

A VISION OF RESTORATION

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Zephaniah 3

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

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. (Zeph. 3:19)

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

With the building of Solomon's temple in 952 BCE, Israel and Judah were united in a peaceful and prosperous empire. After Solomon's death, however, the empire disintegrated, and the nation was divided. The armies of Assyria swept westward, destroying Israel and making Judah subject to it. In 687 BCE, King Manasseh of Judah did not have the military strength to fight and had little choice but to comply. But submission meant tolerance of Assyrian religious beliefs and practices. Assyrian laws took precedence over Hebrew laws. By the time eight-year-old Josiah ascended Judah's throne, the Assyrian empire was beginning to fall apart. As Josiah matured, Assyrian power waned. In about 628 BCE, Josiah launched massive religious reforms.

While repairing Solomon's temple, workers came across an old book of laws. The prophet Huldah authenticated it but warned of coming destruction (2 Kgs. 22:19–20). Her message: God is indignant at Jerusalem's idolatry and complacency. Josiah responded by reintroducing the statutes of the Sinai covenant (see Deut. 12–26). While Huldah proclaimed God's coming judgment, her hope was that the people would humble themselves and escape the day of divine wrath.

Zephaniah takes up the spirit of Huldah's prophecy and calls Judah to repent. Abruptly, Zephaniah breaks into song! There will be no disaster. Instead, through Zephaniah, God offers glimpses of a hopeful future.

In the face of our despair over the state of the world, O God, offer us glimpses of the future that can be ours if we are faithful. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Zeph. 3:14–20

3:14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵The 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.

¹⁶On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;

do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷The 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
¹⁸as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.

¹⁹I 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.

²⁰At 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.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

CONFIDENCE

Zephaniah 3:14–20 opens with an exhortation to daughter Zion and to Israel to sing. Addressed with female appellations, the people are called to rejoice wholeheart-

edly (v. 14). The hymn belongs to the song tradition of women in ancient Israel, a tradition that goes back to the ancient songs of Miriam in Exodus 15 and of Deborah in Judges 5, which is believed by many scholars to be one of the oldest portions of Scripture. It echoes women's songs in times of crisis and celebration in other prophetic books (see, for example, Jer. 9:17–22; 31:2–6). The promises picture God having reversed judgment and reclaiming the throne (v. 15) and reverting to the arrangements of the Sinai covenant (see Exod. 19:1–6). This is the kind of relationship between God and God's people that King Josiah's reforms will favor.

Jerusalem is admonished to fear no longer. God will not only bring victory over the enemy but also join with the people in singing this hymn of praise (vv. 16–17). Zephaniah proclaims that God's presence among the people will make all the difference, bringing universal liberation (vv. 18–19). In invoking the vision of a utopian society, the audience is motivated to change the status quo. A homecoming with fame and fortune awaits at the finale (v. 20).

Above all, the prophets were messengers of good news: "Do not fear. . . . The LORD, your God, is in your midst" (Zeph. 3:16–17). "Do not fear" is a persistent biblical refrain, repeated because human beings are afraid of many things. We fear that God is not in our midst and that the enemies of good and God are winning. We fear that we are weak and powerless. We fear insignificance, doubting that we matter and dreading that events will crush us. We fear political defeat and natural disaster. We fear that our faults and foibles will be discovered and make us less than the person we had fooled ourselves and others into thinking we were. We are afraid that we won't have enough or that we won't be enough. We even fear that God may keep God's promises and interrupt the safety of our fears with something new. Zephaniah acknowledges our fear and dispels it with a promise of a transforming joy and not a threat of judgment.

If God can restore the fortunes to a small nation humiliated by the superpowers of the world and dragged away into slavery, then surely God can also banish our fears and our challenges.



Zephaniah's encouragement to the people, "Do not fear," is one of the most frequent admonitions in Scripture. What are your deepest fears? Where do you find solace?

JOY

Twice, the prophet affirms God's presence with the people, affirming that God is and will continue to be in their midst: "The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. . . . "The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory" (vv. 15b, 17). God's presence protects and brings joy. The people will live without fear, trusting that God saves them from disaster. God's presence does more than remove threats, however. God's presence among the people animates them, for God rejoices with them, renews them, and exults over them: "[The LORD] will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival" (vv. 17b–18a). God frees and strengthens the people by being present among them. God's living among the people releases them from fear and shame, invigorating them to work for good: "I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. 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" (vv. 19b–20a).

The prophet reserves a special word for those who have suffered at the unjust hand of the oppressors: "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" (v. 19). The same themes are echoed in Revelation 21:4: "Mourning and crying and pain will be no more." God's promises reveal a preference for protecting and lifting up those who are oppressed.

Zephaniah's praise of the humble should not be interpreted solely as a way of ascribing value to humility. Rather, God's purposes are to make right systems of injustice, healing the shame that results from oppression. In exalting the humble, Zephaniah finds both a divine rejection of the abuses of power and a divine promise to protect the weak.

God's promises to those who suffer are not accomplished from a divine distance but by God's very presence among the people. In dwelling among the people, God nourishes and makes real the promised future of peace and joy that theological hope imagines. The image of God singing over God's people (v. 17), unique to Zephaniah, is a beautiful image of a God who lives in intimate communion with the people, sharing not only their sufferings but their joys as well.

