

THE 
PRESENT
WORD
ADULT BIBLE LESSONS

LEADER'S GUIDE

WINTER 2021-2022

JUSTICE, LAW, HISTORY

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LEADER’S GUIDE

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Introduction

Depending on who you are and what you have experienced, the word *justice* calls to mind a range of responses. If you are a part of the criminal justice system, your response is likely influenced by the role you play—law enforcement officer, lawyer, judge—or how you have experienced justice being administered—convicted felon, parolee, incarcerated person.

For some, it seems Lady Justice is far from an impartial force for good. If you are a person of color, an undocumented person, a woman, a child, or anyone whose voice has been muffled by circumstance, your access to true justice may be limited or even non-existent. Social activists seeking justice for all argue passionately that justice exists for those who have power, money, and influence, while the rest may seek justice in vain.

For people of faith, justice originates in the nature of God. In this study, you will explore justice as a theme woven into the very fabric of Hebrew Scripture. Kings administered justice, but they also frequently ruled with arrogance and unjust actions. At times, the people responded with righteous and just behavior to the gift of the Law, but all too often they strayed from the righteous path to which the Law pointed. When kings erred and people strayed, prophets spoke out for God's justice, sometimes with great risk to themselves. At times, justice seemed distant, far removed from the lives of people who desperately longed for it.

As you engage in these lessons with others who seek to discern God's presence and God's will in Scripture, may you experience insights that point to the nature of true justice and its expression in the very heart of God.

Martha Bettis Gee
Editor

The Uniform Series

The Present Word quarterly Bible study is based on the Uniform Series, a plan for reading and studying the Bible. The objectives of the series are to help persons increasingly:

1. to know the content of the Bible,
2. to understand the message of the Bible in light of their experiences and relationships, and
3. to be aware of God's self-disclosure, especially God's redeeming love as revealed in Jesus Christ, that they may respond in faith and love—to the end that they may know who they are and what their human situation means, grow as the children of God rooted in the Christian community, live in the Spirit of God in every relationship, fulfill their common discipleship in the world, and abide in the Christian hope.

The emphasis in these objectives is on the Bible as the record of the revelation of God in Christ as the primary source of understanding the meaning of the Christian faith and as the most effective means of confronting persons with the significant concerns of the gospel. These concerns include personal faith, values, human relationships, social responsibility, Christian hope, and the implications of Christian discipleship under the lordship of Christ and in the fellowship of his Spirit.

One of the distinctive features of the Uniform Series is the collaborative process through which denominational partners engage in the common task of developing the Lesson Guides. The development process begins with a Scope and Sequence subcommittee whose work sets a framework for the biblical themes of each six-year cycle. The Scope and Sequence team for Cycle 23 (2016–2022) chose themes that are creatively expressed in this statement of Christian faith:

The God of the Bible, the source of creation, loves us and calls us in covenant through our faith to worship and to do justice.

The underlined words in the statement compose the eight recurring themes throughout each quarterly segment of *The Present Word*.

Quarter in Brief

The study this quarter focuses on justice as presented in a variety of Hebrew Scriptures. Justice originates in the nature of God and is given to God's people as a gift under the Law. The history of God's covenant people demonstrates that kings who exercised God's justice according to God's law were considered good kings. Over time, adverse circumstances caused God's people to raise questions about God's justice.

Unit I, "God Requires Justice," has four lessons that explore how leaders of God's people must rely on God's Law as they administer justice. Deuteronomy demands that God's people be just and equitable. In 2 Samuel, King David demonstrates justice by showing kindness to Mephibosheth. Isaiah describes a reign of justice and righteousness. In 1 Kings, the Queen of Sheba recognizes Solomon as a king who "execute[s] justice and righteousness" (10:9). Through the prophet Nahum, God metes out justice to Judah's enemies.

Unit II, "God: the Source of Justice," encompasses five lessons that focus on God's justice in the lives of God's people and in the gift of the Law. Stories in Genesis reveal God's justice in the face of human injustice. Included are stories of Cain's murder of his brother Abel, as well as Hagar's and Ishmael's being cast out of Abraham's household. Exodus demands justice for all people including one's enemies. In Deuteronomy, judges, officials, and priests work together to administer justice for God's people. In particular, Deuteronomy demands justice for marginalized people.

