on your private devotions. In some of these you must find occasions to draw joy from your position in Christ's body of believers.

greatly enhance our appreciation of the resurrection story.

Above we noted how the belief in an afterlife influences funeral services. Personalize this point. Consider the thoughts and emotions you experience at the funerals of loved ones. Are funerals events of doom and gloom for you? Or, are they occasions of celebration and hope? Perhaps it is some of both. But, do not take it for granted.

Consciously examine your views and how these have changed over the years. Can you say that you are at the point where you see death as just the end of the first stage of life? If you are not yet at that point, are you getting there?

Nothing mentioned above should suggest that you not mourn the loss of loved ones when death comes. That is the human side of all of us. Even Jesus wept at the death of beloved Lazarus (John 11). However, in that same chapter Jesus assured us of Jesus' status as the "resurrection and the life." Yes, we can mourn when death calls. But even in that mourning we must

remember that the "resurrection and the life" is among us.

Finally, do not keep the wonderful message of the resurrection to yourself. Around us every day are people desperately looking for hope and meaning in life. Help them! Share freely with them the hope and meaning you have found in the resurrected Christ.



Finally, do not keep
the wonderful message
of the resurrection to
yourself.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe the resurrection of Christ happened exactly as given in the gospels? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think some people still have difficulties in accepting the bodily resurrection of Christ?
3. Why is it crucial for believers to defend the gospel account of the resurrection?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Listen to "Cornerstone" as sung by the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir.

Prayer: We thank you, Jesus, for opening the door to eternal life. We know there is perfect justice in your presence. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**April 6-April 12**

Monday	Mark 16:1-8 (Women Find Jesus' Tomb Empty)
Tuesday	Acts 9:1-9 (Saul Meets Jesus on Damascus Road)
Wednesday	Romans 5:12-17 (Free Gift of Grace and Hope)
Thursday	1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (The Dead in Christ Will Rise)
Friday	1 Corinthians 15:24-28 (All Things Under God's Control)
Saturday	1 Corinthians 15:50-58 (Victory Through Our Lord Jesus Christ)
Sunday	1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 12-14, 20-23, 42-45 (All Are Made Alive in Christ)

INJUSTICE WILL BE PUNISHED

Lesson Scripture: Esther 3; 5; 7

Focus Scripture: Esther 7:1-10

*Key Verse: So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai.
Esther 7:10 (NRSV)*

ESTHER 7:1-10 (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.

7 The king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king had determined to destroy him.

8 When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining; and the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face.

ESTHER 7:1-10 (KJV)

1 So the king and Haman came to banquet with Esther the queen.

2 And the king said again unto Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition, queen Esther? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? and it shall be performed, even to the half of the kingdom.

3 Then Esther the queen answered and said, If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request:

4 For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my tongue, although the enemy could not countervail the king's damage.

5 Then the king Ahasuerus answered and said unto Esther the queen, Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?

6 And Esther said, The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman. Then Haman was afraid before the king and the queen.

7 And the king arising from the banquet of wine in his wrath went into the palace garden: and Haman stood up to make request for his life to Esther the queen; for he saw that there was evil determined against him by the king.

8 Then the king returned out of the palace garden into the place of the banquet of wine; and Haman was fallen upon the bed whereon Esther was. Then said the king, Will he force the queen also before me in the house? As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.

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.

9 And Harbonah, one of the chamberlains, said before the king, Behold also, the gallows fifty cubits high, which Haman had made for Mordecai, who spoken good for the king, standeth in the house of Haman. Then the king said, Hang him thereon.

10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then was the king's wrath pacified.

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the matter of justice we can have no doubt that God takes the matter seriously.

Yet, it seems that God has a sense of humor, which circumstances sometimes reveal. This is one such case. In this lesson we see God's fingerprints all over a case of poetic justice. Purists may object to the reference about God's fingerprints because God is not mentioned in the book of Esther.

True; that is one of the peculiarities of the book. But, as we read the scripture we see all the hallmarks of God's standard of justice played out. There is a traditional proverb that warns us about digging wells and laying traps for others. For the wells we dig may become our own graves. This in essence is a proper summary of the book of Esther. Does that principle still

hold today? Follow the lesson!

Fortunately for many abusers of the modern justice systems, our society does not execute offenders as they did in Esther's day. Nevertheless, as you will see in the sections below, those who seek to manipulate justice systems pay a price. At times it takes years for injustices to come to light. However, come to light they do. And for this we say, to God be the glory!

At times it takes years for injustices to come to light. However, come to light they do. And for this we say, to God be the glory!

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

The story of Esther is set in a time when Jewish people were under the rule of the Persian Empire. There are four main characters to the story: the king of the empire, his powerful "Secretary of State and Chief Administrator" Haman, Queen Esther, and her cousin Mordecai. Esther and Mordecai were both Jews –

devoted Jews, who felt the pain of their brothers and sisters. Haman had an oversized ego and loved people to praise and adore him. Mordecai (perhaps because Jews only did homage to God Jehovah) could not bring himself to give such praise and adoration to Haman. That offended the great and mighty chief Haman. This tension between Haman and Mordecai set the scene for what unfolds in Chapters 3, 5, and 7.

Offended by Mordecai's refusal to lavish respect to him, Haman devised a plan to get rid of Mordecai and all of his fellow Jews.

To execute the plan, Haman needed royal authority. So, he went to the king and tricked the king into authorizing the vile plan to eliminate the Jews. Queen Esther, a Jew herself, got word of the plan. It grieved her to the heart. She could not let her people suffer this wicked injustice. So, Queen Esther came up with a plan, a counter plan. Of course, as queen she had no authority on her own to put the plan in place. So, just as Haman had done, she set about to get the king's

approval. Meanwhile, Haman had gone ahead and built gallows for Mordecai's execution. Haman had no idea of what awaited him. As part of Esther's plan she invited the king and Haman to a special dinner party in the palace. Haman was beside himself. He thought the invitation was a tribute to his importance. But he was wrong, so wrong.

At what was supposed to be the dinner party, Esther exposed Haman's diabolic plan to the king. When the king heard of the evil Haman was planning, fire came out of his ears and nose. He was that mad. And in a display of good poetic justice, Haman was killed on the same gallows which he had built for Mordecai and the Jews. As my grandmother used to

“
As my grandmother
used to say, “Be careful
what you wish for; you
may get it.”

say, “Be careful what you wish for; you may get it.” Haman wanted someone to die in his gallows and it turned out to be him!

SANKOFA

Here is a 2018 story which was widely reported both in the Ugandan and international press. It appropriately gives

a modern-day example of the fall of a senior court prosecutor. The headlines should have been, “Prosecutor Now Prosecuted.” It is truly a story of how the tables of natural justice can turn.

According to the reports, William Bayo, a senior state prosecutor in the Gulu (Uganda) High Court, was arrested and charged for allegedly demanding a bribe from a suspect in a money theft case.

The prosecutor was arrested at the Jojos Palace Hotel where he allegedly went to receive the bride.

This case had a glaring similarity with the Mordecai – Haman situation. The prosecutor allegedly asked for the bribe from a suspect in a robbery case. A person connected to the suspect informed the authorities of the bribe demand and a counter-operation was set up. As a result, the prosecutor was arrested at the place which was supposed to be the bribe-paying location. Just another case that proves the Bible is still very relevant to our times.

CASE STUDY

The Miami Herald reported this case in November 2018. In this case, “Raimundo Atesiano, the former Biscayne Park (Florida) police chief who directed his officers to frame innocent (black) men for a series of unsolved burglaries, admitted he wanted to appease community leaders and polish the village’s property crimes record.” Apparently, the community was

putting heavy pressures on the police to come up with answers for the crime situation. The police chief, by his own admission, gave in to that pressure and came up with a plan to show better results. As a result, the chief “directed his officers to frame innocent (black) men for a series of unsolved burglaries.”

They deprived these men of their civil rights because the charges laid against them had no legal basis. In the end, the judge sentenced the police chief to three years in prison!

But this case of poetic justice did not stop there. Other officers who had worked under the corrupt chief got free



Just another case that proves the Bible is still very relevant to our times.

accommodations in the jails. These were the same jails they had worked so corruptly to put black men in. In one case, three officers pleaded guilty to charges of civil rights violations. According to the records, these now former officers were guilty of “falsifying the arrest affidavits for a 16-year-old black suspect for four unsolved break-ins in June 2013.” And here was the irony in this case. Shortly before this corruption unfolded, the police chief had “touted the town’s 100 percent burglary clearance record at a village commission meeting.” Each of the three officers in the case of the 16-year-old were sentenced to a year in jail. And note this! All the charges against the framed teenager were eventually dropped.

The revelations, investigations, and convictions that followed the former police chief’s arrest and conviction read like a Saturday night crime drama movie. We have deliberately omitted some details. We have enough to make one point: because of God’s standard of

justice, what is done in the dark must be revealed in the light. It does not matter where the injustice occurs. It could be in the back street of your neighborhood, or in the highest offices of government. God will use servants to find and expose it. As was the case with Mordecai, the person God may use to expose corruption does not have to be a clergy person.