 What signs or reminders of God’s presence bring you joy in the face of fear and anxiety?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

We do not experience the sort of extreme deprivation or shame that was experienced by Zephaniah’s original audience. But because we love God’s world, we listen to that pain in the experiences of others. Then we can pray in solidarity with our sisters and brothers around the world as well as in our own communities, who experience the world in ways much more like the experience of Zephaniah’s hearers. We pray for an end to injustice and exploitation, and we trust in God’s promise for the restoration of humanity and of all creation.

As we pray in solidarity with others, we recognize that God’s promise is also for us. Once we have recognized the differences between our own fears and those originally addressed by Zephaniah, we can say with confidence that the same God who promised to replace Judah’s fear with rejoicing will banish all our fears as well. God will ultimately bring an end to our pain and our suffering, giving us joy in return.

It is not inauthentic or illegitimate to claim for ourselves the promise of restoration given to the people of Judah (v. 15). At the birth of Christ, the angel announced, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10). This good news—the gospel—is for the people living long ago and for us today, for the privileged as well as those bowed down by this world. The good news is a promise of the restoration of creation, but it is also a promise of restoration to right relationships, with God and with one another. When God promises that we will be praised throughout the world, the promise is based on who we are as God’s children and not on our own might or strength. When we are in right relationship with one another and with God, then we will be renowned and praised in all the earth (v. 20).

Prophets say what no one wants to hear. Prophets point in directions no one wants to look. They hear God when everybody else has concluded that God is silent. They see God where nobody else would guess that God is present. Prophets feel God’s compassion for us, God’s anger with us, and God’s joy in us. They dream God’s dreams and deliver wake-up calls; they

hope God’s hopes and announce a new future; they will God’s will and live it against all odds. Prophets sing God’s song and sometimes interrupt the program with a change of tune.

? How can we as a community of faith speak prophetically to our culture about the promise of God’s presence?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. The book’s opening verse dates the ministry of the preexilic prophet Zephaniah to about 630 BCE, during the reign of King Josiah (2 Kgs. 22:1–23:30).
2. Passages that speak of the day of the Lord or “that day” can have both an immediate context as well as refer to the second coming of Jesus.
3. A number of psalms praise God for salvation, for stopping the enemy. Examples are Psalms 14; 18; 35; 63.

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	May 4	God’s Worldwide Covenant with Abraham	Gen. 12:1–8
T	May 5	A New Covenant of the Heart	Jer. 31:31–34
W	May 6	Divided Peoples to Become One	Ezek. 37:15–23
T	May 7	Just Living in Church and World	Rom. 12:9–21
F	May 8	Cultivate Peaceful and Just Relations	1 Thess. 5:12–22
S	May 9	Joyful Feasts Draw Newcomers	Zech. 8:18–23

PEACE AND JUSTICE REIGN

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Zechariah 8

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

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

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Although their names are similar, Zephaniah and Zechariah lived about a century apart. While Zephaniah prophesied in the time leading up to the Babylonian exile, Zechariah lived at the end of the exilic period when the people were beginning to return to Judah.

Zechariah writes to a people who for seventy years had no home of their own. They had experienced unspeakable horrors at the hands of the Babylonians. Jerusalem had been plundered and destroyed, and, along with it, God's Temple. The Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God's presence, had been carried off. The mood of the time is described in the opening of Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion" (Ps. 137:1). The people were filled with regret. Given that the prevailing cultural concept was that gods were territorial, many of them no doubt wondered if the "God of Israel" had been able to follow them to Babylon. Was God even close enough to hear them if they prayed? Had they been forsaken by God? Would God be with them in their return to their land?

Through Zechariah, God brings a message of encouragement to the postexilic people. Zechariah introduces an important theological concept for Jewish identity: the "remnant," and he delivers God's promise of a new world of peace and prosperity for God's people.

You have promised us, O God, that where two or three are gathered together, there you will be. In the stillness of this place, bring us a message of encouragement through your Word. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Zech. 8:1–8, 11–17

8:1 The word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying: ²Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath. ³Thus 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. ⁴Thus 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. ⁵And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. ⁶Thus 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? ⁷Thus says the LORD of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; ⁸and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness. . . .

¹¹But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, says the LORD of hosts. ¹²For there shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit, the ground shall give its produce, and the skies shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things. ¹³Just 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.

¹⁴For 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, ¹⁵so again I have purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; do not be afraid. ¹⁶These 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, ¹⁷do 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.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

THE REMNANT

A remnant is a small piece left over from a rug or length of cloth. In 587 BCE, Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, had been destroyed. Its leaders and many of its people were scattered throughout the Babylonian Empire. Many people lost their identity as people of Judah. About a century and a half earlier, the same thing had happened to the northern kingdom of Israel when they were scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire and largely lost to history. Only a small portion, a remnant, of three of the tribes of Israel (Judah, Benjamin, and Levi) was left.

God promises to restore to this remnant all the original blessings of the covenant: “But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, says the LORD of hosts. For there shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit, the ground shall give its produce, and the skies shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things” (vv. 11–12). In fact, the future of the remnant is prophesied to be a complete reversal of the previous generation’s fate: “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, so again I have purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; do not be afraid” (vv. 14–15).

