

# Special Session



*BIBLICAL FOCUS: Genesis 19*

## *Children of God, we are marching to Zion...*

### *Comment 1*

Many ancient stories appear in the Hebrew scriptures. Most of these stories were originally told orally. They were told and retold not because they literally functioned as “history” but because they were useful stories for teaching.

Many of these stories became so familiar that only a word or two would remind folks of the whole story.

### *Comment 2*

Some function in a similar way for us. For example, if someone talks about having “the courage of Daniel,” we can readily picture someone standing up to the governing authorities, remaining true to God even when it means being thrown into a lion’s den.

Other stories are less familiar, even though they may have been widely repeated in ancient times.

### *Comment 3*

One of the stories that is less familiar to modern folks—or even misunderstood—is the story about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet this seems to have been a deeply familiar story to many people in the past, for there are repeated references to it throughout the Hebrew scriptures and even in what we call the New Testament.

In this ancient story, Sodom is presented as a powerful, successful, and immensely wicked city. Because of its wicked ways, it falls apart. Ancient Jews clearly interpreted Sodom’s destruction as resulting from the deep displeasure of God. One “teaching message” of the story was that God sees evil wherever it occurs—and God doesn’t put up with it.

### *Scripture to Read*

Ezekiel 16:49–50

### *Comment 4*

In this passage from Ezekiel, God’s people are told that their behavior has been “worse” than that of Sodom. The people of God have become proud, wealthy, and selfish, ignoring the poor and the needy.

Ezekiel makes it clear that God’s displeasure with Sodom was not related to any single incident. Rather, God’s displeasure grew out of Sodom’s long-standing pattern of behavior, a pattern of living that was contrary to God’s wishes.

### *For Discussion*

Do you find the description of Sodom’s destruction for sins such as this troubling—or reassuring? Why?

### *Scripture to Read*

Genesis 18:20–21

### *Comment 5*

The dramatic story of Sodom’s destruction is told in the Book of Genesis.

In these first two verses, God is described as talking with Abraham. While they’re chatting, God tells Abraham that Sodom’s sinful ways are “very grievous.” In other words, they have been causing God a great deal of grief.

“So I think what I’ll do,” says God, “is go over and investigate, so that I can see first hand what is and isn’t true.”

### *For Discussion*

From the viewpoint of the story, particularly as it is told in verse 21, why is God so upset about Sodom, even though God hasn’t yet been down to Sodom to investigate?

What larger message can we take from this picture of God’s grief?

### *Scripture to Read*

Genesis 18:22

### *Comment 6*

It’s not clear who the story is talking about when it describes some men turning their faces toward Sodom. Perhaps the “men” are the angels or messengers of God who had come to tell Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child in their old age.

Or perhaps these “men” are merely representative of those who eagerly rush to retaliate and destroy whatever and whomever they think that God should get rid of.

### *Comment 7*

In some ways, we are all a bit like those who rush to play a role in the destruction of others, particularly those whom we think of as evil. Too often, we don’t care who gets hurt in the process. Revenge and retaliation get our juices flowing. And if we can perhaps beat God to the punch, we’re happy to “do what needs to be done.”

But the story of Sodom is crafted in such a way that we are stopped in our tracks. Although certain “men” rush off to jump on the city that has caused God so much grief, both Abraham and God stay standing in the same place. Abraham doesn’t move. He doesn’t rush to destruction. Instead, according to verse 22, “Abraham stood yet before the Lord.”

### *For Discussion*

What do you think the “teaching message” is in this part of the story?

Why do you think Abraham keeps standing there, rather than running off to join the others in jumping on Sodom? What can his behavior teach us about the proper response to evil in our own world?

### *Scripture to Read*

Genesis 18:23

### *Comment 8*

The ancient stories that have had the most enduring power in the Jewish and Christian tradition are those stories that wrestle with deep and difficult questions. And in verse 23, Abraham looks God in the eye and asks the kind of question that thoughtful humans have wrestled with down through the ages: “Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?”

In those days, cities and their surrounding countryside functioned almost like independent nations. Sodom was no different than many nations today. It was rich, powerful—and selfish. It did as little as it could for the poor and the needy. Instead of practicing hospitality toward strangers and outsiders, it practiced hostility. The cry of those who suffered at its hands had reached to heaven—and caused God grief.

### *Comment 9*

Not everyone in Sodom was equally selfish. Not everyone in Sodom was equally mean. Not everyone in Sodom was equally arrogant. Should the whole nation be wiped out—Abraham wondered—just because the majority of the people

were living in such evil, self-serving ways?

The same question arises down through human history. All too often, families, communities, cities, and nations self-destruct—and when they do, it is not just the “wicked” who suffer. All too often, the “righteous” suffer as well. The old saying, “You reap what you sow,” is only partly true, for sometimes a terrible price is paid by those who were only living nearby. Sometimes even those who seek to live in righteous ways are caught up in the storm.

### *Comment 10*

Jews who lived through the exile in Babylon must have felt such questions deeply. Prior to the exile, the political and religious leaders of Judah did great evil. They abandoned God’s ways, seeking power and glory and wealth however they could get it. But in the end, it wasn’t just those evil leaders who were carried into exile. It wasn’t just those who had done so much wrong who were hauled off to a strange land. Ordinary folks suffered as well—including many who had tried to remain true to God own ways.

So perhaps another “teaching message” from the story of Sodom is that there is nothing wrong in presenting our questions to God. When we can’t make sense of what we see around us, there is no need to suppress our questions. Abraham looks God in the eye, so to speak, and gives voice to the troubling thoughts in his heart.

### *Scripture to Read*

Genesis 18:23-24

### *Comment 11*

Verse 24 adds an important element. Abraham asks God, “What if there are fifty people in the city of Sodom who are righteous?” Abraham doesn’t mean that they are perfect. In the Jewish sense, to be “righteous” means to be *striving to do what is right*—sharing your resources with the stranger, reaching out to the poor and the needy, lifting up those who are bent down, and resisting the temptation to engage in violence to others.

“Sure, there are thousands of people in Sodom

who are doing what is wrong,” Abraham seems to say. “But if, among the thousands who live in Sodom, there are fifty who are living with God’s values, won’t that be enough to save the city?”

### *Scripture to Read*

Genesis 18:26

### *Comment 12*

God responds and says, “If I find fifty people in Sodom who are living as they should, then I will save the whole city.” The answer is remarkable, for it suggests that *a few people* doing what is right is all that it takes to save a multitude. They don’t have to force everyone else to live rightly. They just have to do it themselves.

“Yes,” says God, “fifty righteous individuals would save the whole multitude. A few righteous people can make a difference.”

### *For Discussion*

What should God’s answer to Abraham teach us for our living today?

Does it seem “right” to you—or “wrong” to you—that a few righteous people should save a multitude, even when the multitude has done great wrong? Why?

### *Scripture to Read*

Genesis 18:27-28

### *Comment 13*

God’s answer to Abraham, indicating that fifty righteous individuals would be enough, raises a further question. If fifty people can save a multitude of sinners, what if there are fewer than fifty? In other words, how many is enough? How many people standing up for what is right will make a difference—not just for themselves but for the world in which they live?

Abraham humbly raises the question with God. “Well, what if there are only forty-five?”

“Oh, that would be enough,” says God.

### *Scripture to Read*

Genesis 18:29-30

### *Comment 14*

In the story, as it is told in Genesis, Abraham now begins to test the boundaries. He tries different numbers, trying to learn how many is enough to make a difference. “What about forty?” he asks. “What about thirty?”

In other words, if a million people wanted to ignore God—and a mere *forty* said that they would humbly pray—would that be enough to save the million? Or if a vast crowd strutted around with arrogant pride, would *thirty* people reaching out to the poor and the needy be enough to make a difference in God’s judgment on that community?

### *Comment 15*

By implication, Abraham is asking this: If the leaders of a nation decided to start a bloody war and a mere *forty* folks stood up and said, “I won’t study war no more,” would that change God’s judgment on that nation? Or if a mighty throng of well-off folks kept everything they had for themselves—but *thirty* righteous individuals shared their food with the hungry—could that save the whole throng from God’s wrath?

Abraham asks his questions, and in each case, God says “yes.”

### *Scripture to Read*

Genesis 18:31–32

### *Comment 16*

Abraham keeps asking, dropping the number each time. “What about *twenty*? What about *ten*?” “Twenty righteous?” says God. “Ten righteous?” Either way, says God, it’s enough. Ten people behaving rightly can save a nation.

### *For Discussion*

What sort of “teaching message” do you suppose people were supposed to learn from Abraham’s questions and God’s answers?

In what ways does this message fit—or not fit—with other teachings of Scripture?

In what kinds of situations do you find it hardest to behave rightly when everyone else is

behaving wrongly?

### *Scripture to Read*

Psalms 15:1–5

### *Comment 17*

This psalm describes those whose living is righteous. They work for righteousness. They speak truthfully. They don’t destroy others with their backbiting and gossip. They don’t speak evil about others or tear down those whose ways are different from their own. They don’t “lend money to usury,” which means that they don’t try to profit from other people’s financial needs. Nor do they seek personal gain at the expense of “the innocent.”

People who live in this way, says the psalmist, “shall never be moved.” The multitude can go against them. The crowd can run toward that which is evil. Great powers can rise up and try to force them to do what is wrong. But those who are committed to righteousness have their roots firmly planted on God’s “holy hill.” Winds can blow. The earth can tremble. But the righteous shall not be moved.

### *Comment 18*

According to the psalm, in holding firm to the ways of God, we bring blessings not only on ourselves but even on those who have done great evil. As God tells Abraham, ten people doing that which is righteous can save a nation.

On one level, we can find ourselves attracted to a teaching like this. But on another level, many of us may find ourselves put off by it. Why should our righteousness save those who have persisted in doing evil? Wait a minute, we might say—shouldn’t evildoers suffer for the wrongs that they have done? Why should evil folks be saved by our good and faithful behavior?

### *Comment 20*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Love your enemies. Do good to them that hate you. Pray for those who show you spite. Bless those who persecute you.” We don’t find it hard

to *read* what Jesus taught. But we do find it hard to *practice* what Jesus taught.

Deep down inside each of us there is a stubborn resistance to the practice of redemptive righteousness. We are convinced that everybody—except us, of course—should “get what they deserve.”

#### *Comment 21*

Multiple passages of Scripture portray Israel as a “servant” nation whose righteousness was to save the world. The children of Israel were to be an agent of redemption for those who had not even the faintest understanding of what righteousness was about.

