


THE   
PRESENT  
WORD

ADULT BIBLE LESSONS

PARTICIPANT'S BOOK

WINTER 2021-2022

JUSTICE, LAW, HISTORY

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# PARTICIPANT'S BOOK

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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.

# JUSTICE AND OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW

## 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 command-  
ments of the LORD  
your God and his  
decrees that I am  
commanding you  
today, for your own  
well-being.  
(Deut. 10:12-13)

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

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

If you are using *The Present Word* throughout the year, you know 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. These lessons not only ushered us into the season of Advent, they also prepared us well for this quarter's look at how God's justice is perceived and experienced by those of us living in the here and now.

It may seem odd to use *justice* as the main theme for a Christmas and New Year study. The Scripture selections for this quarter, though, remind us that God's justice always stems from love, grace, and compassion and that it is intended for all people equally. That is a message we can embrace any time of year!

Our first lesson comes on the second Sunday of Advent, which traditionally focuses on the theme of peace—a goal that underlies Moses's instructions to walk in God's ways and to serve God with all our heart and soul. This builds on the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, which encompasses the health, well-being, and prosperity of individuals and of nations. In many prophetic writings the term refers to conditions of economic and social justice for all members of the community. In some contexts, it means "salvation."

In the broadest sense of the word, *shalom* refers to the contented state of being that comes when relationships are whole and unbroken, whether these relationships are between members of a family, groups in society, or entire nations. It most especially refers to when covenant relationships are whole and unbroken—and that includes our relationship with God. Thus, Moses teaches that faithfully following God’s instruction is the only way we will find true well-being (and thereby, peace) as individuals and as a community.

*Great God, on this second Sunday of Advent, we give you thanks for the call to be your holy people and for the gift of the Christ child. Through him, may we be moved to work for peace and justice as a witness to your loving presence among us. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

Deuteronomy 5:1–3; 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. <sup>2</sup>The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. <sup>3</sup>Not 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, <sup>13</sup>and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God 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. <sup>2</sup>On 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. <sup>3</sup>You 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. <sup>4</sup>So 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. <sup>5</sup>And you shall build an altar there to the LORD your God, an altar of stones on which you have not used an iron tool. <sup>6</sup>You



must build the altar of the LORD your God of unhewn stones. Then offer up burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God, <sup>7</sup>make sacrifices of well-being, and eat them there, rejoicing before the LORD your God. <sup>8</sup>You shall write on the stones all the words of this law very clearly.

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

<sup>9</sup>Then 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. <sup>10</sup>Therefore obey the LORD your God, observing his commandments and his statutes that I am commanding you today.

## GOD'S GIFT OF THE LAW

**I**n Deuteronomy 5, Moses recounts his experiences at the top of Mount Sinai and then presents the Ten Commandments to the people. He reminds the people of God's loving invitation to enter into a special relationship—one that they accept by agreeing to follow the commandments and to be faithful in keeping their vows. Because this speech comes to the Hebrews as they prepare to enter the Promised Land at last, many see it as the beginning of a sermon on their call to be a holy people.

The word we translate “law” is *torah*, which means “teaching” or “instruction.” In Hebrew theology, *torah* is a gracious gift to humankind, provided so that people will know how to be in right relationship with God and one another. God has a plan for the world that includes peace, wholeness, and justice. *Torah* is an instruction manual for how to achieve those goals.

*Torah* is also more, however, in that it represents the terms of God's covenant relationship with God's people. Within this relationship, God and the faith community agree to belong to one another. In this regard, we may consider *torah* as “the rules of engagement” within a family—rules that allow the family to function healthfully and graciously toward each other so that they may prosper, finding peace and joy together.

Deuteronomy 10:12–13 provides the basis for the call to commit to God completely. The people are to respond in thankfulness out of awareness of the special honor God has granted them. The word for *serve* also means “worship,” while the term *heart* refers to the seat of the intellect and will. When we add that the Hebrew word translated *soul* means “being” or “breath,” then the image becomes one of dedicating our entire self to God.