The term *remnant* is used by all the postexilic writers (Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah) to denote those Jews who remained faithful to God’s word and God’s covenant. Without a temple in which to worship, during their exile the Jewish people (as they came to be known during the exile) developed the concept of the synagogue. While the central act of worship in the Temple was sacrifice, in the synagogue the study of the Scriptures and prayer were the focus. The faithful remnant studied God’s word, prayed, and continued to trust in God throughout their seventy-year-long ordeal. For this reason, God has “purposed to do good” to them as they return to the land of promise.

The postexilic people could easily have been discouraged that their once-proud nation had been reduced to a small remnant, but Zechariah turns the title into a badge of honor. The remnant is not simply those who were not destroyed: it is the faithful few whom God is determined to bless in the present and the future. This remnant would return to establish the society into which Jesus was born.

? How does Zechariah use the concept of remnant to bring hope to the returning exiles?

FAITH

In the New Testament, the word for faith, *pistis*, means belief or trust, and that is how we tend to think about faith. In Hebrew, however, faith also carries with it the meanings of faithfulness or fidelity. Faith is not simply assenting to certain tenets or trusting in God, as important as that is. Faith is also fidelity to God's covenant. "Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city" (v. 3b) because its inhabitants are faithful. Unlike their ancestors who repeatedly turned away from God to worship idols, the postexilic Jews had put away false gods once and for all. They remained faithful to God in the face of temptations and even threats on their lives if they did not worship other gods (think of Daniel in the lions' den).

Faith not only describes the remnant. Zechariah also uses it to describe God's commitment to the people: "They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness" (v. 8b). "In faithfulness and righteousness" describes how God will behave toward the people. As the remnant have kept faith with God throughout the exile, God promises to be faithful to them as they return from exile.

God's keeping faith with the people—in the sense of fidelity—in turn inspires faith—in the sense of belief or trust—on the part of the people toward God: "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? . . . I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; 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" (vv. 6–8). Faith in the sense of trust is not a blind belief: it is rooted in God's faithfulness to us. Because God has been faithful in the past, God's people have confidence that God will be faithful in the future and will accomplish all that has been promised.

Toward the end of the passage, God, through Zechariah, reminds the people of their covenant responsibility to keep faith by pursuing personal and social righteousness: "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, 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” (vv. 16–17).

 **Compare the two aspects of faith as used in Scripture (New Testament versus Old Testament). How do these two facets of faith nurture each other?**

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Like the people of Judah as they prepared to return to their homeland, we frequently find ourselves on the threshold of the unknown. Psychologists tell us that times of transition, whether joyful or painful, cause us anxiety and stress. As communities of faith, pastoral transitions or the death of beloved members can engender anxiety in the whole congregation. We, like they, can become overwhelmed with this anxiety and slide into a sense of hopelessness. When faced with an unknown future, we can easily lose our motivation.

In 1939, the British posted red placards with a crown at the top and the words “Keep Calm and Carry On” in large, white letters. The posters were intended to raise morale and keep panic to a minimum during the air raids from the German *Luftwaffe*. The poster has since been widely parodied (one of my favorites is “Keep Calm and Have a Cupcake,” with a cupcake at the top instead of a crown), but, in truth, it is extremely difficult for most of us in times of stress either to “keep calm” or to “carry on.”

In such times, we should remind ourselves, as Zechariah reminds the exiles, of God’s faithfulness in the past as a means of building our faith in God in the present. That past may be the distant past, such as looking back at God’s mighty acts in history (the exodus, or the return from exile), or it may be the recent past (God’s helping us through the past year, or even the past day). Often we are advised to “take it one day at a time,” but sometimes “one day at a time” is too much, and I have to take it one hour at a time. Either way, the knowledge that God brought me through last year (or last week, or the last few minutes) feeds my faith to make it through the next few minutes, then the next few weeks, and then the years ahead. It is a cliché, but the truth expressed is important: “I do not know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future.”

Turning our focus away from ourselves and toward others will help with anxiety as well. If we follow God’s command in verse 16—“Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace”—we are not only keeping faithful to God’s covenant but also allaying our own fears and anxieties as we focus our energies on one another instead of on ourselves.

? How might this passage help you deal with anxiety about the future or about times of transition?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai; the two prophets encouraged reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem following return from exile (Ezra 5:1; 6:14).
2. The “mountain of the LORD” refers to the literal Temple Mount, but it is also used by the prophets in a figurative sense (Isa. 2:2–3; 25:6). This promise of God’s continual presence and restoration looks forward to images of a new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21:1–5.
3. The LORD promised Abram that his ancestors would be a blessing to the world (Gen. 12:3). Disobedience turned that to a curse, but Zechariah promised that the ability to bless the world would be restored.

