

Denominational Relations Committee

Initial Report and Recommendation

June 28, 2021

Overview:

In February 2021, the First Baptist Church of Tallahassee (FBCTLH) re-established its Denominational Relations Committee and charged the Committee with the responsibility of studying and addressing ongoing controversy with our denominational relations based on doctrinal issues and practices.

As your representatives, it has been our privilege to begin our journey of study and prayerful discernment. A complete list of the committee members and staff liaison are included as Attachment A to this Initial Report and Recommendation.

Background:

Our committee was charged, in part, “to make recommendations to the church regarding our future denominational involvement, including, but not necessarily limited to: The use of denominational curriculum in various church education settings.”

As part of our responsibility, we reviewed Sunday Morning Bible Study (SMBS) literature that was (and is) being used in two adult SMBS classes. Based on current SMBS Department rolls, these lessons have the potential to reach more than 90 class members and our visitors/guests each week.

The literature in question was published by Smyth & Helwys, an ecumenical publishing company that serves as a partner to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and its partner organizations. It should be noted that, as a technical distinction, Smyth & Helwys is neither owned nor operated by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The literature that we reviewed was originally brought to the attention of the Senior Pastor Dr. Gary Shultz and Deacon Chairman Lee Scarboro by a teacher and assistant director whose department currently uses the Smyth & Helwys literature. The teacher expressed concern regarding the appropriateness of the materials for use, citing specific examples that appeared to be inconsistent with Southern Baptist Convention theology.

Subsequent to receiving the concerns of these individuals, our Associate Pastor of Missions and Pastoral Care, under the supervision of our Senior Pastor, performed a more detailed review of the Smyth & Helwys curriculum that was used in the aforementioned classes from May 2019 to April 2021. The result of that review was summarized as follows: “... while there are occasional quality lessons ... there is too much teaching inconsistent with our Statement of Faith and the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (adopted by FBCTLH on August 28, 2019).”

Finding:

Our review of the work prepared by our Associate Pastor and the underlying literature itself confirmed the conclusions reached by our Associate Pastor.

Recommendation:

We recommend that the Senior Pastor, in his role as the leader of our church's educational program as presented in our church's bylaws, end the use of Smyth & Helwys curriculum and work with our Sunday Morning Bible Study and other educational leaders to find other suitable resources consistent with our church's Statement of Faith.

This recommendation is made in full consideration of many factors:

1. We believe that the Smyth & Helwys literature sufficiently conflicts with scripture and our statement of faith to warrant discontinuing its use.
2. We believe that using literature contrary to our statement of faith can compromise educational efforts and mislead members, guests, and visitors as to what we believe.
3. We believe in the faithfulness of our SMBS teachers. We believe that they teach a faithful expression of biblical truth. We recognize and hold the deepest appreciation for the dedicated, Godly men and women who have been called to teach at FBCTLH.
4. We believe that those called to teach should be willing to be subject to the spiritual servant leadership of our Senior Pastor.
5. We believe that alignment with the church's teaching program does not compromise a teacher's individual understanding of scripture as revealed by the Holy Spirit, nor does it prevent a teacher from applying that understanding as led by the Holy Spirit.

Additional Reports and Recommendations:

It should be noted that there is much more work to be done by the Denominational Relations Committee related to policies, practices, and positions of our denominational partners. This Initial Report and Recommendation is being made due to the time sensitive nature of educational materials being used by our Church.

Additional reports and recommendations regarding other denominational doctrinal issues and practices may be forthcoming in the days ahead as the committee continues its work.

Attachments:

Attachment A - A list of the members (and staff liaison) of the Denominational Relations Committee

Attachment B - A list of examples of Smyth & Helwys educational curriculum that are inconsistent with the theology and doctrines of our church's Statement of Faith and adopted Baptist Faith and Message 2000.

Attachment A

Consistent with the formation of the original Denominational Relations Committee, current committee members include: Deacon Chair, Deacon-Chair Elect, a past Deacon Chairman (who is serving as the Chairman of the Committee), Personnel Committee Chair, Finance Committee Chair, Missions Committee Chair, WMU Director, and three at large members chosen by the Deacon Chair.

Committee:

Dave Westberry, Chair (former Deacon Chair)

Lee Scarboro (current Deacon Chair)

Lee Vickery (Deacon Chair-Elect)

Steve Burgess (Finance Committee Chair)

Jim English (Personnel Committee Chair)

Donna Heald (WMU Coordinator)

Richard Tudor (Mission Committee Chair)

John Corven (at Large)

Lori Bouck (at Large)

Harlan Moret (at Large)

Dr. Gary Shultz (Staff Liaison)

Attachment B

Example 1

The Battle of Jericho

July 7, 2019

From the Lesson:

“How, then, should we deal with the violence in this text?”

“First, we must remember one central theme of the Deuteronomic History (Joshua – Kings): God’s blessings depend on obedience.”

“Second, although Joshua depicts God as a warrior, sometimes God chooses not to fight (Joshua 7).”

“Third, the summary statements in the book of Joshua tend to be highly exaggerated. Like the victory monuments of ancient kings, they describe sweeping victories around more complex realities. If the descriptions of slaughter aren’t to be taken literally, what of the command to undertake it?”

“Finally, we must let the Israelites be products of their own time. Nearly every ancient culture pointed to their gods’ warrior prowess as proof of their gods’ superiority. It shouldn’t shock us that that is how the book of Joshua frames the argument for Yahweh’s superiority over the gods of the Canaanites.”

From the Commentary:

“Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the God described in Joshua 6 has nothing to do with miracles, though. It has to do with the killing of the people of Jericho, purportedly at the command of God.”

“When we read in the Old Testament about a God who wants people killed, we can remember that this is not the final, or best, word in Scripture about God’s people, either. We can remember that the Bible is a progressive book that moves and develops over time. The God of Jesus, in other words, is very different from the God of Joshua.”

“The theology and ethics in Joshua have been replaced by the theology and ethics of Jesus.”

“He (God) allows us to say that those people of Israel entering the land of Canaan and slaying people in the name of God had a long way to go. They had a long way to go in their understanding of God and they had a long way to go in their understanding of what it means to be God’s people.”

Concerns:

1. We believe that the lesson and commentary inappropriately depict the immutable nature of God – “The God of Jesus, in other words, is very different from the God of Joshua.” “The theology and ethics in Joshua have been replaced by the theology and ethics of Jesus.”

Malachi 3:6

“For I, the Lord, do not change: therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed”

Hebrews 13:8

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

2. We believe that the lesson and commentary inappropriately call into question the goodness of God and the nature and reliability of scripture – “If the descriptions of slaughter aren’t to be taken literally, what of the command to undertake it?”

1 Chronicles 19:13

“Be strong, and let us show ourselves courageous for the sake of our people and for the cities of our God; and may the Lord do what is good in His sight.”

2 Timothy 3:16

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and training in righteousness;”

3. We believe that the lesson and commentary inappropriately distinguish between Jesus and God in the Old Testament, as Jesus is the God of the Old Testament.

John 1:1-3

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

John 8:58

Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.”



July 7, 2019

The Battle of Jericho



Joshua 6:1-5, 20-25

Central Question

How much is up to me and how much is up to God?



Scripture

Joshua 6:1-5, 20-25

1 Now Jericho was shut up inside and out because of the Israelites; no one came out and no one went in. 2 The LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have handed Jericho over to you, along with its king and soldiers. 3 You shall march around the city, all the warriors circling the city once. Thus you shall do for six days, 4 with seven priests bearing seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, the priests blowing the trumpets. 5 When they make a long blast with the ram's horn, as soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and all the people shall charge straight ahead." ... 20 So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. 21 Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys. 22 Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, "Go into the prostitute's house, and bring the woman out of it and all who belong to her, as you swore to her." 23 So the young men who had been spies went in

and brought Rahab out, along with her father, her mother, her brothers, and all who belonged to her—they brought all her kindred out—and set them outside the camp of Israel. 24 They burned down the city, and everything in it; only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD. 25 But Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, Joshua spared. Her family has lived in Israel ever since. For she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

Reflecting

Faith can feel like a game of tug-of-war. We know that victory is up to God, but we also know that faith isn't an excuse for passivity. Faith is expressed in action. Even in seasons of waiting, God expects us to actively seek the divine presence and obey the Spirit's lead.

But how do we find this balance? How do we know when to wait expectantly for God and when to press ahead in faith? When victory is on the line, how much is up to us, and how much is up to God?

Joshua may have had these same questions as he prepared to lead Israel into battle against Jericho. The Israelites had seen God miraculously part the waters of the Jordan River (ch. 3), but this fortified city was their first real test. They didn't have the skill or technology to breach its immense walls. Yet without invading Jericho, they had little hope of capturing the promised land. They had to believe God's promise, but they also had to act on that belief in order to achieve victory.

As with Israel, our victories result from both faith and action. We



believe God's promises and then we act on that belief. God may not ask us to march around a city, but God may ask us to walk into our neighborhood school and volunteer, to befriend someone from a different race or culture, or to live with integrity even when it costs.

Our victories are ultimately God's responsibility, but we experience these victories by putting faith into action. As we study the battle of Jericho, let's consider our own battles. How can we achieve victory by acting on God's promises?

Studying

Joshua 6 begins by describing a seemingly hopeless situation: "Now Jericho was shut up inside and outside because of the Israelites; no one came out and no one went in" (v. 1). Jericho was the first city Israel encountered after crossing the Jordan. To take the promised land, Israel had to capture Jericho. But Jericho was highly fortified, protected from siege by massive walls. The Israelites were the sons and daughters of former slaves who had spent the last forty years wandering in the wilderness. They weren't skilled in warfare, and they lacked siege towers or battering rams. Capturing Jericho would require another miracle.



Jericho was surrounded by an embankment with a stone retaining wall 12–15 feet high. On top of that was a smooth mud brick wall 6 feet thick and 20–26 feet high. This wall rose at a 30-degree slope. The slope, called a glacis, prevented invaders from using battering rams to breach the wall or ladders to climb over it. Only at the top of the slope did one encounter the city's main wall, whose base was roughly 46 feet above ground level.

Yet God speaks to Joshua as if the battle has already been won: "See, I have handed Jericho over to you, along with its king and soldiers" (v. 2). From God's perspective, Jericho is already defeated. Joshua and Israel simply have to respond in faith to God's promise.

To that end, God lays out a surprising plan. Instead of instructing them to continue besieging the city and starving out the inhabitants, God tells Joshua to gather the priests and the ark of the covenant and march around the city. They are to do this once a day for six days. Then, on the seventh day, the priests are to march around the city seven times and blow their trumpets. At the sound of the trumpet blast, the people are to “shout with a great shout” (v. 5). As the Israelites shout, God says, the walls of Jericho will fall down flat.

This isn’t a battle strategy; it is a religious ritual. In faith, Israel obeys God’s command, and everything happens just as God said it would. Jericho’s fall demonstrates that Israel’s victory was God’s work, not theirs.

Though God gave Israel the victory, Joshua and his men still had to fight. When the wall fell down, “the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it” (v. 20).

The story takes a deeply unsettling turn in verse 21. In obedience to God’s command (v. 17), every living thing within the city is put to death. Then in verse 24, the city is burned to the ground, and the valuables are kept for the sacred treasury.

We may wrestle with the violence in this text—and we should. Nothing in this passage, or elsewhere in Scripture, should lead us to conclude that violence is a characteristic of the Christian life. We live in light of Calvary. We serve a Savior who turns the other cheek and teaches that “no one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). Jesus’ greatest victory was won not through the sword but through sacrifice. We are meant to follow Jesus’ example of sacrificial service.

How, then, should we deal with the violence in this text? First, we must remember one central theme of the Deuteronomic History (Joshua–Kings): God’s blessings depend upon obedience. Although God is “a jealous God” (Ex 20:5), God takes no pleasure in exacting justice. Sin always produces suffering.

Second, although Joshua depicts God as a warrior, sometimes God chooses not to fight (Josh 7). Israel's victory at Jericho is no guarantee that God will continue to fight for them no matter what. Sometimes in Scripture, God even fights for Israel's opponents. The same God who used Israel to execute judgment against Canaan later used the Assyrians and the Babylonians to punish Israel for its sins.

Third, the summary statements in the book of Joshua tend to be highly exaggerated. Like the victory monuments of ancient kings, they describe sweeping victories around more complex realities. If the descriptions of slaughter aren't to be taken literally, what of the commands to undertake it?

Finally, we must let the Israelites be products of their own time. Nearly every ancient culture pointed to their gods' warrior prowess as proof of their gods' superiority. It shouldn't shock us that that is how the book of Joshua frames the argument for Yahweh's superiority over the gods of the Canaanites.



Joshua 13:1; 16:10; and 17:12-13 describe how much of the land remains unconquered. Joshua 15:13-19 recounts a battle against the people of Debir—even though they had apparently been utterly destroyed five chapters earlier in 10:38-40!

As we wrestle with Israel's destruction of Jericho, we should remember the emphasis on Rahab the prostitute. A Canaanite prostitute might seem like an unlikely hero of faith, but Rahab cast her allegiance with Israel and Israel's God. She hid the Israelite spies because she knew their God was "God in heaven above and on earth below" (2:11). She pled for mercy for her family, and God granted it. Rahab was an outsider who became an insider. She found more than a place to live among the Israelites; she found a place in God's story of salvation (Mt 1:5).

Rahab's story reminds us that God offers grace to all who turn to God for refuge. Judgment is God's job, not ours. As followers of Christ, we are agents of God's grace. It is our

job to proclaim the gift of salvation and to welcome all who would turn to God.