LIFE APPLICATION

Most Christians are very familiar with two verses from the book of Esther – 4:14 and 4:16. Both of these reflect Esther’s great courage. For the sake of her people she was willing to risk her position as queen and face possible death for the sake of justice. Consider this. When you reflect on those verses, how do

they speak to you? And, to what extent do the sentiments in those verses awaken awareness that to stand for justice may involve personal sacrifice? No doubt God will move when we pray and ask for help in situations of injustices. However, we must be open to the idea that God may want to move through us. Also note

...because of God’s
standard of justice,
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in the light.

the high level of cooperation that Esther and Mordecai used to find a solution to the threat of Haman. Often, no one person can force the justice a situation may demand. It usually takes a group marching in line to the same drum. Here again, we must assess our willingness to cooperate with others for the common good. For believers this is easy, right?

What is the takeaway from this lesson? The same conclusion we came to in other lessons on justice and injustice: in the end, right will always prevail. Injustice may flourish for a while. The plots to keep justice out of the courtrooms and government offices may get the support of many powerful people. Yet, at the right time and in the right way, God will ensure that justice prevails.

Sometimes you may bluntly ask yourself this question about a situation. “Will justice really prevail in the case of _____(enter the situation you are considering)?” If your answer is yes,

then you have mastered this lesson. If you have doubts, consider rereading the lesson.

QUESTIONS

1. What is your main take-away from the story in the book of Esther?
2. How is this story still relevant to us today?
3. How do you respond to the statement, “Esther shows that God is a revengeful God?”

CLOSING DEVOTION

We will close this lesson with a corporate reading of Psalm 7:6-8 (Message Bible).

⁶⁻⁸ Stand up, God; pit your holy fury against my furious enemies. Wake up, God. My accusers have packed the courtroom; it's

judgment time. Take your place on the bench, reach for your gavel, throw out the false charges against me. I'm ready, confident in your verdict: “Innocent.”

Amen.

“...at the right time and in the right way, God will ensure that justice prevails.”

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**April 13-April 19**

Monday	Esther 3:1-6 (Mordecai Refuses to Bow to Haman)
Tuesday	Esther 3:7-11 (Haman Sets Decree to Destroy the Jews)
Wednesday	Esther 5:9-14 (Haman Builds Gallows to Hang Mordecai)
Thursday	Esther 8:3-8, 16-17 (Decree Against Jews Struck Down)
Friday	Esther 9:18-23, 29-32 (Festival of Purim Established)
Saturday	Esther 10:1-3 (Mordecai Advances Welfare of the Jews)
Sunday	Esther 7:1-10 (Esther's Plea and Haman's Punishment)

THE LORD LOVES JUSTICE

Lesson Scripture: Isaiah 61:8–62:12

Focus Scripture: Isaiah 61:8-11; 62:2-4a (end with “Desolate”)

Key Verses: For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

Isaiah 61:8 (NRSV)

ISAIAH 61:8-11; 62:2-4A (END WITH “DESOLATE”) (NRSV)

Isaiah 61:8-11

8 For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

62:2-4a (end with “Desolate”)

2 The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.

3 You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

4 You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;...

ISAIAH 61:8-11; 62:2-4A (END WITH “DESOLATE”) (KJV)

Isaiah 61:8-11

8 For I the Lord love judgment, I hate robbery for burnt offering; and I will direct their work in truth, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

9 And their seed shall be known among the Gentiles, and their offspring among the people: all that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the Lord hath blessed.

10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels.

11 For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.

62:2-4a (end with “Desolate”)

2 And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name.

3 Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God.

4 Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate:...

INTRODUCTION

The scripture, especially the **Key Verse**, puts God's position on justice beyond any doubt. But the passage goes even further. It reinforces three factors about God's view of justice. First, God rewards people who stand for justice. Second, when God punishes a nation for injustice the punishment lasts only for a set time. And third, there is a strong link between the practice of justice and economic prosperity in a nation.

But the association between justice, the rule of law, and economic prosperity is not only shown in the Bible. The World Bank also recognizes it. So, we don't have to keep the issue of justice in a "religious and emotional goodness" box. When we consider the economic implication of the practice of justice, we find more reason why we should urge leaders to make the practice of justice a feature of their administration. We explore aspects of the link between justice and prosperity in our examples and case study below.



When God's blessings are on a nation, that nation stands out as extraordinary.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

In the scriptures we can see God's promise of abundant living to the Jews returning out of captivity. However, we do not see these promises as ancient and exclusive to the Jewish nation. See them also as extended to us through our relations with Jesus Christ. However, we must note that to realize the promises,

people must recognize and accept the character of God. The almighty is the Lord who loves justice and hates wrongdoing. Further, God is a covenant God who rewards the faithful and compensates them for their sufferings. When God's blessings are on a nation, that nation stands out as extraordinary. Through the special prosperity

of blessed people, onlookers come to recognize that God is a God of justice, and they praise the Lord.

Isaiah 62:1-4 shows God's special love for Israel (including us in spiritual Israel). They also highlighted the divine desire to see justice practiced among the Lord's people. The special prosperity

which God releases on his people makes them the envy of the world. God's faithful people will not be put in situations where onlookers will see them as forsaken or forgotten by God. Also, the blessings do not stop at one generation. They extend to all the descendants of the blessed people (verse 5). In verses 6-10, God promised the nation security and protection. Then God renewed the prediction that the nation would be the "pride of the earth." Because they would be secured, they would enjoy the fruits of their labors. No one will rob them. Then in verses 10-12, the message points to the coming of the special one, the Messiah, who will usher in the promised new era.

SANKOFA

Through a series of special projects, the World Bank shows that it recognizes the close link between the practice of justice and the prosperity of nations. In one of its publication (see endnote) we noted, "Justice institutions are vital to the achievement of the World Bank's twin goals to end extreme poverty and promote

shared prosperity. Empirical studies demonstrate the critical role of justice for fostering a healthy business environment, enhancing growth, improving access to public services (particularly for the poor), curbing corruption and restraining the abuse of power. Justice underpins the political process by protecting individuals' rights, facilitating collective action and enabling credible commitment."

“Justice institutions are vital to the achievement of the World Bank’s twin goals to end extreme poverty and promote shared prosperity.”

As a result of this recognition, the World Bank committed resources and personnel to help many countries improve the quality of justice institutions. In Kenya, for example, one of the World Bank's projects helped the judiciary to put in place a system to track legal cases. This has enhanced the

administration of justice in that country. Similarly, in Nigeria, a Bank project helped to create legal aid centers. The Central African Republic people got assistance in promoting compliance with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. For Cambodia, it was support for the Arbitration Council to resolve labor

disputes. For Sierra Leone, the Bank offered help to paralegals to address administrative law issues and improve the delivery of health services. These were all projects to strengthen the practice of justice in these countries. As the benefits of these projects flow through societies, we should see in these countries some of the prosperity conditions which Isaiah saw in a liberated Israel.

(The full World Bank report on the association between justice and prosperity: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/governance/brief/justice-rights-and-public-safety>)

CASE STUDY

Isaiah painted a glowing image of what God had planned for the liberated Jewish people. And although some parts of the vision were spiritual, we also see in it many earthly aspects. For in every nation, we find people who hold progressive dreams for their people, especially the poor and disadvantaged. In America one such person was Henry McNeal Turner. Mr. Turner saw himself as an educator

and this was reflected in his work. His vision of a society which treated all people with respect and dignity led him to join the AME Church in 1854. In 1880 he became a bishop in the church. He spearheaded the growth of the AME Church in Georgia. His pioneering work went as far as ordaining a woman as a deacon. This was very controversial and divisive at that time.

For in every nation, we find people who hold progressive dreams for their people, especially the poor and disadvantaged.

While many people talk glowingly about seeing better for the people, few dare to devote their lives to make that better life a reality. Bishop Turner both spoke it and worked tirelessly to see it happen. In the latter part of the 1800s he was among the pioneers who cut paths to better prospects for

Negroes. Because of Bishop Turner's achievements, many African Americans now sit high in the American society. Let us look briefly at some of those achievements.

Bishop Turner became the publication manager for the AME *The Christian*

Recorder. He used that platform to inspire and educate his people towards the same better life vision that was driving him. As a community leader in Washington, D.C., he drew many into his dream of taking their place in society. Towards that end, he did his part. For example, he scored another first when he became the U.S. Postmaster in Macon, Georgia: the first black person to hold that office. Outside the church, as a member of the Republican party he helped to motivate and organize black voters in Georgia. We must also note his contribution as one of the first black state representatives in the Georgia legislature. He represented his people there until he and other “colored” representatives were kicked out in a vote that highlighted the racial hostilities of his day. As part of his vision of seeing black people participate in all levels of society, he was part of the lobby for President Lincoln to allow Negroes into the military. He himself was one of the first African American chaplains in the U.S. military.

Bishop Turner left for us a shining example of what we can do to help bring about the better life we often daydream about.