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	May 11	Seeking Divine Help in Troubled Times	Ps. 86:1–13
T	May 12	Land Now Belongs to Babylon	Jer. 27:1–11
W	May 13	Choose to Love and Obey the Lord	Deut. 30:15–20
T	May 14	Surrender and the People Will Live	Jer. 38:14–18
F	May 15	Jerusalem Will Fall	Jer. 21:1–7
S	May 16	Jerusalem Defeated and Zedekiah Exiled	2 Kgs. 24:20b–25:7

PRACTICE JUSTICE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 21

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Thus says the LORD: Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. (Jer. 21:12a)

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

What are the qualities any leader needs? Today's passage provides the basic Old Testament answer: it is to exercise authority in a way that ensures the protection of people who might be taken advantage of by others: "Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed" (v. 12). This is the responsibility of the house of David, of the person who "sits on David's throne." Judah's kings have to keep remembering that their vocation is to fulfill the responsibility of the Davidic king to whom Yahweh made extraordinary commitments but of whom Yahweh has great expectations. To put it another way, it is to exercise authority in a way that expresses faithfulness to vulnerable people and, thus, to Yahweh. The psalmist describes God in this way: "Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob" (Ps. 99:4). The Davidic kings were to emulate God, the Mighty King, in loving justice and in establishing equity.

The primary purpose of the monarchy is to do justice and to care for the needy (v. 12; cf. Exod. 22:20–23). The primary purpose of prophets is to deliver the word of Yahweh. In Jeremiah's view, the kings and prophets of his day are not fulfilling their purposes: as we have seen in the writings of other prophets, both kings and prophets have been corrupted by power and money. They serve only themselves and therefore lead the people of Judah away from Yahweh. The chapters now before us give us a good picture of Jeremiah's message to the kings and prophets and his understanding of their role in the downfall of Judah.

Lead us, O Sovereign God, as together we explore your Word. Break open the ancient words of Scripture to new understandings of what it is to be faithful to you and to our calling. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Jer. 21:8–14

21:8 LORD: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. ⁹Those 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. ¹⁰For 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.

¹¹To the house of the king of Judah say: Hear the word of the LORD, ¹²O 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.

¹³See, 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?”

¹⁴I 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.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

PRESUMPTION

The book of Jeremiah—and indeed the entire Old Testament—is shaped by the events surrounding the downfall of Judah, culminating with the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 587 BCE. Certainly, the downfall of Judah seems to jeopardize Yahweh’s covenant promise of land and progeny to his chosen people. The unique relationship between God and God’s people may have come to an end. Has God abandoned the covenant and the covenant people?

A new, powerful threat has appeared on the scene: Babylon. This menacing power had already defeated the Assyrian Empire, thereby capturing the northern kingdom of Israel, and was now able to take over the southern kingdom of Judah, the remnant of the once-great nation. A compounding threat lay to the south of Judah: its old nemesis Egypt. In Jeremiah, there is a succession of kings, all sons of the great reformer Josiah, who foolishly try to placate first one of these great powers and then the other. Then, after finally provoking the stronger of the two, Babylon, to invade its territories and assume governance of Jerusalem, most of the citizens of Judah are sent packing to the hinterlands of Babylon. A few more Davidic kings accede the throne, but they are puppet monarchs, controlled by Babylon.

While historians might view these developments simply from the standpoint of competing political and military entities, Jeremiah views them from the perspective of a mistaken theology. According to Jeremiah, Israel and Judah have failed to keep covenant with God. They have ignored their God-given responsibilities to do justice and instead do whatever it pleases them to do. They think that their status as God's covenant people gives them automatic protection, regardless of whether they keep the statutes of that covenant. They are presuming upon God's grace.

Of course, their attitude does get them into trouble—with God. It falls to Jeremiah to point out to the people of Judah the error of their ways. Jeremiah announces Yahweh's judgment to the people, as well as to the various rulers of the court and temple. But his words of judgment fall on deaf ears, in part because of the mistaken belief that Yahweh's promises were irrevocable and would guarantee their safety and security regardless of their actions. Jeremiah calls repeatedly for Judah to repent and return to Yahweh and to covenant keeping. It is the only possible means of avoiding a repeat of history: a history of exile, death, and destruction.

? God's chief requirement for kings and other leaders was that they pursue and uphold justice for oppressed people. Is this high on our list of priorities for our leaders today? Why or why not?

JUDGMENT

Chapter 21 opens with a surprise: King Zedekiah is asking Jeremiah for advice and counsel! Judah is staring disaster in the face. As a puppet king, Zedekiah was required to pay tribute money to the Babylonian king. After several years, Zedekiah refused to pay and attempted to stage a revolt. In response, the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem. Seeing the handwriting on the wall, the king is grasping at straws, looking for help wherever he can get it. He dispatches emissaries to Jeremiah who ask the prophet to seek Yahweh's help (vv. 1–2).

Considering Yahweh's covenant history, the king's request is logical. Since the role of the prophet is to provide for the welfare of God's people, the king can expect a favorable answer. But Jeremiah is not like other prophets. The word he brings from Yahweh is not a word of comfort and support but a word of judgment: "I am going to turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon. . . . I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and mighty arm, in anger, in fury, and in great wrath" (vv. 4–5). The "turning back" and "striking down" are now directed toward Judah and not her enemies. The "outstretched hand" and "mighty arm" of Yahweh are a much bigger threat to the kingdom than the mighty armies of Babylon.

In verses 11–14, we are reminded of why Yahweh has turned against the king: a monarch must execute justice and deliver all who are oppressed. This king, like others before him, is not living up to his calling. He exploits God's people to prop up his corrupt policies. For him, there can be no escape from Yahweh's judgment: "I am against you. . . . I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings. . . . I will kindle a fire in its forest, and it shall devour all that is around it" (vv. 13–14).