The story of Jericho teaches us that both faith and obedience are necessary to experience God's victory. God's intervention helped Israel defeat an enemy they never could have vanquished on their own. Yet if Joshua and the Israelites had not heeded God's commands, they wouldn't have experienced the victory. Both faith and obedience were necessary.

We must also remember Rahab's role in Israel's victory. Rahab is the ultimate example of an enemy become friend: a portrait of what it looks like when God redeems. As followers of Christ, we don't win battles through military conquest. On the contrary, we win battles by loving others, sacrificially serving, and faithfully proclaiming the good news. As we do so, we can help people like Rahab find their places in God's story of salvation.

Understanding

What victory do you need to experience today? Maybe there's a sin you're struggling against. Maybe you've prayed about something for years and are still waiting for God to answer. Maybe you're hungry for more—to change your personal life, to see God move in a powerful way, or to truly make a difference. Whatever it is, imagine how God's presence could help you win that battle.

The story of Jericho reminds us that both faith and obedience are necessary to win the battles. The walls of Jericho came down because God commanded them to fall. In the same way, no obstacle can stand in our way when we obey God's commands. God is able to do greater and more powerful things than we can ask or even imagine. When God tells us to go, we are to respond in faith.

Obedience is key to our victory. Israel would never have conquered Jericho by sitting in their camp. They had to

prepare their swords and trumpets, march around the city, and fight. To win our battles, we must also be willing to do what God commands.

As we step forward in faith, we must also remember that God doesn't fight the way the world does. We don't win battles through the perfect sound bite or social media zinger.

Victory doesn't come by tearing people down or destroying the enemy. We follow a Savior who conquered through sacrifice, and we find victory as we follow his example of surrender and service. Our greatest victories aren't about winning honor for ourselves but about bringing glory to God.



What does "victory" look like in the service of a crucified Savior?

What About Me?

- *I can win battles God's way.* We can't win spiritual victories with earthly weapons. When we face our personal battles, we need to seek God's victory plan. This plan may not seem logical in conventional, earthly terms. Nevertheless, we achieve our greatest victories when we follow Christ's example of sacrifice, service, and surrender. If I want to experience God's victory in my life, I must learn to fight God's way and not my own.
- *Victory takes both faith and obedience.* Joshua needed faith to fight the battle of Jericho, but he had to demonstrate this faith by doing what God told him to do. In the same way, we need faith to fight the battles we face. Nothing is impossible with God, but we must couple faith with obedience by acting on God's promises. Obedience puts faith into action and shows that we are ready to receive the victory.
- *The greatest victory may be telling someone about Jesus.* As she came into the Israelite camp, neither Rahab nor the Israelites

knew the role she would play in the story of salvation. Her story demonstrates what can happen when God redeems. Likewise, we don't know the influence our witness will have. Some will reject it, but others will believe—and their lives will be changed for all eternity.

• *The violence in Scripture can be troubling.* Not every Bible verse ends with “go and do likewise.” Surely this is the case with the slaughter of Canaanites in the book of Joshua. How can we honestly acknowledge the moral and theological challenges such texts pose? How can we arrive at productive and God-affirming ways of addressing them?

Resources

A. Graeme Auld, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, The Daily Study Bible (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1985).

David M. Howard, *Joshua*, Kindle ed., The New American Commentary (Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998).

Marvin E. Tate, *From Promise to Exile: The Former Prophets*, All the Bible (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1999).



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THE BATTLE OF JERICHO

Joshua 6:1-5, 20-25

Introduction

This account of the battle of Jericho is the most famous passage from the book of Joshua. It is perhaps one of the most famous battles in all of history. It might actually be a misnomer, though, to call the battle of Jericho a battle. The people of Israel, following God's instructions, march around the city, blow their trumpets, shout at the top of their lungs, and watch as the city walls crumble to the ground. They then conquer the city with little to no resistance.

The victory at Jericho was important to the people of Israel for at least three reasons. First, it was an important military victory. Jericho was an ancient, established city that served as a guardian fortress between the lower Jordan Valley and the central hill country of Canaan. If the Israelites were going to move into Canaan, it was absolutely necessary that they move past the roadblock of Jericho.

Second, it was important to the people psychologically. They had wandered in the wilderness for forty years with little momentum or success. To engage Jericho in battle and to win in such a resounding fashion no doubt convinced the people that God was indeed on their side. Their spirits must have soared when those walls came tumbling down. This was Israel's first battle after crossing the Jordan River, and they won it in convincing, even miraculous, fashion.

Third, it was important for Joshua's confidence and credibility as a leader. As we saw last week, when Joshua succeeded Moses as leader of the exodus it must have been a trying time for both him and the people of Israel. Could Joshua fill Moses' shoes? Would God be with Joshua the way God had been with Moses? The battle of Jericho answered both of those questions with a resounding yes.

But the account of the battle of Jericho is not without its problems for modern readers, most notably some of the characteristics of God in the story. Let's probe this passage by looking at three attributes of God it suggests.

A God of Miracles

What happened at Jericho was a miracle. Those walls should not have collapsed, but they did—because God made it happen. Some scholars

have pointed out that this area was a geologically unstable earthquake zone, so perhaps an earthquake caused the walls to crumble. But the writer of the book of Joshua makes it clear that *God* made those walls come tumbling down.

We have all probably had situations in our lives that we could call miraculous—our own version of the walls falling down. The tumor went away. The dream job fell in our lap. The at-risk baby in the womb turned out to be perfect. The money for the rent showed up in the mail. There is no logical explanation when those things happen, and we're content to give God the credit. "It was a miracle," we exult to our family and friends.

The problem is that miracles don't always come. Sometimes—most times—the miracle we want to happen doesn't happen. The tumor grows. Unemployment lingers. The baby is born with a deformity. Or the financial trouble turns into a full-blown crisis. When the miracle doesn't happen, we tend to blame God. After all, if God could make the walls at Jericho fall, couldn't God do something miraculous for us too? If we expect constant miracles, though, we're in for a life of disillusionment.

Sometimes, modern people scoff at the Bible because it contains so many miracles. In the Bible, walls crumble, seas part, men survive lion's dens, the sun stands still, people walk on water, sick people are healed, and dead people are raised. "That's not the real world," modern skeptics say, "and no one in their right mind should believe those things."

What we often overlook, though, is all of the times in the Bible when the miracle doesn't happen. In the Bible, people become depressed and discouraged; rain floods the earth, armies are defeated, babies die, good men are tossed into prison, other good men die for their faith, and a Galilean carpenter is crucified for crimes he never committed. I'm sure all of those people were praying for a miracle; but the miracle never came.

In other words, the Bible gives us both sides of the story. Sometimes God performs a miracle—and a miracle is always cause for wonder and celebration. But sometimes miracles don't happen, and people have to deal with a reality that is far short of perfect. Therefore, the Bible is a picture of life in the real world.

When the trumpets blow and the walls fall, we shout for joy. When the trumpets blow and the walls don't fall, we search for answers and live with all of the faith we can muster.

A God of Punishment

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the God described in Joshua 6 has nothing to do with miracles, though. It has to do with the killing of the

people of Jericho, purportedly at the command of God. This is not the only time in Joshua, or the Old Testament, that God sanctions or even commands the destruction of Israel's enemies.

In our passage next week from Joshua 10, God rains deadly hailstones on the Amorites and makes the sun stand still so the Israelites have more light by which to destroy their enemies. That passage will give us the opportunity to deal with this problem of a vindictive God in more depth. But suffice it to say that, in much of the Old Testament, the Israelites are a warrior people led by a warrior God.

What we have in passages like Joshua 6 is not a picture of the way things should have been, but a picture of the way things actually were. The Bible honestly tells us what life was like as the people of Israel tried to enter the promised land. It was a violent time, when people fought battles in the name of their gods. It was a time when people thought their gods wanted them to fight, and would even fight with them. Joshua 6 is an honest snapshot of that culture.

That doesn't mean, however, that it is a culture that needs to be emulated. In fact, much of the Old Testament shows us how not to live. When we read in the Old Testament about a God who wants people killed, we can remember that this is not the final, or best, word in Scripture about God. When we read about God's people killing others in God's name, we can remember that this is not the final, or best, word in Scripture about God's people, either. We can remember that the Bible is a progressive book that moves and develops over time. The God of Jesus, in other words, is very different from the God of Joshua.

By the time we reach the New Testament, Jesus tells his people to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, love their enemies, and pray for those who persecute them. And by this time, the people of God are not, in fact, killing others. They're loving others and breaking down the walls that separate people. The theology and ethics in Joshua have been replaced by the theology and ethics of Jesus.

Someone once said that Jesus was God's way of getting rid of a bad reputation. For sure, the New Testament writers hold Jesus up as the best picture of God we've ever seen. When it comes to passages like Joshua 6, Jesus comes to our rescue. He allows us to say that those people of Israel entering the land of Canaan and slaying people in the name of God had a long way to go. They had a long way to go in their understanding of God and they had a long way to go in their understanding of what it means to be God's people.

The tragedy, of course, is that we still live in a world of wars and conflict. It often seems we're still stuck back there in Joshua 6, fighting people and claiming that God is on our side. Sadly, the world still seems much like the world of Joshua 6, and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount sounds like a pipe dream.

A God of Surprises

When Joshua sent two men to spy out the land, they were housed and protected by a prostitute named Rahab (2:1-7). For this risky act of hospitality, Rahab and her family are spared when the Israelites pillage Jericho in Joshua 6. Rahab is held up as a heroine of faith, not only in Joshua, but throughout the Bible. In fact, when the writer of Hebrews lists the heroes and heroines in the faith hall of fame, Rahab makes the list: "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace" (Heb 11:31).

It's a bit of a surprise that a prostitute like Rahab would make it into the faith hall of fame until you stop to notice the kind of people God uses throughout the Bible. Upon close scrutiny, the heroes and heroines of faith turn out to be both flawed and fallible. Noah had a drinking problem. Moses had a speech impediment and had killed a man in a fit of anger. Ruth was an outsider to the people of Israel. David was a rapist who killed a man to cover up his sin. Ezekiel seemingly had hallucinations. Hosea was a jilted husband. Jonah ran away from God's call. Jesus' disciples forsook him and fled. Paul was a volatile firebrand who had persecuted Christians.

Throughout the pages of the Bible, God surprises us with the people he chooses and uses. Samuel's choosing of the successor to King Saul is symbolic of the way God works throughout Scripture. The strapping sons of Jesse parade before the prophet in 1 Samuel 16, all of them looking like first-class king material. But he chooses David instead: the little runt out tending sheep in the field because no one thought of him as king material at all.

The problem, God tells Samuel, is that people use the wrong criteria when making choices. But "the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). That's why people like Rahab make it into the faith hall of fame. We look at her and see a woman of questionable morals. God looks at her and sees a woman of courage and faith.

Knowing that God has a penchant for calling flawed, fallible people can do two things for us. First, it can give us hope. If God uses people

The Battle of Jericho

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like this, we stand a good chance of being chosen as well. Second, it can make us less judgmental of others. Before we throw stones at the Rahabs of the world, we should stop and remember all of the sinners God chose to use in the Bible. Maybe we need to quit looking at the outward appearance and start looking at the heart.

Conclusion

Perhaps the best way to end a study about the battle of Jericho is to celebrate three things:

- Let's celebrate that God is a God of miracles and be grateful for the miracles in our life. Let's also celebrate the strength and presence of God in our lives when we don't get the miracles we desire.
- Let's celebrate that the best picture we have of God is not in Joshua but in the Gospels. Let's also celebrate the wonder of Jesus, who got rid of God's bad reputation once and for all.
- Let's celebrate that God is full of surprises and be open to the surprising things God wants to do in our lives.

Thank you, God, for the miracles that surround us every day. Thank you for being a God of love and grace who calls us to be people of love and grace. And thank you for surprising us with blessings beyond measure and callings that give us purpose and joy. In Christ's name and spirit we pray. Amen.



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Example 2

The Day of Atonement

Leviticus 16:2-5, 15-18

November 15, 2020

From the Lesson:

“Perhaps we struggle with the significance of blood sacrifice, so prominent in today’s passage, or we wonder what these ritualistic practices have to do with confession and forgiveness.”

From the Commentary:

Christians have struggled with the notion of atonement for centuries.

“Several theories of the atonement have been proposed throughout history, but for the past few centuries the penal substitution theory of the atonement has been prevalent in many Christian circles. This theory holds that sin had to be punished because a righteous God could not ignore human sinfulness. Therefore, God needed someone to suffer for humanity’s sin, so God sent Jesus to die in our place. Jesus became the sacrificial lamb who died in our place, taking upon himself the punishment that we deserved.”

“The problem with the penal substitution theory, at least for me, is that it doesn’t give us a very compelling view of God. It gives us a righteous God who has to punish sin by requiring an innocent man to die, a God who needs the shedding of blood to make salvation happen. Somehow the God of the penal substitution theory doesn’t seem like the loving Father of the prodigal son parable or the Jesus who laughed with children.”

“I prefer to think of the atonement like this: When Jesus died on the cross, God was becoming “at one” with us.”

From the Teacher’s Guide

- The Blood of Jesus

Provide hymnals for each participant. (Older hymnals will probably work best if available.)

Explain that many older hymns dwell on the imagery of Jesus’ blood. These hymns aren’t necessarily bad, but sometimes they can be problematic.

Have participants search for hymns with blood imagery.

Questions

- What do these hymns get right? (For example: Do they take sin seriously? Do they emphasize salvation as God’s work and not our own?)
- How might these hymns be problematic? (For example: Do they drive a wedge between the Father and the Son? Do they glorify the goriest elements of the crucifixion? Do they equate whiteness with purity or goodness and blackness with sin or evil?)