But all too often, judging from other passages, Israel didn’t want to be a blessing to others. It was a lot like us. It didn’t want to be an agent of others’ salvation. Instead, like us, it wanted to have its own exclusive place with God. It wanted those other evil folks to be wiped out.

But by taking such an attitude, we turn away from God. We fail to be the blessing to others that we could have been.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Romans 5:6–9

#### *Comment 22*

Scripture is filled with an abiding awareness of the redemptive power of righteous action.

Ten people committed to righteous living, firmly upholding the gracious ways of God, could have saved the whole city of Sodom, evil though it was. Israel was asked to live rightly so the whole world might be blessed, even those who had done great wrong. And in the Sermon on the Mount, we are all told to use our lives to bless those who are doing that which is evil.

#### *Comment 23*

According to Genesis, ten righteous people would be enough to save a city, and there may well have been many times that ten righteous folks did indeed save a city, at least for a time.

But that raises another question: how many

righteous folks would it take to save a world—not just for a time but for eternity? How many would it take not just to save the good folks but to save the deeply wicked ones as well?

#### *Comment 24*

In light of so much biblical teaching about the righteous redeeming those who are evil, the answer to that fundamental question about how many it would take to save a world is not surprising: all it takes is *one*. One righteous life, says Romans, can save a world. One righteous life can redeem every wicked soul from destruction. One righteous life can bring an end to revenge, retaliation, and rebellion. One righteous life can bring hope to every enemy, every evil doer, every soul devoted to that which is wrong.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Romans 5:18–19

#### *Comment 25*

The words of Romans 5 reflect an underlying truth that is found even in Abraham’s questions back in the ancient story of Sodom. “By the righteousness of one,” says Paul, “the free gift came upon all.” When Paul says, “By the obedience of one, shall many be made righteous,” he is not uttering a new teaching. It is an old teaching—made real in Jesus.

#### *Comment 26*

Judging from what we read in the Gospels, Jesus liked to call himself “the son of man.” He stressed that he was just an ordinary guy, the offspring of Adam, a child of the earth.

It was only much later—looking back on his life, looking back on his righteous behavior—that his followers began speaking of him as “the son of God.” He had practiced God’s right ways so thoroughly and so redemptively that it was as if he was not just a child of the earth but also one who had truly been born from Above, one who had truly reflected the ways of God, just as a child would reflect the characteristics of a parent.

### *For Discussion*

In light of all this, what do you think Scripture means when it says that we all need to be “born again”?

### *Scripture to Read*

John 3:7

### *Comment 27*

Too often, we think of being “born again” as a religious act, a spiritual attitude, or a set of theological beliefs.

But biblically, to be “born again” is to be born from Above. To be “born again” is to be shaped in the same way that Jesus was shaped.

### *Comment 28*

To be “born again” is to reflect the ways of a gracious God and not just the ways of the world. To be “born again” is to be so thoroughly and completely grounded in righteous behavior that we too can truly be called the “sons and daughters of God.” To be “born again” is to practice the kind of compassionate and redemptive living that truly brings blessing and salvation to even the worst enemies of the Holy.

### *Scripture to Read*

Romans 8:28–29

### *Comment 29*

Jesus himself doesn’t want to be the only “son of God,” for that would mean that no one else had been “born again.”

As it says in Romans 8:29, God’s desire is that Jesus be the first born of many sisters and brothers, all of whom are conformed to his image, all of whom reflect God’s righteous ways.

### *Scripture to Read*

Romans 9:26,29

### *Comment 30*

Paul quotes the Book of Isaiah, suggesting that unless God had “left us a seed,” we would all have been like Sodom and Gomorrah. That seed

is Jesus, the one who was righteous, the one who was righteous enough to save the whole.

In other words, when talking about numbers with God, Abraham didn’t go low enough. He only got down to ten. But all it took was *one*—one who was willing to be “born again,” one who was willing by righteous behavior to save not just a few poor sinners but every sinner who ever would be.

And it shall come to pass, says Scripture, with that single “seed” as our model, that even we who could not possibly be called “God’s people” will be equally transformed. We will live in God’s way, doing God’s work in keeping with God’s mercy and grace. And then we shall be called, says Scripture, “the children of the living God.”

### *Scripture to Read*

Romans 8:14

### *Comment 31*

It would be a tragedy, indeed, if Jesus were to remain as the *only* “son of God.” For through his righteousness, we are saved. We are redeemed. We are transformed.

Even now, the Spirit of God is calling to us, seeking to lead us in righteous ways, drawing us down peaceful paths and through loving gates. Our lives are being reshaped. Our hearts are being reborn. We are striving to be the ten righteous individuals who save a city, who save a nation.

### *Comment 32*

We are not yet as fully “born again” as Jesus was. None of us will ever be as perfect a child of God as he was. But he is the “seed” that has taken root among us, and we are seeking to demonstrate the same kind of “redemptive righteousness”—righteousness for the sake of others—that we have seen in him.

We may still be on the streets of Sodom. We may still be surrounded with violence and greed. Pride and selfishness may still rise up around us. But with each step we take in keeping with God’s own ways, reflecting God’s own values, we show

where we are headed—and we show beyond a shadow of a doubt whose child we are.

We can't turn back now, for every righteous action makes a difference. We can't turn back now, for every righteous action is a part of God's great and gracious redemption:

*Children of God,  
we are marching to Zion,  
step by step all the way...*

# Special Session



*BIBLICAL FOCUS: Jeremiah 17, 21–23, and 52*

## *Rolling through an unfriendly world...*

### *Comment 1*

The New Testament has many references to a sad and slightly mysterious place named “Babylon.” Many of these allusions are in the book of Revelation, but similar references appear in other New Testament books as well.

When the various parts of the New Testament were written, there was no place literally known as Babylon. So the New Testament allusions to “Babylon” are obviously figurative in nature. Nevertheless, these figurative references were meant to convey an important meaning.

### *Comment 2*

Although the ancient nation of Babylon had long since vanished into the pages of history, “Babylon” had remained a vivid concept in Jewish consciousness.

Babylon was the name of the nation that, hundreds of years before the time of Jesus, had taken the nation of Judah captive and carried it away into exile. Even many centuries later, when the books that became the New Testament were being written, “Babylon” remained a terrible memory for the Jewish people. Those days of exile in Babylon were days of tyranny and oppression, days of struggling to remain true to their faith in a strange and difficult land.

### *Comment 3*

During their captivity in Babylon, the people of God had felt an ache in their hearts. Deep within, they had felt like a motherless child—a long ways from home.

In the time of Jesus—as well as later—life was hard for many Jews. They were dominated and controlled by an outside power: the Roman Empire. As a result, some Jews began figuratively referring to the Roman Empire as “Babylon.” For many, the name “Babylon” came to symbolize all that goes wrong in our world, especially the evil and violence and oppression that is done by mighty nations. “Babylon” came to stand for greed and domination. “Babylon” represented those destructive forces that “occupy” our world and “take us captive.”

### *For Discussion*

What kind of “Babylons” and destructive forces occupy our world today, taking us “captive”?

### *Comment 4*

To understand the tremendous power of the “Babylon” image in the book of Revelation—and to better grasp what it means for us—we need to understand what the literal Babylon meant in the lives of the Jewish people.

Babylon was a rich and powerful nation. The

book of Isaiah describes it as “the glory of the nations.” Babylon’s armies stormed into every nation on which it ever set its eyes, plundering the world’s riches for itself, taking the people of other nations captive whenever they might have value in some way for Babylon.

#### *Comment 5*

More than six hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Babylon was boldly asserting its power in the world. Its leaders were arrogant and proud. They felt they had a right to do whatever they wanted.

Babylon kept invading more and more nations, taking what it wanted. By the year 600 BCE, it had occupied most of the territory around Jerusalem.

#### *Comment 6*

Those awful days were also the days of the prophet Jeremiah, a prophet whose message seems not to have been well received. Indeed, Jeremiah seems to have often been persecuted and ridiculed. The book of James talks about God’s prophets as those who are “afflicted.” Jeremiah certainly fits that picture.

The people of Jeremiah’s day had been seduced by Babylon. Indeed, before they were *literally* taken captive, they had been *emotionally* taken captive, for they had been seduced by Babylon’s wealth and power. The people of Judah looked over at Babylon—and began wanting Babylon’s wealth and power for themselves. Too easily, they forgot that mighty weapons fail. Too easily, they forgot that wealth is that which withers.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 17:1, 5

#### *Comment 7*

Jeremiah says that the “sin of Judah” has been written with a pen of iron on the table of its heart.

In other words, the people of Judah have been seduced, and the seduction now lies deep within

their soul.

#### *Comment 8*

What is this seduction that has been chiseled deep into their hearts by Babylon and by all those who demonstrate arrogant power and selfish greed?

Jeremiah makes it clear. The people of God have begun to “trust in man.” They have started to trust in human power and human glory and human accomplishments. In addition, they “make flesh their arm.” They think that mighty muscles will save them. They think that military force will protect them. In short, they think that they have it made. They think that they are on the road to riches and glory.

But Jeremiah declares that they are deceived.

#### *Comment 9*

The book of James offers a similar critique of the world’s deceptions and seductions. James talks about how “every man is tempted” and “drawn away of his own lust” (James 1:14).

With a deep level of feeling, James urges his “beloved brethren” not to be deceived (James 1:16). He urges us to hold to “the word of truth” which God has implanted in each of our hearts (James 1:18). He reminds us that when we put our trust in riches, we are putting our trust in that which will become “corrupted” and “moth-eaten” (James 5:2). He warns us against putting our trust in that which shall “rust” and which ultimately will only serve as a “witness against” us on that day when those who have abandoned the “wisdom from above” will begin to “weep and howl” (James 5:1).

#### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 17:9–11

#### *For Discussion*

What are some of the ways that we today are deceived by powerful forces that seduce our hearts?

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 17:14, 7–8

### *Comment 10*

Jeremiah offers a stark contrast. You can trust in the power of your own “arm”—or you can trust in the Lord. You can be blown back and forth by illusions and the foolish pursuit of riches and wealth, which never last—or you can be like a tree planted by the waters that shall not be moved, a tree that continues bearing fruit for the Creator, for the Redeemer, for the One who sustains us and embraces us with an everlasting love.

In the book of James, we find similar contrasts. James talks about those who are following the wisdom of this world as those who are tossed back and forth, like waves in the sea (James 1:6).

### *Comment 11*

Chapter 17 of Jeremiah offer a powerful contrast. The text portrays the fruitless wavering of those who trust in power and wealth, and then compares that wavering with those who trust in the Holy One—and keep bearing fruit for God.