For some, Bishop Turner is remembered for his “God is a Negro” remarks. He defended the remarks by noting that a people needed to see their reflection in their deity. To say that those remarks were considered inflammatory and divisive would be an understatement. Many people could not see (or refused to see) the greater point Turner was trying to make. Also noteworthy is his time as chairman of the board of Morris Brown College. Bishop Turner left for us a shining example of what we can do to help bring about the better life we often daydream about. And we must never forget the times in which he made his mark: a time that was bitterly hostile to people of his race. What a display of humility!

LIFE APPLICATION

Notwithstanding racism and injustices in the world today, we must admit, as a race, people of African descent have come a long way. Of course we have not yet reached the Promised Land. Still, we can see its shores from where we are now. This thought should prompt in us

great appreciation for the forerunners who built the foundation on which we now stand. Therefore, we should stop occasionally to reflect on those pioneers. In this regard, ask yourself how much you know about the work and achievements of people like Bishop Henry M. Turner and Frederick Douglass. What can we do to ensure that the work and sacrifices of such people are never forgotten? Where necessary, research the contributions they made to secure some of the privileges and opportunities we now enjoy.

As noted in the **Introduction**, it is so easy to talk about having a better life for our people. Anyone can do that, and many do. But after wishing and complaining, nothing happens. The better life comes when people create it through work, commitment, and sacrifice. Therefore, each person must think about what he or she is doing or can do to make life better for our people. We do not have to be famous or have prestigious titles to make a contribution. Everyone in his

or her corner of influence can contribute to the practice of justice in our society. Take time to consider how you will make your contribution. Again, as hinted in the **Introduction**, there is a link between the practice of justice in a country and the nation's economic health. The more widespread the practice of justice, the more prosperous the nation will be. Even the secular experts at the World Bank

and United Nations recognize this. Think about what you can do to enhance justice and prosperity in your community. Put the emphasis on actions rather than words.

Finally, we will state the obvious. Consider for a moment Psalm 127:1. It gives this warning: unless God is at the center of our

efforts to do something, we are wasting time, effort, and money. Whatever we seek to do, we must be certain that we seek the approval and guidance of God. We said that this is obvious, and yes, it is. Nevertheless, many people step out on projects and programs without consulting the Lord and asking for God's help. Insure

Whatever we seek
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of God.

you do not do that. And, if at this time you are involved in any program for which you have not sought God's clearance, stop and correct that now in a time of prayer and meditation.

QUESTIONS

1. What evidence do you see to support the idea that the practice of justice brings prosperity to a nation?
2. The writer in 62:1 says, "For Zion's sake, I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest." What cause or issue will make you "not keep silent" or cause you not to rest?
3. How can we use reports from secular

organizations like the World Bank to make the call for more justice in our countries?

4. What more do you know of Bishop's Henry Turner's fight for justice for African Americans?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Psalm 23 gives an impressive imaginary picture of God's protection and provision for those who trust the Lord. This is the same picture projected by the set scriptures. A corporate recital of Psalm 23 is a fitting way to end this session.

Prayer: Dear God, we thank you for your protection and provisions. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

April 20-April 26

Monday	1 Kings 3:16-28 (Solomon Makes a Just Decision)
Tuesday	Luke 4:14-21 (Jesus Issues His Platform for Justice)
Wednesday	Leviticus 25:8-17 (The Year of Jubilee Established)
Thursday	Isaiah 49:1-7 (A Light to the Nations)
Friday	Isaiah 61:1-7 (A New Vision for the People)
Saturday	Isaiah 62:5-12 (Zion Welcomes the Redeemed Home)
Sunday	Isaiah 61:8-11; 62:2-4a (end with "desolate") (The Lord Brings the People Justice)

A VISION OF RESTORATION

Lesson Scripture: Zephaniah 3

Focus Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Key Verse: I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast. Zephaniah 3:19 (NRSV)

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20 (NRSV)

14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

15 The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.

17 The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing

18 as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.

19 I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

20 At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20 (KJV)

14 Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.

15 The Lord hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the Lord, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more.

16 In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack.

17 The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.

18 I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly, who are of thee, to whom the reproach of it was a burden.

19 Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame.

20 At that time will I bring you again, even in the time that I gather you: for I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the Lord.

INTRODUCTION

In the set text, we see what is a usual pattern with prophetic messages. They start with a notation of what was ungodly in the nations. Then judgment and punishment is predicted. But this period of chastisement is followed by a promise of restoration. Often, the restoration period points beyond the current period into the millennial age. It is indeed helpful to know that something good always flows from God's chastisement of a people. This is as true for individuals as it is for nations. Further, these prophetic Old Testament messages point to the very nature of God. Therefore, we see in them much of what was later made plain in the New Testament period.

If you listen carefully you can hear John 10:10 as an undertone in the text. Yes, God will punish sin. But out of that punishment can come a higher, rich, and satisfying life. Is that not the promise of John 10:10, that Jesus came into the world to bring life, and more abundant living? Sadly, many of us never appreciate that life until *after* God has put us up against some hard walls in life.

That reality puts into focus scriptures like Psalm 119:71, "My suffering was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees." See how this is played out in the examples given below.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Chapter 3 is the climax of the prophetic message of the prophet Zephaniah. The message cuts across three time periods: the situation of the prophet's day, the days of the Messiah, and the time of the final eternal judgment. Some commentators argue, with good justification, that today we are in the center period. Also, in the chapter we see three concurrent themes. In verses 1-7 the prophet calls out the injustice with a view to inspiring repentance. Verses 3-8

Yes, God will punish sin. But out of that punishment can come a higher, rich, and satisfying life.

give encouragement and hope to God's faithful people. The final section, verses 14-20, point to the future prosperity which reaches into the end-times. Keep this background in mind as we focus on verses 14-20. One last point to add here! Some critics have a problem with the contrasting messages of severe judgment and hope for salvation in the same chapter. But for most commentators, that is not a

problem. Jesus also gave these blended messages of condemnation, repentance, and salvation in the same teaching.

Verses 14-15 looked to the coming days of eternal salvation (relief) for God's faithful people. In contrast to the horrors which the people faced at that time, the prophet gave good news, exciting news. So the people were encouraged to rejoice, to shout and sing. This message of eventual salvation was directed to the

'daughter of Zion' and 'Israel.' Both of these terms are inclusive of the faithful people of Zephaniah's day as well as all other faithful followers of Christ. So we are included. Why should the people rejoice? Because at that time, all their troubles will be over, and they will be safe and secured in the presence of God.

The good news to the redeemed people continues in verses 16-18. The prophet explained further why the people should rejoice and be happy. The prophet saw God dwelling in their presence. And, in that day of salvation, God will have great pleasure in God's people. The Lord almighty will shower them with love. They will have no cause to mourn or fear.

To appreciate verses 19-20, see them in contrast to the conditions that existed in Zephaniah's day. In the prophet's day the people were badly oppressed. The people will now be free, and God will punish the oppressors. The poor and helpless were without a defender or provider – without hope. Now God will be their provider and protector. Instead of the shame and disgrace which the exiles endured, these redeemed people will have glory and fame.

And, in that day of salvation, God will have great pleasure in God's people. The Lord almighty will shower them with love.

Also, the people were exiled in a hostile environment, so God made the promise to return them home, i.e. to their familiar place of safety. This would not be to their former lands where they would face more threats and hardships. Instead, God would bring them home, to God's home.

That is, to a secure place of peace, security, and prosperity. What a promise; what a message of hope!

Finally, the Lord personally signed off on the message: "I the Lord have spoken." This must have been an inspiring message of hope to a people who had endured captivity and oppression. It is

also a message of hope for us today. We are included in the promises. Whatever we face on earth now, we can still look forward to what will happen on “that day” or “the day of the Lord” (i.e. the return of Jesus Christ).

SANKOFA

Since today’s text mentioned Ethiopia, it is fitting to use that country to demonstrate the power of hope in a nation. Prior to May 2015, Ethiopia was a country in chaos. Charges of human rights abuses, corruption in government, and wars among different tribes abounded. Generally, the outlook for the future was negative. Then came May 2015, and a new leader was elected. By August 2016 the international press was reporting that the mood of the country had changed. People were now more hopeful, more positive. What happened in that short space of time to turn around the outlook of the population? Hope! The new leader sounded a note of hope for the people.

From the start of his administration, the new prime minister showed that he

was open to addressing the concerns of the people. He promised to end the attacks on demonstrators, to listen to the differing opinions, and to accommodate them where possible. Also, he offered to explore ways to improve relations between the various ethnic groups. Further, the leader promised to drop charges against activists, and to have frequent open dialogue with the public.

Social reforms would come. Reforms would also be made in the justice system. In short, the government gave the assurance of a more open, people-friendly administration. It would be one in which justice would be evident.

It is still too early to say how well the government will deliver on the promises. The country still faces great

challenges with droughts, shortages of portable water, and reclaiming drought land for agriculture. However, the shift in outlook shows the power of hope a leader can bring to a people. Fear and hopelessness have largely been replaced by hope. Even the critics are cautiously optimistic.

