



LIBERATING
FAITH STUDIES



A KING FOREVER
AND EVER

The Order of Service

- I. Bell tap or organ voluntary as a signal for silence
- II. Singing
- III. The Apostles' Creed
- IV. Prayer, closing with the Lord's Prayer in concert
- V. Singing
- VI. Calling roll of officers and teachers
- VII. Responsive reading of the lesson text by school
- VIII. The Decalogue

The Lesson

- I. Organ interlude while the classes are being arranged
- II. Class study of the lesson
- III. Warning bell — 5 minutes
- IV. Closing bell — silence

The Closing

- I. Singing
- II. Review and application of the lesson
- III. Secretary's report
- IV. The Church School Creed
- V. Singing
- VI. Benediction

Editorial Staff

Publisher • Rev. Dr. Roderick D. Belin

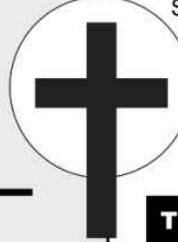
Editor • Rev. Dr. Garland F. Pierce

— Lessons —

Rev. Lionel Merritt

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.



The Church School Creed

I believe my A.M.E. Church School must grow and grow; and that I must make it a top priority to make it so. Every member a Christian, every Christian a worker, every worker trained so that a worker need not be ashamed. This we ask in Jesus' name.

A.M.E. Discipline

Hello, AME Church School Member!

The Home Daily Bible Readings will continue to appear at the end of each Sunday's lesson but they will be the readings for the following week. We made this change in response to your requests. The readings for the first week are below.

For over a year we have used Zoom and Facebook to facilitate our weekly Connectional Church School with teachers (lay and clergy) from around the AME Connection. They generously share their knowledge, talents, and expertise with a weekly average of 500 participants viewing via Zoom and 1500 on Facebook.

This virtual AME Connectional Church School was birthed due to the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The blessings from the teachings have been immeasurable. We will continue this Connectional Church School on Sundays at 9:00 a.m. EST. Join us! Zoom Meeting ID: 829 9325 1894.

Visit our website- www.iamame.org- to find worship and study resources to empower you and enhance the life of the church.

Like our Facebook page so you will be informed about programming and important announcements from the Publishing House and *The Christian Recorder*: www.facebook.com/amecpublishing.

Join our Facebook Group to continue conversations after Church School and share ideas, thoughts, and best practices with other AME

Church School members and teachers:
[www.facebook.com/groups/amechurchschool.](https://www.facebook.com/groups/amechurchschool)

Thank you for purchasing Liberating Faith Studies. We are working every day to fulfill our mission to provide high quality resources to empower us to spread Jesus Christ's liberating gospel, pursue justice, and enhance the social development of all people.

And, always remember, I am praying for you.

Roderick D. Belin
President/Publisher

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

November 25–December 1

Monday Luke 3:23-38 (We Belong to Christ's Family)

Tuesday Psalm 128 (A Household Built by God)

Wednesday Ruth 1:1, 3, 6-18 (Determined Loyalty)

Thursday Ruth 2:1-3, 17-23 (An Act of Kindness)

Friday Matthew 12:46-50 (Bound Together by More Than DNA)

Saturday Ruth 3:1-13 (Daring Faith)

Sunday Ruth 4:9-17 (God Has Not Abandoned You)

LESSON 1 DECEMBER 1, 2024

THE ANCESTRY OF KING DAVID

Lesson Scripture: Ruth 1–4; Luke 3:23-38

Focus Scripture: Ruth 4:9-17; Luke 3:23, 31b-32

Key Verse: The women...gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David. Ruth 4:17

RUTH 4:9-17; LUKE 3:23, 31B-32 (NRSV UE)

Ruth 4:9-17

- 9 Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses today that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon.
- 10 I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses.”
- 11 Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, “We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem;
- 12 and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.”
- 13 So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son.

14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin, and may his name be renowned in Israel!"

15 He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him."

16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom and became his nurse.

17 The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Luke 3:23

23 Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli,...

Luke 3:31b-32

31b ...son of Nathan, son of David,

32 son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz, son of Sala, son of Nahshon,...

RUTH 4:9-17; LUKE 3:23, 31B-32 (KJV)

Ruth 4:9-17

9 And Boaz said unto the elders, and unto all the people, Ye are witnesses this day, that I have bought all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's, of the hand of Naomi.

10 Moreover Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have I purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place: ye are witnesses this day.

11 And all the people that were in the gate, and the elders, said, We are witnesses. The Lord make the woman that is come into thine house like Rachel and like Leah, which two did build the house of Israel: and do thou worthily in Ephratah, and be famous in

Bethlehem:

12 And let thy house be like the house of Pharez, whom Tamar bare unto Judah, of the seed which the Lord shall give thee of this young woman.