Chapter 18 of Jeremiah—the very next chapter—is a famous one, for it’s the chapter where Jeremiah talks about going “down to the potter’s house.” There he sees a potter who is reworking a clay pot, reshaping it and remolding it to fit the potter’s finest wishes.

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 21:4–5

### *Comment 12*

The message that Jeremiah seems to be conveying is that when we are seduced and crushed by the destructive ways of Babylon, we have a Potter who can rework us, reshape us, and remold us. We can be healed.

Unfortunately, as revealed by these verses from Jeremiah 21, the leaders of Judah didn’t want to be reworked. They had been thoroughly seduced. They thought they could stand up to Babylon using the tools of Babylon. They forgot

that the tools of Babylon lead only to destruction. They forgot that when we take up weapons of war and wealth and power, we turn our backs on God.

### *Comment 13*

And when you turn your back on God, says Jeremiah, watch out! For it is then that God begins fighting against you “with an outstretched hand and with a strong arm, even in anger and in fury, and in great wrath.”

James offers a similar critique of those who think they can go their own way. He says that they are foolishly failing to see that they are merely fattening themselves “for the day of slaughter.” They are treating themselves like farm animals who are being fattened up for eating (James 5:5).

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 22:1–5

### *Comment 14*

The ways of God are different from the ways of Babylon. Jeremiah is convinced that the way to live like trees that cannot be moved and the way to bear fruit in season and out of season is by turning our backs on the ways of Babylon.

Jeremiah goes on to explain what this means. He says it means doing justice and living rightly. It means delivering people from the hands of oppressors. It means doing no wrong and no violence, even to those strangers and foreigners whom some might call “terrorists.” It means supporting the fatherless and the widows and all those who are struggling financially. And it means “studying war no more” so that innocent blood will no longer be shed on God’s holy earth.

### *For Discussion*

What could we do differently in today’s world to better meet God’s expectations?

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 22:13–17

### *Comment 15*

Babylon was overrunning Judah. But Babylon was not winning just by military might. It was winning by seducing the hearts and minds of God's people.

They were cheating their neighbors. They weren't paying fair wages. They were exploiting other people, engaging in violence and shedding others' blood for the sake of their own riches and wealth. With those riches, they were building wide houses with large rooms and big windows. These were fancy houses, with cedar ceilings and fancy paint. The reality is remarkably similar to what is portrayed with equal passion in the book of James.

### *Comment 16*

Did you think you would "reign," asks God, just because you lived in a fancy house with cedar ceilings? Did you forget what your ancestors did to gain God's favor? Did you forget that they worked and struggled, pursuing justice and mercy even when those seemed like impossible goals?

Did you forget that it was because of your ancestors' compassionate concern for others that things went so well for them? Did you forget that working for the cause of the poor and the needy, even when we ourselves feel poor and needy, is how we know God?

### *For Discussion*

If you were to ask a group of average American Christians for the best way to "know God," how many of their answers do you think would reflect the answer given in this passage from Jeremiah? Why do you think this is the case?

Do you think it's true that working for the cause of the poor and the needy is the way to "know God"? Does this fit with any other teachings of scripture that you can think of?

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 22:21–22

### *For Discussion*

Why do you think that God says to a people who are seduced by their own prosperity, "The wind shall eat up all thy pastors"? What's the implication here?

### *Comment 17*

The people of Jeremiah's day thought of themselves as very religious. They prayed and sang and were enthusiastic participants in worship services. There was a whole network of priests and prophets who gladly gave the people a "feel good" message that justified their continued seduction by the ways of prosperity and power. These "pastors" told them to expect ever greater prosperity and ever greater pleasure. These "pastors" assured them that all God wanted to do was to bless them.

But these "pastors" had no grounding. They were no longer like trees planted by the waters. Their roots didn't go deep. They were shallow lovers with a "be happy" message. So God declares that a storm is coming, and when "the wind" of heaven begins to blow, they will find their dreams crashing down around them.

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 23:24–25, 31–32

### *Comment 18*

I see what's going on, says God. Priests and prophets are preaching lies in my name. They say they are delivering a "word from the Lord." They tell folks that their message is straight from above—and they truly believe it. But they've been blinded by their own dreams, dreams growing out of the destructive seductions of Babylon.

Be careful, says God. Just because somebody says that "the devil is going to be mad but I'm telling you the truth" doesn't mean that what they have to say is truly from the Lord. Be careful, says God. The churches and places of worship to which the largest numbers of people flock may not be delivering my word at all.

### *Comment 19*

As it happens, again and again, the false prophets and preachers told the people of Judah that everything would be all right. All God wanted to do was bless them, and it really didn't matter who they clobbered to make their way to greater power, prosperity, and prestige.

But having been *seduced* by Babylon, the people of Judah were *overcome* by Babylon. In 598 BCE, the armies of that mighty nation attacked Jerusalem and took its people captive.

598 BCE was the beginning of the *physical* captivity, but the people's *emotional* and *spiritual* captivity had begun much earlier, for according to Jeremiah, they had been seduced by the ways of Babylon, not realizing that the ways of Babylon would ultimately destroy the very way of life that they thought that they had built for themselves.

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 52:1, 4-5, 9-13

### *Comment 20*

Thus began a tragic period in the history of God's people—a time of sorrow and sadness, cruelty and oppression. Generations were born and generations died in a strange and distant place. The tears of God's people were real.

### *Scripture to Read*

Psalms 137:1-4

### *Comment 21*

Although the long years in Babylon were a time of sorrow and sadness, they were also a time of cleansing.

The lies of false preachers who claimed that they were delivering "the word of Lord" no longer had much impact. Shallow sermons with rich promises no longer had any following. All of the false dreams and self-serving illusions that had so seduced God's people had at last been blown away. A mighty wind had arisen, a wind that took its orders from God's own lips.

### *For Discussion*

In what ways does God bring cleansing today?

The book of James tells God's people to "rejoice" when they face trials and testings, yet it's not likely that those who endured exile in Babylon felt very happy about what they were experiencing. Those years were filled with genuine hardship, religious persecution, and ethnic discrimination. Can you think of any more contemporary situations in which some kind of good emerged from a time that was genuinely hard or painful?

### *Comment 22*

The people of God, having been seduced by the false ways of Babylon, ultimately became the victims of Babylon. It was a horrible time. But it wasn't entirely a bad time, for in the long run, those hard years of captivity became a cleansing time. At last, the people of God began to see the world and its ways for what they really are.

Those hard years of captivity also became a strengthening time, for they opened a space in which God's people could make a conscious choice to reject the foolishness with which they had been seduced so that they might instead sink their roots deep into those gracious and peaceful ways of living that truly cause us to know God.

### *Comment 23*

In 1993, a group called the Princely Players recorded an old spiritual that included these words:

*I'm a-rolling, I'm a-rolling,  
I'm a-rolling through an unfriendly world.*

*Oh, brothers, won't you help me?  
Oh, brothers, won't you help me to pray?  
Oh, brothers, won't you help me?  
Won't you help me in the service of the Lord?*

*Oh, sisters, won't you help me?  
Oh, sisters, won't you help me to pray?  
Oh, sisters, won't you help me?*

*Won't you help me in the service of the Lord?*

Scripture portrays the time of exile in Babylon as a time in which God's people knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were "a-rolling through an unfriendly world."

There were constant efforts to get them to bow to the same false gods of power and prosperity that had betrayed them once before. When they refused to be deceived yet again, they were subjected to ridicule, harassment, and punishment. Some faced lions' dens. Some faced fiery furnaces.

#### *Comment 24*

But a big part of the strength which the people of God achieved during the exile in Babylon was due to the fact that they were able to recognize that it was indeed an unfriendly world through which they were a-rolling.

They were no longer seduced. They were no longer fooled. They saw through the destructive impulses of this world—and were determined not to get caught up again in the world's most destructive ways of living.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 21:5–6

#### *Comment 25*

There was perhaps something else that the captives in Babylon learned, something equally important, and it's reflected in a vivid drama that finds its way into the book of Isaiah.

In this little drama, a discouraged and defeated group of people find their hearts panting. They are bowed down and dismayed, for there could be no illusions: they are a-rolling through an unfriendly world. They lie awake at night. Fear and grief torment their spirits.

Then the Lord sends word to prepare a table. Eat, drink, gather your strength, says the Lord. Then send out a watchman, to see what he sees.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 21:8–9a

#### *Comment 26*

In Isaiah's vivid drama, a watchman goes out to a high place to watch for any word about what's happening in the world, any deep truth that can be conveyed to his discouraged friends.

In ancient times, there was no mass media: no radio news broadcasts or television reports or newspaper articles with dispatches from abroad. Instead, messengers were sent from one place to the next to announce the news. Watchmen would wait, and cry out the news as soon as it could be learned.

#### *Comment 27*

The watchman in Isaiah's drama stands continually in the tower. All day he waits, day after day. All night he waits, night after night. There seems to be no news. There seems to be no hope. The "unfriendly world" just goes on and on.

But then, on the far horizon, he spots a chariot. Men are in it, racing toward him as fast as they can. Near the chariot, he sees more men on horseback. They are waving their arms and indicating that there is important news to be delivered, a deep truth to be learned.

"What is it?" the watchman cries, his eyes wide, his hands trembling, his heart panting. "What's happened?"

#### *Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 21:9b

#### *Comment 28*

The messenger riding in the chariot then delivers the startling news: "Babylon is fallen, is fallen!"

On one level, Babylon still rules. The people who have been taken captive are still sighing and still weeping. But on a deeper level, Isaiah's drama tells us the real truth, the deep truth: "Babylon is fallen, is fallen!"

A mighty wind has blown. Bubbles have burst.

Illusions have vanished. The forces of destruction have once again done themselves in—and become their own victims.

#### *Comment 29*

The book of James functions as a reminder that we are *still* seduced. But James calls us to take hold of the deepest of truths. James calls us to ground our lives in the “wisdom from Above,” the wisdom that goes against what the world thinks it knows and boldly declares that “Babylon” and all that it represents is fallen and its gods—the arrogant gods of power and violence and greed—have gone crashing to the ground.

It may not be fully evident yet, but it *is* evident. The truth is out. The message has been sent. “Babylon is fallen!”

#### *Comment 30*

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the book of James—like so many New Testament books—have similar messages built on similar images. They are filled with reminders that it is an “unfriendly world” through which we are a-rolling.

But Isaiah, Jeremiah, and James call us to see deeper than that. We have to take hold of a “word of truth” that goes beyond the pain and destruction and false illusions that still seem so strong in our world.

