



Faith Connections

Bible Study Guide

Summer
21

*1 and 2
Thessalonians
Timeless Messages
for the Journey*



Bible Study Guide

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Perspectives

Hope

In recent days I have been thinking about hope. People view, or approach, hope in different ways. When you are a kid, you may hope you get a new bike for Christmas. When you are a teenager, you may hope you get the car of your dreams. When you are a young adult you may hope to get a job after graduating from college. Throughout adulthood we hope for more money, better health, and so on. At certain times a person who really wants something to happen, may cross his/her fingers and think, "I hope (*insert situation here*) happens!"

Hope is defined in the dictionary as *to cherish a desire with anticipation: to want something to happen or be true*.^{*} For believers our hope is more than mere wishful thinking. That is, our hope is based on the truth of God's Word. What God says He will do...He will do. Psalm 119:114 says, "You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in your word." As we open God's Word and read His promises, we can count on them as true and will happen. For example, there have been times in my life when I was going through a situation where I needed God's peace. It is at times like this when I can rest in the words of Jesus, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27). I open myself up, through faith, to God's peace and allow His presence to infiltrate my heart and life. As I do, I experience His peace.

During this quarter we will look at the message of Paul to the church at Thessalonica and examine the timeless message of God from certain passages of Scripture. We will explore what God's Word says about sanctification, the second coming, God's strength, and more. As you read each passage and study each message, know that we can trust, place our hope, in Him.

May God bless you as you study His Word this quarter!

MIKE WONCH

Editor

*<<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hope>> Accessed March 23, 2020.

June
6

A TRANSFORMED PEOPLE

*We are people transformed through faith, love,
and hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

THE WORD

**1 THESSALO-
NIANS 1:2-10**

KEY VERSE

We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. **³We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.**

⁴For we know, brothers and sisters[a] loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

ENGAGE THE WORD

THANKSGIVING FOR THE THESSALONIANS

1 Thessalonians 1:2-5

Paul, Silas, and Timothy are listed in verse 1 as the senders of this letter. Verses 2-5 are actually one long complicated sentence in which they express their thanksgiving to God for the transformation of the Thessalonian Christians. This letter is one of the

earliest Pauline letters and was written to a predominantly Gentile church. The Gentiles had a lot to learn about living to please God. Their surrounding culture had some very different standards in areas like sexual practice and work ethic. The gospel message came to them not only as information, but also with the power of the Holy Spirit so that the Thessalonians truly understood the gospel on a deep, transformational level.

Their conversion was evident in their faithful ministry, their labors of love and enduring hope, even in the middle of persecution by their neighbors and perhaps city government. The city of Thessalonica was a long-time settled pagan community in which everyone knew their place, and kept in their place. But the power of the Holy Spirit was disruptive to their lifestyle and so opened up these new Christians to peer pressure to conform to the status quo.

1 Thessalonians 1:6-7

The Thessalonians realized that the gospel was not just something to be heard and believed, but it had a power to transform their lives. They understood the significance of the investment of Paul and his co-workers in their lives. Paul, Timothy, and Silas were living examples of how Christians were to live and they conscientiously lived godly lives in front of the new Christians. The Thessalonians understood the significance of evangelizing through their lives and so became examples of Christian living to those around them.

As mentioned above, two of the areas which were difficult for pagan converts to understand were Jewish Christian sexual ethics and the Jewish work ethic. I will introduce these here, but the letter goes into much more detail in later chapters. The lack of morality of the Greek and Roman gods is notorious and yet these were the examples for the people.

For the pagan Gentiles, adultery was only if a man had sexual relations with a married woman. Oth-

BECOMING IMITATORS

Did You Know?

One of the most difficult ideas for the Gentiles to understand was bodily resurrection. They had been taught that matter and the body were transitory and evil. The body was a prison for the soul, so why would anyone want to come back to life in a body? They imagined a decaying body, like what we see in modern zombie movies. Yet Paul tells us that without the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our faith is worthless and empty. Because the Jews believed that body, soul, and spirit were one thing, Jesus' body was an important part of who He was and proved that He was a real human being as well as God. This is where we get the idea of Jesus as God-incarnated (in the flesh). This concept was one that Paul had to come back to again and again when discipling Gentile Christians.

erwise, he could have sexual relations outside of marriage and not be held accountable. The reason for the problem of sexual relations with a married woman was because she was someone else's property and her fertility was owned by her husband—not the fact that they were being unfaithful to their marriage vows!

The second issue was one that particularly concerned the Thessalonians because they were highly aware of status. For them, the less a person had to work with his/her hands (we might call this blue-collar work), the higher his/her status. But for Jews, and these were the only Christians they knew, a person was expected to “work with their hands” to contribute to the community, even if they were a teacher as Paul was. Paul's hands-on ministry was working with Cilicium wool from the black goats in his home area, Tarsus in Cilicia. He worked with the people in the city who made tents and material that was water-resistant.

RINGING OUT THE GOSPEL THROUGH GODLY LIVES

1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

Paul told the church that he had observed that “the Lord's message rang out” from them (v. 8). The word “rang out” literally means “thundered.” The church at Thessalonica was not a secret society. Their testimony thundered across the land.

Through these verses we are given a fascinating glimpse of how the gospel was proclaimed in the first century. We are well aware of the story of Acts and how Peter and Paul went from place to place preaching. But here we find Paul commenting on the fact that because the Thessalonian Christians had lived their transformed lives in front of their neighbors, the gospel had been communicated so much so that Paul and his co-workers did not have to say anything! The people Paul encountered in Greece told Paul about the Thessalonian Christians and how they once served

Think About It

One of the primary ways that people were taught how to live in the first century was by the teacher being a model or example. Verbal instructions are helpful, but today we can also watch a video on YouTube that shows us how something is done. Paul, modeling the life of a Christian, was their real-life “video” of how to live as a Christian. In today’s passage Paul, Silas, and Timothy were models of how Christians live for the Thessalonians. And the Thessalonian Christians in turn, became models to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

idols, but now serve the living God. They were waiting for Christ to return, whom God raised from the dead, and who is delivering them from God’s judgment.

Their example was not just a quiet witness. Paul says of these believers that “from you (the Thessalonian Christians) the word of the Lord has rung out (like church bells) and they have continued to ring not only in Macedonia (northern Greece) and Achaia (southern Greece), but in every place where your faith toward God has gone out.”[†] The old saying that “actions speak louder than words” is very apparent here.

These were people who knew that to take the step of faith was going to be a costly endeavor. It was going to take a great deal of courage. Costly faith is still the norm for new believers in much of the world. That could be the reason why the most vibrant expressions of the Christian faith are found in the most oppressed regions of the world. Experiencing a costly faith is radically transforming and radically hopeful.

REFLECT **H**ow are you communicating God’s transformative work in your life? Who is being affected by your living testimony?

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June

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THE FAMILY OF GOD

*Authentic Christian community develops
out of mutual love and nurture among believers.*

THE WORD

1 THESSALO-
NIANS 2:1-16

You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. ²We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. ³For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. ⁴On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. ⁵You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. ⁶We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. ⁷Instead, we were like young children among you.

KEY VERSE

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, ⁸**so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.**

⁹Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. ¹⁰You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. ¹¹For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, ¹²encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

¹³And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. ¹⁴For you, brothers and sisters, became

imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews ¹⁵who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone ¹⁶in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

ENGAGE THE WORD

GOD'S APPOINTED MESSENGERS

1 Thessalonians 2:1-7

Paul and his co-workers came to share the gospel with the Thessalonians fresh from persecution by wealthy Roman business people in Philippi. Paul had exorcized a spirit from a slave girl who was making the slave master lots of money by fortune-telling. The business person incited the crowd and Paul and his co-workers were charged with "throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice" (Acts 16:20-21).

Although Paul and Silas could have claimed their Roman citizenship privilege, they chose not to and were severely beaten with rods (Acts 16:22-23). They were thrown in jail. An earthquake came in the middle of the night. Because Paul and his co-workers did not run, the jailer was converted and took them into his home and fed them. The next morning when the magistrates found out that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed and did what they could to make Paul and Silas happy, but asked them to leave the city.

This passage tells us that even fresh from suffering in Philippi, Paul and his co-workers knew they were God's appointed messengers of the gospel and courageously shared the gospel with the Thessalonians. The Jews became envious and they quickly created a riot in the city. Paul and his co-workers had about three weeks (Acts 17:2) before their friends were forced to smuggle them out of the city at night.

What was amazing was that in that short time some

Did You Know?

There were many “holy men” who traveled to teach their version of the truth, requiring payment for their teaching and miracles and claiming godly authority. Notice in this passage that Paul and his co-workers came instead working to provide for themselves and giving freely to the Thessalonians. They could have claimed their right as apostles to demand pay for their teaching, but they came in a child-like, innocent way. Contrast this with the behavior of the “holy men” who just wanted to live off the people they could con. Paul and his co-workers were modeling the fact that God loves and cares for God’s children. God is not out to trick or exploit us!