It is easy to assume that for people

“Whatever we face on earth now, we can still look forward to what will happen on “that day” or “the day of the Lord” (i.e. the return of Jesus Christ).

in a poor country, intangible things like the character of the leaders are not important. Such cases show clearly this is not true. As poor as they were, the people of Ethiopia showed that they do appreciate things like character and the philosophies of their leaders. Just like us, they know when they elect people with a love for decency and justice, the level of hope and outlook rise. On the other hand, when people who are indifferent to justice or comfortable with injustice are in offices of high influence, the people lose hope and take pessimistic positions on future outcomes.

CASE STUDY

What about the level of hope in American society? Naturally this varies from region to region. However, there are some national measures. At the end of 2018 NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist conducted a poll on people's outlook towards the coming year. The results of the poll were published in December 2018. They showed an interesting picture. Based on the responses, the pollsters came to some interesting conclusions. About 60% of the population held a positive

outlook towards the coming year (2019). Around 37% held pessimistic or fearful outlooks; while 3% were uncertain. But the surprises went even deeper.

The 60% positive response was an increase of six percentage points over the corresponding results for 2011 (54%). So the next question was, what caused this high level of positive outlooks? The prospect for families, jobs, health services, and finance were among the major reasons given. On the other hand, the majority of people with negative outlooks identified politics and the political news reports as the basis for their negative responses.

One of the amazing things about these answers was the absence of references to intangibles like justice and religion. So, can we conclude that Americans are comfortable with the level of justice in society? Or are such things not that important to how they see life events? Alternatively, are Americans complacent about such matters? Something to think about!

“As poor as they were, the people of Ethiopia showed that they do appreciate things like character and the philosophies of their leaders.”

LIFE APPLICATION

As Christians, we believe firmly that God will ultimately provide solutions for all the issues that annoy and harm us. And that is great. But how does that assurance help us to face the hurtful situations that confront us now? This is a very practical question. No doubt different people have varying answers for it. Maybe you can suggest that it be the topic for one of your Bible study sessions.

What is shared in such a session will help individual believers, especially new converts, in a tremendous way.

In really tough, disturbing situations, people may say, "Only God can solve this." The challenge for us is to recognize when that which we hope for is happening. And we must do this with the understanding that the way God works is usually outside our normal way of thinking. So, in your private meditation time, consider how you recognize when God is at work to provide relief in a hurtful situation. What are the signs which scream to you, "God's got this"? To find meaningful clues, you may need to consider when, in the past, God provided

amazing solutions seemingly 'out of the blue.'

The next consideration flows from the suggestion in the last paragraph. We say God provides relief to distressing situations. We know these solutions often come through the actions of people. God brought the Israelites out of Egypt. But Moses and Joshua led the march to the Promised Land. With that in mind,

consider how you would know if God is trying to use you to resolve a situation for another person. In thinking about this, think about the ordinary "nobodys" God used to help other people find solutions. One such case is in 2 Kings 5 where a nameless young girl helped Naaman to find healing.

So, in your private meditation time, consider how you recognize when God is at work to provide relief in a hurtful situation.

QUESTIONS

1. In the text, as in other parts of the Bible, we see God's punishments followed by a period of restoration. As Christians, how can we reflect this feature of God's love when dealing with people who hurt us deeply?
2. In how many ways can you connect God's promise of restoration in the set

text to John chapter 10?

3. To what extent does the promise of a world of everlasting justice and peace motivate you to try to live a life that pleases God?

Refrain

*Claim the promise, plead it o'er and o'er;
On his Word lay hold as ne'er before;
Claim the promise, plead it o'er and
o'er; Let your faith be mightier than e'er
before.*

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

We close this lesson by singing or reciting the lyrics to the hymn "Claim the Promise." Here are the first two stanzas:

"Claim the Promise"

Never let a shade of care rest on your brow,

You can have the Savior's helping hand just now;

He has promised if his Word you will believe,

That according to your faith you shall receive.

He has called you in the world to shine for him,

Never need the brightness of your life grow dim;

He has promised evermore he will bestow

All that you may need to keep your light aglow.

Refrain

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to walk in the power of your promises. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

April 27–May 3

Monday	Deuteronomy 30:1-6 (God Promises Restoration of Israel's Fortunes)
Tuesday	Ezekiel 34:11-16 (God Will Shepherd the People)
Wednesday	Zechariah 10:6-12 (God Will Strengthen the People)
Thursday	Acts 5:27-32 (Christ's Forgiveness of Israel's Sins)
Friday	Zephaniah 3:1-7 (Leaders, Priests, and Prophets Don't Listen)
Saturday	Zephaniah 3:8-13 (God Will Preserve a Remnant)
Sunday	Zephaniah 3:14-20 (Rejoice in God's Glory and Salvation)

PEACE AND JUSTICE REIGN

Lesson Scripture: Zechariah 8

Focus Scripture: Zechariah 8:1-8, 11-17

Key Verse: I have purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; do not be afraid. Zechariah 8:15 (NRSV)

ZECHARIAH 8:1-8, 11-17 (NRSV)

Zechariah 8:1-8

1 The word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying:

2 Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath.

3 Thus says the Lord: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts shall be called the holy mountain.

4 Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age.

5 And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.

6 Thus says the Lord of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the Lord of hosts?

7 Thus says the Lord of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country;

8 and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.

11-17

11 But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, says the Lord of hosts.

12 For there shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit, the ground shall give its

ZECHARIAH 8:1-8, 11-17 (KJV)

Zechariah 8:1-8

1 Again the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying,

2 Thus saith the Lord of hosts; I was jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I was jealous for her with great fury.

3 Thus saith the Lord; I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and Jerusalem shall be called a city of truth; and the mountain of the Lord of hosts the holy mountain.

4 Thus saith the Lord of hosts; There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age.

5 And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof.

6 Thus saith the Lord of hosts; If it be marvellous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, should it also be marvellous in mine eyes? saith the Lord of hosts.

7 Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Behold, I will save my people from the east country, and from the west country;

8 And I will bring them, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in truth and in righteousness.

11-17

11 But now I will not be unto the residue of this people as in the former days, saith the Lord of hosts.

12 For the seed shall be prosperous; the vine shall give her fruit, and the ground shall give her

produce, and the skies shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things.

13 Just as you have been a cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you and you shall be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.

14 For thus says the Lord of hosts: Just as I purposed to bring disaster upon you, when your ancestors provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the Lord of hosts,

15 so again I have purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; do not be afraid.

16 These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace,

17 do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the Lord.

increase, and the heavens shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things.

13 And it shall come to pass, that as ye were a curse among the heathen, O house of Judah, and house of Israel; so will I save you, and ye shall be a blessing: fear not, but let your hands be strong.

14 For thus saith the Lord of hosts; As I thought to punish you, when your fathers provoked me to wrath, saith the Lord of hosts, and I repented not:

15 So again have I thought in these days to do well unto Jerusalem and to the house of Judah: fear ye not.

16 These are the things that ye shall do; Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbour; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates:

17 And let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbour; and love no false oath: for all these are things that I hate, saith the Lord.

VOCABULARY

- **Paradox** – Seemingly contradicting conditions.

INTRODUCTION

Naturally as humans, and as believers, we want peace and justice in our lives and in the society in which we live. But, we can face hardship which lasts for a long time. At times it seems like the bad times have no end. We cannot see the days of freedom from where we now stand. It is in those long, distressing situations that a word from the Lord gives life. In this lesson we will see where and how God

sent such a word to the descendants of Jacob (Israel). All the promises that God had made to Abraham and Jacob were still in play. Yet the people were literally living in hell. As you study the lesson, try to put yourself in the place of the people to whom the message of restoration was first sent. Try to see and feel what they saw and felt.

Then, consider the modern parallels given later and note the wonderful outcomes God can design when we endure in faith. What may look hopeless and impossible for us is nothing in the hands of God. Miraculous outcomes do happen. Solutions, though unforeseen by

us, can spring forth. Read this lesson with a view of putting some of the principles to work in your own life.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

We must note that this is a message, or rather a series of messages, from the Lord of Sabaoth, Lord of hosts. The Hebrews gave names to God to indicate the aspect of God's character they wanted to emphasize. By using this term, Zechariah was highlighting God as the ultimate warrior who controls the armies of both heaven and earth. So, what was the "Ultimate Warrior" concerned about it? And what did he plan to do about those concerns?

Bear in mind that Israel (the descendants of Jacob) were to be God's special people on the earth. They were to be the people who showed off God's favor and blessings to the world. But, their sinful acts of injustice had blurred the picture. So rather than being a bright light to the world, they were walking in deep darkness. The people who were blessed to be more than conquerors were conquered and enslaved. God showed

up to reveal divine plans to put Israel in its rightful place both on the earth and in eternity. Let us examine those messages. God opened by expressing his deep concern (jealousy) for God's people. This concern had made God angry about what was happening in the nation. So, God was showing up to urge the people to do what was right. God also invited them to look forward to the glorious days God

was setting up for them.

The first message was that Jerusalem and the Temple Mount (the sacred places of worship) were going to be restored. In the second message, God promised that God's people would once again live in a place of safety and joy. This was followed by a call for them to get serious

about restoring the temple. At first glance, the task may have looked impossible. However, it was achievable because God, for whom nothing is impossible, was going to help them.