#### *Comment 31*

We have to see through the fog of war and through the clouds of greed and beyond the foul smoke of those who constantly oppress and cheat and ignore their neighbor. We have to rise above the demeaning slander that fills our media, labeling as “fiery” or “unpatriotic” those who stand for what is right.

We have to see beyond this present unfriendly moment to a God who endures, a God of love and compassion who will still be standing tall and strong when the destructive powers of this world have finally ground themselves to pieces, a God of mercy and grace who will still be redeeming and delivering even on that day when the

whole world will have to acknowledge, “Babylon is fallen, is fallen!”

#### *Comment 32*

In the old spiritual about rolling through “an unfriendly world,” some of the verses include words like these:

*Oh, brother, won't you help me?*

*Oh, sister, won't you help me to pray?*

*Oh, brother, won't you help me?*

*Won't you help me in the service of the Lord?*

Originally, those verses might have been a plea for help from those who were seeking to flee from a life of enslavement. But today these same words can serve as a reminder that when we are seeking to embody God's deepest truth, we'll need to call on brothers to help us. We'll need to plead with sisters to stand beside us. Together, we'll need to pray. And together, we'll need to begin working—as James described himself as working—“in the service of the Lord.”

#### *Comment 33*

As we work and as we pray, we need to know in a deep and powerful way not only that it is “an unfriendly world” through which we are rolling but also that “Babylon” will not forever stand. Indeed, it is already fallen. Indeed, it has already started down the path of self-destruction, for every “Babylon” that the world has ever known has been built on illusions, illusions that will ultimately cause it to be driven “like waves upon the sea.”

Perhaps the biggest illusion of all was that God's anointed one could be murdered, shut away in a tomb—and forgotten. Perhaps the biggest illusion of all was that the earth wouldn't shake and the stone wouldn't move—and the grave wouldn't open. But “Babylon is fallen, is fallen!”

#### *Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 21:11–12

*Comment 34*

In the conclusion to Isaiah's vivid drama, one of those individuals who had been sighing and weeping and enduring a most "unfriendly" world comes and cries out to the watchman. "Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, will the terrors never end?"

And the watchman says, "Babylon is fallen. The morning cometh. Yes, weeping may endure for a time, but joy is coming. A tomb is opening. Morning is just around the bend."

*Oh, brother, won't you help me?*

*Oh, sister, won't you help me to pray?*

*Oh, brother, won't you help me?*

*Won't you help me in the service of the Lord?*

# Special Session



*BIBLICAL FOCUS: John 13*

## *Fix me, Jesus!*

### *Comment 1*

In the days of Jesus, there was no more sacred moment than the annual Feast of Passover. Around the time of Passover, many Jewish pilgrims would make their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the deliverance of God's people from slavery in Egypt.

The Roman rulers of Palestine were usually on high alert during Passover. They were naturally fearful of the great numbers of people who would be present in Jerusalem for this annual celebration.

### *Comment 2*

But the fear of the Romans may also have been because among many Jews, Passover aroused nationalistic and patriotic feelings. The Romans knew that such feelings could erupt into violence and rebellion.

During Passover, some Jews would get to thinking that they as a people were specially close to God—and specially deserving of God's enduring favor. Passover prompted proud slogans and self-serving mental images.

But as we will see, the Gospel of John conveys a radically different understanding of Jesus' final Passover celebration with his disciples.

### *Scripture to Read*

John 13:1a

### *Comment 3*

According to the text, Passover is coming, the most important festival in the Jewish religious year. It's a celebration that faithful Jews had been keeping for many hundreds of years—and are still keeping today.

From the other Gospels, we know that Passover was high in the minds of Jesus' disciples. They looked forward to celebrating Passover with him in Jerusalem.

### *Comment 4*

But the Gospel of John portrays Jesus as having a deeper consciousness of God's work in the world. Yes, Passover is coming. But according to John, what Jesus knew most clearly is that "his hour was come."

To those around him, an ordinary "hour" would have been insignificant in comparison to the holy Feast of Passover. What could an ordinary "hour" matter when Passover was just around the corner?

### *Comment 5*

For Jesus, however, this was no ordinary "hour," for the Gospel of John describes it as the time during which he would "depart out of this world unto the Father."

In other words, it would be a time of reunion. It would be the time of his return to the One who had sent him. It would thus be a holy moment, a glorious encounter with the very God of the

Passover, the God who has always stood for deliverance and redemption.

*Scripture to Read*

John 13:1

*For Discussion*

When the Gospel of John says that Jesus loved “his own,” about whom do you think the Gospel is talking?

*Scripture to Read*

John 1:10–11

*For Discussion*

What do these earlier verses tell us about those whom Jesus considered “his own”?

*Scripture to Read*

John 10:2–4, 11

*For Discussion*

What do these verses from John 10 tell us about those whom Jesus considered “his own”?

*Comment 6*

The Gospel of John begins by telling us that Jesus came unto “his own,” but “his own” received him not.

Later, in John 10, there is a scene in which Jesus talks about himself as a “good shepherd.” He says that “his own” know his voice and respond to his call.

At first, these two passages might seem contradictory. How can “his own” receive him not—and yet respond to his voice?

*Comment 7*

Perhaps the answer to the puzzle is in John 13, the chapter that we’re looking at today. There we are told that Jesus loved “his own” and that he loved them “unto the end.”

To understand this, we need to remember that the Gospel of John sees Jesus as being one with God, and the Gospel of John likewise sees

Jesus being present in some spiritual sense at the creation of the world. So when Jesus loves “his own,” he is loving every creature in the world, everything fashioned by God’s own hand, past, present, and future.

*Comment 8*

At first, Jesus’ love—like God’s love—is misunderstood. At first, according to John, “his own” receive him not. But we are told that Jesus—like God—loves them “unto the end.” Jesus—like God—loves all those who are “in the world” until they finally recognize his voice and answer his call.

As we will see, he even loves those who choose to betray him, for there is no one who is not “his own.” He will love every creature—even those who are consumed with evil—until God’s holy love breaks through our walls of hatred and mistrust. He will love and love and love until the power of love is victorious and moves us from living in the violent ways of “the world” to living in the holy ways of our Maker.

*For Discussion*

What should Jesus’ pattern of loving “to the end” teach us about our own relationship with others?

*Scripture to Read*

John 8:59

John 13:2

*Comment 9*

John 8 includes a scene in which religious people take up stones to throw at Jesus. Although he loves them, they want to destroy him. They want to bombard him with violence until he is no more.

In like manner, we are told that the devil has bombarded the heart of Judas Iscariot with evil thoughts that lead to evil deeds.

*Comment 10*

The King James Version uses a very mild-man-

nered translation to convey this image. It says that the devil “put” these thoughts into Judas’ heart.

But the Greek verb that the Gospel of John uses to describe this “putting” is the same Greek verb that it uses to describe the violent throwing of stones contemplated by those who wanted to stone Jesus to death.

#### *Comment 11*

In other words, the Gospel of John is portraying a very violent assault on Judas’ own heart. We aren’t supposed to imagine that these thoughts have been quietly placed in Judas’ heart. Rather, we are to see these thoughts as thrown there with an evil vengeance.

According to John, Judas has been attacked and bombarded. This one who walked with Jesus, this one who had heard and seen so much of God’s holy ways, he has been assaulted and beaten up by an evil spirit that goes beyond our comprehension, a violent evil spirit that is still at work in the world.

#### *For Discussion*

In what ways does the devil “throw stones” at us today?

#### *Scripture to Read*

John 13:3

#### *Comment 12*

The Gospel of John is blunt in its description of the devil’s violent assault on Judas Iscariot. But it presents that description in a remarkable context.

Verse 2 talks about the devil’s assault against one of God’s own, but the description of that assault is surrounded by verses 1 and 3, and both of those verses talk about a Jesus who “knew” that the assaults of the devil are not the end of the story. Both verses talk about a Jesus who loves unto the end, loves even those who are caught up “in the world,” loves even those who are beaten down by the devil’s stones, loves even those who think and do great violence.

#### *Comment 13*

John wants us to understand that evil is real. It continues today. It throws its stones at all of our hearts. It provokes violence and despair, and even makes otherwise good people beat up on each other. For a time, it can seem like the devil is winning. For a time, it can seem like God’s own disciples are falling. For a time, it can seem like betrayal and hatred are coming out on top.

But Jesus—like God—keeps on loving. Jesus keeps on knowing that “the Father” has “given all things into his hands.” And Jesus keeps on knowing where he has come from—and where he is going.

#### *Comment 14*

In a sense, John is teaching us that every time we find the devil at work and every time we find evil growing stronger, the answer is not more evil but more love.

Evil can be surrounded. Evil can be overcome. But it takes the kind of love that comes from knowing whose we are. Just as Jesus knew where he had come from—and where he was going—so must we.

#### *Scripture to Read*

John 13:4

#### *Comment 15*

The Gospel of John provides only this one scene from Jesus’ last Passover supper with his disciples. But it is a powerful scene. It’s a teaching scene filled with action verbs, and each verb conveys a rich significance.

First, we are told that Jesus “riseth.” The Greek verb that is used in this passage is the same Greek verb that is used elsewhere in John to describe those who “rise” from the dead. It implies a getting up with power, and the Gospel of John seems to use it here as a foreshadowing of what is to come.

#### *For Discussion*

When evil is strong and begins throwing

stones of violence or hate at our family, our community, or our world, what are some of the ways that we—like Jesus—can “rise” with power?

#### *Comment 16*

Secondly, John tells us that this one who “rises” up from the Passover supper proceeds to “lay down” his garments. The Greek verb here is the same verb that is used elsewhere in the Gospel of John to describe the actions of a good shepherd who “lays down” his life for his sheep.

In a sense, then, the Gospel of John seems to be showing us a Jesus who “rises up” over evil because he is able to “lay down” his outer garments. He “lays down” his outer life so that his inner life might soar toward heaven, overcoming and overpowering the evil that is still vengefully throwing stones at him.

#### *For Discussion*

When lessons can we learn from this for our own response to the evil of our world?

#### *Comment 17*

Next we are told that Jesus “took” a towel. This Greek verb is used dozens of times in the Gospel of John. It’s a Greek verb that is often translated as meaning to “accept” or “receive.” It is the same Greek verb, for example, that is used in the first chapter to describe those who “received him not.”

It’s as if John wants us to see Jesus not just as “taking” the towel but as “receiving” it. He “accepts” the message that God has given. He “takes” unto himself the knowledge of who he is—and whose he is. He is not afraid. He takes it up, for he knows that in God’s truth and in God’s way, he will find great strength.