Jews, a large number of Gentiles, and a few prominent women were converted and became Christians who were modeling Christianity for all of Greece.

LIVE WORTHY LIVES

1 Thessalonians 2:8-12

In this passage very intimate family language is being used by Paul to describe his feelings for these new Thessalonian Christians. It is curious that it was the Jews who were envious of their success in converting the people. But they used a pagan reason to try to silence Paul. They said he was proclaiming another king other than Caesar—Jesus.

In the midst of conflict and perhaps because Paul knew that the Christians staying behind in Thessalonica would face persecution, Paul and his co-workers tenderly disciplined, educated, and encouraged the baby Christians. They did not want to add to the stress, so they worked night and day to support themselves. They acted as loving parents who were bringing children into a world full of pain. Many of these new converts would have been kicked out of their homes and were literally homeless. Paul and his co-workers were creating a new warm and loving family to take care of these newborn Christians.

Paul reminds us that Christians have obligations to one another. The apostle mentions three: exhorting, comforting, and urging his friends to “live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (v. 12).

YOU RECEIVED THE WORD OF GOD

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

It is obvious that Paul was confident the affection he felt for the Thessalonians was as deeply felt by them for him. And the ground of their affection was confidence that Paul’s message was the very word of God. “You accepted it not as the word of me, but as it actually is, the word of God” (v. 13). When the mes-

Think About It

Paul and his co-workers were modeling God's care and use some very intimate language to describe what it means to belong to God's family. They cared as a nursing mother cares for her infant. This mother longs for her child and delights in every new thing the child accomplishes. Sharing their "inner lives" with the Thessalonians, Paul and his co-workers were modeling for the Thessalonians how Christians nurture and encourage one another.

sage is delivered with integrity, the truth is received with greater openness

Paul and his friends rejoice because all their hard work and tender ministry bore fruit in the lives of the Thessalonians. As these new Christians welcomed the words of Paul and his co-workers as the very words of God, these spiritual words were saving and transforming the Thessalonians. They became imitators of the Jewish Christian church in Judea. Both churches suffered the raw persecution from their own people—their own human families.

Since the primary instigators of the persecution in Thessalonica were Jews, Paul goes on to say that these Jews killed their fellow Jew, Jesus, and before Him, they killed the prophets who had tried to bring God's Word to them. These were the same people who chased Paul and his friends out of Thessalonica and who were continuing to persecute the Christian church there. These were evil, hateful people who were hostile to everyone. They chose not to believe God's Word and they also were doing everything to forbid Paul and his co-workers to preach the gospel so that others may be saved. They were heaping up sins and God was their judge! Indeed, they had already received their judgment.

REFLECT

How have other Christians sacrificed to help you come to know God? How have you tenderly disciplined new-born Christians?

JEANNE SERRAO

TRUE LIVING

June

20

Jesus died for us so that, whether we are alive or not at the second coming, we may live together with Him.

THE WORD

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ²for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

⁴But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of

salvation as a helmet. ⁹For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

KEY VERSE ¹¹**Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.**

ENGAGE THE WORD

DEAD IN CHRIST

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

The concerns of the original audience and the modern readers are very different when approaching this passage. The original readers were Greeks who grew up with a rather vague idea of the afterlife. Their own writers said hope was for the living and the dead had no hope. This idea that death ended everything took a while to overcome. What was going to happen to these dead Christians? Were they going to miss the Day of the Lord?

Paul uses strong language in 4:15, “by a word of the Lord,”¹¹ to reassure the Thessalonian church that the dead in Christ would not be forgotten. This is not Paul’s opinion, but directly from the Lord. When the Day of the Lord (the second coming of Christ) is announced, the dead in Christ will be resurrected first and then the living will join them in welcoming the Lord. Paul, in 4:14, says before the Word of the Lord is evoked, “God will bring with Him by means of Jesus the ones who sleep.”¹² Indicating that just as Jesus died and was raised by God, so would the dead in Christ.

The modern Christian reader takes for granted that the dead in Christ have the hope of resurrection. What intrigues them is what the Day of the Lord will look like. As we interpret this section for the modern audience, we must first realize that this was not the question Paul was answering. We should keep in mind that Paul uses common ceremonial events for when an emperor would enter a city in his description of the coming of the Lord (see “Did You Know?”). The Greek term translated “meet” was the term used in this arrival ceremony. Because the Lord was not coming from

Did You Know?

Paul is describing, in chapter 4, the typical way a king would be welcomed into an ancient city. When the king was approaching the city, a trumpet would sound indicating his approach, the people would drop everything, go out to meet the king on his way to the city, welcoming and cheering him while walking with his entourage back into the city where speeches were made and gifts exchanged. The reference to meeting Christ “in the air” means that we will meet Christ on His way down to earth from heaven and usher Him back to earth. This is how the ancient readers would have understood this passage and the way the church understood this passage down through the ages.

another earthly city, but from heaven, the natural meeting place would be the sky.

What Paul wants us to understand from this passage is that the dead in Christ have not been forgotten and in fact hold a very special place in God’s heart. They will be resurrected before Jesus comes back and Jesus will bring them with Him. We don’t need to worry about being left out, because according to 4:17 we will always be with the Lord—no matter if we are dead or alive.

NOT SURPRISED

1 Thessalonians 5:1-5

This teaching that no one but God the Father knows when the Lord will return is found in Matthew 24 and Luke 12. Peace was a major issue for the occupying Romans. The city leaders in Thessalonica, though self-governing, had pledged an oath to Rome to preserve the peace on penalty of removal from office, exile, or death. Before the Roman empire, traveling was dangerous and people were often beaten and robbed. Although bandits still roamed the highways of the empire, the presence of the Roman army discouraged them.

The Romans could not imagine anyone coming to disrupt their lives in an instant. But Paul says that their destruction would come suddenly, they would not see it coming and no one would escape. This is because they live in darkness, do not understand the gospel, and do not see the future. But Christians live in the light, they know what is real, and do not live in the illusion of Roman “peace and safety.” Therefore the coming of the Lord will not surprise them.

BE AWAKE! WE BELONG TO THE DAY!

1 Thessalonians 5:6-11

Living in darkness means being unaware of the reality of the gospel. Those in darkness are asleep and drunk—totally not in a position to be aware when

Think About It

From time to time we hear of people who say that they know when Jesus Christ will return. But in 1 Thessalonians, Paul echoes the words of Jesus (Matthew 24:36-44; Luke 12:35-40) saying that no one knows when Jesus will come back. In Matthew 24:36, Jesus tells His followers that no one knows the hour, not even the angels or the Son, only the Father. 2 Peter 3:8-10 repeats Jesus' words.

Christ returns. But Christians are awake and Paul encourages them to be sober and to put on the armor of God. We have our faith and God's love to protect our hearts and our motives, and we have the helmet of salvation hope to protect our minds.

We were not created to endure God's wrath, rather to experience God's salvation. Jesus died and was resurrected so that whether we are dead or alive, we all live with Christ! Paul is reassuring the Thessalonian church that the dead in Christ are not forgotten, but are actually a part of the church.

Whatever the timing of the return of Jesus, whether we are alive at His returning or are among those who are "asleep in him" (1 Thessalonians 4:14), we may have the confidence that we will live with Him forever. And, lest we forget the depth of this hope, Paul says, "Therefore encourage one another" (4:18), reminding us to continue to build each other up. The church is made stronger when we realize that the dead in Christ are as precious to God as the living and that we will all be together again at the coming of Christ.

REFLECT Take time to think about the second coming of Christ. Reflect on your thoughts and feelings.

JEANNE SERRAO

June

27

BEING SANCTIFIED

God is faithful to sanctify Christians through and through.

THE WORD

1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-24

Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray continually, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²²reject every kind of evil.

KEY VERSE

²³May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

ENGAGE THE WORD

CHRISTIAN LIFE IN COMMUNITY

1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

This section and the next are specific instructions on how Christians are to behave, especially in the light of sanctification and the return of Christ. Paul's first concern is how the church treats its leaders. We are "to know" our leaders. This Greek word translated "know" is a special word that conveys the ideas of a

close personal relationship and of giving deserved recognition or respect to someone. We are to love and respect those who instruct, warn, admonish, and lead us.

In addition to giving our leaders personal encouragement and respect we are “to consider them most highly in love because of their work” (5:12-13). This means that we are to recognize their work publically and honor them the best way we know as a community.

Paul then turns to interpersonal relationships within the church. We are to be at peace with each other. If we have a problem with a fellow Christian, Jesus provides a method for dealing with those problems in Matthew 18:15-17. First, we go to the person and try to solve the issue, face to face. If that doesn’t work, then we take a trusted friend along to help mediate. And if that doesn’t work, we treat them as we would any pre-Christian.