Next, God promised to bring together his people from all over the world to the sacred place of worship. God would show



God was showing up to urge the people to do what was right.

up in that safe space to assure God's people of divine favor. God connected that promise to the work of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. The people were to respect the call of the prophets and be diligent in the rebuilding effort. Significant blessings awaited the people who restored the sacred place of worship. The people would see these blessings in both spiritual and material prosperity. God went on to explain the vision further. Because of their disobedience, Judah and Israel had become symbols of a cursed nation. God was about to change all that. Instead of the world looking on Israel with scorn, the onlookers would see Israel as a blessed prospering nation.

The people had a role to play in bringing about these blessings. God expected them to be truthful in their speech and dealings with one another. They had to practice what God loves – justice. They were to promote peace rather than trouble and strife. Finally, God emphasized the turnaround that was to come. The blessings on God's

people were going to be so big that the whole world would take note. People from around the world would flock to the Jews to find out what they were doing to be so prosperous. God's original vision for Israel will be realized.

SANKOFA

Consider the miracle that had to occur for Israel to move from where it was (when Zechariah wrote) to the vision the prophet saw. God had to move the country from deplorable to glorious. Sometimes, we read about these miraculous transformations and have difficulty embracing them. We can easily think those stories only happen in the Bible. Wrong! Right in the times we are living on this earth are rich examples of miraculous turnarounds. One such story comes from Ethiopia.

At the turn of this century, Ethiopia was in a deplorable situation. It was listed among the poorest countries in the world. About 50% of the population was living below the international poverty line, according to data from institutions

The blessings on
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like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Childbirth deaths were about 1089 per 100,000 live births. Fast forward to 2015/2016 and there was a miraculously changed picture. The people living below the poverty line fell from around 50% to under 24%. No small achievement by any standards, but even more amazing for a country like Ethiopia. The economy that was once in shambles a few years before is booming. The dramatic improvement in the economy has led to equally dramatic improvement in living standards.

What does this mean? It shows that the remarkable promises we see in the Bible are very believable. Dramatic, unpredictable improvements are still possible today.

CASE STUDY

To appreciate the power in a lesson like this, you have to put yourself in the position of one of the persons who heard it for the first time. You can do that by considering cases where only a miracle could have brought desirable change.

Here is one such case.

Consider that you are an average young adult in Maryland in the late 1600's. At this stage, whatever your personal views on interracial unions, assume you are deeply in love with a person from another race. This person is equally in love with you. Both of you would love to get married and enjoy family life together. But there is one problem. The

laws of the state make interracial unions illegal (anti-miscegenation laws). And, the people of the state support and uphold that law. Even some churches! As a young person in love, could you see that situation changing? Most people could not. Those laws did not change until 1967, in Loving vs. Virginia. That

was some 300 years later. (Although some state judges had ruled against those laws earlier.)

Now, consider what would have been your mindset, if in 1670 you had heard from credible reports that legislation was being prepared to change those laws. Most people would have been hopeful



It shows that the remarkable promises we see in the Bible are very believable.

and looked forward to the day when the promised legislation would take effect. That is the power of credible promises of relief in harsh situations. Credible promises of a better life give us hope. And, with that hope we find the strength to endure hardships. Hope gives us something to live for. That is the kind of impact the prophecy of Zechariah must have had on his people. It would have awakened in them a stronger desire to restore the temple, the sacred place of worship.

(Anyone interested in the story in this section can read it in the book, *Flavor*, which gives the life story of Shirley Howard and John Billy, an interracial couple. It explains how they had the fight of their life against the anti-miscegenation laws of Maryland. When God has decreed justice for a situation, it may take 307 years to happen, but justice and improvement *will* happen!)

LIFE APPLICATION

Consider the people in Zechariah's day. After they heard the message, they had to deal with a paradox. On one hand,

they had the reality of the present's harsh living conditions. On the other, they had the promises of the Lord. When you find yourself in similar circumstances, how do you deal with them? In this regard, consider the case study. What can you do when the justice you desire is promised in the scriptures, but not seen on earth?

Take this consideration a step further. What do you say to relatives who are

facing seemingly hopeless situations? Consider the different ways you can help to give them hope, especially if they are not Christians. For how long could you bear with their constant complaining and pleading? Consider the practical steps you could take to help them. Many of us

attend worship services weekly. We hear sermons often. Yet, we carry around loads of problems from year to year. In the safety of your private meditations, consider how the worship services you attend and the sermons you hear equip you to deal with the everyday challenges of life. In what ways do you connect what

When God has decreed justice for a situation, it may take 307 years to happen, but justice and improvement *will* happen!

you hear in church with what you do outside the church walls? You may want to spend some time thinking about this. Your findings will fashion your outlook on life.

At this stage, think about the messages you hear on the Second Coming of Christ. How do you receive those messages? What is the effect of them to you now? Ideally such messages should give us deeper assurances about the future. How do you handle the criticism that ministers have been preaching these messages for centuries, and nothing has of yet happened? Maybe you can find an old sermon on the Second Coming and listen to it to clarify your thoughts. There are many such messages available for free.

Lastly, give the same thought to a section of The Lord's Prayer. When you pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," what are your mental impressions? Can you connect the image of that request to your desire for justice and peace, or is it just a

line for recital? For people who see God as the source of all peace and justice, that line has the power of dynamite. You can blow away pockets of hopelessness with The Lord's Prayer!

QUESTIONS

1. What do you do to hold on to God's promise of peace in times of strong persecution and injustice?
2. What can we do to help persecuted Christians in Africa and other parts of the world hold on to hope?
3. Apart from the scriptures, where else can we find words of hope God wants us to have in times of trouble?



You can blow
away pockets of
hopelessness with The
Lord's Prayer!

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

The Closing Song: YouTube "Whispering Hope" by Firm Faith Zimbabwe (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9ey1mXIMqA>).

Prayer: Dear Father, help us to hear your voice as you whisper hope to us to get us through these distressing times. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**May 4-May 10**

Monday	Genesis 12:1-8 (God's Worldwide Covenant With Abraham)
Tuesday	Jeremiah 31:31-34 (A New Covenant of the Heart)
Wednesday	Ezekiel 37:15-23 (Divided Peoples to Become One)
Thursday	Romans 12:9-21 (Just Living in Church and World)
Friday	1 Thessalonians 5:12-22 (Cultivate Peaceful and Just Relations)
Saturday	Zechariah 8:18-23 (Joyful Feasts Draw Newcomers)
Sunday	Zechariah 8:1-8, 11-17 (Enjoy Fruits of Peace and Justice)

PRACTICE JUSTICE

Lesson Scripture: Jeremiah 21

Focus Scripture: Jeremiah 21:8-14

Key Verse: Thus says the Lord: Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. Jeremiah 21:12a (NRSV)

JEREMIAH 21:8-14 (NRSV)

8 And to this people you shall say: Thus says the Lord: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.

9 Those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; but those who go out and surrender to the Chaldeans who are besieging you shall live and shall have their lives as a prize of war.

10 For I have set my face against this city for evil and not for good, says the Lord: it shall be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.

11 To the house of the king of Judah say: Hear the word of the Lord,

12 O house of David! Thus says the Lord: Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed, or else my wrath will go forth like fire, and burn, with no one to quench it, because of your evil doings.

13 See, I am against you, O inhabitant of the valley, O rock of the plain, says the Lord; you who say, "Who can come down against us, or who can enter our places of refuge?"

14 I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, says the Lord; I will kindle a fire in its forest, and it shall devour all that is around it.

JEREMIAH 21:8-14 (KJV)

8 And unto this people thou shalt say, Thus saith the Lord; Behold, I set before you the way of life, and the way of death.

9 He that abideth in this city shall die by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth out, and falleth to the Chaldeans that besiege you, he shall live, and his life shall be unto him for a prey.

10 For I have set my face against this city for evil, and not for good, saith the Lord: it shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.

11 And touching the house of the king of Judah, say, Hear ye the word of the Lord;

12 O house of David, thus saith the Lord; Execute judgment in the morning, and deliver him that is spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor, lest my fury go out like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings.

13 Behold, I am against thee, O inhabitant of the valley, and rock of the plain, saith the Lord; which say, Who shall come down against us? or who shall enter into our habitations?

14 But I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, saith the Lord: and I will kindle a fire in the forest thereof, and it shall devour all things round about it.

VOCABULARY

- **Sedition** – Inciting people to rebel.

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, if we are not careful, we will drift into a world of complacency as it relates to God's ideals of justice. As we can see in this lesson, that can be dangerous. In that world of complacency and compromise, we practice double standards. We are firm in our belief that evil must be punished and good rewarded. After all, is that not what God commands? Sure enough! But the question is, do we apply the same standards when the evil is done by our family, friends, or ourselves? For a few persons, the answer is yes. And for many others the answer is no. If the evil is from within our home, we usually find scriptures which point to God's grace and mercy. Instinctively, in those cases we slide away from our strict position that evil must be punished.