13 So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife: and when he went in unto her, the Lord gave her conception, and she bare a son.

14 And the women said unto Naomi, Blessed be the Lord, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel.

15 And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age: for thy daughter in law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him.

16 And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it.

17 And the women her neighbours gave it a name, saying, There is a son born to Naomi; and they called his name Obed: he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Luke 3:23

23 And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, which was the son of Heli,...

Luke 3:31b-32

31b ... which was the son of Nathan, which was the son of David,

32 Which was the son of Jesse, which was the son of Obed, which was the son of Booz, which was the son of Salmon, which was the son of Naasson,...

KEY TERMS

- **Tapestry** – Handcrafted work of art especially in clothes or furnishings.
- **Prism** – The experiences and ideas that frame how we see

issues.

- **Monarchical** – Relating to monarch or king and kingdom.
- **Ancestral** – Relating to ancestors or family tree.
- **Repugnant** – Offensive.

Introduction

Series and Unit Overview

In this series of 13 lessons, we see how God used the earthly kingdoms of human rulers to point to an everlasting king, Jesus the Christ. The opening lessons give Jesus the legitimacy he needed for acceptance by the people he first came to. As you read the set scripture texts, notice how God's invisible hands crafted a tapestry that included a vast variety of people. Certain persons in Jesus' lineage would not fit into our narrow prisms of religious piety. Yet God used them. There is a teaching there.

On Lesson 1

We all like to know the family tree to which we are a branch. People from "good" or famous families wear their ancestral links as badges of honor. Even today, it makes a difference when you are "somebody's son/daughter" or are related to a known or popular family name. But Jesus' genealogy teaches us a feature of family trees that we may sometimes try to hide. All family trees contain individuals whose life events tarnish certain branches of the tree. In other words, we are not always proud of all the branches in our family tree. This lesson and others show Jesus' tree was no different.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

As you approach this lesson, please do not see dry historical events.

Rather, see God using the nation's customs to highlight qualities God approves. Note how God instituted laws to protect Israelites from losing their family's inheritance (Numbers 27:1-11). Further, see Boaz's actions as a display of compassion (Ruth 4:10) and redemption, which was to be the hallmark of the savior. After what looked like a disastrous life for Naomi, Boaz restored future hopes for her family by showing his respect for God's laws which protected family inheritances. This reflected the character traits of the true redeemer: selflessness and respect for God's laws.

To appreciate the depth of Boaz's actions, we must look at the economic exploitation that could have occurred in Naomi's situation. In the Canaanite culture, the death of all males in a household provided a golden opportunity for wealthy men to increase their own property and legacy by acquiring that distressed family's land.

To appreciate the references to Perez (Ruth 4:12, 18), Judah, and Tamar, we must understand the levirate custom (Genesis 38:8; Deuteronomy 25:5-10). This Hebrew custom demanded that a man marry his brother's widow and get children on his brother's behalf if the deceased brother had left no children (preferably sons). But here again, look through the text to see the qualities of the ultimate redeemer (the God of second chances and renewals). Both Ruth and Tamar were women abandoned by their husbands' families. Yet through the invisible hands of God, in the levirate marriage customs,

these women got lasting legacies in Israel and Christ's genealogy. What is the lesson? Human disasters in our past are often the blocks God uses to build the bright lights for our lasting legacies.

In our modern society with multiple support systems, it is easy to underestimate the size of the miracle God engineered in Naomi's life. Take a sober look at Naomi's situation through the eyes of her day. She was a widow without sons and past the age of bearing children. She had no special status in the community, no one to advocate on her behalf, no public pantries or soup kitchens, and no pension or other source of income. Naturally, she faced an uncertain and bleak future. Her life depended on the generosity of others. Then God stepped in and all that dramatically changed (Ruth 4:13-17).

Casual readers, in error, see the grafting of the Gentiles into God's grace as starting with the ministry of Apostle Paul. What a mistake, for the divine outreach to Gentiles is evident in the story of Ruth. As a Moabitess, typical Israelites would have rejected Ruth. For a variety of reasons, the nation of Israel would have seen her as an outcast. First, her Moabite origins would have made her repulsive (Genesis 19:30-38). Then her religious practices – which included human sacrifice to a false God (Numbers 21:29) – and Moab's frequent hostility against Israel (Numbers 21–22; Judges 3:12-31) would have drawn hostile reactions in Israel. Yet look how the great redeemer grafted her into his grace.

Finally, consider how scripture framed the genealogy of Jesus to make him both human and royal. Jesus' family tree (Luke 3:23-38) establishes that Jesus was a descendant of King David (Luke 1:27, 32, 69). This is through his relationship with Joseph. But also notice the link to Adam that makes him a full member of humanity. Our redeemer is therefore fully human, capable of understanding all our trials and tribulations. Still, he is also royally divine with all the power and authority to intercede and help us.