More than keeping the peace, we are to actively care for each other. Paul tells his audience to warn the idle (those who are rebelliously living off the community), console the fainthearted (those in despair), hold on to the weak (staying close to those who have addictions or having that weekly lunch with someone who is going through a long crisis) and being patient with everyone. We are to watch out for any indication that fellow Christians are retaliating by hurting those who have hurt them. Christians “do good” to each other and to everyone.

PERSONAL DISCIPLINE

1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

First of all, as believers, we are to rejoice always. This comes from the hope of salvation. Secondly, we are to pray unceasingly. This means to approach every part of our day asking God to help us understand what is going on and to use us to make a difference. Finally, we are to give thanks in all things. This means we are to approach life with a thankful spirit.

Did You Know?

Those of us in the Western World understand the person to be composed of mind and body or mind, spirit, and body. We learned this from the Greeks who were the creators of Western culture. In the Semitic world (world of the first-century Jews), the person was a complete whole. In other words, the body can't do something different from the beliefs of the person. We hear this in James, "I will show you my faith, by my works" (James 2:18b). What I truly believe can be seen in what I do. Although the meaning is slightly different, we also have the proverb "Actions speak louder than words!" We believe that actions speak more to a person's beliefs than what he or she might say they believe.

We are not to suppress the work of the Holy Spirit by saying *no* to the prompting of the Spirit. We are to be open to the Lord's message to us, whether it is from Scripture or from fellow Christians. (Always think critically about what you are hearing spiritually from others. Does it make sense? Does it ring true from personal experience? Does it agree with the interpretations of the church? Does it agree with the rest of Scripture?)

We are to hold on to everything good and keep away from any form of evil. Some have translated this last section as "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (KJV). But this is not the meaning in the Greek. This translation created situations where sensitive Christians worried so much about not appearing to do anything wrong, they missed ministry opportunities.

ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Paul closes this section with a prayer for their sanctification. These instructions are not something that we can do on our own, but only through the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul uses a rare form of the verb "to sanctify," which indicated to his Greek readers that this was his ultimate wish for them. So that no one would doubt that God could do this, he follows up with verse 24 which describes the one who is calling us to sanctification as faithful and will certainly do it.

Sanctification is often talked about in terms of being "spirit-filled" or "cleansed." As we close our study of 1 Thessalonians, what can we learn about sanctification from Paul's letter? First of all, sanctification transforms our inner being and our most intimate relationships (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8). It gives us the strength to "control our own body in a way that is holy and honorable" (4:4). It also helps us to treat our spouses, siblings, and closest friends in a way that wants the best for them. In other words, a sanctified person does not use others for their pleasure or gain.

Think About It

In 1 Thessalonians 5:23 we read Paul's emphasis on how completely one is to be sanctified. First he uses the term "through and through" (NIV) or "entirely" (NASB), and then goes on to talk about one's "whole spirit, soul and body" (NIV). Because Paul is talking to Greeks, he uses the "spirit, soul, and body" designation to emphasize that sanctification is not just something we pray for, but it is something that becomes a part of every inch of our person.

Secondly, sanctification transforms our relationships with others in the church community (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10a). We are "taught by God to love each other" (4:9b). So this is a deep love which wants the best for fellow believers and is willing to die for it! This is not too hard to grasp with fellow believers who think like we think and have the same cultural values. But this call to love "all of God's family" means that we need to learn to love fellow Christians who don't think like we do and who belong to a totally different culture. This takes spiritual discipline and intentionally reaching out across cultural and language barriers.

Thirdly, sanctification means that we are good citizens of our world. The concern here is that as sanctified people we contribute to our communities to make them a better place. We do our part to build up the community and when we do, we "win the respect of outsiders" and make Christianity an option for those who do not know Christ.

Paul began his instructions on sanctification in chapter 4 and ends his instructions in chapter 5 with a prayer that every part of the lives of the Thessalonian Christians would be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Understanding our need for sanctification and giving our lives to God completely often takes a moment. However, the process of God's work to transform every part of our lives—spirit, soul, and body—may take time as we begin to realize the extent to which we allow God to change our thinking, actions, and emotional responses.

REFLECT **W**hat are some important spiritual disciplines for Christians to grow towards Christlikeness?

JEANNE SERRAO

July

4

PERSEVERANCE

Faithful perseverance through hardship is essential for Christian life and witness.

THE WORD

2 THESSALONIANS 1:3-12

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing.

KEY VERSES

⁴Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

⁵All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. ⁶God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ⁷and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. ⁸He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might ¹⁰on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

¹¹With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. ¹²We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

ENGAGE THE WORD

This passage is actually two long sentences. Sentence one is verses 3-10 and the second sentence is verses 11 and 12. We will divide the first long sentence into two parts, but it is important to realize that the main sentence says: “We ought to give thanks to God for you because your faith is growing abundantly and your love for one another is increasing so that we are boasting about you to all the churches of God about your endurance and faith in all your persecutions and sufferings.”[†] Paul is pointing out how the Thessalonians have been growing in Christ in the midst of intense suffering.

PERSEVERANCE

2 Thessalonians 1:3-4

The word translated “perseverance” in verse 4 is the same Greek word which is translated “endurance” in 1 Thessalonians 1:3. So these two words can both be expressed by the same Greek word (see “Think About it” for more details). 2 Thessalonians is expanding on the simple statement Paul makes in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, “Your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul’s reason for giving thanks for the Thessalonians in both letters is the same; their works of love and endurance.

Their faith is growing “abundantly”[†] and their love for one another (a mark of sanctification, 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10) is increasing in the midst of severe persecution from non-believers. Sometimes, when problems come up in our lives, we are tempted to ask, “Where is God?” But not the Thessalonians, their problems just increase their faith. So what was their secret?

HOPE: GOD IS JUST

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

Hope is their secret! Paul goes on to say that their persecution is proof that they are members of the kingdom of God. He also says that God is just and that means that He will “repay” those causing their suffer-

Did You Know?

We see reflected in Scripture the emphasized need to glorify God, because God is the ruler of the kingdom of God. If we don't glorify God, then we bring shame on ourselves! In the first century pagan culture, the emperor was glorified by building temples to him and praising him at public occasions. In the Scriptures, we find that we glorify God by being godly, by doing the things that please God. The idea of glorification has a present and future meaning. In the present, we glorify God, by doing God's will. The future meaning is that the Lord Jesus Christ will be revealed as the true power on the Day of Judgment. At the same time, since we are part of the community which recognizes the Lord Jesus Christ as its ruler, we will also be vindicated.

ing with their own suffering and God will bring "relief" to those who are suffering when Jesus returns.

In talking about the last judgment, Paul's language becomes apocalyptic. In fact, in verse 7 the word translated "is revealed" is actually the noun for revelation, *apokalypsei*. You can see the resemblance to apocalyptic! Paul talks about fire, vengeance, penalty, and eternal destruction. Some scholars think that Paul is quoting from apocalyptic tradition in 7b-10 as it describes the second coming of the glorified Christ who will bring relief to the suffering Christians and judgment to the unbelievers.

Towards the end of this long sentence Paul begins to talk about the "glory" of Christ's strength which the unbelievers will not experience because of eternal destruction. And he says Christ comes for the purpose of being "glorified" by His holy ones and to be admired by all believers. This glory language is related to the apocalyptic nature of this sentence and topic. It adds to the majesty and awesomeness of this ultimate event.

It may be a little difficult to understand, but what it should say to us is that although Jesus was crucified and condemned by the world and His church has suffered persecution down through the centuries, there is coming a great and significant event when the awesome power of God will make everything right and Christ will be exposed clearly and unmistakably for who He is. Christ and the church will be vindicated. This is the hope which caused the faith and love of the Thessalonians to grow exponentially.

PRAYING FOR YOU

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

Paul's continual prayer for them flows naturally from all that has been covered in verses 5-10. He knows from personal experience that the spiritual battle is not over. So he shares the concern of his prayer and his confidence in praying.

Think About It

Endurance or perseverance is one of the traits of the Thessalonians which Paul gives thanks for at the beginning of both letters. The noun form of this Greek word, *hypomone*, has a primary meaning of staying in the same place when others have fled. It develops the idea of endurance when coupled with the idea of being able to stay in one place and take whatever comes. This is descriptive of the Christians in Thessalonica, who stayed true to the gospel in the midst of intense persecution.

The meat of the second sentence is, “We are always praying for you, so that the name of the Lord Jesus might be glorified in you and you in Him.”[†] What does “glorified” mean in this context? First, it does follow the apocalyptic sentence, so Paul is still talking about the future vindication of Christ and the church. If we look at the dependent clauses in this sentence, we see that the Thessalonians will glorify Christ by their desire for goodness and works of faith which happen because of the power of Christ. So as Christ is vindicated by their actions, they are vindicated by the power of Christ working in them.