If the king had studied God's law, he would have known that God's covenant included not only blessings for obedience but also curses if Israel disobeyed: "But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees . . . the LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you shall go out against them one way and flee before them seven ways. You shall become an object of horror to all the kingdoms of the earth" (Deut. 28:15a, 25).

? Do you think the kings of Judah should have seen God’s judgment coming? Why or why not? What prevented them from discerning it? In what way, if at all, are we like them?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Just as the leaders of Judah presumed upon God’s covenant, neglecting their responsibility to pursue and uphold justice, God’s people today also tend to presume upon God’s grace and discount God’s call to holiness.

The Bible is full of tensions. God is sovereign, yet we are responsible for the choices we make. God’s love is unconditional, and our status as God’s beloved cannot be enhanced by our good works nor diminished by our wanderings. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).

Yet Scripture also reminds us that while God’s love is unconditional, we are called to obedience and faithfulness. “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (Jas. 2:17). Our tendency, as human beings, is to emphasize one side of the equation over the other. But we must hold these two ideas in tension, neither presuming upon God’s grace nor imagining that “being a good person” will earn us favor with God.

The prologue to the Ten Commandments is helpful in holding these seemingly opposite concepts together. Before giving the law, God declared, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod. 20:2). God gives the law after having delivered the people from slavery, not before. It was not a matter of “If you obey me, I will save you and you will be my people.” Instead, it was “Because I am your God and you are my people, and because I have saved you, this is how I want you to live.” Pursuing a life of holiness and justice, in accordance with God’s law, is the response of a redeemed heart. As Jesus said, the one who has been forgiven much, loves much (see Luke 7:47). Just as the kings of Judah took their status as God’s covenant people for granted, presuming upon God’s grace is a sign that we do not appreciate the depth and breadth of God’s love for us.

Judah had plenty of chances to turn back to God, but they did not. Josiah instituted many reforms, but his sons did not continue in the path he marked for them, and they and their

people suffered the consequences. God still calls each of us to turn back to God’s ways and promises forgiveness and wholeness to all who respond to that call.

? Does your personal theology tend to emphasize God’s grace or to lean toward obedience and personal holiness? How do you hold these two concepts in tension?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. The words of Jeremiah would have been seen as seditious to the King. Zedekiah was hoping for a message of deliverance. Jeremiah gave a message of surrender!
2. This chapter continues the running battle between Jeremiah and Pashhur (Jer. 20:1–2; 21:1). The king was looking for a message of deliverance when one was not forthcoming. This is reflected when Jeremiah renamed Pashhur (liberation) to “Terror–all–around” (20:3).
3. The Hebrew words translated *pestilence*, *famine*, and *sword* are collocated in twenty-four verses of the Old Testament, primarily in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Together they speak of inescapable judgment.

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	May 18	Justice for Aliens, Orphans, and Widows	Deut. 24:17–22
T	May 19	God Requires Godly Rule by Kings	Deut. 17:18–20
W	May 20	Who May Enter God’s Holy Presence?	Ps. 15
T	May 21	God’s Justice for the Unjust King	Jer. 22:11–19
F	May 22	The City Suffers for Its Disobedience	Jer. 22:20–23
S	May 23	Injustice Ends the Line of David	Jer. 22:24–30

REPENT OF INJUSTICE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 22

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Act with justice
and righteous-
ness. (Jer. 22:3a)

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Society often ignores or condones the oppression of the vulnerable. This was true in Jeremiah's day, and it is true today. The systematic oppression of one group of people by another, more powerful group seems to be the way the world works. We wonder if righteousness will ever be rewarded and if those who practice evil will ever face retribution.

Chapter 21 of Jeremiah implied that judgment was certain. The sons of Josiah refused to follow in their father's footsteps in continuing the reforms Josiah had instituted. In chapter 22, God sends Jeremiah again to the palace with a message. Once more there are stern warnings of judgment, but this time there is also hope: if the king and people will repent, God will restore the nation to a position of strength and peace. With God, no situation is irredeemable.

God's call to repentance and justice includes familiar categories: the widow, the orphan, and the alien. As God has done repeatedly in the past, God calls on the king, through the prophet, to show justice and mercy to those whom the world ignores or despises. Through Jeremiah, God presents the people of Judah, and especially the ruling class, with an ultimatum: either repent of injustice or else face destruction. God holds out not only the threat of judgment to those who ignore it but the promise of deliverance and peace to those who turn and embrace it. Even in the face of seemingly certain destruction, repentance is always possible.

God of justice, open our eyes, and make us receptive to the words of Jeremiah. Lead us as we seek to discern more completely your call to repent and to do justice. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Jer. 22:1–10

22:1 Thus says the LORD: Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word, ²and 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. ³Thus 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. ⁴For 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. ⁵But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation. ⁶For 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.

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

⁸And 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?” ⁹And they will answer, “Because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD their God, and worshiped other gods and served them.”

¹⁰Do 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.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

A WORD OF WARNING

In chapter 22, Jeremiah again addresses the mistaken notion that the mere presence of the house of David is a guarantee

of Yahweh's protection. It is easy to understand why the king believed in God's protection. After all, God had authorized the monarchy and promised to preserve it, a promise that by this time had endured for over three hundred years. But to Jeremiah the problem with this notion is its focus on the institution of the monarchy as opposed to a focus on the God the monarchy is supposed to serve. As the true King of Israel, God loved justice. In their refusal to emulate God in this love, the kings had in essence already abdicated the throne, for they had failed to live up to the calling that God had established for the Davidic kings.