Watch for this response to evil as it is displayed in the text. And as you work

through the lesson, keep in mind that a just God applies the same standards to everyone. The fact that Israel and Judah were descendants of Abraham and Jacob could not shield them from the divine wrath that their injustice had earned them. Similarly, our membership in a particular church will not save us from the consequences of our sins. God is indeed merciful to the repentant sinner. When

we are truly sorry for our sins and appeal to the Lord for forgiveness, Jesus is available. The same divine mercy is also available to our enemies when they commit wrong. If we hold this balanced view of the injustices around us, "Pride must die in you, or nothing of heaven can live in you."

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

In this lesson, we see King Zedekiah playing the same game of double standards mentioned in the **Introduction**. The king and his people were guilty of sinful living. When all was well, they disregarded God's righteous commandments. So, God lifted God's



God is indeed
merciful to the
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hand of protection from over them. As a result of their exposure, the nation of Babylon came to war with them. The odds were against them. It looked certain that the Babylonians were going to defeat them and take them hostage. King Zedekiah was afraid, so he sent two messengers (one a priest) to ask the prophet to ask God for protection favors.

King Zedekiah did not expect the answer he got from the prophet. God was not about to save the king and his people. On the contrary, God had set up the invasion. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was an instrument of God. Therefore, Judah was about to pay a heavy price for turning its back on the Lord Jehovah. And so Zedekiah and his people were faced with a hard choice. They could try to resist the Babylonians and be slaughtered; even if they did escape for a while, they would face hardships in the form of starvation and disease. Alternatively, they could give in to God's design and surrender to the invaders. In this case, God would keep

them while they were in captivity.

A striking feature in the **Lesson Scripture** is the message that God personally will be in the fight against Zedekiah and his people. No one wants to take on God in hand to hand combat! And, in fairness to the nation, God spelt out the charges against them. They were systematically practicing injustice. God could not ignore this. Punishment was inevitable.



No one wants to
take on God in hand to
hand combat!

SANKOFA

In Africa, there is a history of violent changes in governments. This was especially true in the period leading up to and shortly after the ending of the rule of the European empires in Africa. In some cases, we saw the “Zedekiah syndrome” played out. While in power, some of those leaders executed use of terror and/or unjust means to take or maintain control. In some cases citizens were brutally murdered. Activists disappeared without a trace. People had their freedoms severely restricted.

However, when those same leaders

were overthrown or otherwise removed, they sang from a different hymnal. It was usual for them to demand justice in a “fair trial.” This, despite the evidence that they themselves had denied this to others. If found guilty of crimes in their home courts, they would apply for justice through international courts and tribunals. That is the “Zedekiah syndrome.” The rule for us to treat other people the way we want to be treated is firmly rooted in scripture (e.g. Luke 6:31).

CASE STUDY

A modern-day example of this “Zedekiah syndrome” was seen in the Pennsylvania court case of former Luzerne county judge, Mark Ciavarella, Jr. in 2011.

In that famous ‘Kids for Cash’ case, the judge was charged and convicted of taking bribes from developers of juvenile detention centers. For his part, the judge would sentence juveniles to these centers. During the case, the judge’s lawyers begged for a “reasonable” sentence. In other words, they wanted a just sentence. They wanted what according to the court papers their

client may have denied over 4,000 juveniles. The court gave the corrupt judge 28 years in jail.

As a result of this case, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court overturned about 4,000 convictions which had been issued by that judge between 2003 and 2008. The Supreme Court ruled that the judge had dealt unjustly in these cases. He had violated the constitutional rights

of the juveniles. One can only hope that the judge was satisfied with the reasonable sentence of 28 years imprisonment which *he* got.

LIFE APPLICATION

In today’s scripture, the prophet Jeremiah spoke as God’s communication director. The message from God was harsh. Please note that in those times Jeremiah could easily have been charged with sedition (inciting people to rebel). That charge carried the death penalty, and there was no appeals court. This raises the question of our willingness to obey God’s messages, even when they conflict with the wishes and orders of civil authorities.

The rule for us to treat other people the way we want to be treated is firmly rooted in scripture (e.g. Luke 6:31).

Currently, some practices which were once considered ungodly are now permitted by civil society. Consider what response you would give if called upon to speak publicly on one of these practices. How would you go about telling your employer, a significant client, or a senior government official that a position is contrary to your understanding of the Word of God? Jeremiah knew the risk he was taking, yet he spoke for God. This is something to think about and apply to your own circumstances.

Based on the passage, God did not judge and condemn Zedekiah for the first or second act of injustice. It appears that the practice of injustice had become widespread and habitual. Since as believers we claim that God is the same now as he was then, this lesson should cause us to pause and consider if we are indeed living to please God. Make it a point to consider this in your next private prayer and meditation session. When you look at your life, what do you see? And, if you do not like the picture you see

on the playback of your life, what do you plan to do to change it?

Serving God can be demanding. Usually, we have no problem in making a choice when the options point between good or bad. But life can hit us with some choices when the options are not that straightforward. Although the text said that the options were life or death (v. 8), it was a hard call to make. It was

a choice between two undesirable options: surrender and be enslaved, or fight and die. Consider your strategies for making hard choices. Do you have criteria for selecting the best from among equally horrible options? If you are going to serve God faithfully, you must have guiding principles

to use in the times of hard choices. Set about developing some before you need them.

There is a view that as believers in the period of grace, we shall not suffer the wrath of God like the people in Old Testament times. This view holds that we have what they did not have: the blood



Jeremiah knew the risk he was taking, yet he spoke for God.

of Jesus the Christ. Consider the extent to which you accept that view. What are the consequences of relying unduly on that view? Consider that the people in Jeremiah's day thought they were safe because they were the descendants of Abraham (v.13).

QUESTIONS

1. How can we guard against complacency regarding God's call for us to act justly?
2. How do we stop ourselves from applying double standards to acts

of injustice: one standard when our enemies are guilty and another standard when our friends are guilty

3. How do we approach God and ask for favors when we know within ourselves we have committed acts of injustice?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

The Closing Song: "Lord, Prepare Me to Be Your Sanctuary."

Prayer: Dear Father, help us to be sensitive to your Holy Spirit, and to be responsive to your prompting to live upright lives. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

May 11-May 17

Monday	Psalm 86:1-13 (Seeking Divine Help in Troubled Times)
Tuesday	Jeremiah 27:1-11 (Land Now Belongs to Babylon)
Wednesday	Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (Choose to Love and Obey the Lord)
Thursday	Jeremiah 38:14-18 (Surrender and the People Will Live)
Friday	Jeremiah 21:1-7 (Jerusalem Will Fall)
Saturday	2 Kings 24:20b–25:7 (Jerusalem Defeated and Zedekiah Exiled)
Sunday	Jeremiah 21:8-14 (Choose the Life of Justice)

REpent OF INJUSTICE

Lesson Scripture: Jeremiah 22

Focus Scripture: Jeremiah 22:1-10

Key Verse: Act with justice and righteousness. Jeremiah 22:3b (NRSV)

JEREMIAH 22:1-10 (NRSV)

1 Thus says the Lord: Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word,

2 and say: Hear the word of the Lord, O King of Judah sitting on the throne of David—you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates.

3 Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.

4 For if you will indeed obey this word, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their servants, and their people.

5 But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation.

6 For thus says the Lord concerning the house of the king of Judah; You are like Gilead to me, like the summit of Lebanon; but I swear that I will make you a desert, an uninhabited city.

7 I will prepare destroyers against you, all with their weapons; they shall cut down your choicest cedars and cast them into the fire.

8 And many nations will pass by this city, and all of them will say one to another, “Why has the Lord dealt in this way with that great city?”

9 And they will answer, “Because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord their God, and worshiped other gods and served them.”

JEREMIAH 22:1-10 (KJV)

1 Thus saith the Lord; Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word,

2 And say, Hear the word of the Lord, O king of Judah, that sittest upon the throne of David, thou, and thy servants, and thy people that enter in by these gates:

3 Thus saith the Lord; Execute ye judgment and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor: and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place.

4 For if ye do this thing indeed, then shall there enter in by the gates of this house kings sitting upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, he, and his servants, and his people.

5 But if ye will not hear these words, I swear by myself, saith the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation.

6 For thus saith the Lord unto the king's house of Judah; Thou art Gilead unto me, and the head of Lebanon: yet surely I will make thee a wilderness, and cities which are not inhabited.

7 And I will prepare destroyers against thee, every one with his weapons: and they shall cut down thy choice cedars, and cast them into the fire.

8 And many nations shall pass by this city, and they shall say every man to his neighbour, Wherefore hath the Lord done thus unto this great city?

9 Then they shall answer, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord their God, and worshipped other gods, and served them.

10 Do not weep for him who is dead, nor bemoan him; weep rather for him who goes away, for he shall return no more to see his native land.

10 Weep ye not for the dead, neither bemoan him: but weep sore for him that goeth away: for he shall return no more, nor see his native country.

VOCABULARY

- **Paradox** – Seemingly contradicting conditions.

INTRODUCTION

This scripture passage is very easy to follow. It falls naturally into four sections. In verses 1-5 God made a simple call to the house of David to change course, repent, and return to the Lord. In the next two verses (6 and 7), God warned about the pending judgment. Verses 8 and 9 look at the extent of the pending destruction, and how people would react to it.