Unit III, "Justice and Adversity," includes four lessons that deal with situations in which justice seems absent. In 2 Samuel, Nathan condemns David for his acts of injustice toward Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba's husband. In Ezra, after years of exile in Babylon, Ezra returns to Jerusalem determined to restore respect for God's Law. Session 3 highlights the story of Job's faithfulness to God after several tragic events in his life. The Scriptures in Job question the presence of God's justice when Job has suffered greatly.

Resources for the Leader

The following resources are suggested for those who are interested in doing additional research and study.

Bible Study Guides

Don't Know Much About the Bible, by Kenneth C. Davis. New York: Eagle Brook, 1998.

A Guide to Bible Basics by Tyler D. Mayfield. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.

A Guide Through the Old Testament by Celia Brewer Sinclair. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989.

A Guide Through the New Testament by Celia Brewer Sinclair. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, 4th ed., by Barry L. Bandstra. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Centage Learning, 2009.

Bible Commentary Series

Interpretation Bible Studies. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998–2008.

New Daily Study Bible, by William Barclay. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, edited by Leander E. Keck, et al. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015.

The New Testament for Everyone, by N. T. Wright. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004–2015.

The Old Testament for Everyone, by John Goldingay. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible, edited by Michael E. Williams. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991.

Westminster Bible Companion, edited by Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

Bible Dictionaries

Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible. Edited by David Noel Freedman. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000.

HarperCollins Bible Dictionary—Revised and Updated. Edited by Mark Allan Powell. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011.

Video Viewing

When you show videos to a group, you need to obtain a public performance license from Christian Video Licensing International (CVLI) at <https://us.cvli.com>. Check with your church to see if an umbrella license has already been obtained. Often, many denominations—through conferences, jurisdictions, dioceses, and other structures—secure licenses for their churches.

Worship Leaflets

Growing Faith Resources offers *The Present Word* quarterly Worship Leaflets. Each leaflet includes a brief service of worship with prayers, hymn texts, and opportunities for reflection on the Scripture passage of the day. Order your quarterly Present Word Worship Leaflets at pcusastore.com.

JUSTICE AND OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Nov. 29	Deut. 5:6–21	The Law of Justice
T	Nov. 30	Deut. 5:23–33	Follow the Path of God’s Law
W	Dec. 1	Rom. 12:1–2, 9–21	Discern the Good, Acceptable, and Perfect
Th	Dec. 2	Deut. 10:1–11	The Written Law and the Ark of Wood
F	Dec. 3	Matt. 5:17–20	Jesus Fulfills the Law
Sa	Dec. 4	Deut. 27:14–26	Curses upon Disobedience

MAIN IDEA

How can people find the strength to do what is right? Deuteronomy teaches that obedience to God’s Law is for our well-being.

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Deuteronomy 5; 10; 27; 28:1–2

VERSES TO REMEMBER

So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. (Deut. 10:12–13)

PREPARING TO LEAD

- Pray for participants and for yourself as leader. Read and reflect on lesson 1, “Justice and Obedience to the Law” (Participant’s Book, p. 1).
- Familiarize yourself with the context of the Scripture.
- Provide Bibles, Participant’s Books, and Worship Leaflets for lesson 1, name tags, and pens.
- If possible, in advance of the first lesson, contact participants and ask them to bring either a notebook and a pen or pencil or a tablet for journaling. Plan to provide pens and writing paper for those who do not bring journaling materials.
- This is the second Sunday of Advent. Continue to provide four purple candles, as well as a means to light them. It is not necessary to place the candles in a wreath; they can simply be lined up on a

table. Also provide a white pillar candle to serve as the Christ candle. This candle will remain unlit during Advent.

- On newsprint or a board, print the following prompt: “To me, the only way to achieve peace and well-being is to. . .”
- Step 6 in each lesson offers additional options from which to choose.