Concerns:

1. We believe that the literature speaks contrary to the view of the atonement as put forth in the reformation, maintained in subsequent Baptist history, and celebrated in our church – *“The problem with the penal substitution theory, at least for me, is that it doesn’t give us a very compelling view of God.” “I prefer to think of the atonement like this: When Jesus died on the cross, God was becoming “at one” with us.” “Do they (blood hymns) glorify the goriest elements of the crucifixion?”*

Isaiah 53:4-10

*Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.*

*But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.*

*All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.*

*He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.*

*By oppression and judgment He was taken away;
And as for His generation, who considered
That He was cut off out of the land of the living
For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?*

*His grave was assigned with wicked men,
Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Because He had done no violence,
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.*

*But the LORD was pleased
To crush Him, putting Him to grief;
If He would render Himself as a guilt offering,
He will see His offspring,
He will prolong His days,
And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.*

See also: Genesis 22:13, John 1:29, John 3:16, Mark 10:45, Acts 2:22-24, Romans 3:21-26, Romans 4:1-9, Romans 4:25, Romans 5:6-10, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Colossians 2:13-15, Hebrews 2:17, Hebrews 9: 1-28, Peter 3:18, 1 John 2:2, and others.

2. We believe the literature errs in presenting penal substitutionary atonement as contrary to the basic nature of God as love – *“Somehow the God of the penal substitution theory doesn’t seem like the loving Father of the prodigal son parable or the Jesus who laughed with children.”*

John 3:16

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

1 John 4:10

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.



November 15, 2020

The Day of Atonement



Leviticus 16:2-5, 15-18



Central Question

How does God's presence address my sin?

Scripture

Leviticus 16:2-5, 15-18

2 The LORD said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy seat that is upon the ark, or he will die; for I appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat. 3 Thus shall Aaron come into the holy place: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. 4 He shall put on the holy linen tunic, and shall have the linen undergarments next to his body, fasten the linen sash, and wear the linen turban; these are the holy vestments. He shall bathe his body in water, and then put them on. 5 He shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering.... 15 He shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the curtain, and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it upon the mercy seat and before the mercy seat. 16 Thus he shall make atonement for the sanctuary, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions, all their sins; and so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which remains with them in the midst of their uncleannesses. 17 No one shall be in the

tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the sanctuary until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel. 18 Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement on its behalf, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and of the blood of the goat, and put it on each of the horns of the altar.

Reflecting

What happens when the sacred and the secular mingle? There is certainly a great hope that the holy seeps into all of our broken places and brings healing—that the sacred is unleashed upon a broken world.

Yet there is also a tendency to protect sacred spaces from being defiled by things we deem secular or worldly. We naturally resist the idea of disrespecting what we view as sacred.

Visitors to Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome are instructed to take care to cover their shoulders and to wear pants or skirts that are appropriately modest. In the Muslim tradition, worshipers are required to bathe the face, hands, arms up to the elbow, feet up to the ankles, and the top of the head before prayer. Other religious traditions have their own practices to heighten worshipers' mindfulness of what it means to enter the presence of the holy.

Closer to our Protestant sensitivities, churches sometimes have heated debates about whether their sanctuary space should be used for a secular speaker, performance, or presentation. Some churches have policies prohibiting the use of secular music during weddings, or during any event at all, in their sanctuary.

At the same time, other churches believe it is acceptable to use secular songs and texts to connect with those who show up in their



What degree of reverence is appropriate for your church's worship space? Does it depend on what activity is taking place in it at the time? Why?

sanctuaries. By doing this, they strive to bring the holy into conversation with the lives of worshipers.

These concerns about the sacred and the secular raise complicated questions about what exactly we are trying to protect. What is at stake: God's sacred holiness or merely human scruples about proper decorum? The examples I've noted are pretty mundane, but they point to larger questions about human brokenness and divine presence. In this week's lesson, we consider how God's presence addresses our sin and also how our sin might affect God's presence.

Studying

Leviticus 16 provides rules about cleansing the tabernacle of ritual impurities. The setting is Mount Sinai in the months after Israel's exodus from Egypt. Through Moses, they are receiving instructions for living before God in holiness before they embark upon their journey through the desert toward the promised land. Leviticus comes from the word "Levite." The book is a summary of rules specifically for the priests as guardians of the people's holiness.

Leviticus 16 describes how the mercy seat, the lid of the ark of the covenant, figured into the purification ritual of the Day of Atonement. The high priest sprinkled blood on this "footstool" of God in the process of cleansing the tabernacle, which is God's dwelling place among the people of Israel. Chapter 16 is the climax of this portion of the story (Fox, 584). The ritual described here and in Leviticus 19 constitute what Fox describes as the "purification ritual par excellence" (584).

Leviticus 16:1 references the deaths of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu. The story of their deaths is found in Leviticus 10. They were consumed with fire when they performed their ritual priestly functions in a way that offended God. It is not clear whether their sin was intentional or unintentional (Fox, 546). Did they misunderstand

their ritual duties? Were they drunk and unable to properly perform them (Fox, 546; see Lev 10:9)? In any event, their action polluted the sacred space of the tabernacle in two ways: first, through whatever offense they committed and, second, by the presence of their dead bodies in the holy place (Mays, 171). Cleansing the tabernacle at this point proved to be a bit of an emergency (Fox, 584).

In Leviticus 16, the Day of Atonement is a yearly ritual with two purposes: to cleanse both the sanctuary and the people (Mays, 171; Bailey, 584). The rite brings cleansing from inadvertent defilement—from simply not following the rituals properly—and from intentional, deliberate and knowing acts of rebellion. These purification practices reflect traditions found in other cultures from the same period (Bailey, 192).



The Bible describes sin and its remedy in a number of ways: acquittal before a judge, being bought out of slavery, etc. In Leviticus 16, the imagery is that of purification after becoming contaminated.

Modern readers may not know quite what to do with these ancient practices of ritual cleansing. For ancient peoples, the spiritual and the physical intertwined in ways that may be new or unusual to us. But there is beauty and depth in such ritual practices. We should not dismiss them simply because we are not used to them.

In fact, Micklem suggests that it is unbiblical to insist that the spiritual and the physical are separate from each other and do not affect each other (82). And Fox explains that these sorts of cleansing rituals have less to do with ancient perceptions of hygiene and medicine and more to do with maintaining the borders between life and death: they are valuable because of their affirmation of life (556).

Leviticus is full of instructions about boundaries and ritual purity that modern readers may find irrelevant. Why should it matter to us which fabrics can and can't be worn together (see Lev 19:19)? In Judaism, some families are

careful to strictly follow the biblical dietary laws while other families don't keep their kitchens to such a high standard. It is perhaps helpful, though, to focus on the idea that boundaries between life and death affirm life.

Leviticus 16 recounts God's instructions to Moses, which are to be passed on to Aaron so that he doesn't make an error in his priestly duties and die as his sons did (v. 2). These instructions describe how Aaron is to enter the divine presence, what he is to bring with him, what he is to wear, and how he is to cleanse himself beforehand (vv. 3-4). All of these stipulations have to do with spiritual and physical purity in God's presence.

Nor is Aaron to enter the sanctuary any time he wants. He is to enter God's presence only when God hovers over the mercy seat (v. 2). This cloud is likely a cloud of incense intended to hide God (Laymon, 72). The end of the chapter establishes that this ritual of cleansing is to take place once per year, on what is today known as Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement (v. 29).

The sacrifice is described in two phases. First, Aaron is to bring a young bull and a ram for his own ritual cleansing (v. 3). The young bull is intended for a sin offering and the ram is a burnt offering, which most scholars identify as an offering of thanksgiving. Second, Aaron is also to bring two male goats and a ram on behalf of the community (v. 5). Here, the two goats are a sin offering, and a ram once more is a burnt offering. He is to sprinkle the blood of the bull and the goats on and in front of the mercy seat (vv. 14-15).

According to verse 4, Aaron is to wear simple, white linen. Usually, the high priest wears ornate liturgical garb, but



Such preparations having been made, the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties; but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people. (Heb 9:6-7)

not now. The plain linen garments identify Aaron with the people (Mays, 171).

Furthermore, Aaron is to wash his entire body before entering the sanctuary. This naked washing requires that he give up all the dignity of his high priestly office (Mays, 171).

This is indeed a “purification ritual par excellence” (Fox, 584). As we study it, we are led to wonder about how God offers us the opportunity to start again, to cleanse the spaces where we meet God, and to be cleansed anew ourselves.

Understanding

God chose to dwell among us. We see this in the story of the Israelites building the tabernacle so that God might move among them, and we see it in the incarnation of God in flesh in the story of Jesus. Yet there is still mystery about how the sacred and our sin interact.

Today’s text focuses on what is required of Aaron to be ritually prepared to enter the tabernacle’s inner sanctuary where the ark is located. It also highlights the sacrifices required for cleansing the tabernacle and the people. These rituals may seem foreign to Christian worshipers today, but they can still be instructive.

This passage raises complicated questions. Perhaps we struggle with how our imperfections could defile a space and whether God needs us to seek the kind of protection provided by ritual cleansing in Leviticus. Perhaps we struggle with the significance of blood sacrifice, so prominent in today’s passage, or we wonder what these ritualistic practices have to do with confession and forgiveness. In the end, we can rest in the knowledge that God promises us redemption and that our work is to discern how God’s presence affects our sin—and how our sin affects God’s presence.



How can Christians take sin seriously without becoming paralyzed by guilt?

One thing to hold in mind is that ritual is largely intended as an affirmation of life. How might we bring that understanding into our own spiritual practices around confession and forgiveness? How can the idea of affirming life help us keep sacred spaces sacred?

What About Me?

- *A solemn moment.* The Day of Atonement is the most solemn day on the Jewish calendar. This is evidence that Scripture takes the defilement of sin seriously. What about us? Do we take sin that seriously, or have we come to take grace and forgiveness for granted?
- *Sin's repercussions.* The Israelites conceived of sin not as a private, individualized experience of moral failure but as something with repercussions for the community—something that can even taint the place where God comes near. Reflect on the toll that sin can take.
- *Cleansing and wholeness.* The theme of this text is about more than sin; it's about how God addresses sin to bring wholeness to our lives. What do you believe about sin and the possibility of forgiveness? Where does Jesus fit into this story of cleansing? Rejoice that God has provided the means for God's people to be cleansed of sin.

Resources

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James L. Mays, gen. ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

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THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Leviticus 16:2-5, 15-18

Introduction

Israel's first high priest was Moses' brother, Aaron. Our passage this week gives instructions for Aaron and all the high priests who would follow him in observing the Day of Atonement. This day, called Yom Kippur in Hebrew, is still considered the most sacred and significant of all Jewish holy days.

On this first observance of the Day of Atonement, Aaron is warned not to appear at the holy place at any other time lest he die. On this one appointed day, he is to bathe, put on his holy vestments, and enter the holy place with a young bull, two male goats, and a ram. Then he is to take the blood of those animals and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and on the horns on the altar. No one is allowed in the sanctuary as Aaron performs his solitary, sacred acts to atone for the sins of the people.

This ancient blood ritual may seem foreign to us, but beneath it are some issues that we deal with all the time: sin, forgiveness, and the need to be at one with our God. We no longer sprinkle blood on holy things to atone for our sins, but we do want to know how to be at peace with God. Perhaps these verses can stimulate some thought and conversation about those crucial truths.

The Significance of Sin

The Day of Atonement was set aside for one purpose: to acknowledge and atone for sin. Even if average Israelites didn't understand all that Aaron would do in the holy place on that day, they would remember that sin is significant. It is not to be ignored or taken lightly; it must be acknowledged and addressed.

The reason for that is twofold. First, we have all sinned. The finest person in the world is a sinner and needs to admit that and receive God's pardon. As the Apostle Paul put it centuries later, "...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). When Aaron led that first observance of the Day of Atonement, he did it on behalf of all the people because they were all guilty of sin.

Second, sin is destructive. The reason sin needs to be acknowledged and atoned for is that it has the power to destroy a lot of sacred things:

- *It destroys joy.* Sin promises happiness, contentment, and a ticket to the good life. But sin is like cotton candy. It leaves us malnourished and empty. Only when we get rid of the cotton candy of sin and feast on the bread of life can we hope to be full and satisfied.
- *It destroys one's relationships with others.* Sin is seldom solitary, affecting only the sinner. It typically affects marriages, friendships, parent-child relationships, and any other relationship of significance. Sin is inevitably social and even contagious. It has a way of spreading and destroying a host of relationships.
- *It destroys our relationship with God.* Left unrecognized and unconfessed, sin leads a person away from God. This was the main reason the Israelites observed the Day of Atonement. They knew they couldn't ignore their sin and still be in a covenant relationship with God. God is ready and willing to forgive, but we must be willing to acknowledge and confess our sin: "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9). If we don't confess our sins, we cut ourselves off from God's grace.

Perhaps the best metaphor we can use for sin is to say it is a cancer that has the power to kill. Like cancer, sin will spread like wildfire if left unchecked. It will ravage our joy, destroy our relationships with others, and sabotage our relationship with God. Given the devastating effects of sin left unacknowledged and unconfessed, no wonder the people of Israel needed a Day of Atonement!

A Better Atonement

The writer of Hebrews was well acquainted with this passage in Leviticus. He uses the Day of Atonement as a symbol of what Jesus accomplished when he died on the cross. He especially focuses on this symbolism in Hebrews 9–10, where he describes Jesus' sacrifice as far superior to the one Aaron made on that first Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16. He says that Jesus' sacrifice was superior in three ways:

- *Jesus was a far better sacrifice than animals:* "For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to worship the living God!" (Heb 9:13-14).

- *The sacrifice was in a far better place:* “For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb 9:24).
- *The sacrifice never had to be repeated:* “Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb 9:25-26).