#### *For Discussion*

In responding to trouble and turmoil, what are some of the things that we too need to “receive”?

#### *Comment 18*

Finally, in verse 4 we are told that Jesus “girds” himself. He wraps himself in the knowledge of who he is and who God is. He wraps himself in that truth. He clothes himself with that power. It’s like a girder or beam that supports his soul.

The Greek verb that is translated as “gird” is used only one other place in the Gospel of John. It’s used near the very end of the story, long after Peter’s denial of Jesus. Peter and the disciples have been out fishing all night. They spot someone on the shore, cooking breakfast. The person tells them to fish on the other side of the boat. They do, and suddenly they have a catch of huge proportions. Peter realizes it’s Jesus. So he “girds” himself with his fishing cloak and dives into the water.

#### *Scripture to Read*

John 21:17–18

#### *Comment 19*

On the shore, Jesus challenges Peter three times to “feed my sheep.” Peter says, “Lord, you know that I love you.” And then Jesus tells Peter that when you were young, you “girded” yourself and went where you wanted to go. But now it’s time, says Jesus, to let someone else “gird” you. It’s time to let a greater Power support you and lead you in each step of your life.

In his description of Jesus’ last Passover with his disciples, John describes Jesus as “girding” himself. It’s as if John wants us to see that Jesus was ready to let a greater Power carry him along the ways of life. So Jesus RISES from the Passover supper, he LAYS DOWN his outer garments, he TAKES UP the knowledge of who he is, and he GIRDS himself with power from Above.

#### *Scripture to Read*

John 13:4–5

#### *Comment 20*

The Jewish Passover meal always included a time of washing one’s hands as a sign of one’s in-

ner spiritual cleansing. The washing had to be in moving water.

So when Jesus “pours” water into a basin, he is connecting his actions with the traditional Passover washing. But during the Passover meal, it was hands that were washed, not feet. And it’s possible that earlier in the meal, Jesus and his disciples did indeed wash their hands as water was poured. Now, however, in the scene that the Gospel of John has laid out for us, Jesus prepares to wash the *feet* of the disciples.

#### *Comment 21*

Like the washing of hands, the washing of feet had its own spiritual significance. In Exodus 30, for example, Aaron is told to place a basin of water between the altar and the sanctuary so that the priests of God could wash their feet.

In addition, there is evidence that in some Jewish synagogues around the time of Jesus, there were discussions suggesting that the washing of feet as well as hands was necessary as a sign of sanctification or spiritual cleansing.

#### *Comment 22*

In a similar vein, a Jewish philosopher named Philo, writing not too long after the time of Jesus, said that “one should not enter with unwashed feet on the pavement of the temple of God.”

Perhaps the washing of feet was also connected in some people’s minds with the story in Exodus in which Moses confronts a burning bush and is told to remove his shoes for he is standing on holy ground.

#### *Comment 23*

So when Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, he is connecting them with that which is holy. He is freeing them from all that would hold them down and hold them back. He is cleansing them from their bondage to this world, a bondage that could hold them tight in Egypt, whose name in Hebrew literally means “the tight spot.”

By washing their feet—even the feet of the one whom he knew would betray him—Jesus

reenacts the story of the Passover. In a sense, he is freeing his disciples from the bondage of this world. Through an act of liberation, he is freeing them to live and work and serve in God’s holy way.

#### *Scripture to Read*

John 13:6–9

#### *For Discussion*

What do you think Jesus means when he tells Peter that if his feet are not washed, then he has no role to play with Jesus?

What are some of the ways that our feet are figuratively held to the “dirt” of this world’s thinking? From what do we too need to be cleansed?

#### *Scripture to Read*

John 13:10–12

#### *Comment 24*

Jesus has symbolically made his disciples holy. He has symbolically cleansed his disciples from their sense of bondage with the world. And by his actions, Jesus has symbolically demonstrated his love for all who are “his own,” not just those who were there with him at that time but through all of history.

In the traditional words that are repeated each year during Passover, faithful believers are reminded that we are made holy by God’s commandments. And in the Gospels, there is no more fundamental commandment than the commandment to love one another. Through the keeping of such a commandment, we too can be made holy.

#### *For Discussion*

Who in this story do you find yourself identifying with—and why?

#### *Comment 25*

It is Jesus’ love that has made his disciples holy. It is Jesus’ commitment to God’s command that has freed his disciples—as well as each of us—to live in God’s holy ways. That commitment and

that cleansing has been dramatized in Jesus' action in washing his disciples feet. Through Jesus' actions, the disciples have been freed to run on holy ground.

But as the Gospel of John tells the story, Jesus is now about to remind them that with their freedom comes a responsibility to share that freedom and love with others, no matter the cost, no matter the obstacle.

### *Scripture to Read*

John 13:13–15

### *Comment 26*

In the Gospels, Jesus seldom uses any special title for himself. He seeks no special status. Here, however, he is speaking with his disciples in those final hours before his betrayal, in those final hours before the devil does his work. And Jesus wants his dim-witted disciples to understand what he has shown them.

So he reminds them that he is their master. He is their lord. That means that his life and his love and his actions in freeing them to live in holy ways is to be an example for them of how they too are to live.

### *Comment 27*

“Do as I have done to you,” Jesus says. But it's unlikely that he simply means a literal repeating of his teaching action in washing their feet. Jesus' message was bigger than that. When he says, “Do as I have done to you,” it's likely that he's speaking of the fundamental truth of how he has lived.

We who call Jesus “master” and who call Jesus “lord” are to be about the master's business. Like Jesus, we are to be about the business of making others holy by our love. Like Jesus, we are to be about the business of surrounding the violent spirit of evil with the remarkable power of love.

### *Comment 28*

The Jesus whom we meet in John 13 is asking us to “rise up” with transforming grace, reaching out even to those who would betray us.

The Jesus whom we meet in John 13 is asking us to “gird” ourselves with the power of the One who's got the whole world in his hands.

The Jesus whom we meet in John 13 is asking us to “lay down” our outer garments and “take hold” of a new way of living, a way of living that will so deeply rattle the world that the devil himself may soon be plotting against us.

### *Scripture to Read*

John 13:16–17

### *Comment 29*

The Gospel of John concludes this section with Jesus offering words that begin with “verily, verily...” It's as if Jesus is saying that what I'm about to say is true. It's *very* true.

And what is he declaring that is so very, very true? Simply that a servant is not “better” than a master—and we're not “superior” to the One who calls us to follow. You've been sent in my name, says Jesus. You've been sent to do *my* work—not *your* work—in an evil-infested world.

### *Comment 30*

In light of what happened to Jesus, it's clear that behaving as he did won't be easy. If the one who is our “master” ended up on a cross—and if we're supposed to do as he did—then a cross or something like it could be in our future as well.

“Don't start thinking that you're ‘greater’ than me or more deserving of a life of comfort and ease,” Jesus tells his disciples.

### *Comment 31*

It's natural for us to shudder at the words that the Gospel of John delivers to us, for Jesus is portrayed as saying that if we know these things that he has said and done, then we better *act* on them. “Happy are ye if ye *do* them,” he says.

As we listen to such words, it's natural to feel ourselves falling short. As we listen, it's natural to want to cry out, in the words of an old spiritual, “Fix me, Jesus! Fix me!”

*Comment 32*

This scene from John in which Jesus washes the feet of his disciples is sometimes thought of as a call to “humble service.” But the call that Jesus seems to be issuing to his followers goes way beyond a few random acts of charity. Jesus is calling us to a life-changing transformation. He is calling us to a “washing” of our feet that will put us in touch with all that is holy.

In the words of another old spiritual, it’s an invitation to “wade into the water, children.”

*Comment 33*

“Do as I have done to you,” says Jesus. And the “doing” that Jesus has in mind is a love that knows no end. It’s a holy “doing” that can easily take us all the way to a cross.

But because our “feet” have been cleansed, we will—like Jesus—“rise up” from the supper. We will rise up and “gird” our lives with love from on high.

And as it says in an old hymn by Thomas Shepherd, that love will carry us through many

a wilderness. Girded with love and strengthened with hope, we’ll make our “Passover journey” until angels come down and bear our soul away:

*Must Jesus bear the cross alone—  
and all the world go free?  
No, there’s a cross for ev’ryone,  
and there’s a cross for me.*

*The consecrated cross I’ll bear  
till death shall set me free,  
and then go home my crown to wear,  
for there’s a crown for me.*

*Upon the crystal pavement  
down at Jesus’ pierced feet,  
joyful, I’ll cast my golden crown,  
and his dear name repeat.*

*O precious cross! O glorious crown!  
O resurrection day!  
Ye angels from the stars come down—  
and bear my soul away!*

# Special Session



*BIBLICAL FOCUS: Mark 12:37b—13:2*

## *In my Father's house...*

### *Comment 1*

In several places, the Gospel of Mark portrays Jesus as challenging the status quo of religious life. For example, Mark shows Jesus upsetting the tables of those who use the sacrificial system to exploit the poor. Mark even shows Jesus blocking the way of the rich and the self-satisfied when they come to the Temple to worship.

In the Gospel of Mark, the Jerusalem Temple functions as a symbol for the worst aspects of religious life in Jesus' day.

### *Comment 2*

According to Mark, Jesus describes the Temple as a "withered fig tree," a tree that bears fruit no more.

Elsewhere in Mark, Jesus tells his disciples that this "mountain"—this oppressive side of religious life—will be picked up and thrown into the sea. It's the same dramatic fate that Jesus has promised to all those who offend any of God's "little ones."

### *Comment 3*

In like manner, Mark shows Jesus telling his followers that they can have "faith in God" for themselves. They don't need this oppressive Temple and its corrupted ways. They don't need its sacrifices or its complex system of turning those whom God loves into religious victims.

Throughout each of these scenes, Mark weaves elements of what he understands to be Jesus' own

theology. It's a theology grounded in the heart of the Jewish faith. It's a theology that says, "We are God's. It is God who made us, and to God—and God alone—to whom we belong. So let no system possess us. Let no institution own us. Let no person take us. Let no false god burden us. Let no government disable us. We will render ourselves to God—and God alone."

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 12:37b

Psalm 100:2–3

### *Comment 4*

Again and again, Mark tells his readers that the common people hear Jesus gladly. For too long, self-serving religious leaders have turned the Temple and all that it represents into a burden, a place where inequality reigns, a place where one is held down rather than being raised up.