God always leaves it up to us to exercise our free will.

It would be a great devastation that would get global attention. Finally, in verses 10 to 12, we see messages about Josiah’s sons. Note that Josiah had been a good king. You will also want to note that the events Jeremiah saw in chapter 22 have a striking parallel in the New Testament. It was similar to the spiritual desolation which Jesus saw and commented on in Matthew 23:37-39. These passages

show how God in acts of pure love tried to steer people from paths of destruction.

As it was then, so it is today. God always leaves it up to us to exercise our free will. We get a chance to choose right and live; or choose evil and suffer. Therefore,

we must pay attention to the messages God may send to us through God’s faithful servants among us. The Lord does not send spooky spirits to warn us. The messages come through humans just like us. What does the adage say? To be forewarned is to be forearmed!

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

If you read Jeremiah 22 casually, all you will see are judgments, gloom, and doom. On a closer reading, however, you will see an amazing story of God’s fairness, love, and mercy. For in this chapter, God tells King Jehoiakim what he must do to ensure that his family (children of King David) continues as the rulers of the nation. Out of the special love

God had for that family, and in respect of the Lord's promise to King David, God forewarned the king of the dangers of being disobedient to God's rules of justice. It was therefore an act of love that God sent the prophet Jeremiah to talk prophetically to the king. And the message was simple: rule justly. In plain words, the king, his government, and the ruling class must not rob, defraud, or oppress poor and helpless people. Note that in that group of poor and helpless persons, God included foreigners. These were people from other nations who were in the country for one reason or another. The shedding of innocent blood was also addressed in the warning (verse 3).

In verses 4-5 God took the position which God takes about all divine commandments. God leaves it up to the individual to make a choice. Obedience brings blessings; disobedience brings disasters. Yes, the king and his family were special people in God's sight. Yet, God was going to tear them down and ruin them, if they chose to disobey God. God was serious about this matter! God

showed how serious God was when he swore by himself. This is one of those rare events in scripture where we find God swearing by his own honor. You can read Jeremiah 49:13 and 51:14 to see other instances of such an oath. Also note that in scripture there is no stronger affirmation.

So the warning in the passage was a stern warning. Still, it was a warning born

out of divine love. And it was not a complex message. If the king and his family decided to disobey God, they would come crashing down from privileged to pitiful. The fall would be so dramatic and the destruction so devastating it would make world news. People who see or hear about it would wonder how God could be so

mean to a royal family. Eventually, they would understand the fall was a result of rebellion and disobedience. People who reject God can expect to feel the pain of God's rejection.

SANKOFA

Sometimes the things we read in the Bible can seem so remote from the world



**Obedience
brings blessings;
disobedience brings
disasters.**

in which we now live. If we are diligent, we can find remarkable modern-day similarities. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire) we can see a perfect illustration of a leader who fell from splendor and extravagance. He had to flee into exile where he died, away from the splendid palaces he had built. Those luxurious palaces which were once wonders of the world, are now wonders of ruin. Here is a summary of the story in the online *Guardian* (guardian.com) by David Smith in Gbadolite, February 10, 2015. In that article, the writer highlighted the rise and fall of President Mobutu. In that country, one of the poorest in the world, once stood a network of truly opulent presidential palaces. Some estimates put the cost of these palaces at over \$400 million, in a country full of desperately poor people.

In 1997 Mobutu was forced to flee into Morocco, leaving behind the extravagant lifestyle and palaces. He died in that country of prostate cancer. In the article, the writer referred to Mobutu as “the looter-in-chief.” After he fled his country, the palaces were looted and stripped

of all their valuables and furnishings. Today, what was once a wonder of the world, attracting planet-wide admiration, is nothing but a “pathetic and pitiful shell, a mockery of Mobutu’s insane opulence.” A local resident is quoted as saying, “We are not happy how much Mobutu spent while local people were suffering, although he brought us gifts and clothes and money.”

Our brothers and sisters in Africa have seen both the blessings and curses that leaders brought on countries by their obedience or disobedience to the laws of justice.

If you read the above article with an eye on Jeremiah 22, focus on verses 13-16. Which parts of that passage would you apply to what was revealed in the story? Our brothers and sisters in Africa have seen both the blessings and curses that leaders brought on countries by their obedience or disobedience to the laws of justice.

CASE STUDY

Is it reasonable to expect to see a just government on this earth? Yes, it is. The eight-year administration of President Barack Obama gave a glimpse of what that government would look like. Of course, not everyone was happy with President Obama’s administration. Some

of us, with good justification, still question the wisdom of a few positions taken on certain social and moral issues. Be that as it may, the administration had a public face of decency and fairness.

For eight years we saw or heard of no scandals or embarrassing, shady dealings. There was definitely a move to ensure fairness and equality for all people. As far as we know, the courts were given the freedom to make rulings. Some of these judgments went against the government. And, that is a feature we see when the courts are allowed the freedom to act justly. Also, we can note how that administration fought to put medical care services within the reach of all citizens. That was commendable. Now, look again at verses 13-16 of Jeremiah 22 and answer this same question. Which part of that passage can you apply to what you have heard about President Obama's administration?

LIFE APPLICATION

Today's scripture focuses on the quality of government of the kings from

King David's family line. This raises for us a very engaging question: to what extent can we expect justice through secular political processes? There is no clear answer to this. Yet consider it, really consider it. Sometimes, it seems we have to choose from people, all of whom have serious moral and spiritual deficiencies. In other words, the choice may be between the bad and the worst. And, the choices we make will determine how we

participate in political elections and referenda in our country.

Verses 13-14 show clearly that God keeps a record of how we think about and get money and material possessions. If we get them by robbing or defrauding people in any form, it is to our discredit. So, to what extent do you

consider thoughts like these when making decisions about money matters? This consideration extends to where we choose to work, and or the clients we serve. To what extent are we guilty of defrauding people, if we facilitate people and businesses that defraud people? Take time to ponder these matters.

Jeremiah 22:15 stands in harmony

Verses 13-14 show clearly that God keeps a record of how we think about and get money and material possessions.

with Jesus' teaching in Luke 12, especially verse 15. As Christians we are compelled to follow these teachings. Therefore, check if you judge people by what they own and/or how they appear. If you were to spot an honest light within your heart, what would it say about this matter? Lastly, consider this. The collective actions of the individuals in a nation give the nation its flavor and reputation. Therefore, we have double responsibility when it comes to the level of justice in our nation. First, we must ensure that we do all we can to follow God's principle of justice. Second, we must try to influence others to adopt these principles as well. What are you doing with this second responsibility? Something to think about!

QUESTIONS

1. In what ways do you see God's love displayed in acts of divine punishment?
2. What events, if any, can you identify as acts of divine punishment in modern history?
3. Why is it necessary for God to punish all acts of injustice and idolatry, including our own acts of injustice?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

To meet God's standards of Justice, we must first surrender to Christ and get the help of the Holy Spirit. To remind us of this, end with the hymn, "All to Jesus I Surrender" (AME Church Hymnal #251).

Prayer: Help us, dear Father, to raise our behavior to your standard of justice. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

May 18-May 24

Monday	Deuteronomy 24:17-22 (Justice for Aliens, Orphans, and Widows)
Tuesday	Deuteronomy 17:18-20 (God Requires Godly Rule by Kings)
Wednesday	Psalms 15 (Who May Enter God's Holy Presence?)
Thursday	Jeremiah 22:11-19 (God's Justice for the Unjust King)
Friday	Jeremiah 22:20-23 (The City Suffers for Its Disobedience)
Saturday	Jeremiah 22:24-30 (Injustice Ends the Line of David)
Sunday	Jeremiah 22:1-10 (Repent of Misdeeds and Unjust Actions)

RETURN TO LOVE AND JUSTICE

Lesson Scripture: Hosea 11-12

Focus Scripture: Hosea 11:1-2, 7-10; 12:1-2, 6-14

*Key Verse: Hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.
Hosea 12:6 (NRSV)*

HOSEA 11:1-2, 7-10; 12:1-2, 6-14 (NRSV)

Hosea 11:1-2

1 When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

2 The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

7-10

7 My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

8 How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

9 I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

10 They shall go after the Lord, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west.

12:1-2

1 Ephraim herds the wind, and pursues the east wind all day long; they multiply falsehood and violence; they make a treaty with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt.

2 The Lord has an indictment against Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways, and repay him according to his deeds.

6-14

6 But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.

7 A trader, in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress.

8 Ephraim has said, "Ah, I am rich, I have

HOSEA 11:1-2, 7-10; 12:1-2, 6-14 (KJV)

Hosea 11:1-2

1 When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.

2 As they called them, so they went from them: they sacrificed unto Baalim, and burned incense to graven images.

7-10

7 And my people are bent to backsliding from me: though they called them to the most High, none at all would exalt him.

8 How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together.

9 I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God, and not man; the Holy One in the midst of thee: and I will not enter into the city.

10 They shall walk after the Lord: he shall roar like a lion: when he shall roar, then the children shall tremble from the west.