The downfall of this dynasty is heartbreaking. The once-glorious house of David has become synonymous with oppression, corruption, and treachery. They are now reduced to becoming a mere shadow government for Babylon. Jeremiah brings God's warning to the king: "Act with justice and righteousness. . . If you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation" (vv. 3, 5).

In verses 13–19, Jeremiah points specifically to King Jehoiakim's tyrannical and oppressive methods of feathering his own nest: "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, . . . who makes his neighbors work for nothing, . . . who says, 'I will build myself a spacious house. . . ,' paneling it with cedar and painting it with vermilion" (vv. 13–14). The king treats his people as if they were already exiled, forcing them to work without wage simply to build himself a more spectacular house.

Jeremiah continues his charge against Jehoiakim by comparing him to his father, Josiah: "Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy. . . . But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence" (vv. 15–17).

With these words, Jeremiah levels perhaps the most condemning words in all the Bible. Because of the king's dishonesty and corruption, his body will be "dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem" (v. 19). The historian Josephus affirms that this is what happened to Jehoiakim (Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, bk. 10, ch. 6, pt. 3).

 **God had promised that a descendant of David would always be on the throne of Judah (see 2 Sam. 7:12–16). Did God break this promise? If not, how do you explain the Babylonian exile?**

REPENTANCE

Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim, was killed by the Babylonians while Jerusalem was under siege. Jehoiachin's reign lasted only three months, after which he was exiled to Babylon. Jeremiah's prophecy likens Jehoiachin to Yahweh's signet ring, a royal symbol of power and authority. The ring is torn off Yahweh's hand and given to another king, Nebuchadrezzar II. Jeremiah also compares Jehoiachin to a broken pot, thrown away because it is no longer useful. To make matters worse, there is no one to succeed him to the throne of David (see Jer. 22:24–30).

Jeremiah's message could not be clearer. The house of David is to be destroyed without any hope of restoration. The monarchy has failed Yahweh and Yahweh's people, with wide-ranging consequences. The people the ruler was charged to care for will be scattered and sold into slavery. Even the so-called promised land will dry up and die. The seeds of sin sown by the king and his cohorts have overtaken a once-beautiful garden. Life for Judah would never again be the same.

Buried in this passage, however, is an easily overlooked word of hope: "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" (v. 4). If Jehoiakim will only repent, God promises to rebuild the Davidic dynasty, restoring not only the monarchy but the nation to its former glory.

The Hebrew word for "repent," *shub*, literally means "turn." In turning away from something, we simultaneously turn toward something else. So to turn away from evil and injustice is to turn toward God and toward righteousness, mercy, and justice. Although the word *shub* does not occur in this passage, the concept is clearly there: if Jehoiakim will obey God's word, mediated through the prophet Jeremiah, turning from his wickedness toward God and toward justice, God will hear, forgive, and heal (see 2 Chron. 7:14). Unfortunately for him and for Judah, Jehoiakim does not turn. The offer of repentance and the subsequent promise of restoration are genuine, but the king ignores them, to his own and his nation's ruin. The presence of this unheeded call to repentance underscores the tragic nature of Judah's downfall: it did not have to happen like this. It also stands for us as a reminder that we are never outside the reach of God's forgiveness: "If you will indeed obey this word. . . ."

? Have you ever felt that you yourself or a loved one was beyond hope spiritually? How does this passage offer hope?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

The destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity were devastating to Judah. It was the end of the nation as they had known it. But the remnant of God's people endured through captivity and survived. With the Jerusalem Temple destroyed, the people developed a new worship tradition, the synagogue, which focused on Scripture study and prayer rather than sacrifice. They never again turned to the worship of idols. Some seventy years later, the people were permitted to return, no longer as the Israelites but as the Jews ("the people of Judah"). The exile transformed their worship and their identity as a nation.

We began with two questions: "Will righteousness be rewarded?" and "Will evil face retribution?" In the Babylonian exile, we see both things happening simultaneously. The king and the people face judgment for idolatry and injustice, but at the same time the "righteous remnant" is preserved, recommitting itself to worshiping Yahweh alone, intensifying its devotion to the Scriptures, and eventually emerges from its exile a renewed people.

This lesson reinforces how committed God is to justice. The king of Judah is rebuked for failing to defend the cause of the widow, the orphan, and the alien. A commitment to justice is not optional. To be a follower of Christ is to be passionate about justice for all people. To be passionate about justice is not "liberation theology": it is simply theology. It is not the "social gospel": it is simply the gospel.

As the prophets called out the political and religious leaders of the nation for injustice, we learn that justice for all must be high on the list of priorities for our leaders. Whether national leaders (presidents, senators, representatives), local leaders (mayors, councilors, sheriffs), or our religious leaders (pastors, elders, deacons), we should work for the election, selection, or appointment of women and men who champion the cause of justice.