SANKOFA

This lesson highlights how God often fulfills promises using the customs of a nation. For God's ultimate earthly king (Jesus) to be acceptable to Israel, he had to emerge from an acceptable dynasty. The Jewish society was extremely patriarchal where inheritance and other family rights flowed according to family trees. For people born in the modern era, this concept of power and authority arising purely from royal family privileges is often difficult to understand or accept. We associate people's rise to power with public elections and executive appointments. So, to understand the concept and practice of hereditary power and privileges, we must look to countries where people still observe the practices of dynastic governance. One such people is the Zulus of South Africa.

The current King Misuzulu kaZwelithini has a genealogy that stretches back to the sixteenth century. He became king on the day

of the funeral of his mother, Queen Regent Mantfombi Dlamini, who died on 29 April 2021. The queen regent herself became the interim leader of the Zulu kingdom on 21 March 2021 after King Goodwill Zwelithini (her husband), the monarch of the Zulu nation of South Africa, died on 12 March 2021.

The important thing to note is that in a dynasty, respect, power, authority, and wealth flow to heirs under their dynastic lineage. In the same way, Jesus became acceptable to Israel as king (Messiah) because of his place in the lineage of King David.

CASE STUDY

For people in western democracies, God's use of a monarchical system of government, rather than a democratic system, may seem suspect. We may want to note that the founding fathers of America ran away from the monarchical system because of the abuses they saw as inherent in such a system. So why would God favor such a system over one where the people had a free say in choosing their leaders? The answer may have both historical and social overtones.

First, in the ancient Near East, the prevailing system of government was monarchies. Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, and their surrounding nations, all had kings as leaders. Recall how this reality influenced Israel to ask God for an earthly king like their neighbors. This started the reign of King Saul. Also, note at that time, nationals saw the earthly king as a representative of God. It was easy to believe that

God would tell the king how to lead the nation. This was implicit in King Solomon's request to God for the wisdom to lead Israel. Even in the heathen nations, this thought persisted. Democracy, where nationals play a significant role in choosing their leaders, is relatively new.

Greece (Athens) had a limited version of democracy from the 5th century BCE. However, internationally, the kingdom model persisted until the 13th century. The Magna Carta of 1215 is a red-letter document in the history of democracy as we know it today. Therefore, we must put God's use of the kingdom concept in its proper context. It was not God's stamp of approval on the abuses inherent in that system of government. Rather, it is God relating to the people in terms of the system of government with which they were familiar.

LIFE APPLICATION

When we study them, in the stories of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, we see brilliant interplays of God's purpose and human decisions. As these people pursued their own interests, they unknowingly fulfilled God's purpose. Look at this concerning your own life. Sometimes, unwittingly, people try to impose rituals and certain demands on us as preconditions for accessing God's grace. Reject those impositions. Accept that in the same way God met Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz where they were, in the normal activities of life, God will

likewise meet you where you are. Just be open to his invisible hands.

Ruth's story is a fascinating screenplay for a movie. The narrative has all the elements for a box-office hit for our times. Included in the plot are issues of migration, poverty, mixed marriage, and redemptive love. Reflect on each of these and examine your attitudes toward these matters. Ask yourself how your attitudes toward these matters reflect the attitudes you think God holds. For instance, would God despise an immigrant from another country because that person worships in rituals which to you are repugnant? Similarly, can you embrace interracial marriages and still be faithful to your own race? These Bible stories teach us that answers to complex issues are not as cut-and-dry as we would like.

Also, consider how the lineage of David and Jesus can help you to enhance your or your congregation's Advent and Christmas celebrations. Does it really mean something to you that Jesus is from the lineage of David? When you consider the winding and multinational lineage of Christ, do you see God's hands reaching out in love to embrace all humanity? How does such an image frame how you will celebrate this Advent and Christmas seasons? Take your time in thinking about these issues. They have the seeds to grow new, dynamic outlooks in your life.

QUESTIONS

1. How can Jesus be of the lineage of David when Joseph was not his biological father?
2. What message does it send that people with questionable characters are in Jesus' genealogy?
3. If democracies are the best form of governance, why did God set up kingdoms?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: "Hail to the Lord's Anointed," *AMEC Hymnal* #107

Closing Prayer: Dear gracious God, I thank you for redeeming me from the powers of sin, and for the second, third, and fourth chances you have given me in this life. In you, my future is bright. In Jesus' name. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

December 2-December 8

Monday 1 Samuel 16:1-13 (The Lord Looks on the Heart)

Tuesday 2 Samuel 5:1-10 (A Shepherd for God's People)

Wednesday Luke 1:26-38 (Christ's Unending Reign)