LEADING THE LESSON

Opening Worship

1. Gathering

- As participants arrive, greet them. If they are not familiar with one another, provide name tags. Form pairs and invite the partners to discuss how they would respond to the prompt. In the full group, ask each person to introduce their partner and invite volunteers to explain their response. Point out that the author of the Participant’s Book observes that faithfully following God’s instruction is the only way we will find true well-being (and thereby, peace).
- Distribute Bibles, Participant’s Books, and Worship Leaflets for lesson 1.
- Formulate and get consensus on some simple ground rules for the study (for example, welcoming diverse points of view, maintaining confidentiality, and so on).

2. Morning Prayer 1

Worship Leaflet, lesson 1

- Light two candles, noting that this is the second Sunday of Advent.
- Encourage participants to settle into silence.
- Invite volunteers to lead portions of Morning Prayer from the Worship Leaflet, beginning with the Opening Sentences and ending after the Hymn.

Teaching Tip
In the first paragraph of this session, the author of the Participant’s Book observes that the previous quarter ended with four lessons on John’s visions of God’s ultimate victory in establishing a realm of justice and peace, providing a bridge into the season of Advent and a context for looking at how God’s justice is perceived and experienced in the here and now. Since traditionally the first Sunday of Advent centers on hope and this second Sunday focuses on peace, it’s worth calling participants’ attention to how these lessons offer an in-depth exploration of the themes of Advent.

SCRIPTURE

Deut. 5:1b–3; 10:12–13; 27:1–10

5:1b Moses convened all Israel, and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. ²The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. ³Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. . . .

10:12 So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God[a] and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. . . .

27:1 Then Moses and the elders of Israel charged all the people as follows: Keep the entire commandment that I am commanding you today. ²On the day that you cross over the Jordan into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and cover them with plaster. ³You shall write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over, to enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you. ⁴So when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, about which I am commanding you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall cover them with plaster. ⁵And you shall build an altar there to the LORD your God, an altar of stones on which you have not used an iron tool. ⁶You must build the altar of the LORD your God of unhewn[a] stones. Then offer up burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God, ⁷make sacrifices of well-being, and eat them there, rejoicing before the LORD your God. ⁸You shall write on the stones all the words of this law very clearly.

⁹Then Moses and the levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying: Keep silence and hear, O Israel! This very day you have become the people of the LORD your God. ¹⁰Therefore obey the LORD your God, observing his commandments and his statutes that I am commanding you today.

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

Bible Study

3. Scripture

Participant's Book, p. 2

- Invite participants to scan Deuteronomy 5. Review the context in Scripture Note 1. Read today's Scripture passage aloud round robin style, with each person reading one verse in turn.
- Option: After reviewing chapter 5, invite them to imagine they are the people of Israel, convened by Moses to hear the law. Have a narrator read 5:1a and 27:1a, 9a. Read the remainder of the passage aloud yourself.

4. God's Gift of the Law

Participant's Book, p. 3

- Invite participants to call out, popcorn style, the first words or phrases that occur to them when they hear the word *law*. Point out that the author of the Participant's Book tells us that the word translated in today's Scripture passage as *law* is the word *torah*. Invite participants to call out, popcorn style, words or phrases that define *torah*. Discuss:
 1. How do these two lists of words and phrases defining *law* and *torah* compare? Where are they similar? What are differences?
 2. What difference does it make to you to think of *torah* as "teaching" or "instruction" instead of law?
 3. What basis does Deuteronomy 10:12–13 give for thankfulness? How is that thankfulness to be expressed?
 4. On entering the Promised Land, what is the first act of the people? Why do you think this was their first impulse?
- We read that the people are to write the words of God's law on a stone and place this symbol of the covenant on a place they can be seen, even from miles away. Invite participants to describe where they have seen the Ten Commandments displayed. Discuss:
 1. Do you consider displaying the Ten Commandments in a location such as a courthouse or a government building appropriate? Why or why not?
 2. What are other ways Christians might keep God's laws front and center in their hearts and minds?
- Print the rules the group formulated on newsprint or poster board and plan to display where they can be seen.