To be ready when Jesus returns was Paul’s earnest hope and constant prayer for the Thessalonians. However, their relationship with God was not to be a stand-still-and-wait experience; nor is ours. God calls His people to explore what it means to be His children, to reflect His love and self-giving. As God has worked to bring about redemption, so His children are to reflect to the world His goodness.

This all happens because of the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace is important because we might think that our ability to be good and minister in Christ’s name comes from our own abilities. But Paul makes it clear that only by the favor which God decides to give us, because He loves us—not because of anything we have done—we are able to do the right thing.

REFLECT **W**hat is your hope built on?

JEANNE SERRAO

July

11

FAITHFUL LIVING AND WORKING

Praying and working to the best of our ability are important aspects of faithful Christian living.

THE WORD

2 THESSALONIANS 3:1-15

As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. ²And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. ³But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. ⁴We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. ⁵May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.

⁶In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, ⁸nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. ⁹We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."

¹¹We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. ¹²Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat.

KEY VERSE ¹³**And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.**

¹⁴Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel

ashamed. ¹⁵Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer.

ENGAGE THE WORD

PROTECTION FROM EVIL

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Paul begins this chapter asking for prayer so that the gospel will spread quickly (like a race, as the Greek word is “run”) and be glorified (honored). This is the same word which we looked at in the last session and has a community feel to it. Paul is wanting the gospel to find communities willing to believe in it. While it is true that the gospel often divided communities and families, Paul’s desire is not to divide, but to evangelize.

We also hear in this passage echoes of the Lord’s Prayer. Whereas Matthew 6:13 says deliver us from the evil one (or from evil), Paul uses the word “guard” or “keep” you from the evil one. It is the Lord who is faithful and will strengthen them and keep them from the evil one. In verse 2, Paul has identified that there are wicked and evil people who do not believe the gospel and are actively trying to stop it as it is running quickly through the empire.

“May the Lord direct your hearts” (v. 5). Who is there who, at one time or another, has not been curious about the future, while seeking God’s will or specific answer to a tough decision? The apostle is confident that no Christian will ever be left leaderless. Our Lord will guide us every step of the way.

Paul expressed his confidence in the people that they would continue to live according to the commandments he had given them. Their faith was to find concrete expression in their everyday lives. They were not to think that once they had received the grace of God they were going to be automatically accepted into heaven regardless of how they lived in the future. Paul expected them to continue to grow in grace by expressing God’s love for one another. Like Christ, who, as our model, persevered accepting even death by the cross, he expected that they would faithfully persevere.

Did You Know?

As was Jewish custom, Paul had been taught a trade. Paul made tents from leather. His custom was to open a shop in the leather workers' district in order to support himself while beginning a new church. Paul worked hard for long hours so as not to be a burden upon the people of the new church. He also wanted his labor to be an example of how believers were to conduct themselves.
—Robert Branson

Paul is encouraged because he and his associates are persuaded that the Thessalonians are doing and will continue to do God's will as they have understood it from Paul. Paul's prayer for them is that the Lord will guide their hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ. This prayer may be in anticipation of Paul's next section where he tells the Thessalonians how to deal with some rebellious Christians.

WORKING AND EATING

2 Thessalonians 3:6-10

In this passage, Paul deals with a problem which he addressed some in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, but here he goes more into detail. Here Paul indicates that this group was causing quite a bit of trouble and were a bad witness to non-believers. Paul calls them *ataktoi*, often translated "idle," but it was worse than just being lazy. They had been told to contribute, but they rebelliously continued to live off the community.

This problem of the rebellious idle has both cultural and spiritual dimensions. Often sinful attitudes which are reinforced by one's culture are the most difficult to understand or grasp. Here Paul deals with an issue that was disturbing the church and possibly hurting their witness outside the faith.

The rebellious idle in Thessalonica were disrupting the community by taking advantage of the community for their own purposes. While they were perfectly able to contribute to the community and pay for their own food, they let others pay for it. This put undo strain on the budget which was to be used for those who truly needed money for food, because they were unable to work. This hindered the ministry of the Thessalonian church.

2 Thessalonians 3:11-15

Paul's final instructions to the Thessalonians is on how to deal with these rebellious idle Christians who insist on taking advantage of the church communi-

OBEDIENCE AND ASSOCIATION

Think About It

The first century Mediterranean culture was a group-centric culture, meaning that a person's identity and sense of self were derived from the group. When a person lost their group, such as an orphan or a widow, they were nobodies and had no means of support. Group-centric cultures used ostracizing or throwing someone out of the group as a discipline measure, if one's behavior was embarrassing or detrimental to the group. Being a part of a group was not just important for relationships, it was also part of the economic system. So a person who was thrown out of a group, lacked not only friends, but also the economic means to live. Being ostracized was a powerful incentive for behavior change!

ty. These instructions follow the model of the first century honor/shame culture in which right behavior was honored and celebrated and bad behavior was shamed. Not only were these people not working, but were “working around” (play on words in Greek)—they were busybodies! Their rebellious idleness was getting them into more trouble. When Christians are busy doing ministry God has shaped them for, they don't have time to get into trouble gossiping and tearing down others.

Disciplining Christians in the church is not easy today. The key ideas in thinking through how to discipline are found in 3:5, being filled with God's love and patience, and 3:15, regarding the one who needs discipline as a brother or sister and not as an enemy. Some groups have followed a strictly literal interpretation of this passage and “shunned” or ostracized the Christian needing discipline. This may have seemed to work for the first century honor-shame culture, but I don't think it works today. We need a more relationship-based discipline and so being filled with God's love and patience with these wayward Christians is so important. They need to know we are there for them and not just sitting in judgment. We should keep in mind that the purpose of dealing with troublemakers is not to purge the church but to salvage the individual.

REFLECT **H**ow does the admonition to “never tire in doing what is right” relate to you at this point in your life?

JEANNE SERRAO

July
18

A TIME FOR EVERYTHING

Although the challenges of life are many times out of our control, we have hope because God is sovereign over His creation.

THE WORD

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-14 **T**here is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

KEY VERSE

²a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot,

³a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build,

⁴a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance,

⁵a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,

⁶a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away,

⁷a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak,

⁸a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

⁹What do workers gain from their toil? ¹⁰I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. ¹¹He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. ¹²I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. ¹³That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. ¹⁴I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.

ENGAGE THE WORD

During the 1960s folk music scene, words from Ecclesiastes chapter 3 were made popular in the form of the song, “Turn, Turn, Turn” (written by Peter Seeger and famously performed by The Byrds). At a time of much disruption in American culture, these biblical words and images invited listeners to reflect on the passage of time, the reality of change, and the challenge of choice.

Today, we live in a world that is trying to make itself wealthy, consume itself happy, and war itself to peace. Then it asks, “Is this all there is?” Our world is fractured by the call of many competing voices. Values change almost overnight. Jobs and education once used to provide security, now they slip away in a week, a month, a year. We discover that prosperity, technology, and culture make false promises they cannot keep. In the midst of it all, people ask tough questions about life’s meaning: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? What really matters? Does my life count? So many want fulfillment. So few know where to find it.

THE HARD REALITIES OF MORTAL LIFE **Ecclesiastes 3:1**

Perhaps more striking than the fact that the author of Ecclesiastes’ claims that “there is a time for everything” (v.1), is that he goes on to unpack “everything” in such explicit, concrete detail. What a list—birth, death, planting, uprooting, killing, healing, tearing down, building, weeping, laughing, mourning, dancing, scattering stones, gathering stones, embracing, holding back from embracing, searching, giving up, keeping, throwing away, tearing, mending, keeping silent, speaking, love, hate, war, and peace (vv. 2-8). This list is meant to represent all of life here on earth, the full range of human events, experiences, and emotions. Does the author have you hooked yet?

You see, whatever he goes on to say about God and meaning, or godlessness and meaninglessness, it is

Did You Know?

The self-given name of the author/speaker of Ecclesiastes is the Hebrew *Qoheleth* which has no clear, direct translation, but is usually rendered in English as “The Preacher” or “The Teacher.” He is one who has the authority to formally address an assembly.

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

against the backdrop of the ordinary, mundane, demanding, challenging, up-and-down, back-and-forth, day-in-and-day-out realities of life lived as a mortal on this earth. There is no spiritual escapism here.

This life we live is dynamic, it is always changing. Do you like what’s happening now? It will soon give way to something different that you may not like so much. Are you in a difficult circumstance? It will not last forever; something more pleasing will take its place. Nothing stays the same, change is inevitable, life has a certain rhythm to it.