Here’s his final summation of the superiority of the sacrifice of Jesus:

And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifice that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. (Heb 10:11-12)

The original Day of Atonement in Leviticus had its place in history, but Jesus offers a better sacrifice through his death and resurrection.

Celebrating the Day of Atonement Today

Christians have struggled with the notion of atonement for centuries. They have debated such questions as, How did Jesus’ death atone for the sins of humanity? Why did God require a death and the shedding of blood to redeem the world? And what do the death and resurrection of Jesus teach us about God?

Several theories of the atonement have been proposed throughout history, but for the past few centuries the penal substitution theory of the atonement has been prevalent in many Christian circles. This theory holds that sin had to be punished because a righteous God could not ignore human sinfulness. Therefore, God needed someone to suffer for humanity’s sin, so God sent Jesus to die in our place. Jesus became the sacrificial lamb who died in our place, taking upon himself the punishment that we deserved.

The problem with the penal substitution theory, at least for me, is that it doesn’t give us a very compelling view of God. It gives us a righteous God who has to punish sin by requiring an innocent man to die, a God who needs the shedding of blood to make salvation happen. Somehow the God of the penal substitution theory doesn’t seem like the

loving Father of the prodigal son parable or the Jesus who laughed with children.

I prefer to think of the atonement like this: When Jesus died on the cross, God was becoming “at one” with us. He was identifying with the darkest moment we would ever have to encounter. At the cross, Jesus,

though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death—even death on a cross. (Phil 2:6-8)

When Jesus died, he made it clear that the God of the universe is at one with us. In the person of Jesus, God knows what it’s like to be human, to hurt, to be mistreated, even to die. We have a God we can love and trust. But the story doesn’t end at the cross, of course. The atonement also involves the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus came out of his grave, he made it clear that we, too, can overcome whatever darkness and death we have to face. God is with us not only when we suffer at the cross but also when we dance out of the tomb.

In *A Better Atonement* (Minneapolis: JoePa Group, 2012), Tony Jones writes:

Some people today may find it compelling that some Great Cosmic Transaction took place [nearly 2,000] years ago, that God’s wrath burned against his son instead of against me. I find that version of the atonement theory neither intellectually compelling, spiritually compelling, nor in keeping with the biblical narrative.

Instead, Jesus’ death offers life because in Christianity, and in Christianity alone, the God and Creator of the universe deigned to become human, to be tempted, to reach out to those who had been de-humanized and restore their humanity, and ultimately to die in solidarity with every one of us.

Yes, he was a sacrifice. Yes, he was sinless. But, thank God, Jesus was also human. The hope he offers is that, by dying on that cross, the eternal Trinity became forever bound to my humanity.

The God of the universe identified with me, and I have the opportunity to identify with him.

Today, and every day, I hang with him on that cross. (38)

That, to me, is an atonement worth celebrating, mainly because it gives us a God worth celebrating.

Conclusion

It's not hard to imagine how Aaron must have felt on the first Day of Atonement. He must have entered the holy place that day with fear and trembling. This was a serious, somber occasion marked by the sacrifice of animals and the sprinkling of blood on holy things. We can be quite certain there was no laughter or merriment on that day.

But the mood in Hebrews 9–10 seems very different. When the writer of Hebrews describes the atonement Jesus secured at the cross, he is full of hope and joy. The tone is not serious and somber but joyful and hopeful. He writes:

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. (Heb 10:19-23)

Here's where the story in Leviticus 16 finally ends: in a new and living way, in a great high priest, in full assurance of faith, in confession of hope without wavering.

Lord, sometimes the Old Testament seems strange and foreign to us. But we sense that the people in its pages were struggling with many of the same things we struggle with—sin, forgiveness, and how to be at one with you. Thank you for our great high priest, Jesus, who has atoned for our sins and put us right with you. In his name and spirit we pray. Amen.

November 15, 2020

The Day of Atonement

Leviticus 16:2-5, 15-18

Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the *Learner's Study Guide*. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.



Bible Background **The "Purification Ritual Par Excellence"**

Leviticus 16 tells a story about cleansing the tabernacle to rid it of things that have marred its holiness. This is another moment in the story of the people of Israel at Mount Sinai after their exodus from Egypt. Soon they will embark upon their wilderness trek toward the promised land.

Leviticus 16 tells of the use of the mercy seat for the purpose of ritual cleansing. This involved sprinkling the blood of an animal sacrifice on the symbolic "footstool" of God to cleanse the tabernacle. Along with Numbers 19, the cleansing ritual described here is often studied as the "purification ritual par excellence" (Fox, 584).

The Need for Cleansing

Leviticus 16:1 refers to the death of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu. The story of their deaths is told in Leviticus 10 and involves an offense they committed when they entered the tabernacle to perform their priestly duties. It is not clear whether their sin was intentional or unintentional (Fox, 546). Did they fail to understand their ritual duties? Were they drunk and unable to properly perform them (see Lev 10:9)? In any event, their action polluted the sacred space of the tabernacle in two ways: first, through whatever offense they committed and,

second, by the presence of their dead bodies in the holy place (Mays, 171). Cleansing the tabernacle at this point proved to be a bit of an emergency (Fox, 584).

The cleansing ritual became a yearly observance with two purposes: to cleanse the sanctuary and then to cleanse the people (Mays, 171; Fox, 584). The annual rite brought cleansing from inadvertent sins—from simply not following the rituals properly—and from intentional, deliberate and knowing acts of rebellion. These purification practices reflect traditions found in other cultures from the same period (Bailey, 192).

Modern readers may not know what to do with these practices of ritual cleansing. For ancient peoples, the spiritual and the physical intertwined in ways that may be new or unusual to us. But there is beauty and depth in such practices. We should not dismiss them simply because we are not used to them.

In fact, Micklem suggests that it is unbiblical to insist that the spiritual and the physical are separate from each other and do not affect each other (82). And Fox explains that these sorts of cleansing rituals have less to do with ancient perceptions of hygiene and medicine and more to do with maintaining the borders between life and death: they are valuable because of their affirmation of life (556).

Leviticus is full of instructions about boundaries and ritual purity. Modern readers will likely find some of these

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instructions irrelevant. Why should it matter to us which fabrics can and can't be worn together (see Lev 19:19)? Within the Jewish community, some families are careful to strictly follow the biblical dietary laws while other families don't keep their kitchens to such a high standard. It is perhaps helpful, though, to focus on the idea that boundaries between life and death affirm life.

The Day of Atonement Ritual

The Hebrew word *kipper*, used throughout this chapter, can have a variety of meanings. It can mean "covering, purging, atonement, or ransom" (Fox, 584). The biblical text is a merging of earlier and later sources, so it can be difficult to identify the intention of each use of this word. But scholars believe "purging" and "atoning" are the mostly likely intended meanings.

Leviticus 16 recounts God's instructions to Moses, which are to be passed on to Aaron so that he doesn't make an error in his priestly duties and die as his sons did (v. 2). These instructions describe how Aaron is to enter the divine presence, what he is to bring with him, what he is to wear, and how he is to cleanse himself beforehand (vv. 3-4). All of these requirements relate to spiritual and physical purity in God's presence.

Nor can Aaron enter the sanctuary any time he wants. He is to enter God's presence only when God hovers over the mercy seat (v. 2). This cloud is likely a cloud of incense intended to hide God (Laymon, 72). The end of the chapter establishes that this ritual of cleansing is to take place once per year, on what is today known as Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement (v. 29).

Aaron is to bring with him four offerings, two for ritual cleansing and two on behalf of the community. For ritual cleansing, he is to bring a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering, apparently meant as an offering of thanksgiving (v. 3). On behalf of the community, he is to bring two goats for a sin

offering and a ram for a burnt offering (v. 5). He is to sprinkle the blood of the bull and the goats on and in front of the mercy seat (vv. 14-15).

Furthermore, Aaron is to wear simple, white linen. Usually, the high priest wears ornate liturgical garb, but not now.

Outline FOR TEACHING

- I. The Need for Cleansing. Leviticus 16 describes cleansing the tabernacle to rid it of things that have marred its holiness.
 - A. Sin is viewed as a physical contamination that must be removed.
 - B. Though many cleansing agents are proposed in the Old Testament and in ancient cultures generally, blood is considered especially effective.
- II. The blood of the sacrifice is applied to the mercy seat (Lev 16:15), symbolically the footstool of Yahweh, who accepts the offering.
- III. Purposes of Cleansing
 - A. Leviticus 10 describes an "emergency" cleansing after the sin of Nadab and Abihu.
 - B. The Day of Atonement ritual happens yearly and has two purposes.
 1. Cleanse the sanctuary of ritual sin.
 2. Cleanse the people of both unintentional and deliberate acts of rebellion.
 - C. Ritual cleansing has to do with maintaining the border between life and death.
- IV. Requirements on the High Priest
 - A. The high priest (Aaron) may enter the sanctuary only when God hovers over the mercy seat (v. 2).
 - B. He is to bring four offerings (vv. 3, 5).
 1. Two for ritual purgation.
 2. Two on behalf of the community.
 - C. He is to wear simple linen rather than his usual priestly vestments (v. 4).
 - D. Aaron is to wash his entire body (v. 4).

This may imply a distinction between purification and worship (Berlin, 244).

Aaron is to wash his entire body before entering the sanctuary. Whereas the cleansing requires only washing hands and feet, Aaron is required to be naked and to wash his entire body. This naked washing meant he had to give up the dignity of his high priestly office (Mays, 171).

Today's text focuses on what is required of Aaron to be ritually prepared to enter the tabernacle's inner sanctuary where the ark is located. It also highlights the sacrifices required for cleansing the tabernacle and the people. These rituals may seem foreign to Christian worshipers today, but they can still be instructive.

1 A Way to Begin

*Today's lesson describes a bloody ritual sacrifice. We must handle texts like this with care. Instead of focusing on ideas of "holy violence," we should look for the fuller picture of God's redemptive actions toward us. **Begin the lesson by unpacking what the theme of blood sacrifice does—and does not—mean for our relationship with God.***

○ Shakespeare Understood



Before class, enlist three volunteers to play the roles of the Doctor, the Gentlewoman, and Lady Macbeth. Provide them copies of the resource page "Shakespeare Understood." Explain the context of this scene from *Macbeth*—do an Internet search for "Macbeth sleepwalking scene" if you're a bit rusty—and have your volunteers act it out in modernized language. (If you're uncomfortable with the instance of mild profanity, adjust the line to "Come out, *crimson* spot!").

Discuss other images or expressions that describe sin as a stain or contamination—for example, "filthy jokes," "dirty money," etc. Why do we describe wrongdoing in these terms? How is this different from other images we might use?

Today's lesson describes a ritual of cleansing to remove the contamination of sin.

○ The Blood of Jesus

Provide hymnals for each participant. (Older hymnals will probably work best if available.) Explain that many older hymns dwell on the imagery of Jesus' blood. These hymns aren't necessarily bad, but sometimes they can be problematic.

Have participants search for hymns with blood imagery.

Questions

- What do these hymns get right? (For example: Do they take sin seriously? Do they emphasize salvation as God's work and not our own?)
- How might these hymns be problematic? (For example: Do they drive a wedge between the Father and the Son? Do they glorify the goriest elements of the crucifixion? Do they equate whiteness with purity or goodness and blackness with sin or evil?)

○ Cleansing of Sins

Invite participants to reflect on how sin, confession, and forgiveness are talked about in your congregation. How does your church or tradition use the language of "cleansing" or "purification" to describe these things?

2 A Way to Explore Scripture

Leviticus 16 describes the cleansing of the tabernacle. Because the tabernacle was the dwelling of God, the Israelites believed that it must be kept ritually clean.

Exploring this passage may raise questions about how an ancient and unfamiliar practice can or should inform our discipleship today. **Guide participants to find connections between Israel's cleansing rituals and modern practices surrounding confession and assurance of pardon.**

○ Group Discussion

Divide the class into four groups. Assign each group one of the following questions. If your class is especially large, divide it into more groups and have multiple groups work on the same question.

1. When can Aaron enter the tabernacle?
2. What four offerings is Aaron to bring with him?
3. What is Aaron to wear?
4. What is Aaron to bathe before entering?

Have each group read Leviticus 16:2-5, 15-18 to find answers to their question. Bring the class back together and have each group share its insights. Ask the following questions for group discussion.

Questions

- What do these requirements say about the importance of cleansing?
- What does it feel like to be not merely “acquitted” or “forgiven” but “cleansed” from sin?
- What role does Jesus play in your understanding of being cleansed from sin?

○ Lectio Divina

Provide a candle to light at the end of this exercise. Enlist a volunteer reader and lead the class in the following guided listening exercise.

Read Leviticus 16:2-5, 15-18 slowly and deliberately. Have participants listen for a word or phrase that stands out to them.

After the reading, invite participants to share the word or phrase they selected.

Next, have the volunteer read the same passage again. As the passage is read, invite participants to consider why the word or phrase they identified earlier resonates with them at this point in their life. What is going on that causes them to be moved by it? What aspect of their hearts and minds is responding to this word or phrase?

After the reading, have participants share any further insights they might have.

Lead the class in prayer. Have them sit silently for a while and bring their chosen word or phrase into a conversation with God. Suggest that they listen for an invitation to do or be something different.

Finally, lead the class in a time of quiet centering. Light the candle. Have participants sit silently, either watching the flame or closing their eyes. Encourage them to rest in God's presence rather than in any images or words.

3 A Way to End

Learners have reflected on the purification practices that God set forth for the tabernacle: the requirements placed on Aaron, the need to cleanse the tabernacle itself from incidental tainting, and the communal offerings made for redemption from deliberate sin. Close the session by helping participants reflect on their own attitudes toward confession, cleansing, and redemption.