Moses' long speech to the people culminates in Deuteronomy 27 with the command to recognize and honor the covenant relationship with God immediately after crossing the Jordan River. The very first act of the people within the Promised Land is not to be a grand party or even a scouting expedition, but a worship service. The people are to write the words of God's law on a stone protected by plaster and then place this symbol of the covenant on a high mountain—in other words, on a place they can see even from miles away. After this, they are to build an altar to God and offer sacrifices, “rejoicing before the LORD your God” (27:7).

 **What difference does it make to you to think of *Torah* as “teaching or “instruction” instead of “law”?**

## RESPONDING TO GOD FROM THE HEART

Moses' instructions begin with the call to “obey.” The Hebrew word used here is *shema*, which actually means “to listen carefully to” or “to pay close attention to,” and even in some contexts “to persuade.” It carries a sense of being open to a message to a degree that it can change us, leading us into action we might otherwise not have taken. In this regard, we “obey,” not out of an act of will, but from a response of the heart.

Think of it this way: In our prayers, we often beg God to hear us. What we are really asking is for God to take our words seriously and to pay close attention to our request. Our hope is that God will then be moved to act on our behalf out of compassion and mercy. Should we not be similarly moved to respond to God out of love and gratitude?

In our culture, we generally think of *obedience* in terms of external commands or obligations that one then chooses to follow. We assume these rules carry punishment as a deterrent for non-compliance. We may choose to drive above speed limits, but we know this may lead to a ticket. We may ignore a supervisor's instruction at work, but only at the risk of getting fired. We may continually disregard a bill that is due, but our credit rating will suffer. Few of us would willingly choose to miss the April 15 deadline for filing taxes because of the consequences that would follow.

Today's passage does not speak of obedience in terms of fear of punishment, however. Where we think of obedience as an act of the will, Hebrew Scripture understands obedience as a response of the heart. When one really *hears* God's word, really *pays close*

*attention to it, the natural response is to obey it out of gratitude for God’s many acts of grace. To do otherwise is to act unnaturally in some way. Our hope is always that we will “hear” God’s instruction and “be persuaded” to respond in joy and thanksgiving. This is the first step in subsequently keeping the law.*

All this is required, the text implies, not only for us to keep the commandments but also to ensure we keep them in the right way. God does not want blind or begrudging obedience, but lives of service that are offered out of love and gratitude. We are to live according to God’s covenant instructions willingly—even eagerly—because “God is [our] praise” (Deut. 10:21)!



**How does your gratitude to God shape the way you live?**

## **STEPPING INTO THE WORLD**

Thinking about the way love and gratitude should shape our response to God reminds me of a series of conversations I had with a young couple some years ago. During premarital counseling sessions, I began to see potential areas of conflict. They both shared a rosy vision of their new life together as newlyweds without realizing that sometimes their separate dreams were at odds with one another. For example, the bride-to-be spoke of how much she looked forward to sharing every evening watching television and movies together, while the groom more than once mentioned a cozy scenario of him on his computer while she sat nearby reading. He spoke gratefully of a division of labor, while she talked about how freeing it would be in her own home to no longer do chores assigned by parents (or anyone else).

Based on what I heard, I invited the two of them to write short answers privately to several simple questions designed to highlight their different expectations. Once these were ready, I had the bride read her list and asked the groom to listen intently to the picture she painted. How well did her description match his own expectation? Where it differed, what would he have to change or do in order for her vision to become a reality? How willing was he to make this change or effort? I then reversed the roles and had the bride do the same while the groom read his list.

Both of them were surprised to discover points of difference, and each began with reluctance to make any changes at all. It took a couple more sessions to achieve a comfortable compromise, but I am happy to say they did so. Their marriage has been

a strong and prosperous one because they were able to hear each other's needs and desires in a way that moved each in love, ultimately, to make accommodations for the other. This is, in part, the way Moses says we are to listen to what God desires of us.

The call to be active participants in the covenant shows that God is vitally interested in what happens on this earth. In fact, God looks to us to be advocates and instruments of the divine goals whenever and wherever we can. We reaffirm that we are called to work for peace and justice here on earth, no matter how hopeless the cause may seem. Imagine what a great Christmas gift this would be for us to offer God and the Christ Child!

 **What is your congregation currently doing to promote peace and justice? What are you doing ?**

### **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 who is involved (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 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 and blessings 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.