Ecclesiastes 3:2-14

Now this can be received as either bad news or good news, depending on whether or not there is any meaning or significance to these rhythms of life. Much of the tone of Ecclesiastes highlights the bad news perspective: “‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless’” (1:2); “When I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (2:11). Without God or God’s perspective, this is a logical conclusion to the pain and futility of much of life. The author of Ecclesiastes is brutally honest about this.

But there is another, alternate perspective brought out in Ecclesiastes that gives place for human meaning and significance. Notably, it centers on “time”—the very thing the opening verses of this chapter set up as problematic. According to this alternate, God-based perspective, time is not simply the trigger for back-and-forth, up-and-down change that keeps us helplessly trapped in pre-destined cycles. Ultimately, time is something God uses to make “everything beautiful” (v.11a). God does this by placing “eternity in the human heart” (v.11b), an open-ended future that frees us to participate in God’s purposes from the beginning of creation. More is going on than meets the

Think About It

Meaning is found only in a God-centered view of life. The essence of life is an awareness of beauty, an assurance of eternity, and the recognition of the value of the present moment. This calls for whole-hearted obedience and solemn worship of God on our part.

human eye. The apostle Paul, centuries later, would affirm this good news perspective by declaring to the Corinthians that “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit” (2 Corinthians 2:9-10).

Notice the contrast in perspectives: in the bad news, human-only perspective, we only see what is immediately in front of us. Seemingly uncontrollable rhythms trap us in endless cycles of meaningless existence. By contrast, in the good news, God-based perspective, we participate in God’s movement of all creation (including its cyclical rhythms) toward a meaningful “end” (v.11c). The seemingly constant change of human life is actually contained within God’s actions on behalf of creation which “will endure forever” (v.14).

Finding satisfaction in this life—meaning and purpose and significance—is not an inevitable, logical conclusion to the realities we face as mortals on this earth. To the contrary, it seems elusive. But we can find it in God and God’s alternate perspective. This, indeed, is a “gift of God” (v.13).

Ecclesiastes reminds us that our lives are made meaningful only by the goodness of God. While human ingenuity, work, and education are important components of life, they are not avenues to meaning. Our lives become good and meaningful to the degree that we freely respond to God’s blessing by seeking Him and His ways.

REFLECT

How do you view the rhythms and seasons of your life? Have the changes and shifts been favorable or oppressive? If God has “set eternity in [your] heart” (v.11), how might you more intentionally connect with that perspective in your prayers?

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July

25

UNDER THE SUN

God brings meaningful perspective to our lives.

THE WORD

ECCLESIASTES
6:1-12

I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on mankind: ²God gives some people wealth, possessions and honor, so that they lack nothing their hearts desire, but God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them, and strangers enjoy them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.

³A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. ⁴It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded. ⁵Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man— ⁶even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place?

⁷Everyone's toil is for their mouth, yet their appetite is never satisfied.

⁸What advantage have the wise over fools? What do the poor gain by knowing how to conduct themselves before others?

⁹Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

¹⁰Whatever exists has already been named, and what humanity is has been known; no one can contend with someone who is stronger.

¹¹The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?

KEY VERSE

¹²**For who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow? Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone?**

ENGAGE THE WORD

In the previous session, based in chapter 3, the apparent meaningless of life was exposed along with an affirmation of faith that God and God's perspective can permeate our time-bound, mortal life with meaning and significance. The writer of Ecclesiastes found meaningfulness in a personal relationship with the one supreme and true God. Nothing else could satisfy the deep yearning of the heart.

Today's session in chapter 6 revisits the former without the asserting the latter. There are two ways, then, to receive chapter 6: (1) as a re-statement of the human-alone perspective on mortal life that emphasizes limitation, pain, futility, and lack of purpose; and (2) as a prompt to take responsibility for identifying and articulating an alternative perspective that affirms meaning and value to human life on this earth.

THIS IS DEPRESSING!

Ecclesiastes 6:1-6

Though chapter 6 is under a new division, it is related to the theme of chapter 5. Verses 1-2 continue the writer's reflection on the disappointments of wealth. Both 1-2 and 3-6 are illustrations of the premise laid down in 5:18-19, that enjoyment is the gift of God, and that peace of mind is the highest good that life can afford.¹

Consider the two examples provided in verses 1-6. First, a person gains "wealth, possessions, and honor" (v. 2) but is not able to enjoy them because someone of lower status, perhaps even an outsider, takes over. Wealth, possession, and honor can be understood as money, property, and esteem. One who has these things is thought to have everything a person needs. However, without happiness, these are in vain. "The power to enjoy these things is a gift from God. Thus the sovereignty of God is emphasized yet again. The word for enjoy is literally "eat" (*akal*), which is used earlier in this unit in the context of a satisfied laborer who sleeps well whether he or she has eaten much

Did You Know?

In ancient Near East cultures, providing a proper burial was a way that children honored their parents. To not receive a proper burial (6:3) would be considered a grave injustice.

or little (5:12).²² How can one value the gifts of God without the ability to enjoy them?

Second, a person has a long life with many children, but at the end “cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial” (v. 3). In both cases a great start to life does not guarantee a satisfying finish. In fact, the author of Ecclesiastes goes so far as to suggest that “a stillborn child is better off” (v. 3) because as one whose life is cut off before it starts, he/she would not experience decline, decay, or loss over time.

Even if a person lives a long life, if they are unhappy, what kind of a life is this?! If God is the giver of the good stuff at the beginning, then isn’t God responsible for all the loss at the back end (v. 2)? If so, as logic would suggest, then putting God into the equation is meaningless and unnecessary.

IS THIS ALL THERE IS?

Ecclesiastes 6:7-12

The remainder of chapter 6, in fact, makes no further mention of God and spirals around consistently depressing conclusions:

- Our appetites are never truly satisfied, or our hopes fully realized (vv.7, 9).
- Wisdom, learning, and etiquette have no real advantage over foolishness (v.8).
- The known, established past is too strong to allow for anything truly new or innovative (v. 10).
- Words are ultimately meaningless and don’t help anyone (v. 11).
- No one really knows what makes for a good life on earth or after this life (v. 12).

Following the logic of this view of mortal life, death is as preferable to any desire or hope for gaining or accomplishing something while alive that will endure.

These depressing conclusions are hard words that challenge any illusion we might have of human self-sufficiency. Are they the final word about meaning and significance? Not if we examine them beyond just

Think About It

God makes life meaningful through His gracious blessings. As sovereign Lord of our world and of history, He blesses us with many gifts. We must not confuse the blessings that He gives with the meaning of life. Rather, God's gifts are to be enjoyed.

a surface level. Within this description of vanity are implied bits of wisdom that point to possibilities for life beyond just “chasing after the wind” (v. 9). Consider these wisdom words:

First, beware of living only to satisfy your appetites, consuming everything around you. Consumption never brings ultimate happiness, even trying to consume “wisdom” (vv. 7-8).

Second, learn to enjoy the temporary, relative goods of life for what they are. Don't cling or expect more of them than they can deliver. This is what the author of Ecclesiastes means by verse 9a—seeing clearly without trying to possess.

And third, appreciate the questions (v.12) that challenge overconfidence in our abilities or status. As humans we are finite, limited. If we are to encounter and be saved by transcendence, it will not be of our own manufacture. Only God is “someone who is stronger” (v.10).

Our world is filled with people whose experience of life on this earth is every bit as depressing as that described in this chapter of Ecclesiastes. Who will give them a godly alternate vision? Can you become a voice for true meaning and purpose?

1. A.F. Harper *Beacon Bible Commentary: Job through Song of Solomon* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1967), 509.

2. Stephen J. Bennet *NBBC: Ecclesiastes/Lamentations* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2010), 114.

REFLECT

The author of Ecclesiastes cautions against multiplying words (v.11). How might you and your church use words in a more limited, careful, and judicious way to proclaim the good news to your neighbors? How might your actions be just as, or even more, effective?

DOUGLAS HARDY

August

1

STRENGTH IN THE DARKEST VALLEY

*In the most difficult of times, God is there,
walking with us, caring for us, and giving us comfort.*

THE WORD

PSALM
23:1-6

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,

³he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

KEY VERSE

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

⁶Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Psalm 23 is perhaps by many the best loved of all the psalms. The “Shepherd’s Psalm” describes the dependency we are to have upon the living Lord who longs to care for us as a shepherd.

The opening line of this well-known psalm, “The LORD is my shepherd” (v.1) is so profound that it may give readers the impression that the entire psalm is about shepherding. In fact, this tribute to God’s kind and compassionate nature is built around two images—the good shepherd (vv.1-4) and the good host (vv.5-6). Both would have been understood in the ancient Near East as descriptors of a benevolent king.

For Israel, a king like David would fit the bill, but above all this describes the Lord as King.