○ Parting Questions

Ask the following questions.

Questions

- What does today's lesson reveal about God's presence?
- What does it reveal about sin and how to deal with it?
- How do these revelations challenge your previous conceptions? How do they affirm them?
- What hope or assurance does this passage offer for those who struggle with feelings of guilt or unworthiness?

○ God's Redeeming Work

Distribute index cards and pens or pencils to each participant. Have them reflect on the following questions and write their answers on the card.

Questions

- What do you believe God is doing, or has done, with respect to human sin?
- What is required of you in order to come near to God?
- How does God's presence address your sin?

Invite a volunteer to read 1 John 1:8-9. Have participants respond, "Thanks be to God." Close by singing together a hymn celebrating God's grace and forgiveness.

Resources

- Lloyd R. Bailey, *Leviticus-Numbers*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2014).
- Adele Berlin et al., eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Tanakh Translation; Oxford University Press, 2004).
- Everett Fox, trans., *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy* (Schocken, 1995).
- Charles M. Laymon, ed., *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abington, 1971).
- James L. Mays, gen. ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).
- Nathaniel Micklem, "Leviticus," *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 2, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1952).

Example 3

The Lord Fights for Israel

July 14, 2019

From the Lesson:

In a lesson taken from Joshua 10:7-14, which details a battle between the Israelites and the Amorites, the literature finds little in the chosen scripture that is edifying. Instead of teaching from the passage, the literature uses it as a case study for how to interpret the Bible and says that we can reject certain Old Testament scriptures about the nature of God.

From the Commentary:

It is difficult if not impossible to find much in this passage that is edifying to us today. We do not, or should not, want to be a warrior people, and we do not, or should not, want to have a warrior God. As we saw last week in our study of the battle of Jericho, the God presented to us in the book of Joshua is very different than the God presented to us by Jesus.

So, instead of trying to pull some "lessons for life" from this passage, let's use it to think about all of the passages in the Old Testament that present God as violent. Let's use it to construct a philosophy of Scripture that allows us to take the Old Testament seriously without having to accept everything the Old Testament tells us about the nature of God.

The lesson proceeds to offer a method for interpreting Scripture whereby we distinguish which passages are essential to Christian faith, which are strategies for spreading the gospel, and which are specific to the particular culture of the time but do not apply to us today. The final principle to remember according to the commentary is:

Anything in the Bible that contradicts the life and teachings of Jesus is not the final word. Everything in the Bible must be measured alongside him--who he was, what he said, and what he did.

Concerns:

By encouraging the reader to disregard the passage from Joshua due to its perceived conflict with the person of Christ, the commentary presents a distorted view of God. In reality, God is loving AND holy in His hatred of sin. He is merciful toward sinners through Christ AND He is wrathful toward sinners who reject Christ. He will comfort us AND He will fight for us. He is the lamb AND He is the lion. A lesson pulled from Joshua 10:7-14 *can* edify us by showing us various facets of God's matchless perfection: His power over creation, His ability and desire to protect us in ways we cannot imagine, and His response to our prayers.

Scripture References:

2 Timothy 3:16

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;

Exodus 15:3

The Lord is a warrior; The Lord is His name

Isaiah 42:13

The Lord will go forth like a warrior,

He will arouse His zeal like a man of war.

He will utter a shout, yes, He will raise a war cry. He will prevail against His enemies.

John 3:36

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

July 14, 2019

The Lord Fights for Israel



Joshua 10:7-14



Central Question

What do I have the right to ask of God?

Scripture

Joshua 10:7-14

7 So Joshua went up from Gilgal, he and all the fighting force with him, all the mighty warriors. 8 The LORD said to Joshua, "Do not fear them, for I have handed them over to you; not one of them shall stand before you." 9 So Joshua came upon them suddenly, having marched up all night from Gilgal. 10 And the LORD threw them into a panic before Israel, who inflicted a great slaughter on them at Gibeon, chased them by the way of the ascent of Beth-horon, and struck them down as far as Azekah and Makkedah. 11 As they fled before Israel, while they were going down the slope of Beth-horon, the LORD threw down huge stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died; there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with the sword. 12 On the day when the LORD gave the Amorites over to the Israelites, Joshua spoke to the LORD; and he said in the sight of Israel, "Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and Moon, in the valley of Aijalon." 13 And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies. Is this not written in the Book of Jashar? The sun stopped in mid-heaven, and did not hurry to set for about a whole day. 14 There has

been no day like it before or since, when the LORD heeded a human voice; for the LORD fought for Israel.

Reflecting

Sometimes we struggle with how to pray. God cares about our lives, but is it right to bother God with trivial details like parking spaces or football games? God wants to meet our needs, but does that make it appropriate to ask God for a winning lottery ticket or a new sports car in my driveway?

Jesus said that faith can move mountains, but are some things too audacious to ask of God? Should I ask God to perform a miracle where everyone can see it? What do I have a right to ask of God?

Jesus urged us to pray and set an example for us in prayer, yet there will always be mysteries surrounding prayer. Though Joshua lived thousands of years before Jesus, he also dared to pray boldly and expected God to answer.

Our ability to come before God in prayer is an enormous privilege, one we shouldn't take lightly. Joshua's prayer at the Battle of Gibeon reminds us that we can ask big things of God, and it also reminds us that prayer is meant to accomplish God's will, not our own. As we study this lesson, let's consider what Joshua can teach us about what we can—and should—ask of God in prayer.



What is the biggest prayer you ever prayed? What happened?

Studying

After the battle of Jericho, the inhabitants of Gibeon took a bold gambit. Because they knew Israel wouldn't forge alliances with any of the Canaanite peoples they intended to displace, the Gibeonites used deceit to make peace with Israel (Josh 9).

They dressed in worn-out clothes and packed moldy provisions to convince Israel that they traveled a long way

to meet them. The Israelites believed the Gibeonites and formed an alliance with them. When the Israelites later uncovered the deception, they felt obligated to keep the treaty because they had sworn before the Lord. Joshua told the Gibeonites that from now on they would serve as “hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the LORD” (9:27).

When the other Canaanite kings heard that Gibeon formed an alliance with Israel, they were frightened (10:1-2). Gibeon was a large city, and Gibeon’s support gave Israel a firmer foothold in the promised land. Therefore, a coalition of five kings went to war against Gibeon (vv. 3-5).

With the opposing armies on the march, the Gibeonites send word to Joshua asking for aid. Joshua then leads the army of Israel all night from Gilgal to Gibeon. When they arrive, they catch the enemy by surprise.

Although Joshua and the army fight, the decisive action in the battle belongs to the Lord. God fights on Israel’s behalf, sending the enemy army into a panic so that they flee from Israel. The biblical writer also describes God’s hurling huge hailstones from heaven so that “there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with the sword” (v. 11).

As the enemy flees, Joshua prays a bold prayer. In the sight of all Israel, he prays to the Lord, saying “Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and Moon, in the valley of Aijalon” (v. 12).

God answers: “The sun stood still and did not hurry to set for about a whole day” (v. 13).

Our logical, rational way of thinking often leads us to focus on what exactly happened here. Did the earth stop on its axis, making the day longer so Joshua had time to defeat the enemy? Was there some kind of omen in the sky that encouraged Israel and disheartened the enemy? Or was Joshua speaking poetically about even the heavens fighting for Israel? Something similar happens in passages such as Judges 5:20 and Habakkuk 3:10-11.

The truth is that we don't know for sure. Pausing the earth's rotation is well within the power and ability of God, though we might wonder why no other ancient people noticed! We should probably interpret Joshua's prayer as a poetic plea for God to fight on Israel's behalf. Whatever happened, God responded to Joshua's prayer in a dramatic way that Joshua and the Israelites understood as an answer to prayer.

Though the details in this story may leave us with unanswered questions, we need to focus on what the text emphasizes: on this day, God "heeded a human voice." "There has been no day like it before or since, when the LORD heeded a human voice; for the LORD fought for Israel" (v. 14). The narrator doesn't marvel at the actions of the sun and moon. The narrator saves his wonder for the way God responds to Joshua's prayer.

We shouldn't take for granted that God listens to our prayers. On the contrary, it is a privilege we should treasure. The Creator of the universe, Savior and King, Redeemer, King of kings and Lord of lords delights in hearing our prayers.

More than that, God urges us to pray—even commands us to pray. Hebrews tells us to come boldly before the throne of grace (4:16). Jesus tells us that if we ask we will receive and that even a small amount of faith can move mountains (Mt 17:20). God hears our prayers, and that is reason to marvel.

Though we have unanswered questions about Joshua's prayer, his prayer can still serve as a model. First, Joshua prays while obeying the Lord's command.

God tells Joshua to fight for the Gibeonites, and Joshua asks God to help him be successful in that task.

Prayer is a means of accomplishing God's will, not our own. Jesus tells us to pray for God's kingdom to come and



What should be our response when our prayers aren't answered—at least not in the way we had hoped?

God's will to be done (Mt 6:10). James says that one reason our prayers go unanswered is that we ask wrongly when we're led by our own selfish motives (Jas 4:3). When we pray, we are to seek God's will and God's glory.

When we seek God's will and God's glory, we can pray boldly. We serve a great and powerful God who is capable of more than we can ask or even imagine (Eph 3:20). When God gives us a dream or a promise, we can ask God to help us realize those dreams and to fulfill those promises. That's not audacity. It's faith. And faith always pleases the Lord.

Truly, the problem for most of us is not asking too much of God. It's settling for too little. We are rational people, and there is obviously a place for rational thinking. But God exists outside our human boundaries. Too often, we limit ourselves by ruling out the possibility that God may want to work through us in ways that defy all logic.

When it comes to what God can do in and through us, we are often too easily satisfied. The next time you come before God in prayer, begin by asking God what you should pray for. Then pray boldly. Prayer is a privilege that should not be squandered.

Understanding

Joshua's boldness gives us a model for prayer. Acting in obedience to God's command, he prayerfully expected God to provide the help he needed to accomplish God's will.

Joshua was able to pray confidently because he was already doing what God had told him to do. When we step out on faith in response to God's command, we can have the same confidence. God will give us the strength and resources needed to accomplish the task.

When we don't know *how* to pray, one of the most important things we can do is ask God *what* to pray for. Joshua's prayer wasn't about making himself look good or

meeting his own selfish desires. It was about accomplishing the Lord's will.

As we pray, we should ask for a deeper understanding of God's will for ourselves, our families, our churches, and our communities. As we grow in faith, we can boldly pray that God will help us be a part of accomplishing God's will and advancing Christ's kingdom. Prayer is about seeking God's will, not our own.

It is no small thing to come before God in prayer. Prayer is a privilege, and we should make it a priority. As we pray, we must always remember to whom we are praying: the Lord God, sovereign King and all-powerful Creator.

When we seek the Lord's will, we need to give ourselves permission to dream big and pray boldly. All things are possible with God. Let's not be guilty of being too easily satisfied.

As we pray, let us approach confidently based on our relationship with God. Let us ask God how we should pray. Then, when God reveals the divine will to us, we will be able to pray boldly and courageously.

What About Me?

- *We can be confident that God hears our prayers.* The biblical writer marveled that God "heeded a human voice" (v. 14). Those who have followed Jesus as Lord can have the confidence of knowing that God hears our prayers. Like parents who love their children and delight in meeting their needs, God loves us and delights in hearing our prayers and

Thoughts on Prayer



Prayer begins where human capacity ends.

—Marian Anderson

True prayer is asking God what He wants.

—William Barclay

Keep praying, but be thankful that God's answers are wiser than your prayers.

—William Culbertson

It is ours to offer what we can, His to supply what we cannot.

—St. Jerome

meeting our needs. When we pray, we don't have to worry if we're worthy or if we've said the right words in the right way. Prayer doesn't hinge on our worthiness, but God's, and God isn't overly concerned with the outward form of our prayer. We can pray with the confidence that God hears us and will respond.

- *We can seek God's will in prayer.* Prayer flows from the context of our relationship with God. Following Jesus as Lord means that we place God's desires above our own. Our goal, therefore, is to serve God and not for God to serve us. Prayer is more than a wish list of personal needs. Rather, it is how we communicate with God and seek to understand what God is doing in the world around us. In prayer, we seek greater understanding of God's will and find the strength and resources to be a part of God's kingdom work. Prayer isn't about winning honor for ourselves but about bringing glory to God.

- *We can pray boldly because we serve a big God.* When we look from our human point of view, it's easy to dismiss some dreams as impossible or out of reach. But all things are possible with God! We serve a God who delights in doing the impossible, who uses unlikely people to accomplish heavenly goals, and whose ways often surpass the logic of this world. Therefore, we can pray boldly based on our convictions about God's character and purposes. God is able to do greater things than we can ask or even imagine, and God is pleased when we ask for big things in prayer.

Resources

A. Graeme Auld, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, The Daily Study Bible (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1985).

David M. Howard, *Joshua*, Kindle ed., The New American Commentary (Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998).

Marvin E. Tate, *From Promise to Exile: The Former Prophets*, All the Bible (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1999).

THE LORD FIGHTS FOR ISRAEL

Joshua 10:7-14

Introduction

Our passage this week from Joshua 10 is another example of a warrior people being led by a warrior God. As we saw last week in the battle of Jericho, the Israelites invading Canaan saw themselves as led and empowered by God. God was their commander-in-chief, leading them to victory.

In today's passage, God throws the Amorites into a state of panic so that the Israelites can slaughter them. God also rains deadly hailstones on the Amorites so that more of them are killed by the divinely hurled stones than by the swords of Israel. And God answers Joshua's prayer and makes the sun and moon stand still so that the Israelites will have more daylight to kill the enemy.