12:1-2

1 Ephraim feedeth on wind, and followeth after the east wind: he daily increaseth lies and desolation; and they do make a covenant with the Assyrians, and oil is carried into Egypt.

2 The Lord hath also a controversy with Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways; according to his doings will he recompense him.

6-14

6 Therefore turn thou to thy God: keep mercy and judgment, and wait on thy God continually.

7 He is a merchant, the balances of deceit are in his hand: he loveth to oppress.

8 And Ephraim said, Yet I am become rich, I

gained wealth for myself; in all of my gain no offense has been found in me that would be sin.”

9 I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt; I will make you live in tents again, as in the days of the appointed festival.

10 I spoke to the prophets; it was I who multiplied visions, and through the prophets I will bring destruction.

11 In Gilead there is iniquity, they shall surely come to nothing. In Gilgal they sacrifice bulls, so their altars shall be like stone heaps on the furrows of the field.

12 Jacob fled to the land of Aram, there Israel served for a wife, and for a wife he guarded sheep.

13 By a prophet the Lord brought Israel up from Egypt, and by a prophet he was guarded.

14 Ephraim has given bitter offense, so his Lord will bring his crimes down on him and pay him back for his insults.

have found me out substance: in all my labours they shall find none iniquity in me that were sin.

9 And I that am the Lord thy God from the land of Egypt will yet make thee to dwell in tabernacles, as in the days of the solemn feast.

10 I have also spoken by the prophets, and I have multiplied visions, and used similitudes, by the ministry of the prophets.

11 Is there iniquity in Gilead? surely they are vanity: they sacrifice bullocks in Gilgal; yea, their altars are as heaps in the furrows of the fields.

12 And Jacob fled into the country of Syria, and Israel served for a wife, and for a wife he kept sheep.

13 And by a prophet the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt, and by a prophet was he preserved.

14 Ephraim provoked him to anger most bitterly: therefore shall he leave his blood upon him, and his reproach shall his Lord return unto him.

INTRODUCTION

One Bible scholar said of Hosea 11, that in it “we penetrate deeper into the heart and mind of God than anywhere in the Old Testament.” In this passage, the prophet used the parent-child relationship imagery to highlight the relationship between God and God’s people. In the infant years, the child is helpless and fully dependent on the care of the parent(s). A good parent feeds, clothes, and protects the child. In return the child respects, honors, and obeys the parent(s). Generally, when the child follows the guidance of the parent, life goes well. When the child, with limited knowledge and understanding, disobeys and gives in to impulses, life gets more

difficult. Sometimes parents have to discipline their children. The correction measures may be mild or severe. But, the good parent always applies the “rod of correction” in love.

This story of the relationship between God and the Israelites had all these elements. When Israel was small and helpless, God cared for the nation and guided it out from a harsh life in Egypt to a blessed land, the Promised Land. When Israel thought it had become “of age,” it rebelled and fell into idolatry and injustices. God, out of love and justice, had to call Israel to account. Even in times of judgment, God’s love for Israel always shone brightly.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

The importance of the book of Hosea is reflected in its many New Testament cross-references. For example, Hosea 11:1 mirrors Matthew 2:15. Also, in Hosea 12:8, we see how prosperity can lure people into dangerous self-delusion which ends in idolatry. The same thought is found at Revelation 3:17. In the story, the prophet, at the prompting of God, noted that when Israel was in a helpless stage, God loved and cared for the nation. But when the nation grew stronger and prosperous, it forgot God and aligned with idol-worship. Still, because of the God's unfailing love and God's promises to the nation's ancestors, God stuck with Israel. God led and shielded Israel when that was needed.

However, the nation was ungrateful and did not show the respect and worship due to their eternal Father.

When Israel found itself under threat by its enemies, it again insulted God. Rather than look to the ever-faithful God, the Israelites looked for security in frail human allies. It seemed like all God did for the people was not enough to gain

their respect and loyalty. So God had to act to show the nation the level of evil in it. God was about to chastise the nation. This correction was not designed to destroy the nation. Ultimately, it would pull the nation back to God. Oh, how God lamented the lies, deception, and injustice that ran rampant throughout Israel! As a footnote, it was noted that Israel's sister, Judah, was no different. Both were "drinking milk" from idols.

“ God was calling them away from widespread fraud, corruption, and the delusion which flowed among them.

In the passage, we can see that God was really hurt by Israel's and Judah's ungodly behavior. This was especially so because they had an example to follow in their father, Jacob. They could have used Jacob's experience to keep on track and gain favor from God, the same way Jacob did. Again,

because of God's deep love for Jacob's children, God pleaded for the nations of Israel and Judah to return to a proper relationship with God. God was calling them away from widespread fraud, corruption, and the delusion which flowed among them. Israel and Judah obviously did not learn from the punishment which God had served in the past to the peoples

who had turned their backs on God.

SANKOFA

When we look at parent-child relationships in African societies, we see some features that have already disappeared from many other societies. As highlighted in a study in Ghana (shared on Brill.com), the hallmarks of these relationships are respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. Both the child and the parents are expected to follow the customs which revolve around these three Rs. But in African culture, these three Rs extend beyond the biological parents into the wider society. Therefore, the wider community takes much responsibility for raising children in the right way. This is a major point in the book by Hillary Clinton, *It Takes a Village*.

As believers, we can learn a lot by thinking about the metaphor of the child-parent relationship used in Hosea 11 and 12. Despite our adult status in the physical sense, we are but babes in relation to God and the overall wisdom of life. Just like little helpless babes, we

need God so desperately to look out for us. For without God we make an unholy mess of our lives. And, like in the context of African society, we have a whole heavenly community looking out for us. The major players in that community are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are joined by all the heavenly hosts. Yes, there are those who want us to succeed within God's definition of success. We must remember this in tough times. We are not on our own.

CASE STUDY

We make the assumption that all participants in this lesson know well the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, as a descriptive example of love. As said in the Shakespearean play, *Macbeth*, let us make sure – doubly sure. Here's *The Message* version of "The Lost Son":

Then Jesus said, "There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, 'Father, I want right now what's coming to me.'

"So the father divided the property between them. It wasn't long before the younger son packed his bags and left for



For without God we
make an unholy mess of
our lives.

a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncoobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

“That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’ He got right up and went home to his father.

“When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to

be called your son ever again.’

“But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here – given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’

And they began to have a wonderful time.”
(The Message (MSG))
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“**And God in a display of perfect love must allow us to make our own choices under the free will God gave us.**”

The only story that depicts the child-parent relationship better than that is Christ on the cross at Calvary. We gave this modern translation to highlight this “home run” in a language we probably understand

best. Left to ourselves, we might make a mess of most things. And God in a display of perfect love must allow us to make our own choices under the free will God gave us. Oh, how the Father’s heart breaks when we in disobedience run wild and ruin our lives, and the lives of others connected to us. Thanks be to God, our Father is forever looking, ever yearning

for us to return. And, although we return with the hurts, scars, and the stench of sin, our Father receives us and makes us ready for the party of all parties; the party of eternal life. Oh, what a joy to know we have a home to which we can go. And, the doors are always open!

LIFE APPLICATION

In the text, we saw that prosperity caused the people to drift away from God. This tells us we must keep material prosperity in a proper context. Consider this and discuss it with friends where possible. Consider how a Christian should view and use material prosperity. What safeguards can a Christian put in place to ensure that wealth does not lead to idolatry? (Please note, an idol is anything or anyone we put before our duty to worship God.)

Consider the credit due to God for the prosperity we may enjoy. Further, note that some people today have an enlarged sense of entitlement. They tell themselves they are *entitled* to certain houses, fine foods, cars, designer clothes, and even Broadway shows. Look at how we should balance any sense of entitlement we hold with a sense of thanksgiving. Try to see

why, for example, we should give God thanks for the paycheck for which we worked hard.

People, even among faithful Christians, hold varying views of God. Some see God as a cruel taskmaster eager to punish them for mistakes. Others see God as totally loving, always ready to bless them, in spite of their faults and shortcomings. What is your view of God? Where does God sit between those two extremes of stern judge and sweet Savior?

QUESTIONS

1. Why is the parent-child analogy a suitable way to explain our relations with God?
2. Using that analogy, what is our primary responsibility to God?
3. What similarities do you see between the text for this lesson and the parable of the Prodigal Son?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Prayer: Dear Father, we recognize that all we have is worthless unless we have you. And, with you we lack nothing.

Pray Psalm 23.

Amen



What safeguards can a Christian put in place to ensure that wealth does not lead to idolatry?

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**May 25-May31**

Monday	Genesis 28:10-17 (Receiving a New Vision of God)
Tuesday	Acts 15:10-17 (Justice for Gentile Believers)
Wednesday	Deuteronomy 28:1-6, 15-19 (The Up or Down Choice)
Thursday	Matthew 2:13-15 (Jesus a Migrant from Egypt)
Friday	Hosea 11:3-6 (Ephraim Spurns God's Love and Suffers)
Saturday	Philemon 8-21 (Once a Slave; Now a Brother)
Sunday	Hosea 11:1-2, 7-10; 12:1-2, 6-14 (Respond With Love and Justice Daily)