THE KING AS GOOD SHEPHERD

Psalm 23:1-4

The hilly terrain in Palestine made shepherding a challenging task. It required skill, patience, and courage to keep vigilant watch over a flock of sheep that were never far from very real dangers. Therefore, in the Hebrew mindset, a good shepherd was of high value.

It is no surprise, then, that the psalmist puts God in the role of shepherd and himself as a sheep in the flock. God—not in theory, but in fact—has demonstrated to Israel that He is their shepherd by offering both protection and provision. No doubt the psalmist had in mind the Exodus story of God’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 5—12). As they left Egypt behind they found themselves in a dangerous wilderness where God became their shepherd-leader: “By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night” (Exodus 13:21). A later psalm sums it up this way: “[God] brought his people out like a flock; he led them like sheep through the wilderness. He guided them safely, so they were unafraid” (Psalm 78:52-53).

Based on God’s faithfulness to Israel, especially as experienced in the exodus, the psalmist is confident to claim the Lord in a personal, intimate way as “my shepherd” (v.1). Joining this faith of the psalmist, we too can acknowledge God’s shepherding of us to the places in our lives where we find rest and refreshment (v.2), guidance, and justice (v.3).

The psalmist found God’s presence in the midst of deep darkness. He had not been abandoned, and God was not hidden from him. He experienced the Lord’s comforting presence in the midst of the threat of death. Nothing—not even death—could separate him from the shepherd’s presence.

Did You Know?

In modern Palestinian shepherds normally carry with them two pieces of equipment: a club or “rod” for fending off attacks from predatory animals, and a crook or “staff” for guiding and controlling the sheep.

Most poignantly, the Lord as shepherd walks with us “through the darkest valley” (v.4), the threat of death. This includes the “little deaths” we experience while still alive—loss of health, of loved ones, of employment, of reputation, of dreams and hopes—as well as our ultimate, inevitable physical death.

This shepherd cannot shield us from experiencing death but offers that which is priceless: freedom from fear and the comfort of divine presence as we face death.

THE KING AS GOOD HOST

Psalm 23:5-6

We’ve seen a picture of God’s incredible generosity toward us as shepherd to us in the valley of the shadow of death. The psalmist now complements it with a second picture of God’s generosity, this time with imagery of one of the finest experiences we can have in life—a good meal. And this is not just any meal. It is a banquet feast, prepared and hosted by God, and blessed with the joy of anointing (v.5). Notice the similarity in context of the meal in verse 5 with the walk in verse 4. Even as God’s comforting presence is given in the dark valley, so also the generous meal is offered in the presence of enemies. Reception of God’s gifts do not require escape from or elimination of that which opposes and threatens us.

How appropriate that a psalm which draws significantly on God’s actions in the past to account for God’s activity in the present, will end by pointing to God’s continuing action in the future (v.6). The Lord as shepherd is a covenant God, which means that God’s whole identity is based in a promise to maintain faithful lovingkindness forever. We can trust God’s “goodness” and “love” to (pursue) follow us all the days of the journey of our lives until we finally return to our true home, forever with God.

This is a psalm of confidence. If this is the kind of king that the Lord God is, then we, like the psalmist,

Think About It

From a Christian perspective this psalm could describe Jesus' testimony about God the Father. This is the generous love that imbued Christ's life, death, and resurrection (as the Good Shepherd) and which characterizes the sacramental meal of the Lord's Supper (of which Christ is the "Good Host").

can put our trust in God's shepherding of us and give thanks for such gracious hosting.

OUR HOPE

"Surely goodness...will follow me all the days of my life" (v. 6). That's puzzling coming from a person who experienced many things in his life that we would not consider good. The "valley of death" (v. 4) was not just a theoretical concept for David. He knew the smell of death. In desperate flight from pursuit on many battlefields, he had lived in that dark shadow. He knew the presence of enemies. That doesn't sound like goodness. That doesn't sound like a cup overflowing. What is he saying?

David is not saying when we follow God everything is nice and pleasant. The pleasant experiences he describes in this psalm are true. But life also includes other experiences—even for those who follow God obediently—that are not so pleasant. There are parts of the journey that go through the valley of the shadow of death. There are places where we are faced with enemies of sorts. When David declares "Surely goodness... shall follow me," he is not saying that those experiences don't happen. He is saying that even there, in the valley of death's shadow, in the facing of threatening enemies, we find the assurance of God's goodness.

David had learned to trust God despite unlikely circumstances. It is deep confidence in the character of God that says when things are rough, "The boundary lines have fallen for me in the pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance" (Psalm 16:6). When our situation doesn't look good, we look to God for the assurance of hope for the future.

REFLECT **R**ead Psalm 23 several times this week. Each time, allow its message to speak to your heart.

August

8

THE LORD OUR REFUGE

It may seem like the wicked are prospering, but God is sovereign and will protect His own.

THE WORD

**NAHUM
1:2-8**

The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and vents his wrath against his enemies.

³The LORD is slow to anger but great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet.

⁴He rebukes the sea and dries it up; he makes all the rivers run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither and the blossoms of Lebanon fade.

⁵The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it.

⁶Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him.

KEY VERSE

⁷The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him,

⁸but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into the realm of darkness.

14-15

¹⁴The LORD has given a command concerning you, Nineveh: “You will have no descendants to bear your name. I will destroy the images and idols that are in the temple of your gods. I will prepare your grave, or you are vile.”

¹⁵Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, Judah, and fulfill your vows. No more will the wicked invade you; they will be completely destroyed.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Nahum is one of the minor prophets of the Old Testament. Unlike some of the other prophets, we know almost nothing about him, including how he came to be called. We can see in this opening chapter, however, Nahum fulfilling one of the most important functions of a prophet—asserting and declaring the nature of the God who does the calling. The focus of today's session is first and foremost the nature of God. What are some of the most basic and important things we can say about God, and why do they matter?

A JEALOUS GOD?

Nahum 1:2-3a

Nahum begins his prophecy by bluntly stating, “The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath” (1:2). The two words used to describe God in verse 2 are problematic in the English usage in ways that they are not in the original Hebrew. “Jealous” for most of us most of the time refers to a petty, emotional state of mind. To be labeled as jealous is not a compliment; rather, it implies a weakness of character or inability to control one's emotions in the context of important relationships.

By contrast, the Hebrew term translated “jealous” implies the uniqueness and supremacy of the one to whom it is attributed. An example is in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:5) where God's jealousy is a way of asserting God's worthiness of true worship. Similarly, “avenging” suggests to us an emotional and petty response to another, angrily getting back at someone with an eye-for-an-eye. The Hebrew term has none of that. Instead it refers to a measured and just response that is appropriate to the situation—not personally motivated. God is angry at the injustice in the world and desires that things be made right, but always acts in ways that are true to holy love. Hence, the important caveat about God's anger: “The LORD is slow to anger” (v.3a), even though powerful enough to punish. God, by nature, models what will later be

Did You Know?

The name “Nahum” means “comfort” or “reassurance.”

His name is a good reminder that the ultimate purpose of God’s prophets is not the pronouncing of judgment for judgment’s sake, but rather to encourage those who are faithful to God’s covenant love to remain so.

**SLOW TO ANGER,
BUT GREAT IN
POWER**

THE LORD IS GOOD

commended as a characteristic of those who follow Jesus: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (James 1:19-20).

Nahum 1:3b-6

God shows up—as present and noticeable as a “whirlwind,” a “storm” with clouds of dust (v.3b), in order to oppose that which is destructive to God’s creation, including that which is opposed to the human beings He loves. Chaotic, destructive, and violent forces are symbolized in Nahum by the image of the stormy “sea,” and by rebellious “Bashan,” “Carmel,” and “Lebanon” (v.4), rival mountains to God’s chosen Mount Zion (cf. Psalm 68:15-16; Isaiah 33:9; Amos 1:2).

The additional imagery in verse 5 of quaking mountains, melting hills, and a trembling earth contribute to an overall picture of a weak and vulnerable creation in contrast to an awesome and powerful creator God. The prophet wants us to take seriously the desolation of the earth—not because God is opposed to His own creation, but rather because of what comes from those forces opposed to God: chaos, destruction, and violence. This section of the chapter ends with rhetorical questions about just how powerful and effective God is as the Holy One who pursues justice: “Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger?” (v.6a). The implied answer: No one!

Nahum 1:7-8

Because images of an angry, wrathful, and vengeful deity were common in the ancient Near East, the prophet Nahum was careful to assert the foundational feature of the identity of the God of Israel: merciful and faithful love. God’s anger, impassioned sense of justice, and opposition to others only make sense if we first affirm that “The LORD is good, a refuge . . . [and] He cares” (v.7). These kind of positive affirmations of God’s char-

Think About It

God's Word comes so that we can evaluate our lives and line them up with God's will and obey Him. We must evaluate our lives in light of God's Word—walking in the light God has given us.