It is difficult if not impossible to find much in this passage that is edifying to us today. We do not, or should not, want to be a warrior people, and we do not, or should not, want to have a warrior God. As we saw last week in our study of the battle of Jericho, the God presented to us in the book of Joshua is very different than the God presented to us by Jesus.

So, instead of trying to pull some "lessons for life" from this passage, let's use it to think about all of the passages in the Old Testament that present God as violent. Let's use it to construct a philosophy of Scripture that allows us to take the Old Testament seriously without having to accept everything the Old Testament tells us about the nature of God.

You Have Heard It Said of Old...

Perhaps the best place to begin our study is in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5, Jesus takes six Old Testament commandments and either updates them or changes them altogether. He uses the formula, "You have heard it said of old..., but I say to you" He quotes the Old Testament commandment and then offers an interpretation of it. The six commandments he addresses are (1) murder, upgraded to the anger that prompted it; (2) adultery, upgraded to the lust that produced it; (3) certificates of divorce, upgraded to the act of divorce that engendered the certificate; (4) oaths, upgraded to speaking the

truth all the time; (5) revenge, upgraded to grace and turning the other cheek; and (6) loving neighbors, upgraded to loving all people all the time. In the first four upgrades, Jesus transcends the letter of the laws and addresses the spirit beneath them. In the last two upgrades, he changes the laws altogether.

It's easy to see why the religious leaders were so furious with Jesus. They must have seen him as both haughty and heretical. Imagine someone with the audacity to change the commandments of God. Imagine someone suggesting that God's commandments are insufficient and inadequate. Such a person deserves to be chastised. But Jesus came to be a better picture of God and God's way than the world had ever seen, so he had no problem taking issue with some of these ancient teachings.

This "you have heard it said..., but I say to you..." pattern of Jesus shows us that Scripture moves and changes. It is alive and sharper than a two-edged sword. Just because some Old Testament passages say to kill people doesn't mean we should take up arms and slay our enemies in the name of the Lord. By the time we get to Jesus and the Gospels, those old edicts are overturned, and a new ethic of grace and forgiveness is established.

Just because some Old Testament passages specify exactly how to eat and dress doesn't mean we have to adhere to those instructions today. By the time of the New Testament, early Christians knew that the new covenant in Jesus had reframed those Levitical laws.

That is why it is always dangerous—and foolish—to pull out certain passages and say they must be followed because they are in the Bible. If we adopt that philosophy, we can use the Bible to justify war, slavery, racism, polygamy, the denigration of women, and the stoning of disobedient children. Sadly, people through the years *have* used the Bible to justify those things.

But the passages that prescribe those things are not the final word from God on those issues. Biblical thought moves and changes, and wise interpreters of the Bible know that.

Wise Interpreters of the Bible

Being a wise interpreter of Scripture isn't easy, but the burden of biblical interpretation falls on every person who reads it. It's comforting to envision an inerrant God dictating an inerrant book so that all we have to do is read and follow its simple instructions. "God said it; I believe it; that settles it" offers a certain amount of comfort.

But when we come at the Bible honestly, we know it is a complicated, often culturally conditioned book that is anything *but* simple and straightforward. In fact, in places it seems both confusing and contradictory.

There's no telling how many well-intentioned people have made a vow to read the Bible from beginning to end, only to get bogged down in Leviticus and decide to read no further. They thought the Bible would be inspiring. They had no idea it would tell them to stone disobedient sons to death outside the city walls. In frustration, they quit their Bible-reading campaign and privately decide that the Bible isn't all it's cracked up to be.

So it behooves each of us to approach the Bible with our eyes wide open. It is a complicated compilation of sacred writings written over a span of at least 1,000 years, and some parts are more crucial to our lives than other parts. In his book *Mere Morality* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1983), Lewis Smedes makes some points that underscore that truth. He compares the Bible to baseball and says they have three things in common.

First, Smedes says, they both have *rules of the game*. These control the essence of the game. Change these rules, and you change the game. In baseball, for example, if you declare that a batter is out after only two strikes, you have fundamentally changed the nature of the game. In the Bible, if you declare that Jesus didn't really die and rise again, you have altered the very essence of the Christian faith.

Next, they both have *rules of strategy*. When baseball teams adopt an infield shift and move the infielders into different places on the field, they have made a strategic move designed to help them win. When the Apostle Paul told slaves to honor their masters, he may well have been proposing a strategy for helping the Christian movement survive. An uprising of slaves could have sabotaged the Christian movement before it ever got a foothold. Good strategies? Yes. Rules of the game for all time? No.

Finally, the Bible and baseball both have *rules of propriety*. It is deemed improper in baseball to throw at a batter's head, flip a bat after hitting a home run, or kick dirt on an umpire. These are not rules of the game or rules of strategy but rather rules that protect the integrity of the game. Many of the laws and edicts in Scripture, which make no sense to us today, made perfect sense when they were written thousands of years ago. They were rules of propriety that respected cultural mores and the rights of others.

These distinctions are helpful because they remind us that not everything in the Bible is equally important. It is up to each of us to assess the

relative importance of a particular passage. The laws in Leviticus pale beside the truths in the Sermon on the Mount. The commands to kill people in Joshua 10 are overturned by Jesus and passages about love such as 1 Corinthians 13. Paul's assertion that women wear veils when they pray in public doesn't carry the same weight as his assertion that "there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

It makes us nervous to think that we have to discern the difference between a rule of the game, a rule of strategy, and a rule of propriety. It also makes us nervous to think that we have to be knowledgeable enough to know which Old Testament passages have been updated or changed by the New Testament. But deciding what is truly important is the very essence of being a wise interpreter of the Bible.

The Ultimate Word

The ultimate, all-important word in Scripture is not a written word, but a living Word: Jesus of Nazareth. Listen to the words of the writer of Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Heb 1:1-3)

The ultimate word in the Bible is Jesus, "the exact imprint of God's very being." All of those strange Old Testament laws, all of those passages that make God look mean and punitive, and all of those passages that totally confuse us are finally swallowed up by the governing word in Scripture: Jesus is the full revelation of God, and his death and resurrection have put us right with God.

Here, then, is the final principle we must remember when we're dealing with a passage like Joshua 10: Anything in the Bible that contradicts the life and teachings of Jesus is not the final word. Everything in the Bible must be measured alongside him—who he was, what he said, and what he did. When that principle is upheld, there is plenty of reason to celebrate. The Bible is good news indeed.

Conclusion

In Hebrew, the name Jesus (Yeshua) literally means “the Lord is salvation.” It is a variation of the name Joshua. Jesus and Joshua, in other words, basically bore the same name. Certainly, Joshua was a hero among the Jewish people, and many Jewish boys probably bore his name through the centuries.

After all, Joshua did some amazing things. He was one of two spies who believed the Israelites could conquer the land of Canaan. He was a capable military leader under the command of Moses. He was willing to step up as leader of the people after Moses died. And he successfully led the Israelites into the promised land. It’s no wonder that Jewish people through the centuries would name their sons Joshua.

But, like all of us, Joshua was a product of his time and place. Like everyone else in his world, he believed his God was a warrior who wanted the Israelites to be a warrior people. He was determined to be faithful to that God.

Some 1,300 years later, another Joshua was born. His parents named him Yeshua, and he also grew up to be faithful to his God. But his God would be very different from the God of the first Joshua. Jesus’ God would not be a warrior God intent on destroying enemies and winning battles. Rather, his God would be a gracious God intent on loving enemies and winning hearts. Jesus would not stir his people to be military conquerors; he would challenge them to be sacrificial servants.

These were two men with basically the same name. But they had very different understandings of God and preached very different messages. Joshua 10 is worth studying because it gives us an honest and accurate picture of life among the Israelites as they completed their settlement of the promised land. But its trumpeting of the exploits of the first Joshua also reminds us of the Joshua who was yet to come: the one who tells us not to hate our enemies, but to love them.

Help us be wise interpreters of the Bible, God, so that we can know and live the truth. Amen.

Example 4

God's Tender Compassion

July 26, 2020

From the Lesson:

The lesson begins with a quotation of Hosea 11 relating how God has cared for Israel.

...it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms...I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.... They shall go after the Lord, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. (NRSV)

The image of God as a divine Mother caring for her children is a powerful image, especially in light of the male-dominated images associated with God in the Bible.

From the Teaching Guide:

Even with the most wonderful Mother ever, Israel persisted in turning away from her.... Hosea 11 paints a tender picture of God as a grief-stricken parent who loves her children in demonstrable ways.

We find a beautiful picture in this verse of lifting a baby to one's cheek and feeding the child. God fondly remembers caring for Israel in this way. What a powerful image of God as Israel's loving, nursing mother.

In Hosea 11:10-11, the prophet assures Israel that they will one day return to their God and their homeland. He uses the images of a lion recalling her cubs from wandering...

Concerns:

1. Scripture is interpreted to portray God as Mother. The word “mother” is never used in Hosea 11, and fathers can be compassionate and perform all of the acts listed in Hosea 11. While men and women are both created in God's image, God has chosen to reveal Himself to us in the masculine as Father.
2. The literature takes word-choice liberties that effectively change Scripture to support the depiction of a motherly God. First, “feeding” is exchanged for “nursing.” Neither the NRSV used by the literature, nor any other translation of the referenced verse includes the word “nursing.” Every version translates the word as some form of feeding. (Most translations render this verse as lifting a yoke from the jaw and the feeding is of a domestic animal.) Second, the gender of the roaring lion is changed from male to female. The verse from Hosea 11 says “his children,” but the teaching guide refers to “her cubs.”
3. This is not an aberrant lesson but part of a pattern of denying how God has chosen to reveal Himself to us in Scripture. Throughout the two years of lessons examined by the committee (May 2019-April 2021), masculine pronouns for God are avoided unless they are direct quotes from Scripture or in reference to Jesus. Rather than using He/Him/His, the literature uses God/God's. For example, in the study guide for the January 3, 2021, lesson we read: Go back to Genesis 1, where we first learn that God created humankind in God's own image. A typical author who is not trying to avoid gender issues would use His instead

of God's because the author has already identified the antecedent. In Scripture, pronouns that reference God are always masculine.

Scripture References:

Genesis 1:27

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

John 14:16

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever,

July 26, 2020

God's Tender Compassion



Hosea 11



Central Question

What difference does God's compassion make?

Scripture

Hosea 11

1 When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. 2 The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. 3 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. 4 I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. 5 They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. 6 The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. 7 My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all. 8 How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. 9 I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. 10 They shall go after the LORD, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come

trembling from the west. 11 They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD. 12 Ephraim has surrounded me with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit; but Judah still walks with God, and is faithful to the Holy One.

Reflecting

One Sunday, the pastor of a rural church in Oklahoma told a story from his childhood. He said that he grew up in a very poor household and that his mother made great sacrifices.

As a small child, this pastor was excited when his family got a new dog. It was a puppy, easily excitable and rambunctious. The young boy loved his new playmate. The two were inseparable. But, as is typical with young children, his mother was the one who cared for the dog by making sure it was fed and watered each day.

About the same time the family acquired the dog, the mother made a beautiful new dress for herself. The pastor related that it was the first time he had seen his mother ever wear a new item of clothing. She loved that new dress and looked great wearing it.

Then it happened. The pastor's mother washed a load of laundry and hung it on the outside clothesline. The family left for a short time, and when they got back they discovered that the dog had entertained itself by pulling the clothes off the line. The mother's new dress was among the victims. In fact, it was destroyed.

The mother was crestfallen, and her young son was mortified. He was sure the family would make him get rid of the dog. He expected his mother to take out her anger on the playful family pet. The mother, however, simply picked up the clothes and took them inside. That night after dinner, the mother took the remaining table



When have you experienced great forgiveness and compassion?

scraps and fed them to the misguided young dog. At that precise moment, the boy learned what compassion and forgiveness are all about.

Studying

In Hosea 11:1-4, we are given a picture of God that is rarely seen elsewhere in the Old Testament. The prophet depicts a God who is tender and compassionate. God is portrayed as a loving parent, presumably a mother, who loves and cares for Israel as God's own child.

The birth of Israel is described in verse 1 as God delivers the people out of captivity in Egypt. This new "son," however, continues to turn his back on God and chase after idols (v. 2).

But God doesn't give up on this rebellious son. On the contrary, the prophet describes God as teaching Israel to walk and gathering the people up in a big parental hug (v. 3). Another nurturing comparison is offered in verse 4 as God caresses Israel, lifting them to the cheek and providing them sustenance. God is portrayed throughout these verses as a loving parent, gently showing compassion and mercy to Israel. This image is a refreshing change from the judgment and proclamation of coming destruction in much of Hosea and in the prophetic writings generally.

The theme of returning to Egypt conjures up a negative picture in verses 5-7. In many Old Testament texts, the people turn their eyes away from God. They look behind them to where they have come from. Returning to Egypt represents a rejection of the call and covenant God has placed before them. It is also a dangerous act. Verse 6 confirms that the people will face violence, with little to no rest from the reality of danger.

When you drive your car, you have a wide windshield in front of you along with a relatively small rearview mirror. God's people were trying to turn this arrangement backwards. Israel had its attention firmly focused on the rearview

mirror. The windshield—and the way forward—was tiny in comparison, all but hidden from view.

It is easy to focus only on the past. This is true of past triumphs but also of defeats. For those who relive their past glory, it can be difficult to let the past go and press toward the future. For those still mourning past defeats, it can be equally difficult to let go of the guilt and pain we sometimes inflict on ourselves. Yet even though we can remember the past and celebrate its victories, we must press on toward what is ahead. Also, we must be able to overcome past sins by submitting to God, seeking and accepting divine forgiveness, and learning to forgive ourselves.