If we have not heretofore cared much about justice or have seen it as somehow ancillary to the life of faith, the call to

repentance found in today’s passage gives us true hope. God calls us to repentance today. The time to commit to God’s program of justice is now. As we experience God’s healing and forgiveness, we are ready to begin participating in the healing and restoration of our churches, our communities, our nation, and our world as we seek justice for all persons.

Today’s lesson ends on a serious note but by no means a hopeless one: the promise of new heavens and a new earth is placed before us.

? How does the tragic fate of Judah offer us hope for transformation and restoration?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. The dead king for whom the people were not to weep in Jeremiah 22:10 was godly King Josiah, who had been killed in battle in 609 BCE; rather, the people were to weep for his evil son Jehoahaz (also known as Shallum, per Jer. 22:11) in exile (2 Kgs. 23:29–34).
2. The successor to Jehoahaz was Jehoiakim, the king who occupied the palace of Jeremiah 22:1.
3. Other places where the Lord swears by himself include Jeremiah 49:13; 51:14. There is no stronger affirmation than this.

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	May 25	Receiving a New Vision of God	Gen. 28:10–17
T	May 26	Justice for Gentile Believers	Acts 15:10–17
W	May 27	The Up or Down Choice	Deut. 28:1–6, 15–19
T	May 28	Jesus, a Migrant from Egypt	Matt. 2:13–15
F	May 29	Ephraim Spurns God’s Love and Suffers	Hos. 11:3–6
S	May 30	Once a Slave; Now a Brother	Phil. 8–21

RETURN TO LOVE AND JUSTICE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Hosea 11-12

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

But as for you,
return to your
God, hold fast to
love and justice,
and wait con-
tinually for your
God. (Hos. 12:6)

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

In biblical times, people often equated God's favor with prosperity. The seeds of this idea can be found in the stories of the ancestors of Israel in Genesis, who are described as being "blessed" by God with livestock, wealth, and children. We also see this in the covenant blessings in Deuteronomy and in many biblical proverbs. But such passages came to be misapplied. The Scriptures teach that health and wealth are blessings from God, but that does not mean that the lack thereof is a sign of God's disapproval, nor that we are to strive after them.

The immense popularity of the "prosperity gospel" today shows that we are no different from ancient people in how we view God's favor. Every Sunday, large auditoriums here and around the world are packed with listeners who hear that they can use the words of the Bible to manipulate God to give them money and health. Those who find themselves still struggling are led to question whether God really loves them.

The prophet Hosea reminds us that prosperity is not the standard by which we are to be judged. Hosea reminds us that love and justice are God's standards. Instead of running after wealth, we are called to seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, trusting that all the things we need will in turn be "added to us as well" (see Matt. 6:33).

Holy God, as we encounter you in Scripture, capture our attention and help us to focus on that which should come first: seeking your kingdom. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Hos. 11:1-2, 7-10; 12:1-2, 6-14

11:1 When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.

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

.....

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

⁸How 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.

⁹I 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.

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

.....

12:1Ephraim 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.

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

.....

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

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

⁸Ephraim has said, “Ah, I am rich,
I have gained wealth for myself;
in all of my gain
no offense has been found in me
that would be sin.”

⁹I 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.

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

¹¹In 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.

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

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

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

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

INFIDELITY

Hosea spoke to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel (called Ephraim, probably meaning “a fruitful place”) over seven hundred years before Jesus’ birth. The principal worship centers of the north—Bethel, Shiloh, and Shechem—were all in Ephraim. Hosea was a northerner, preaching at least twenty years after the prophet Amos. By this time, international pressure and internal turmoil were creating mounting chaos. Six kings from five families reigned in just one generation. Four of

these were assassinated, and the last was exiled just before Israel was destroyed.

During the prophet's life, Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Israel. Hosea attributed Israel's collapse to the worship of foreign gods. These gods were known as Baals (11:2). Baal worship sought to control or manipulate the divine through fertility. By taking part in certain worship rituals, the people supposed they were guaranteed productivity and security. Baalism was essentially worship of the life process, equating God with nature and its powers.

Hosea asserts that the God of Israel, unlike the Baals, is separate from nature yet involved relationally with people and the world. Hosea articulates one of the clearest statements of God's transcendence: that God is not one power among many but above all powers, and yet related to us.

Hosea believed that the embrace by Israel (Ephraim) of the Baals was accompanied by a decline in values. According to the prophet, injustice, robbery, murder, and drunkenness had replaced the concern for the poor and vulnerable that had characterized Israel at other times. Hosea prophesies against northern Israel for covenantal infidelity, as shown by the material prosperity of northern Israel (Hos. 12:8), which went hand in hand with economic injustice (12:7). Far from being a sign of God's favor, Hosea illustrates, Israel's prosperity is instead now a sign that they have abandoned God and God's concern for justice and have instead profited from exploiting their fellow Israelites.

According to Hosea, God objects to superficial worship, worship carried out as a transactional arrangement (i.e., if we approach God in a particular way, especially with gifts, God will reciprocate with favor). Instead, God wants a relationship; God wants to be known and loved.

? How does Hosea characterize infidelity? How, if at all, does our society demonstrate the same kind of infidelity?

PARENTAL LOVE

Despite Hosea's strong words, he maintains that God's steadfast love remained with Israel. In Hosea 11:1–4, the prophet recalls God's enduring presence during the exodus from Egypt. Hosea is subtly comparing the situation in Egypt

with the violence the people are experiencing now with Assyria. This becomes even clearer in verse 5, when the prophet notes that the people “shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king.”