GOD WILL RESTORE

acter are peppered throughout the Psalms (cf. 34:8; 86:5; 100:5; 107:1; 145:9) and were probably central to Israel's worship liturgies. We, too, can strengthen our trust and confidence in God as our refuge by praising God for God's goodness. God's goodness sets God in opposition to all that would threaten that goodness. In Nahum's day it was "Ninevah" (v.8), the great Assyrian empire. What in our day stands against the goodness God desires for all God's creation?

Nahum 1:14-15

As mentioned above, Nahum's world was dominated by Ninevah, the capital of the Assyrian empire. For more than 100 years the Assyrians had ruled the ancient Near East, including Judah, with an iron fist. The destruction of the Assyrian images in the Jerusalem temple was a special comfort to the people (v. 14). The deception was ended. The false representations of God were set aside. They were free to worship God in truth and celebrate their holy days once again (v.15).

Can you see the two-sided quality of the prophet's declarations which match the dual aspects of God's very nature? Judgment (v.14) and salvation (v.15). Destruction of false narratives, false power, false worship (v.14) and restoration of "good news," "peace," and "festivals" (v.15). This combination will ultimately be fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, the "one who brings good news, who proclaims peace" (v.15a; cf. Isaiah 52:7). This is the basis for Christian worship (v.15b) and for our hope in the promise that, someday, the restoration of God's kingdom will be "complete" (v.15c).

REFLECT

If God can be angry, passionate, and a pursuer of justice while remaining always good, merciful, and kind, how might we imitate that combination? Does it come naturally, or does it need to be cultivated?

August

15

A PRAYER FOR MERCY

God pours out His mercy on those who are faithful.

THE WORD

**GENESIS
18:16-33**

When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way.¹⁷Then the LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? ¹⁸Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. ¹⁹For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

²⁰Then the LORD said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.”

²²The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ²⁵Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

²⁶The LORD said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

²⁷Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the LORD, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, ²⁸what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?”

KEY VERSE

“If I find forty-five there,” he said, “I will not destroy it.”

²⁹Once again he spoke to him, “What if only forty are found there?”

He said, “For the sake of forty, I will not do it.”

³⁰Then he said, “May the LORD not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?”

He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.”

³¹Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the LORD, what if only twenty can be found there?”

He said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.”

³²Then he said, “May the LORD not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?”

He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

³³When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

ENGAGE THE WORD

This story is full of characters: Abraham, God, the three male visitors, and the inhabitants of the city of Sodom. If we pair God with the three visitors who have traditionally been understood to be messengers of God on the “divine” side, and then pair Abraham with the residents of the city of Sodom on the “human” side, then we can begin to explore this passage through the lens of relationship. What is the nature of the relationship between God and humankind? Between God and individuals? Between God and whole communities? And what are the implications of relationship for our life of prayer?

GOD AND HUMANS IN CONVERSATION, PART 1

Genesis 18:16-22

The three men who visited Abraham and Sarah as messengers of God to announce that the elderly Sarah would give birth to a son (vv.1-15) now take their leave. Abraham walks with them as they begin their journey (v.16). To an outside observer, it would appear as the interaction of a normal group of men; nothing could be further from the truth, however, because the text makes it clear that the first to speak is God, per-

Think About It

We must not mistake God's mercy for indifference to sin or approval of sin. God has mercy on us so that we might repent, not so we can keep on sinning against Him.

haps through the voice of one of these messengers. Into a situation marked by surprise, upheaval, and ultimately hope, God speaks. What is most striking is the familiarity exhibited in God's speech toward and with Abraham:

- God wonders out loud just how open to be with Abraham (v.17).
- God affirms His choice of Abraham and affirms that God's promised blessings will be realized (vv.18-19).
- God announces that He will personally visit and check out the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to discern if their evil reputation is warranted (v.20).

Here is a God who is present, open, and conversational with Abraham. And apparently, Abraham is learning to be the same way with God. The image at the end of verse 22 is poignant: "Abraham remained standing before the LORD." It would be just as true to say it in reverse: "the LORD remained standing before Abraham." God initiates, Abraham responds, and the result is an interactive, dynamic, and familiar relationship. As God would later declare through the prophet Isaiah: "Abraham [is] my friend" (Isaiah 41:8). This is grace, a grace that surrounds and undergirds the law, as verse 19 makes clear (God's choice precedes Abraham's keeping the way of the Lord which is then followed by God fulfilling the promise).

GOD AND HUMANS IN CONVERSATION, PART 2

Genesis 18:23-33

God's grace at work in Abraham has the effect of inviting him ever deeper into relationship with God and with his fellow human beings. First, we see the deepening of relationship with God in the fact that Abraham "approached [God]" and spoke (v.23a). What follows may appear to modern, Western readers like an inappropriate bargaining with God, but in fact it was a typical ancient Near Eastern way of relating—exploring possibilities through engaging in back-and-forth propositions and counter-propositions. It was

Did You Know?

The biblical testimony that God is a genuine covenant partner who is free to respond with flexibility to the actions of people creates the possibility of meaningful, even intercessory, interaction between God and believers.

the kind of healthy discussion and debate that marks a relationship of mutual trust and respect.

Second, we see a deepening of Abraham's relationship with his fellow human beings in the content of this conversation with God (vv.23b-32). In the face of potential destruction of the city of Sodom, Abraham intercedes on their behalf, appealing to God's mercy and righteous judgment. Reflecting the very nature of God as the God who loves the whole world and who desires that all the nations be blessed through Abraham's faithfulness, Abraham directs his attention, concern, and prayer toward all the inhabitants of Sodom, not just to his relatives who may happen to live there.

Abraham's intercessory prayer for Sodom can serve as a model for us in our prayer for all the world in which we live:

- Approach God without fear to express our desires and hopes for God's kingdom to be done on earth as in heaven (v.23a).
- Appeal to God's revealed nature and character and ask God hard questions about the implications (vv.23b-25).
- Persist in asking for God's merciful interventions for all, even small groups of people (vv.26-32).
- Maintain a posture of humility before God (vv.27,30,32).

Like Abraham, our intercessory prayer can anticipate God's desire to bless the whole world, God's entire creation, so that one day "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

REFLECT

Abraham's interactions with God in and through the three visitors occurs in the context of hospitality (making safe, trusting space for another). How might our prayer meetings, especially intercessory prayer for others, become places of hospitality?

August

22

NO ROCK LIKE OUR GOD

*It is always good to celebrate and
praise God for His good gifts.*

THE WORD

1 SAMUEL
2:1-10

Then Hannah prayed and said: “My heart rejoices in the LORD; in the LORD my horn[a] is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance.

KEY VERSE

²“There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.

³“Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed.

⁴“The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength.

⁵Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry are hungry no more. She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away.

⁶“The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up.

⁷The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts.

⁸He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor. “For the foundations of the earth are the LORD’S; on them he has set the world.

⁹He will guard the feet of his faithful servants, but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness. “It is not by strength that one prevails;

¹⁰those who oppose the LORD will be broken. The Most High will thunder from heaven; the LORD will judge the ends of the earth. “He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.”

ENGAGE THE WORD

The Song of Hannah, a kind of hymn similar to a psalm, is in response to the events immediately preceding it in chapter 1. Hannah, one of two wives of Elkanah, was childless (1:2), a source of shame in ancient Near East cultures. Further, Peninnah, the other wife, “kept provoking her in order to irritate her” (1:6). At the temple, while Hannah expressed her anguish to the Lord in weeping and voiceless prayer, she was falsely accused by the priest of being drunk (1:10-14). Her persistence paid off, however, for “in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son . . . Samuel” (1:20).

Her son Samuel would be called by God to be the prophet (1 Samuel 3), judge (1 Samuel 7), and priest of Israel. Later he would be the one who anointed Saul (9:16; 10:1) and David (16:12-13). He is considered one of the great leaders of Israel (Jeremiah 15:1; Hebrews 11:32).

GOD DELIVERS

1 Samuel 2:1-3

Following this much-sought-after birth, Hannah worships the God who heard and answered her prayer. This worship is not perfunctory—it is from her “heart” (v.1), which is where her original prayer to have a child was based (1:13). This is a moment of joy for her and an opportunity to delight, even boast in her victory (v.1). The ultimate focus, however, as is appropriate for all true worship, is on God. This hymn affirms important attributes of God’s very nature, the reasons why Hannah experienced deliverance:

- the Lord makes us strong (v.1 “horn” is a symbol of strength, as in an animal with its head raised high)
- the Lord is holy
- the Lord is incomparable
- the Lord is strong and stable as a rock or mountain
- the Lord sees, knows, and makes wise and just judgments (vv.1-3)

Did You Know?

In the Bible, the number “seven” often stands for perfection or an ideal. Thus, “she who was barren has borne seven children” in verse 5 is a way of suggesting an ultimately fulfilled family scenario.