The themes of compassion and tenderness return in verses 8-9. God asks four rhetorical questions that confirm God's love for Israel: "How can I give you up, Ephraim?" "How can I hand you over, O Israel?" "How can I treat you like Admah?" "How can I treat you like Zeboiim?"

Yes, the children of Israel have sinned. They have repeatedly chosen infidelity and idolatry over faithfulness to the one true God. Sin brings consequences, and Hosea argues that God has every right to punish the people or to cast them aside. But in a way that only God can, God expresses tenderness, compassion, and mercy.

Ephraim is mentioned in verse 8. Ephraim is the name of a prominent northern tribe. In the prophetic writings, it is often used as a synonym for the northern kingdom as a whole. In this instance, Hosea uses "Ephraim" alongside "Israel" as a synonym in the first two questions of verse 8.



The next generation, your children who rise up after you, as well as the foreigner who comes from a distant country, will see the devastation of that land and the afflictions with which the LORD has afflicted it—all its soil burned out by sulfur and salt, nothing planted, nothing sprouting, unable to support any vegetation, like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the LORD destroyed in his fierce anger. (Deut 29:22-23)

Admah and Zeboiim were cities that were destroyed alongside Sodom and Gomorrah in the book of Genesis. This act of destruction is described in Genesis 19, but Admah and Zeboiim are not mentioned in that chapter. They are mentioned, however, alongside Sodom and Gomorrah in Deuteronomy 29:23. Now in Hosea 11, God announces the choice of mercy over judgment. Once again harkening back to the tender love of a parent for a child, God chooses to love and forgive rather than show fierce wrath.

In the conclusion of Hosea 11, the Israelites return to their ancestral homes after living in exile (vv. 10-11). The prophet compares this return to the way lion cubs come home to their den at the call of the lion, or the way birds return home after wintering far away.

Egypt is one of the places the people will return from. Another is Assyria, the dominant world power of the eighth century BC. Verse 12 adds one more dig at the people of Israel. Israel has told lies and acted in deceit before God while Judah, Israel's southern neighbor, walks with God and remains faithful to God.

This picture of God as a doting mother is one of the most beautiful and tender images of God in the Old or New Testaments. It is also completely out of character with the usual message of most of Hosea and the other eighth-century prophets, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah. There are glimpses of God's grace in each of these other prophets, but none of them explore the depths of God's love and grace like Hosea 11. I have come back to this passage time after time as a descriptive image of the God of Israel, especially in dialogue with those who want to argue that the God of the Old Testament is only about judgment and consequences. I personally am



Most scholars believe that Isaiah 1–39, sometimes called "First Isaiah," was written in the eighth century BC, and that the remainder of the book comes from later generations.

grateful to know the God we serve is capable of such wondrous love and forgiveness.

God loves each of us as children in spite of our many failings. As the old hymn goes, God loves me “just as I am.”

Understanding

The image of God as a divine Mother caring for her children is a powerful image, especially in light of the male-dominated images associated with God in the Bible. But in Hosea 11, the focus is not on the issue of gender. Rather, it is on the great compassion and tenderness we find emanating from the very heart of God.

In a book filled with betrayal, sinfulness, and idolatry, we find One who will be faithful when no one else can or will be. We can count on God, no matter where we find ourselves. God’s love is constant and assured. It is encouraging to read about God bringing Israel from the land of Egypt as a “son.” God cares for and loves Israel through the infancy years and into the exploratory world of a toddler. Such ripe imagery focuses our minds on God’s compassion and grace.

As we read through the books of Samuel and Kings, we learn about the many ways Israel turned its back on God. Beginning with Saul, the first king of the united monarchy, the kingdom’s leaders begin to turn away from God’s instructions and become disobedient. David’s sins are well documented, yet God still uses him in tremendous ways to establish a monarchy and a royal lineage extending all the way to Jesus. First Kings 11 records the idolatry and pagan worship practices that Solomon tolerated and encouraged. On and on and on, Scripture details the wickedness and unrighteousness of the people of Israel. But Hosea 11 reveals just how much God loves God’s people in spite of their sinfulness. God loves us just as much today.



Compassion will
cure more sins than
condemnation.
—Henry Ward Beecher

This lavish love does not imply universalism or a lack of accountability. Rather, it compels us to consider again the meaning of grace and forgiveness. Where else can we find unconditional love and grace in our world? We find the fullness of this unique treasure in God alone.

What About Me?

- *How have you experienced God's compassion?* There is something refreshing about taking a shower after a difficult workout or a couple of hours of yard work. When is the last time you felt truly clean on the inside? Can you remember the last time you saw the hand of God at work in your life? God is working in many ways in all of our lives, yet we sometimes miss God's hand if we aren't paying attention.

- *What difference does God's compassion make?* Often, we only hear the negative side of things in the evening news, the newspapers, or on the newsfeeds on our digital devices. Isn't it great when, instead, we catch a glimpse of God at work in our world? If we aren't careful, we can become jaded by the darker things in our world. Remember, though, that God is actively loving people today. As with Israel, God loves us like precious children.

- *How can I offer compassion to others?* There are endless opportunities to share love and compassion with a lost and dying world. We can be active in our local church's missions and ministry opportunities. We can be involved with groups that serve our community. Maybe God has placed a particular burden on your heart to show love to others. Ask God to open a door for you to show God's compassion to others.

Resources

James Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea-Jonah*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011).

Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco TX: Word, 1987).

God's Tender Compassion

Hosea 11

Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the *Learner's Study Guide*. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.



Bible Background

Words of Grace and Kindness

The Old Testament has gotten a bad rap from many Christians. Have you ever heard statements to the effect that the New Testament is about God's grace but the Old Testament is about God's law and judgment?

The truth is there is evidence of God's grace throughout the pages of the Old Testament—and plenty about God's righteous judgment of sin in the New Testament. The same God who suffered at the crucifixion of Christ also suffered time after time as the people of Israel ran after other gods. Perhaps the most visible evidence of God's love and compassion in the prophetic texts of the Old Testament is found in today's words from Hosea 11.

Hosea 11:1-4 compares God's love for Israel to a mother's love for her child. There are places throughout the Old and New Testament where feminine imagery is used to describe God. In Isaiah 66:13, for instance, God says, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." And Deuteronomy 32:18 chides Israel for having forgotten "the God who gave you birth."

One of my favorite examples is found in the trilogy of parables in Luke 15. Luke 15:1-7 opens with the parable of a shepherd and his lost sheep. God is described as a shepherd, presumably male, who leaves his ninety-nine sheep to go find the one that was lost. In Luke 15:11-32,

we read the parable of the prodigal son, in which God is described as a kind and patient father waiting for his errant son's return. Right in the middle of these two parables that describe God in masculine terms sits a beautiful and eye-opening parable. Luke 15:8-10 is the parable of the woman who has lost a coin. She tears her home apart looking for the coin that was lost. When is the last time you heard a sermon titled "God the Good Housewife"?

A Mother's Love

Hosea 11:1 states that God has loved Israel as God's own child since the nation was brought into existence, birthed from the faithfulness of Abraham and the long-suffering of Moses, who led the people out of Egypt and to the border of their new home in Canaan.

The allusion to being brought out of Egypt refers to the exodus and the very beginnings of Israel as a national entity. Yet Hosea points out that from the outset, the people began to chase after other gods (v. 2). Once again, we find mention of the Baals or "lords," not only the name of the chief Canaanite god but also a title applied to various localized deities such as Baal-Peor in Numbers 25:3 or Baal-Berith in Judges 9:4.

God laments this course of Israel's history in which the more God loves the people, the harder they run away. Even with the people's constant turning away from God, God has continued to love

them like children (v. 3). God as mother is central to verse 3. God recalls teaching Israel to walk. God recalls a mother's memory of gently holding her child in her arms.

The theme of God's gentleness continues in verse 4, which describes God leading these rebellious children with kindness. We find a beautiful picture in this verse of lifting a baby to one's cheek and feeding the child. God fondly remembers caring for Israel in this way. What a powerful image of God as Israel's loving, nursing mother.

Hosea 11:5-8 returns us to the reality behind this idyllic imagery. Even with the most wonderful Mother ever, Israel persisted in turning away from her. Long after the people of Israel had thrown off Pharaoh's tyranny in Egypt, Hosea says they will return in droves to Egypt only to find themselves under the reign of the Assyrian kings. (The Assyrians conquered Egypt in the seventh century, a few decades after the time of Hosea.)

The mention of the Assyrian kings is a historical reference showing the shifting geopolitical landscape: the major superpower was no longer Egypt but Assyria. The shadow of Assyria is already looming as Hosea writes. Assyrian forces will ultimately be responsible for the demise of the kingdom of Israel in 722 BC under Sargon II. At that time, many Israelites were forcibly removed from their homeland.

Verse 6 promises misery and continued violence and war for Israel because they have failed to return to God. They will cry out to God, but their cries will go unanswered, at least for a season.

God's Maternal Anguish

Hosea 11:8-9 is perhaps the most intimate glimpse into God's heart of any passage in the Bible. God confesses, "How can I give you up, Ephraim?" (v. 8). Ephraim is often used as synonym for the northern group of tribes more often known as Israel.

The idea of God as a loving parent is on full display here. God doesn't want to

give up on God's children. The prophet makes reference to the cities of Admah and Zeboiim. These cities were destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah in the time of Abraham (see Gen 19; Deut 29:23).

The text continues with God saying, "My compassion grows warm and tender." The Hebrew word for "compassion"

Outline FOR TEACHING

- I. God's Motherly Love (Hos 11:1-4)
 - A. Israel is described as a child birthed and deeply beloved by God (v. 1).
 - B. Even so, Israel has been a wayward child from the beginning (v. 2).
 - C. In spite of their turning away from God, God raised Israel from infancy and loved the people as a mother loves her children (vv. 3-4).
- II. Israel's Persistent Rebellion (Hos 11:5-7)
 - A. Many of the people of Israel will flee to Egypt and find themselves under Assyrian rule (v. 5).
 - B. Those who remain will fare no better: the land will be plagued with war and violence because of their sins (vv. 6-7).
- III. God's Tender Compassion (Hos 11:8-9)
 - A. God will not give up on these difficult children (v. 8).
 1. God will not destroy them as God destroyed Admah and Zeboiim.
 2. God's compassion (related to the word for "womb") grows warm and tender toward them.
 - B. God promises never to destroy Israel again (v. 9).
- IV. Israel's Eventual Return (Hos 11:10-12)
 - A. Like a lion calling her cubs home, so God will call Israel home (v. 10).
 - B. The children of Israel will one day return as trembling birds and vulnerable doves (v. 11).
 - C. For the moment, however, Israel is overrun with falsehoods—unlike faithful Judah (v. 12).

is derived from the word for “womb.” Clearly, God does not want to punish the land of Israel even though they have been unfaithful.

Verse 9 announces that God will indeed choose mercy over judgment and refrain from destroying Israel. In a sneak peek into the fuller revelation of God in Christ, God boldly announces that love wins. God is not bound by our human emotions, sentimentality, or need for vindictiveness. In this instance, forgiveness and grace trump judgment. Grace is evident in the very heart of God. Time after

time, Israel has turned its back on God. Even so, God’s love is able to overcome even the worst of betrayals.

In Hosea 11:10-11, the prophet assures Israel that they will one day return to their God and their homeland. He uses the images of a lion recalling her cubs from wandering and of birds flying back to their homeland from Egypt and Assyria.

And yet one additional negative word is added in verse 12. Israel has surrounded itself with lies and deceit. This is contrasted with Judah in the south, who continues to walk faithfully with God.

1 A Way to Begin

One of the most beautiful pictures of God’s grace is found in the feminine imagery of Hosea 11. Many of us are conditioned to thinking of God in masculine terms, but sound theology requires that we acknowledge that God is above such human limitations. God does not have a physical body—either male or female! The entirety of Scripture refers to God in a myriad of ways: God is light, love, Father, King, Judge, and divine Warrior. And God is also a Mother who loves her children in unfathomable ways. Begin the lesson by raising participants’ awareness of the amazing variety of biblical images of God.

○ Images for God



Cut the resource page “Images of God” into small strips. As the session begins, enlist volunteers to take one of the strips and read the biblical text it cites. Discuss the diversity of images for God in these verses. List the various images on the board.

Ask participants to share other Scripture texts that describe what God is like. Add these images to your list.

In today’s text, Hosea describes God as a loving Mother. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- Do you find it difficult to think about God in feminine terms? Why or why not?
- What does it mean that Scripture uses such an abundance of word pictures to describe what God is like?
- Should any one image of God take precedence over all the others? Explain.

○ Acts of Compassion

Share a favorite story about an act of compassion that you have witnessed. Maybe you were on the receiving end of this act or maybe you were simply privileged to see it.

Divide the class into groups of three to four. Invite participants to share their stories of compassion with one another. Then bring the class back together and have each group report on the stories they heard.

Introduce Hosea 11 as a picture of God’s compassion for the people of Israel. This great compassion is expressed through God’s willingness to love Israel even after they have turned away from God.

68 God’s Tender Compassion

2 A Way to Explore Scripture

The reader of Hosea faces an abrupt shift from Israel being described as a beautiful vine that is overrun with thorns and weeds in chapter 10 to being described as a rebellious son in chapter 11. The prophet says that Israel is will be cut off from God's protection and guidance because of their wickedness. This dark reality is quickly replaced by the love and compassion of God expressed in Hosea 11.

○ Discussion Prompts

Read Hosea 11:1-4. Ask participants to identify details in this passage that speak of a parent's love and care. List these on the board. Invite participants to suggest other passages in the Old or New Testament where God is described as a loving parent.

Read Hosea 11:5-7. Use information from the Bible Background to explain the significance of these verses. Discuss how the people of Israel are described. Is there anything we might have expected? Is there anything surprising?