The Jesus whom we meet in Mark brings hope to common people, for he reminds them that it is God who has made them. We are all sheep of God's pasture. In God's eyes, no one stands higher than another. All of us are made from the same hand, fashioned by the same God.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 12:38–39

### *Comment 5*

There is a scene in Mark in which Jesus praises

an especially thoughtful scribe, describing him as “not far from the kingdom of God.” But here in Mark 12, we find Jesus warning his followers to “beware of the scribes.”

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 8:15

### *Comment 6*

The warning in Mark 12 to “beware” of the scribes is reminiscent of words in Mark 8, where Jesus tells his disciples to “beware” of the religious inclinations of the Pharisees and to “beware” of those who follow in the political path of Herod.

The attitude of both groups, says Mark, is like “leaven.” It’s like yeast that “possesses” every last bit of the flour that surrounds it. It’s a mentality that feeds on others. In the view of Mark, the religious scribes of Jesus’ day are the same. They take over. They surround. They consume.

Beware, says Jesus, of religious leaders who behave like all-consuming yeast.

### *Comment 7*

Jesus’ warning about the scribes is in stark contrast to how the scribes like to be seen.

Mark says that the scribes go around in “long clothing.” Their traditional garb is a long white robe made of linen. In Jesus’ day, ordinary people dress in various colors. So, to set themselves apart, the scribes dress in white linen. Their robes are long, reaching toward their feet. They want people to know who they are as they walk to and fro.

### *Comment 8*

In Jesus’ day, if a scribe passes by, it’s your duty to immediately stand and greet him with a term of respect, such as “Rabbi” or “Teacher” or “Master.” His clothing tells you who he is. His clothing alerts you to his status and role.

Mark portrays Jesus as resisting all titles of respect that are offered to him. Most likely, he wants to differentiate himself from the scribes,

whose actions he abhors. He doesn’t want to be seen as seeking any status or glory for himself.

### *Comment 9*

Not only do the scribes expect a greeting if you see them in the marketplace, but they also expect to be given the seats of honor at feasts and banquets, seats that would otherwise be given to the aged or the elderly or to one’s own parents.

In the synagogues, the scribes sit up front, facing the congregation. They are the religious leaders who study the scriptures, who copy the scriptures, and who communicate the scriptures to others. They see themselves as a biblical people. They figure that makes them special. They figure that means they should be treated with honor.

### *For Discussion*

How do you think the scribes in Jesus’ day justified or explained their behavior? To whom do we give honor today? Are today’s religious titles of respect right or wrong? What about the special dress that some clergy use to identify themselves to the public? Is that good or bad? Why?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 12:40

### *Comment 10*

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus doesn’t just criticize the scribes for their love of status and honor. He criticizes them as well for the way in which they “devour widows’ houses” while making a show of their long prayers.

In Palestine at this time, women are not allowed to own property. Economically, they are often treated as second class. After they are “given in marriage,” they “belong” to their husbands. They are viewed almost as property. And obviously, “property” cannot own property.

### *Comment 11*

This creates special hardships for widows. If a woman’s husband dies—and if no other man

“takes” her—then the woman is in big trouble. She isn’t allowed to own her house or her land or any other property.

To keep the property from falling into the hand of a greedy neighbor, scribes would offer to take over the ownership of a woman’s house and land.

#### *Comment 12*

Because the scribes are religious people, and because they are seen as ministers and devout students of the scriptures, they are viewed as trustworthy. How could you go wrong turning your house over to a student of scripture?

So sometimes scribes would take over a widow’s house—and let her live in it as long as she made a required payment of money or crops.

#### *Comment 13*

Through practices such as this, a widow whose husband once owned a house could easily become a renter in her own quarters. And if she failed to make the payments, she lost everything.

This seems to be what lies behind Jesus’ comment about the way in which scribes “devour the homes of widows.” In other words, the scribes are using their “long prayers” and “pious image” to prey on the poor. They are forgetting that they and the widows from whom they steal are sheep in the same pasture. They are fashioned by the same hand. They belong to the same God. But to love your neighbor as yourself is not something that the scribes do very well. They would rather pray (with an “a”)—and then prey (with an “e”).

#### *For Discussion*

In what ways, if any, do people today use religion to take advantage of a neighbor? Do you think the scribes of Jesus’ day realized what they are doing? How can we more fully examine our own use of religion to make sure we aren’t doing the same?

#### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 12:41

#### *Comment 14*

Back in Mark 11, late in the evening, just after his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus goes to the Temple and looks around. His eyes penetrate the pain that is often evident there. His heart feels the sorrow and anguish that is often felt there. He takes in the scene. He surveys the situation.

Now, here in Mark’s last Temple scene, Jesus also carefully takes in the situation. He sits near the Temple treasury. He watches. He observes.

#### *Comment 15*

The treasury is located in what is known as the Court of Women. Although women may not be allowed in certain parts of the Temple, they are allowed here. They are allowed here—where money is deposited, where dues are paid, and where scribes receive the offerings and payments of the people.

The treasury consists of thirteen trumpet-shaped vessels where money can be deposited. Jesus, sitting here, observes that some who come by are rich. And these rich worshippers are anything but stingy. In the words of the King James Version, “they cast in much.” They give a lot. But, then again, they have a lot to give. So they go home with hardly a dent in their way of living.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 12:42

#### *Comment 16*

In Mark’s drama, Jesus is sitting in the Court of Women. He is watching people deposit their money in the Temple treasury. Seemingly, Mark wants us to picture the scribes, standing nearby, being greeted with honor by those who pass by.

Here on Mark’s stage, we see people paying debts. We see people seeking social and religious approval. We see people seeking to overcome their “uncleanness” through ever larger contributions to the treasury.

### *Comment 17*

But we also see women. We see women bent over, tired, and broken. We see widows coming to pay their rent to scribes for houses that they, as women, are no longer allowed to own.

We see widows desperate and afraid, hungry and weak. They don't know where they'll find their next meal or how they'll clothe their children.

### *Comment 18*

As Jesus watches, a poor widow comes forward. Her dress is ragged. She has a gaunt and hungry look in her eyes. She is a woman in bondage. She is a woman who has been "possessed" by those who behave like leaven.

She is not being treated like one of the sheep in God's pasture. She is not being seen by the scribes as they see themselves. To put it plainly, those who are in authority no longer recognize "whose" she is.

### *Comment 19*

As Jesus' eyes follow her, this widow deposits two tiny coins in one of the treasury's receptacles. Scholars say that these particular coins are so incredibly small in size that there is barely room on them to make even the tiniest marking to indicate their value. These coins have so little value that they would buy almost nothing, even in Jesus' day.

As the coins clink into the treasury, we can imagine the widow looking up at the scribes who stand watching in their long white robes. As the coins clink, she mumbles the required words of greeting.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 12:43-44

### *Comment 20*

Jesus then calls the disciples to him. The poor widow is still shuffling by, perhaps preparing to look for somewhere to spend the night.

Maybe, after this visit to the Temple, she will

find shelter in a doorway somewhere. Maybe, after paying the last of all that she had to the religious leaders, someone will offer her a crust of bread. Or so she hopes.

### *Comment 21*

Perhaps, as she leaves the Temple, she remembers the house in which she once lived. Perhaps she remembers the land she once worked. If only her husband hadn't died. If only sickness and death hadn't broken her dreams...

Jesus looks at the woman and then turns to his disciples. In some versions, the first word that Mark puts in Jesus' mouth is "verily." In other versions, it's "truly." But however it's translated, it's that solemn word of devotion that Mark always includes before relaying to us one of Jesus' most profound pronouncements.

### *Comment 22*

As Jesus looks at his disciples, anger rises in his voice. "Verily, this poor widow," he declares, "has cast in more than all those rich worshippers who paid so lavishly out of their abundance. Did you see her? She had only two of the very smallest of coins. What she dropped into the treasury was just a hair's breadth from nothing—and those tiny coins were the last of what she had."

"Look at her," Jesus continues. "She is a woman in want. She is a woman in need. And she has been made to pay every last penny she has. She has given to these scribes all that she had—all of her living. Even then, it wasn't enough. Can you believe that they took that from her?" Jesus grows indignant. "Can they not see whose child she is?"

### *For Discussion*

Why do you think people in Jesus' day went along with a system that abused them so badly? Who is treated like this today?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 13:1

### *Comment 23*

After seeing this gross display of immorality, Jesus leaves the Temple. In the story as Mark tells it, never again will Jesus set foot in this place.

Yet as Jesus and his disciples leave, one of the twelve turns to Jesus and says, “Wow! Have you ever seen stones this big? Have you ever seen buildings this glorious?”

### *Comment 24*

For Mark, the disciples are as dense as ever. They’re so caught up in the physical splendor of the Temple that they can’t see the ugliness within. They look at the outside of the structure instead of at its heart.

They’re so filled with awe over a majestic building that they can’t feel the raw tears of a poor widow who has just handed to the biblical scribes the last two coins to her name. They have already forgotten this woman who knows not where her next meal will come from, who knows not where she will spend the night. Everything she had is gone—taken from her in the name of religion.

### *Comment 25*

By including this comment from one of the disciples, Mark is also reminding us of something. He’s pointing us to the incredible irony in the scene that has just been played out before our eyes.

We’ve seen a woman of utter poverty, a widow whose house has been “devoured” by pious scribes in long robes, a woman whose last possessions in the world are two tiny coins that are worth almost nothing, and even these last two coins she has had to hand over to the scribes.

Yet, as she leaves—perhaps to die—she leaves behind one of the grandest and most beautiful structures in the world, for the Jerusalem Temple is rich and glorious beyond our imagining.

### *Comment 26*

Flavius Josephus was a refined and educated Jew, born in Palestine a few years after the death of Jesus. He became a writer and historian. Like

many of the rich, he often sided with Rome. He wrote a number of books about events in Jerusalem, and at least three of his books survive.

In one of these books, he describes the Temple in Jerusalem at about the time that the Gospel of Mark was written. This is his description:

*“Now the outward face of the Temple in its front lacked nothing that was likely to surprise either men’s minds or their eyes: for it was covered all over with plates of gold of a great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendor, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun’s own rays.”*

### *Comment 27*

When we read the story of this poor widow, going home with nothing but her fears and her tears, we need to remember the context.

The place where she paid out the last two coins to her name was a building “covered all over with plates of gold.” It was so shiny that when the morning sun hit it, you had to turn away, for it was as bright as the sun itself.

We can only imagine what such a place must have appeared like to Jesus and the disciples, coming as they did from rural Galilee.

### *For Discussion*

What do you imagine it is that makes a house of worship “beautiful” in God’s eyes? What can we do to deepen the “beauty” from a divine perspective of our own religious structures today?