5. Responding to God from the Heart

Participant's Book, p. 4

- Moses' instructions begin with the call to "obey," with *shema* being the Hebrew word used. Discuss:
 1. In our culture, how do we generally think of the word *obedience*? How does our contemporary understanding contrast with the implications of the word *obedience* in today's passage?
 2. When we pray, we often beg God to hear us. The author suggests that what we are really asking is for God to take our words seriously and to pay close attention to our request and then be moved to act on our behalf out of compassion and mercy. Is this how you would describe your own petitions? Is this the way you view obedience? In what ways or to what extent is your obedience to civil laws or to cultural norms or expectations shaped by a fear of punishment? For you, is obedience more an act of will or a response of the heart, as Hebrew Scripture understands it?

3. What does the author suggest should be our natural response to paying close attention to God's word?
4. The text implies that a response of joy and thanksgiving is required, not only for us to keep the commandments, but also to ensure we keep them in the right way. For what are you grateful to God? How does this gratitude shape the way you live?

6. Stepping into the World

Participant's Book, p. 5

- Invite a volunteer to briefly summarize the author's anecdote of what transpired when she counseled a couple preparing to marry. She notes that the marriage has been strong because the couple has been able to hear each other's needs and desires so that ultimately each spouse made accommodations for the other.
 1. The passage suggests that this is, in part, the way we are to listen to what God desires of us. How do you respond?
 2. What is your congregation currently doing to promote peace and justice?
- Invite participants to respond in their journals.
- Choose between these optional activities to explore the Scripture:
 1. Ask participants to read Deuteronomy 28:3–14 and to name the blessings that are promised for keeping the commandments, recording these answers in their journals for further reflection.
 2. Form five smaller groups or pairs and assign each pair or group one of the following: Deuteronomy 5:1; 6:4–5; 9:1; 20:3; 27:9. Ask each pair or group to try to summarize in ten words or fewer what Yahweh desires us to hear and understand.
 3. Explain that, while the Ten Commandments are clear, some of the decisions we face may fall into "gray areas." For example: Am I considering buying a new car because I really need one or because I covet the cars of my friends? Have participants consider similar dilemmas and pray silently asking for God's guidance.
 4. Invite participants to journal about the meaning of *peace*. The challenging events of the previous two years, such as the pandemic, may make it seem that shalom is in short supply. Ask participants to reflect on how they might contribute to healing.

Closing Worship

7. Morning Prayer 2

Worship Leaflet, lesson 1

- Invite the participants to turn to the Worship Leaflet, and enlist volunteers to lead the remaining portions of Morning Prayer.
- Begin with the Prayer of the Day, pray the Lord's Prayer, and end with the Dismissal.
- Challenge participants as they leave, saying "(Name), in your

- actions in the coming week, prepare the way of the Lord!”
- Extinguish the Advent candles.

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture.

1. Deuteronomy is addressed to the Israelites born during the forty years in the wilderness. The preceding generation was disobedient and died on the way to the Promised Land. The people are admonished to “hear, O Israel” (5:1; 10:12).
2. The structure of the covenant in Deuteronomy is similar to that of an ancient peace treaty—identifying the parties involved in the treaty (Yahweh and Israel and their ongoing relationship), enumerating the terms of the agreement (the law of Moses), and concluding with the consequences of keeping or rejecting the terms of the finalized agreement (blessings and curses).
3. The question of what the Lord requires of the people is asked again by Micah (Mic. 6:6–8). In both cases, the answer is not a list of ritual observances, but a sincere love of God reflected by keeping the law and dealing with others justly.
4. Moses commanded that the agreement between Yahweh and Israel be solemnized by the antiphonal reading of curses for disobedience and blessings for obedience read from two neighboring mountaintops in the Promised Land, Gerizim and Ebal (Deut. 27:11–28:68).
5. The command to make the altar for sacrifice from “unhewn stones” is repeated in the Hebrew Scripture (Josh. 8:31). This command could be an indication that humans can do nothing to make attractive the ugliness of sin that requires sacrifice.

ENGAGE YOUR LEARNERS DURING THE WEEK

Send an email or a text:

1. Suggesting that they consider how they might express gratitude in obedience to God; and
2. Encouraging them to revisit one of the Daily Bible Readings, Matthew 5:17–20, and reflect on how Jesus fulfilled the law.