Read Hosea 11:8-9. Ask participants to identify the four questions God asks in these verses. How would you summarize these in a single question? What emotions do you detect in God's speech here? What does it mean when God says, "My heart recoils within me"? What does this statement reveal about God's nature?

Read Hosea 11:10-12. Verses 10-11 describe a homecoming in which rebellious Israel will one day return to their ancestral home. Invite participants to reflect on times when they have returned home for a joyful occasion: a wedding, a high school reunion, etc. What emotions do we associate with such homecomings? Note the contrast between Israel and Judah in verse 12. Why might Hosea have ended this passage with one last note of divine displeasure?

○ Scenes of Compassion

Divide the class into groups of three to four and provide paper and pens or pencils for each group. Ask participants to list current books, movies, or television episodes that address the themes of compassion, love, or forgiveness.

Once each group has compiled their list, have them rank the media. Let "1" represent the media that most clearly exemplifies these themes and then move on to the least—which, of course, will still be a good example.

Bring the class back together. Have each group share the top three items on their lists. Write these on the board. Lead the class in arriving at a single example from all of those suggested that most reflects compassion, love, and forgiveness.

Read Hosea 11:1-12. Discuss this passage as an example of the same themes. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- How is this passage like the contemporary media the class has discussed?
- How is it different?
- How do you account for the differences?

3 A Way to End

Hosea 11 paints a tender picture of God as a grief-stricken parent who loves her children in demonstrable ways. Even though Israel has turned away from God—and page after page of Hosea is filled with the details of Israel's betrayal—God still loves Israel like a child. Close the session by encouraging participants to reflect on how this passage encourages them in their own spiritual lives.

○ Getting Past Betrayal

Have participants reflect on an occasion when their inappropriate behavior was met with forgiveness, tenderness, or love. If one or two are willing to share their stories, offer them the opportunity to do so. Then ask them to remember how they felt when they knew they had been forgiven.

Next, ask participants to reflect on times when they have overcome hard feelings toward others who have wronged or betrayed them. How did they feel in that situation? How were they able to reach a point where they were prepared to forgive another?

Discuss the ways betrayal can harm a relationship. What does it take to move beyond it?

Close with a prayer for forgiveness for times when we have betrayed God. Ask God for the strength and courage to do what it takes to get our spiritual relationship into a better place.

○ Closing Prayer

Gather participants in a circle and ask them to join hands for a time of prayer. Invite them to bow their heads in silence. Next, invite them to privately consider whether they are currently struggling with issues of forgiveness. Lead the group in the following closing prayer.

Dear Lord, help us forgive others even as you have forgiven us. Help us to love and forgive one another as you have loved and forgiven Israel, and to seek forgiveness from those we have wronged. May we share your redeeming love with a lost world that seems filled with hate. We thank you, Lord, for showing us a better way to live. Amen.

Resources

Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

James Limburg, *Hosea–Micah*, Interpretation (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011).

James Luther Mays, *Hosea*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1969).

John W. Miller, *Meet the Prophets: A Beginner's Guide to the Books of the Biblical Prophets* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist, 1987).

Douglas Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco TX: Word, 1987).

Example 5

Israel's Restoration

August 2, 2020

From the Lesson:

In a lesson from Hosea 14, the author of the Study Guide suggests that some sin does not need forgiveness if a person can resolve an issue with another person. The literature states “when we try to do the right things, we may regret the results of our sins and try to make earnest restitution. For example, if we have offended someone, we can ask for their forgiveness and seek to repair the damaged relationship. Sometimes, however, these rifts can be so deep that repairing them seems impossible. Our sin may lead us to the Humpty Dumpty scenario where, no matter how hard we try, we can’t put things back together again. At this point we are forced to rely on the love and forgiveness of God, who alone is able to put us back together.”

Concerns:

In this Study Guide, the author ignores the fact that sin is against God and needs God’s forgiveness. The Study Guide suggests that if we can’t fix a situation ourselves, then we should go to God for forgiveness.

God is not our last resort for forgiveness.

Scripture References:

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

August 2, 2020

Israel's Restoration



Hosea 14

Central Question

From what must I repent?



Scripture

Hosea 14

1 Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. 2 Take words with you and return to the LORD; say to him, "Take away all guilt; accept that which is good, and we will offer the fruit of our lips. 3 Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses; we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy." 4 I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. 5 I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily, he shall strike root like the forests of Lebanon. 6 His shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive tree, and his fragrance like that of Lebanon. 7 They shall again live beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden; they shall blossom like the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon. 8 O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like an evergreen cypress; your faithfulness comes from me. 9 Those who are wise understand these things; those who are discerning know them. For the ways of the LORD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.

Reflecting

We all know the familiar nursery rhyme: "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall / Humpty Dumpty had a great fall / All the king's horses and all the king's men / Couldn't put Humpty together again." Many times, we find that we have strayed from the straight and narrow path. Sometimes we need someone to put us back together and place us on the right path.

Christian tradition calls this process repentance. That little voice deep inside of us speaks to us when we mess up. Some may describe it as our conscience, the Holy Spirit, or good old-fashioned guilt, but most of us have experienced that voice reminding us of our sins. Upon hearing this voice, we have a decision to make. We can confess our sin and seek to make things right, or we can suppress the voice of our conscience and continue in our sinful ways.

When we try to do the right things, we may regret the results of our sins and try to make earnest restitution. For example, if we have offended someone, we can ask for their forgiveness and seek to repair the damaged relationship. Sometimes, however, these rifts can become so deep that repairing them seems impossible. Our sin may lead us to the Humpty Dumpty scenario where, no matter how hard we try, we can't put things back together again. At this point, we are forced to rely on the love and forgiveness of God, who alone is able to put us back together.

Throughout Hosea, the reader is constantly reminded of the sinfulness of the people of the northern kingdom, Israel. They have broken the covenant they made with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The priests and prophets have



The common Hebrew term for repentance is *teshubah*, meaning "a return." The common Greek term for "repent" is *metanoia*, meaning "a change of mind."

led the people astray with elements of Canaanite worship directed toward the god Baal.

The book of Hosea compares Israel's unfaithfulness to God with the relationship between the prophet and his unfaithful wife, Gomer. The final chapter of the book begins with a call for the people of Israel to repent. The prophet calls them to flee from their sinfulness and return to the relationship God intended for them ever since God first visited Abram and Sarah and promised that they would be the ancestors of a mighty nation.

Studying

Hosea 14 opens with a call to repentance. "Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God" (v. 1). The Hebrew word translated "return" here is commonly used to describe repentance.

Repentance is a repeated theme throughout the book of Hosea. God calls the people of Israel to turn from their idolatry and worship the God of Israel with undivided loyalty. The word "return" is repeated for emphasis in verse 2: "Take words with you and return to the LORD." The people have been unfaithful to God, but Hosea implores them to repent and return to a right relationship with God. Hosea instructs the people to seek forgiveness. This will relieve their guilt before God as they renew their covenant vows.

In verse 3, the prophet warns the people of three things not to put their trust in. They are not to hope that Assyria is going to save them. In fact, just a few decades later in 722 BC, the Assyrians would destroy the nation of Israel.

Second, the people are not to trust in their military might, alluded to by the mention of horses. Centuries before, King Solomon built many stables and gathered a formidable army of horses



Solomon gathered together chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem. (1 Kings 10:26)

and chariots during his reign. But Israel is not to hold to the false hope that their military forces can save them.

Finally, Israel is not to place hope in idols or false gods. As we have witnessed throughout Hosea, many in the northern kingdom were worshiping the Canaanite god Baal alongside their worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

In verses 4-7, Hosea speaks of the renewal of Israel. God promises to heal the brokenness plaguing both the land and the people. Furthermore, God will continue to love the people in spite of their unfaithfulness.

In a glimpse of a future time, the prophet compares Israel to a blossoming garden protected by God, who casts a divine shadow over them (v. 5). This will be a day of fruitfulness and fertility.

From our place in history, we know of the coming destruction of Israel by the Assyrians. We also know of the dispersion of the ten tribes of the north, the origin of what are sometimes called the ten lost tribes of Israel. In spite of the coming destruction, Hosea 14 offers a beautiful picture of hope for a people who have become wayward and are disobedient to God.

Hosea affirms that God will one day usher in a brighter new day: a day of hope, bounty, and sweet fragrances. In our modern houses of worship, we can't fully relate to the aromatic aspects of worship described in the pages of the Old Testament. The closest thing we experience to a pleasing aroma is probably walking by the fresh flowers on the Communion table at the front of our sanctuaries.

Worship in the ancient world engaged all the senses, including the sense of smell. In the northern kingdom, Jeroboam I established two national shrines, one at Dan in the northern part of Israel and one at Bethel in the south. These altars were used for animal sacrifices. The places of worship would have smelled like blood, fresh vegetables, wine, and of course freshly cooked meat. In addition, the Old Testament speaks of the use of incense in worship in

passages such as Exodus 30:34-38; 37:29 and 2 Chronicles 13:11.

In verse 8, the prophet reminds Israel of God's own faithfulness to them. It is God who has sustained them and will continue to sustain them in the days to come. God promises to "answer and look after" Israel. These closing words offer a picture of love and forgiveness. In spite of Israel's great spiritual promiscuity, God remains faithful. God will continue to look after the people even though they have been unfaithful.

Hosea 14:9 is an interesting verse. If you read it apart from the context of the book of Hosea, where in the Bible might you find words like these? If you answer Proverbs, you are on the right track.

Many readers of the Old Testament consider Hosea 14:9 reflective of an ancient wisdom tradition. It has much more in common with the wisdom texts of the Old Testament—Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, etc.—than the prophetic tradition. This verse is a call to take heed of the messages found throughout Hosea. It endorses the prophet's message as valid.



Why is it wise to repent?

Much of the book of Proverbs is directed toward a young male audience. The writer is concerned with keeping these young men's thoughts and lives in line with God's commandments. As in Hosea, the themes of marital fidelity and God's faithfulness run through Proverbs. It makes sense that a Proverbs-like phrase would come at the end of the prophet's message.

Hosea 14 serves as a fitting conclusion to this unique piece of biblical literature. The book begins with the story of the prophet's relationship with his unfaithful wife (chs. 1-3). The main body of the book applies this story to the nation of Israel, addressing the people's compromised worship, broken covenant, and corrupt leadership. In the

end, though, the book concludes with a beautiful picture of love, forgiveness, repentance, and future hope.

Understanding

The idea of repentance can seem like a foreign concept to some people in our world today. Our culture has framed the idea of sin in a context where all wrongdoing is seen as irrelevant. Regardless of what we've done, there is always something to blame in society or in someone other than ourselves. Accepting our wrongdoing and taking responsibility for our actions goes against the grain.



Why do some Christians shy away from the language of sin and repentance? Why do some Christians focus on these themes to the point that grace and forgiveness are forgotten?

Hosea 14:1 is clear, however, that the people of Israel bear the blame for the destruction of their land. They must repent of their years of spiritual adultery. The people—from the monarchy, prophets, and priests to the common people—are guilty of unfaithfulness to God. In a futuristic vision, God calls Israel back to God's self and to their land.

How might you and I be unfaithful to God? We don't have sufficient time or space to uncover all the ways we can turn our backs on God in our world today. Listing types of grievances or sins might make some of us feel bad, some not so bad, and perhaps others relieved that I didn't mention their favorite vice.

But the truth is, if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that most of us have done many things from which we need to repent. In the Old Testament world, once you had broken the covenant, it was necessary to restore it. That is one of the main purposes of Israel's sacrificial system. The book of Leviticus describes how one could bring a sacrifice to the temple and have the priests offer it on the person's behalf.

Today, we have the blood of Jesus, a one-time sacrifice for all of our sinful ways. Yet even with the universal sacrifice of Christ, we still have the obligation to confess our sins and ask God to forgive us. We are responsible to turn away from the sinful actions of our past.

What About Me?

- *From what must I repent?* Take a minute and consider ways you may have been unfaithful to God in the past week. Does anything come to mind? Perhaps you did not do things you know you should have done. Or perhaps you did things you knew were not right or pleasing before God. Either way, take a moment and quietly ask God to forgive you and to restore you as the person God has created you to be.
- *Are the blessings Hosea describes material or figurative?* Hosea describes a time when Israel will once again become a fragrant garden, with God casting a divine shadow over God's people. By their descriptive nature, the blessings Hosea mentions are more figurative than material. It is, however, entirely possible that these figurative blessings could translate into tangible blessings that Israel will enjoy in the future. Forgiveness and healing are in store for Israel. In God's future, they will flourish and be fruitful. Flourishing and fruitfulness can be measured in several different ways. So the blessings described by Hosea in chapter 14 are both material and figurative.
- *What are the benefits of repentance today?* When I was a teenager in Oklahoma, I spent a number of summer days in the hay fields. This was long before round hay bales became widespread. In those days, we hauled the square bales in pickups or on flatbed trucks. My cousin David ran his own hay-hauling crew, complete with a pop-up loader that would pick up the square bales and raise them up to the workers

on the truck. My job was to walk alongside the truck and heave the bale as hard as I could onto the truck for the loader. Bales usually weighed between 60 and 90 pounds each, but they could easily reach 100 pounds. At the end of the day all of us were sweaty, dirty, and just overall yucky. It felt wonderful to take a shower or a bath after a long day of hauling hay. Better yet, a quick drive to the local lake or river provided immediate relief. We were fresh and new once again. It is possible to feel fresh and new in our spirits when we turn from unfaithfulness before God and repent of our sins. It is a great feeling and an opportunity to start again.

Resources

James Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea-Jonah*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011).

Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco TX: Word, 1987).

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