Using parental images, Hosea affirms God’s love for Israel (Ephraim). Even when the people had turned away from God, God led Israel to freedom and nurtured them. Hosea implies that God will see Israel through, although Israel may have to endure the consequences first. God will keep watch (vv. 8–9), and the people will eventually be liberated.

Hosea characterizes the desired relationship between God and humans as one of *hesed* (loyalty or steadfast love). In the Psalms, this term emphasizes divine faithfulness (see, for instance, 5:7; 6:4; 18:25, 50; 23:6; 25:6, 7, 10; 89:1, 2, 14, 24, 28, 33, 49; and the refrain of 136). But humans have ruptured their relationship with God through their disregard for society’s weaker members and for Israel’s teachings, bringing on human and ecological ruin (Hos. 4:1–3).

The familial metaphor exemplifies what the Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel called “God’s pathos,” the anguish God feels watching the troubles a society brings on itself. Hosea hopes for lasting change in human hearts. He speaks of divine healing that allows Israel to flourish (Hos. 14:1–9).

Hosea also bears witness that idolatry wounds the heart of God. When we look for security in sources other than God, we are spurning the love and protection of the One who has chosen us as a beloved people. Covenant requires not just obedience but intimacy. Faith is not only about believing; it is about living in a way that shows that we cherish God and rejoice in God’s grace.

Hosea does not seem to be portraying God as a human parent but as the parent of creation. We can draw from our understanding of healthy parental love to understand God’s love for us. God loves as tenderly, wholeheartedly, and defenselessly as the human parent, only more so. When the people reject God, God does not reject them but remains present to them.

 **What about the image of God as parent is comforting for you? What is problematic? How do you contrast God as parent with human parents?**

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Hosea's God relates to the world through justice, righteousness, steadfast love, and mercy (2:16–20). Hosea's prophecy is relevant to current discipleship concerns, particularly in Western society, where many people strive after material wealth, success, and productivity, taking part in Baalism by another name. Hosea's favorite term for those who ignore God and pursue Baal is "harlotry." Israel "plays the harlot" with Baal, much as today we "play the harlot" with materialistic, success-driven society.

In Luke 12, Jesus tells a parable of a rich man who decides to build even bigger barns to hoard his wealth. At the end, however, the man's life is required of him, with the implication being that the man's striving after wealth was futile. Material prosperity alone—without God—cannot sustain an individual, a family, or a nation. On the other hand, the pursuit of God's righteousness will lead to true blessing. Instead of running after wealth (as fools do, according to Jesus in v. 20), we seek to follow God and thank God for the undeserved blessings bestowed on us along the way.

Christian readers of Hosea 11 will also be reminded of Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, or more aptly, the parable of the Loving Father. Here too, things are set right by forgiving, not punishing:

"So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!'" (Luke 15:20–24a)

For centuries, many Christians have put their pursuit of God's kingdom ahead of the pursuit of wealth by taking vows of poverty. Even if we are not moved to take vows of poverty as we strive for God's kingdom, we can all work to uphold God's standards by showing selfless love and by working for justice, especially for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

? If we do not take vows of poverty, what vows might we make to turn away from our culture's obsession with material prosperity?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. The book of Hosea is widely seen in terms of two major divisions: chapters 1–3 and chapters 4–14, the latter including prophetic oracles against northern Israel for covenant infidelity prior to that nation's exile by Assyria in 722 BCE. The historical context is that of the material prosperity of northern Israel (12:8), which went hand in hand with economic injustice (v. 7).
2. The verbal parallels between Hosea 12:8 and Revelation 3:17 indicate that the danger of self-delusion that can accompany prosperity revealed itself in the first century CE as it did in the eighth century BCE.

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	Jun. 1	Faith Community Discerns Path of Wisdom	Acts 6:1–7
T	Jun. 2	Parents Joyfully Pass on the Faith	2 Tim. 1:3–9a
W	Jun. 3	Learning the Fear of the Lord	Ps. 34:11–18
T	Jun. 4	Violence Not a Wise Choice	Matt. 26:47–52
F	Jun. 5	Vast Scope of Solomon's Wisdom	1 Kgs. 4:29–34
S	Jun. 6	Prize Wisdom and Insight	Prov. 4:1–9

About the Writer

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Coming Next Quarter

God is experienced as wisdom in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. During this quarter, we explore the many facets of wisdom as recorded in the book of Proverbs, in the Gospels, and in the letter written by James.

Unit I, “Wisdom in Proverbs,” in four sessions, explores the nature of God’s wisdom as found in the book of Proverbs. These sessions describe how Wisdom calls to us and the value of Wisdom and the gifts she offers, and they end by exploring the metaphor of the feast of Wisdom.

Unit II, “Wisdom in the Gospels,” offers four sessions, one session from each of the four Gospels, that examine the wisdom of God seen in the teachings and life of Jesus.

Unit III, “Faith and Wisdom in James,” offers a five-session study of wisdom as seen in the Letter of James. These sessions explore the interaction of faith and wisdom, including practical advice regarding faith in action and taming the tongue. The study ends by contrasting two kinds of wisdom.