GOD REVERSES SOCIAL CONDITIONS AND STATUS

As the warning in verse 3 indicates, a proper response to this God is humility, not arrogance.

1 Samuel 2:4-8

God is actively and purposely at work behind human events. Unlike other deities in the ancient Near East, however, the God of the Hebrews chooses to act on the side of those who are typically despised for their weakness and seeming insignificance. Notice the three couplets in verses 4-5 and which of each pair is favored: the stumblers (not the warriors), the hungry (not the full), and the barren (not those with many children).

Verses 6-8 make clear that God acts out His favor; it's not simply God's opinion, but God's behavior that reveals God's true character. God's actions in the movement and shifting of conditions and status whereby those on top are sent down and those on the bottom raised up, reflect God's very being. That God can engage the full range of actions (bring death and life, send poverty and wealth, humble and exalt) is testimony to the breadth and scope of God's capabilities. The point, however, is not simply to brag on God's abilities; rather, it is to celebrate that God's abilities are compassionately directed toward those in need.

This counter-cultural preference of God to favor the lowly, the poor, and the marginalized has always been a difficult one to accept, believe, and honor—hence, the warning against arrogance (v.3). The biblical witness is clear and consistent in God's choice of no-name Abram, God's deliverance of Hebrew slaves, God's special kindness to childless women (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Elizabeth), and God's choice of the poor, young, virgin Mary to become the Christ-bearer. Notice the similar refrains of “Mary's Song” in Luke 1:46-55 with “Hannah's Song.”

GOD UPHOLDS HIS KING AND PEOPLE

1 Samuel 2:9-10

This hymn is really not just about Hannah. It contains truths that can be affirmed and voiced by all

Think About It

In the song of Hannah we are reminded that life is subject to change and God is able to reverse the fortunes of both the feeble and the strong. As the life of Hannah illustrates, God can exalt the lowly as well as bring healing and happiness to the one experiencing pain. God can also humble the arrogant and lay low the powerful. [*New Beacon Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2012), 53.]

"[God's] faithful servants" (v.9). God gives strength to all, from the king all the way down to the lowliest servant. None prevail due to their own strength, but rather by the strength that comes from being anointed, that is, chosen by the Lord. By contrast, those who oppose the Lord—who, in effect, oppose the life of God, the Creator—will ultimately experience defeat (v.10).

HANNAH'S SONG SPEAKS TODAY

What can we learn from Hannah's song? In what ways does it speak to us today? One important message is that Hannah gave thanksgiving and praise to God for the way He worked in her life. She knew to whom she owed gratitude and expressed it in her actions (presenting Samuel as an offering to God) and by her words in a song.

Gratitude toward God is an important part of our relationship with God. In gratitude, we thank God for what He has done, is doing, and will do. It also expresses our continued dependence on Him for His guidance and strength in our lives.

REFLECT

Who in our day and in our society needs to experience God's deliverance and reversal of social conditions or status? Who in our day and society are the privileged and the proud? What evidence is there that God is actively working behind the scenes to bring about justice?

DOUGLAS HARDY

August

29

THE NEW JERUSALEM

*There is hope now and for eternity
for those who trust in God.*

THE WORD

REVELATION 21:1-4

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴**He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death¹ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.**

KEY VERSE

REVELATION 22:1-5

¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

ENGAGE THE WORD

The passages for this session give a climactic vision of the end of all things, the ultimate coming of God's kingdom. They reveal the final outcome of the conflict, judgment, and destruction that have permeated previous chapters in the book of Revelation and serve as a fitting end to the entire canon of Scripture, our Bible.

NEW CREATION!

Revelation 21:1-4

John the Revelator's description of what heaven, our ultimate destination, will be like, is very brief. We would welcome more detail! Nonetheless, it's conciseness and focus tell us all we need to know in order to keep faith with God's purposes. Specifically, this celestial vision is about newness: "A new heaven and a new earth" (v.1); "the new Jerusalem" (v.2); "I am making everything new" (v.5a). The world which is old and which we are used to by virtue of our living in it will give way to a new and different place. Will this new dwelling place be anything like our current dwelling place or will it be completely different? None of us can know for sure, but the language of "earth" and the imagery of Jerusalem suggest that it could very well be a renovated and rejuvenated earth-as-we-know-it. Even so, it will be qualitatively, substantively new. New in what ways?

- "No longer any sea" (v.1)—the sea in biblical usage typically refers to a place of chaos and threat due to its power to crush ships and drown people, and because it is the home of sea-monsters. Earlier in Revelation we read, "The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea" (13:1)—the symbolic images of anti-Christ evil. The sea is also a geographical feature that separates people and lands. In the new creation, the new order of God's fulfilled kingdom, chaos and threat will be totally neutralized and all barriers which would separate us from God and each other will be eliminated.

Did You Know?

The Greek word for tabernacle is closely related to the Hebrew word “Shekinah,” which describes the presence and glory of God. The Gospel of John says that in Jesus, the Word became “tabernacled” among humans (John 1:14).

- “The Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down . . . prepared as a bride beautifully dressed” (v.2)—Jerusalem in Scripture represents all that God desires for His creation, the fulfillment of God’s intention to “dwell with them” (v.3). John the Revelator knew the history of Israel’s traumatic relationship with the city; God’s people built it, worshiped God in it, and celebrated a life of *shalom* (peace) in it, but they also were exiled from it, saw it destroyed, and grieved the desolation of a lost home. In the new creation, home is marked by completion, fulfillment, beauty, and rich fellowship—“They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (v.3). God’s people have already had a taste of this, but what will be new in the future kingdom is that full fellowship with and connection to God will be unbroken.
- “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (v.4)—these all-too-common features of mortal life on earth will be no more. Notice how this new existence, free from these things will be the result of direct action from God—“He will wipe every tear from their eyes” (v.4). God will dwell with God’s people as King, yes, but not buffered from them. Being their God means being close enough for a healing touch.

This vision of newness echoes and brings to fulfillment what the apostle Paul declared to the Corinthians: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The good news of the gospel is that this heaven is both here for us now in Christ and yet to come in fullness in the future through Christ’s fully established kingdom.

THE GARDEN RESTORED

Revelation 22:1-5

The new city is really a restored garden. By using the imagery of Eden, John the Revelator links the ending of human history with its beginning as recorded in

Think About It

John struggles to express the immensity, perfect proportions, and magnificent other-worldly beauty of “the New Jerusalem.” This perfection represents the glory of God’s eternal, intimate relationship with humanity. God’s radiant presence makes the city resplendent, and since the city represents the saints, they also reflect God’s glory. [NBBC: *Revelation*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hilly Press of Kansas City, 2012), 306.]

Genesis 1—2. What God desired for Adam and Eve will ultimately be realized.

Two Old Testament river stories would have been in the mind of John the Revelator as he wrote about “the river of the water of life” (v.1): Genesis 2:10 which describes a river flowing through Eden watering the garden there, and Ezekiel 47:1 which describes a river of water coming out from under the temple. Both passages also refer to trees, very similar to “the tree of life” (v.2a) whose ultimate purpose is finally revealed: “for the healing of the nations” (v.2b).

That which happened in the fall in Eden (Genesis 3) is reversed and superseded in the new Eden:

- The curse of sin and death introduced through the serpent will be no more (v.3a).
- “The throne of God and of the Lamb” will be a place for reverential service, not rebellion (v.3b).
- Direct, intimate relationship between God and God’s creatures will be fully restored: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (v.4). Remember, throughout the Bible seeing God’s face directly would have resulted in death! Further, God’s name represents God’s character.
- All the dangers of night will be removed by the full light of God’s loving, protective presence (v.5a).
- The “ruling over the earth” (Genesis 1:26, 28) that God envisioned for humankind at the beginning will be realized as, with God, “they will reign for ever and ever” (v.5b).

May “the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen” (Revelation 22:21)!

REFLECT

These visions of a future heaven remind us of what still matters now, here on earth: loving God (dwelling with God) and loving our neighbors (wiping the tears from their eyes). How can the church in our day be like “leaves for the healing of the nations”?

Key Verse Memory

Committing God's Word to memory is an important goal for Christians of every age. To assist you in this worthy objective, we have suggested three key verses for memorization. Select one to memorize each month or memorize one of your choosing for the quarter.

Key verses for Summer 2021:

1 Thessalonians 5:23

Psalms 23:4

1 Samuel 2:2

COMING NEXT QUARTER

FALL 2021

Unit 1: Beginnings

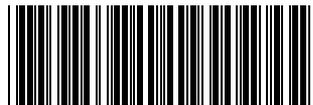
God has been at work in the lives of people from the very beginning. Through this study, we will discover His plans and purposes for creation and for our lives.

Unit 2: The Patriarchs

During this study, we will continue to see how God was at work in the lives of those who opened themselves up to His leading.



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