### *Comment 28*

Josephus also wrote:

*“This Temple appeared to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow; for, as to those parts of it that were not gilt, they were exceeding white.”*

From a distance, the Temple in Jerusalem apparently looked like a “mountain covered with snow.” The parts of it that weren’t gold were white and gleaming. The dome rose high over the city. It was a mountain, indeed—a “mountain” of

riches and wealth, a “mountain” of exploitation and despair.

#### *Comment 29*

The Temple in Jerusalem was a place in which the rich were given easy entry. But the poor, the widows, the lame, the blind—and all kinds of “social outcasts”—they found themselves having to climb up the rough side of this mountain.

Their entry was slow and hard, for this place that was originally built as a symbol of true devotion to a holy and compassionate God had become a place that embodied human arrogance and greed.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:17,22–23

#### *Comment 30*

In Mark 11, we find Jesus referring to the Temple. He says that it was supposed to be a house of prayer for all people. But instead, it has become a “den of thieves.”

A few verses later, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, “Have faith in God. Verily, I say to you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart but believe, it will be done for you.”

#### *Comment 31*

It’s not just figurative mountains that can be moved, but “this mountain” as well—this grand Temple, plated with gold and capped with “snow.”

This building that looks so much like a mountain to those who approach it, this building that feels so much like a mountain to those who are forever struggling to climb “the rough side” of its oppression and greed, it too can be tossed into the sea. For it is God and God alone to whom we are to be faithful. We are not bound by righteous devotion to any religious institution that has become little more than a den of thieves, no matter how “impressive” it might appear.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 13:1

#### *Comment 32*

In Mark 13:1, an unnamed disciple expresses amazement at the “stones” with which the Temple is built.

Those stones are indeed amazing.

According to records of the time, the stones used to build the Temple were gigantic in size. Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote in one of his books that some of the stones in the Temple were five cubits high and six cubits deep and forty-five cubits long. In another place he described them as eight cubits high and twelve cubits deep and twenty-five cubits long. Whichever it is, the stones are massive beyond belief.

#### *Comment 33*

And this Temple, built of massive stones, consists not of one building but many. The various parts are connected with columns and courts. It is an architectural wonder, one of the most impressive sights in the ancient world.

For Jewish people at this time, the Temple is not only a reminder of the central traditions of their faith but also a source of deep national pride. It is a cultural treasure. So it’s understandable for the disciples to express awe in its presence.

Unfortunately, this place of deep national pride has also become a place of deep spiritual shame. This cultural treasure is a spiritual impoverishment. It is sucking the lifeblood out of the very people who are awed by its grandeur.

#### *For Discussion*

Can you think of any similar situations in today’s world in which objects of pride and shame are intertwined?

#### *Scripture to Read*

Micah 3:9–12

#### *Comment 34*

In this text from Micah, the prophet says that

the leaders of Israel abhor justice, pervert equity—and build Jerusalem with blood.

The prophet declares that Israel's rulers are giving judgment for a bribe, its priests teaching for a price, its prophets giving oracles for money. They think no harm will come to them, but because of their oppression and injustice and failure to treat all God's people as sheep in the same pasture, Zion will be plowed like a field.

### *Comment 35*

According to Micah, Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins. And according to Micah, "the mountain of the house," meaning the Temple, will be so utterly destroyed that it will once again be like a wooded hillside. When religious fervor loses its righteous grounding, God's judgment can be devastating.

This same spirit comes through in the words of Jesus about how the mountain that is the Temple will be tossed into the sea. And this same spirit comes through as well in the remarkable words that we are about to read from the Gospel of Mark.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 13:2

### *Comment 36*

One of Jesus' disciples has just expressed awe at the size of the stones and the magnificence of the buildings that make up the Temple.

But Jesus now turns to this disciple and says, "These buildings may be great. Their stones may be huge. But the day is coming when not one stone shall be left upon another. Every stone you see here, whether it's plated with gold or bleached white as snow, every one will be thrown down."

### *Comment 37*

Jesus' words must be shocking to the disciples. Chances are, they don't believe him. The Temple is too large. It's too grand. It's too magnificent. How could such a thing happen?

The disciples have forgotten the words of Micah. They have forgotten that a city built on

blood will not stand. They have forgotten that a religious institution filled with leaders who exploit the poor will not last.

They have forgotten that a city built on injustice and inequality does not reflect God's hand. Its leaders may think that no harm will ever come to them, but one day, when they aren't looking, their city will be plowed as a field, and their treasure will become a heap of ruins.

### *Scripture to Read*

Psalm 118:22–23

Mark 12:10–11

### *Comment 38*

In Mark 12, there's a parable about a vineyard. The stewards of the vineyard attack and kill messengers who are sent by the owner of the vineyard. However, the owner doesn't give up and finally sends his own son to persuade the stewards to change their ways. But this beloved son is killed as well.

At the end of the parable, Mark shows us Jesus quoting from Psalm 118:22–23, declaring that the "stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." The implication seems to be that although at first the son is rejected, he will become the "chief cornerstone" at some future time.

### *Comment 39*

When we put this together with Jesus' final comment on the Temple—that not a stone of the old Temple will remain standing—it's clear that Jesus sees a new temple being built.

It's a house built not with hands but with a love that binds human hearts. It's a love that understands *whose* we are. It's a love that causes us to see all our neighbors exactly as we see ourselves—not as property to be exploited but rather as sheep grazing in the same pasture, fed and tended by the same hand of the Holy One.

### *Comment 40*

In the mind of Jesus, as conveyed by Mark, it is this new house—this house not built with hands,

this house established in human hearts—that will truly be “a house of prayer for all people.”

All who enter there will be affirmed in joy, for all will sit at the welcome table. No more will widows’ homes be devoured. No more will the poor have their last penny taken from them. No more will the lame and the blind be shut out. No more will the despairing go away hungry. No more will one worshipper take advantage of or put down another.

#### *Comment 41*

Perhaps this is the kind of house that is meant in a contemporary gospel song:

*Come and go with me,  
to my Father’s house,  
to my Father’s house,  
to my Father’s house—  
come and go with me,  
where there’s joy, joy, joy.*

*Peace and happiness there,  
in my Father’s house,  
in my Father’s house,  
in my Father’s house—  
peace and happiness there,  
in my Father’s house.*

*Everything’s all right  
in my Father’s house,  
in my Father’s house,  
in my Father’s house—  
everything’s all right,  
in my Father’s house.*

#### *Comment 42*

Marvelous is the Temple in Jerusalem. It has a shining dome, gold-plated stones, endless porches and courtyards.

But it has blood on its hands. It has injustice under its feet. Its arms are wrapped in bribes. And its chest is built on greed. So it will fall. Any house that mocks its Maker will not last.

#### *Comment 43*

But Mark assures us that there is a new temple, a temple filled with grace. This temple is built by God’s own love binding together human hearts. No more will widows be exploited. No more will the poor have the rug pulled out from under them by pious-sounding religious scholars who march around soliciting the respect of those whom they oppress. No more will selfish wars be fought in the false name of the One who is always working to turn swords into plowshares.

This new temple has a cornerstone that’s pure. It has a cornerstone that lasts, for its whole construction, according to Psalm 118, is “the Lord’s doing.” What could be more marvelous in any of our eyes?

# Special Session



*BIBLICAL FOCUS: Psalm 146 and Isaiah 35*

## *Lo, how a rose e'er blooming...*

### *Scripture to Read*

Psalm 146:1

### *Comment 1*

In the King James Version, this psalm begins with the words, "Praise ye the Lord." But in some other translations, it begins with "Hallelujah," which is the same thing, for *hallelujah* is simply a Hebrew word that means "Praise the Lord."

### *For Discussion*

Why do you think that the psalmist has to speak to his or her soul and literally tell it to "praise the Lord"? What kinds of circumstances can cause our souls to stop praising the Lord?

### *Scripture to Read*

Psalm 146:2

### *Comment 2*

The psalmist declares that she or he will praise the Lord as long as life shall last. The psalmist says that he or she will sing hymns to God forever.

### *Scripture to Read*

Psalm 146:3

### *Comment 3*

The psalmist knows that our deepest desires are not always easy to keep. We can be distracted. Other powers can seek our loyalty and trust. In

the King James Version, the psalmist mentions the danger of putting one's trust in "princes." That's just a colorful way of saying that we can be misled into putting trust in those who portray themselves as "great" or "strong" or "impressive" from the world's point of view. Those who are "great" can seduce us. Those who are "great" can pressure us. Those who are "great" can fill our mind with empty promises.

Watch out for the "great," says the psalmist, for they are nothing but children of this earth.

### *For Discussion*

Who are the "great" in today's world who seek to capture our trust?

### *Scripture to Read*

Psalm 146:4

### *Comment 4*

The psalmist knows that trust and praise go hand in hand. If we are trusting in "princes," then that is who our soul is praising. If we are putting our faith in human strength and human efforts seeking "security," then no amount of words uttered in praise to God will really mean anything.

We can pray and sing all we want. We can stand and clap and say that we are giving God glory. But if on a practical level our trust is in "princes," then our soul—whether we know it or not—is praising that which will pass away, that

which will perish on the earth.

*Scripture to Read*

Psalm 146:5

*Comment 5*

The psalmist says that true happiness comes not from trusting in the “great” or the “powerful” but rather in the “God of Jacob.”

This psalm was not written during the days of Jacob. It was written many hundreds of years later. So in effect, the psalmist is pointing to an “old-time religion.” In effect, the psalmist is pointing to a God who endures.

*Comment 6*

But at the same time, the psalmist is lifting up the ancient story of Jacob, a man who—like us—was a bit of a scoundrel. He cheated his brother. He lied to his father. He often found himself on the run. Angry forces pursued him. But in the midst of his troubles, Jacob took hold of God. Jacob was one who “wrestled with God,” and as a result, God stood by him.

Princes will fail, says the psalmist. The breath of the “great” will return to the earth. But the God of Jacob—ah, that’s a different story!

*Scripture to Read*

Psalm 146:3–6

*Comment 7*

The psalmist now starts describing what makes the God of Jacob so different from those whom we might be tempted to trust.

Unlike those whose breath fails them, this One with whom we, like Jacob, can wrestle is the One who made heaven and earth. This is the One who has made everything that is.

And this is the One, says the King James Version, who “keepeth truth forever.”

*For Discussion*

What do you think the psalmist means by

saying that God “keeps truth forever”?

*Scripture to Read*

Psalm 146:7

*Comment 8*

The psalmist continues reminding us why true happiness and security comes only from the Lord.

Unlike the God of Jacob, the “princes” and rulers of this world don’t keep truth forever. Like so many winning politicians, even in our own day, the “great” make false promises—and hide their true agendas.

The God of Jacob, says the psalmist, provides justice to all who are oppressed, gives food to all who are hungry, and sets free all who have been put in prison. Injustice and hunger and imprisonment—these are the cruel tools of the “princes” of this world. But they are not the ways of God.

*Scripture to Read*

Psalm 146:8

*Comment 9*

The psalmist continues with descriptions that remind us that the Lord is a Creator and not a Destroyer. When eyes are blind and when legs are weak and when lips are numb and when backs are bent, there is a Creator who never gives up. There is a Creator who keeps on creating that which is good and right and perfect in God’s eyes.

We should trust not in “princes,” says the psalmist, but rather in the One who opens blind eyes and lifts up those who have been beaten down.

*Scripture to Read*

Psalm 146:9

*Comment 10*

The Creator sets a hand of protection over the “stranger.” Those who are “new” or “different”

or raised in a minority culture are not to be persecuted or discriminated against. To some, they may seem “strange” or “foreign.” But God is the God of all, and God doesn’t make us all the same. Indeed, God loves the differences.

So the hand of God rests gently around all those who are viewed—for whatever reason—with distaste or suspicion. God smiles and says, “You are mine.”

In like manner, God gives courage and strength to the fatherless and the widow—and to all those who find themselves on the margins, socially, economically, or politically.

### *For Discussion*

If we were truly trusting a God who behaves like this, rather than trusting in “princes,” how would that affect our behavior?

### *Scripture to Read*

Psalm 146:10

### *Comment 11*

“Princes” fall away. “Great” folks lose their grip. But “the Lord shall reign forever,” says the psalmist. Our God is God not just in the past and not just in the present—but for all generations.

All generations are united in God’s love and God’s care. We may feel distant from those ancient ones who lived so long ago. We may have no knowledge of those that will come after us. But we are one with all generations, for “the Lord shall reign forever,” and in God, all people find their hope. All people find their strength. All people find a graceful Creator who never stops making all things right.

### *For Discussion*

Why, then, do people trust in “princes”?

### *Scripture to Read*

James 5:7

### *Comment 12*

The world is not yet as the Creator would want. So it’s easy to lose heart. It’s easy to be led astray by vain promises from the “princes” of this world, who would have us forget that we don’t live just in the present moment, for Scripture teaches that we are one in God with all generations. The world in which we have been placed is way bigger than the here-and-now.

Be patient, says James, until “the coming of the Lord.” James isn’t talking about the birth of Jesus, for when James was written, Jesus had already come and gone. Evil had done its worst. A grave had been sprung open. And still, things weren’t as the Creator would want them. There was poverty and injustice, violence and war. There was trouble and sorrow.

### *Scripture to Read*

James 5:7–8

### *Comment 13*

Remember the “husbandman,” says James, using an old word for someone who tends a garden. Be patient, says James, for there is a Gardener who is still tending the “precious fruit of the earth.” That fruit needs the early rain—as well as the later rain.

Life is more than the here-and-now, James seems to say, for all generations are one in the Lord—and each generation has its role to play.

### *Comment 14*

Establish your heart, says James. In other words, dig in, hold fast, and don’t be seduced by the “princes” of this world, for each generation—including our own generation—is called to join in the work of the Gardener, bringing to life the diverse and varied but always precious “fruit of the earth.”

A seldom-sung carol by Percy Dearmer expresses the same sense that even now, God is at work—and the “seed” is growing. So even now, says the carol, it’s time for each of us to “rise and

join the Lord's command."

The words of the carol are these:

*Ah, think not, "The Lord delayeth."*

*"I am with you," still he sayeth.*

*"Do you not understand?"*

*Look not back, the past regretting;*

*on the Dawn your hearts be setting:*

*rise, and join the Lord's command.*

*For e'en now the Reign of Heaven*

*spreads throughout the world like leaven,*

*unobserved, and very near:*

*Like the seed when no one knoweth,*

*like the sheltering tree that groweth,*

*comes the Life Eternal here.*

*Not for us to find the reasons,*

*or to know the times and seasons:*

*comes the Lord when strikes the hour.*

*Ours to bear the faithful witness*

*which can shape the world to fitness;*

*thine, O God, to give the power.*

### **Scripture to Read**

Isaiah 35:1

### **Comment 15**

Get ready, says Isaiah. For the day is coming when the wilderness shall be glad—and the desert shall bloom—for there is a Gardener who is still tending the "precious fruit of the earth." There is a God whose work as Creator endures from generation to generation.

An old Christmas carol—"Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"—draws on this text from Isaiah. It's a reminder that even when the world around seems like a desert, even when it feels like we're caught in a war-torn desert, there is a Creator who never stops working, a Creator who can forever cause a rose to bloom. And when that Creator is at work, even a barn can bring forth a Savior.

### **Scripture to Read**

Isaiah 35:2

### **Comment 16**

The prophet mentions some of the most beautiful places in his world. He speaks of "the glory of Lebanon" and "the excellency of Carmel and Sharon." And he says that if we are patient, if we are steadfast, then beauty of that sort will erupt in even the most barren desert, for there is a Gardener whose glory shall be seen in every dimension of what James called "the precious fruit of the earth."

### **Scripture to Read**

Isaiah 35:3

### **Comment 17**

So hold on, says the prophet—and hold out. Strengthen every hand that is weak. Make firm every knee that wants to give way. For the Gardener is looking for gardeners. The Creator of all good things is looking for those who will be part of God's eternal plan, turning their backs on "princes," participating instead in the ways of the One who shall reign forever.

### **Scripture to Read**

Isaiah 35:4

### **Comment 18**

The writer of Psalm 146 had to talk to his soul and say, "O my soul, praise the Lord," for it is easy to lose heart, and it is easy to let our deeds go astray.

The "princes" of this world often use fear to undermine the praise to the Creator that should flow from our deeds. So the writer of Isaiah 35 says to us—and to all who have a fearful heart—"Be strong, fear not!"

### **Comment 19**

Isaiah reminds us that God is coming. The King James Version makes it sound like it's a God

of vengeance. But the words of Isaiah are more rightly understood as describing a powerful God who *makes things right*.

It's a Creator who never stops tending the "precious fruit of the earth." It's a Gardener who through every generation is coming to save, coming to deliver, coming to redeem.

### *Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 35:5

### *Comment 20*

Yes, it's a God who sets things right—a God who opens the eyes of the blind, a God who unplugs the ears of the deaf. This is a God who doesn't put up with the ways of destruction, the ways of limitation, the ways of exclusion. This is a God for all generations.

As Isaiah makes clear, this is a God who causes even the desert to bloom.

### *Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 35:6–7

### *Comment 21*

Then those of every generation whose legs have been broken—and whose spirits have been crushed—shall find themselves leaping like a deer. When we are strong and fear not, when we join our lives in praise and service to the Gardener, then those who tongues have been silenced in every wicked corner of our world shall at last break out in song. Rain shall fall. Parched land shall become a pool. Thirsty land shall burst with springs of water.

"Come unto me," said Jesus. "Live in God's way, and I shall give you living water," water for the life-enhancing work of the Gardener, water for the One who is continually bringing hope to the "precious fruit of the earth."

### *Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 35:8a

### *Comment 22*

Isaiah says that in the parched desert, in the very place where a rose shall bloom, a highway shall appear—a road to lead our steps, a path to guide our journey.

In the King James Version, it is called "the way of holiness." In some other translations, it is called "the Sacred Way." But whatever it is called, it is the way of the Holy One. It is the pathway of the One who feeds the hungry. It's the holy route of the One who upholds the weak, heals the blind, frees the prisoner, embraces the stranger, and fills the fearful with courage and hope.

### *Comment 23*

In some remarkable sense, this is the "way" to which the star over the manger began to point. And this is the "way" of which the Gospel of John so eloquently speaks when it says of Jesus, "I am the *way*, the truth, and the life."

This is the *pathway* that the Gardener has laid out before us. It's the route of the One who forever calls us to join in tending the "precious fruit of the earth."

### *Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 35:8b–9

### *Comment 24*

A gospel song written by Mary Gardner and Thomas A. Dorsey celebrates this highway through the desert, this road that seeks to guide our steps:

*It's a highway to heaven,  
none can walk up there  
but the pure in heart.  
It's a highway to heaven,  
I am walking up the King's Highway.  
My way gets brighter,  
my load gets lighter,  
walking up the King's Highway.  
Yes, there's joy in knowing  
with him I'm going,  
walking up the King's Highway.*

### *For Discussion*

What parts of this song fit well with the text that we've read from Isaiah—and what parts fit less well?

### *Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 35:10

### *Comment 25*

Isaiah here uses an image that would be especially meaningful in the days when people of God were returning to Jerusalem from years in exile.

Isaiah says that those who have been “ransomed” by the Lord shall return. A “ransom” is a term for what one pays to a kidnapper to free a loved one who is being held in bondage.

### *Comment 26*

In other words, even when our souls are kidnapped by the false “princes” of this world, there is One who is ready to ransom us, ready to set us free, ready to cause sorrow and sighing to flee away.

In addition, Isaiah says that those who are freed from sorrow and sighing will “come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads.”

### *Comment 27*

Some of Isaiah's same images can be found in the Gospel of Luke as an angel from the Lord tells a band of anxious shepherds to “fear not.”

By implication, the message is to us as well: Fear not, stay strong, be patient—for the ransom of the Lord is coming to Zion. Lo, a rose is blooming. Behold, a river is flowing. A baby is crying—and sorrow and sighing are fleeing away.

### *Comment 28*

And then, as Luke tells the story, “suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host.”

Who are these “heavenly host”? Angels, perhaps. Or perhaps these are they who have walked the Sacred Way. Perhaps these are they who have followed the Highway of Holiness. Perhaps these are they who, even through a dry and barren wilderness, have been led by One who can make a desert bloom. No longer are they deceived by “princes,” for they know that from generation to generation—and from age to age—there is a Gardener who “keeps trust forever.”

### *Comment 29*

And so, as Luke tells the story, this multitude of heavenly host—this multitude that resembles pilgrims journeying on the Sacred Way—breaks into joyful song as it comes home to Zion, as it returns to that place where a rose is about to bloom.

The song is not only a song of praise but also a song of invitation, for it is sung as the multitude of heavenly host encounters a fearful, anxious band of shepherds and social outcasts. Indeed, Luke says that the purpose of the song is to deliver “good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people”—

*Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth, peace,  
goodwill toward men!*