Thursday Psalm 2 (God Defends God's Anointed)

Friday Isaiah 9:1-7 (Endless Peace for David's Throne)

Saturday Romans 1:1-7 (The Son of David)

Sunday 2 Samuel 7:4-17 (An Everlasting Kingdom)

LESSON 2 DECEMBER 8, 2024

GOD'S PROMISE TO DAVID

Lesson Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:1-17

Focus Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:4-17

Key Verse: Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. 2 Samuel 7:16

2 SAMUEL 7:4-17 (NRSV UE)

- 4 But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan,
- 5 "Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in?
- 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.
- 7 Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'
- 8 Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel,
- 9 and I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you, and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.
- 10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place and be disturbed no more, and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly,
- 11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel, and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house.
- 12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your

ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.

13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

14 I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings.

15 But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you.

16 Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever."

17 In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

2 SAMUEL 7:4-17 (KJV)

4 And it came to pass that night, that the word of the Lord came unto Nathan, saying,

5 Go and tell my servant David, Thus saith the Lord, Shalt thou build me an house for me to dwell in?

6 Whereas I have not dwelt in any house since the time that I brought up the children of Israel out of Egypt, even to this day, but have walked in a tent and in a tabernacle.

7 In all the places wherein I have walked with all the children of Israel spake I a word with any of the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to feed my people Israel, saying, Why build ye not me an house of cedar?

8 Now therefore so shalt thou say unto my servant David, Thus saith the Lord of hosts, I took thee from the sheepridge, from following the sheep, to be ruler over my people, over Israel:

9 And I was with thee whithersoever thou wentest, and have cut off all thine enemies out of thy sight, and have made thee a great name, like unto the name of the great men that are in the earth.

10 Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant

them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more, as beforetime,

- 11 And as since the time that I commanded judges to be over my people Israel, and have caused thee to rest from all thine enemies. Also the Lord telleth thee that he will make thee an house.
- 12 And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom.
- 13 He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever.
- 14 I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men:
- 15 But my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee.
- 16 And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever.
- 17 According to all these words, and according to all this vision, so did Nathan speak unto David.

KEY TERMS

- **Ethiopia** – A country in eastern Africa with a population of 126 million.
- **Sacred** – Highly respected and/or feared (revered); be holy (dedicated to God).
- **Gratitude** – Feelings or expressions of being thankful/grateful.
- **Dynasty** – A line of rulers from the same family.

Introduction

Material prosperity and professional success can affect people's lives in diverse ways. For worldly people, the taste of success can open a larger appetite for more success. Sadly, in the pursuit of more success and material prosperity, such people neglect their relationship with God. For others, material prosperity and success trigger gratitude to God and draw them closer to God and his purpose in their lives. The latter case is what we saw with King David. His success in wars and comforts in his home triggered in him a gratitude that focused him on God, and what he could do to honor God.

Yet it was not a straight walk from project conception to completion. God had his own divine plans for David and his family. Accordingly, David's plans, though well intended, had to give way to God's plans. A lesson worthy of note. As believers, we should plan and make provisions for the future. However, we must also be open to God's overriding purpose in our lives.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Three powerful themes emerge from the pages as we read the background text. First, we see the power of gratitude and how God responds to it. Second, we see God's sense of humor and how the Lord uses it in a cross-play of words. Then, we notice a display of the trait that is arguably King David's most commendable attribute. He

happily submerged his will and plans under those of the Lord. Look for these as you work through the text.

King David's desire to build a physical "house" for God sprung from gratitude (7:1-2). He and his kingdom were at rest from war. David saw that period as the ideal time to show God his appreciation for the string of successes God had given Israel. This surge of gratitude led to a conversation between David and God's representative.

The interplay of words is obvious in the word "house." David intended to build a physical structure, a house of worship. God responded and told David, "As we are talking about houses, let me tell you about the 'house' (dynasty) I plan to build for you." This is a huge point. It tells us that God responds to us in a language we can understand and relate to. Hence, we should be cautious when people tell us they receive a message from God, and we must hire a programmer from the Pentagon to decode it.

Verses 7:6-9 make a point that believers can easily overlook. God noted that he had always lived among his people "in a tent and in a dwelling." This points us back to both Exodus 26 and John 1. Indeed, it reminds us of God's interactions with Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. These references show God's primary desire is to be with his people in all situations. God does not want to be set aloof in a magnificent sanctuary somewhere removed from the people. The Lord is at home among us wherever we are.

The reference to “cedar” (7:2, 7) shows David’s thinking and God’s response and counter. David, as king, was living in luxury (cedar) and wanted to give God a house of worship of a similar or better quality. At that time, people in that region regarded cedar as the highest quality wood for construction. It grew tall and straight (Psalm 92:12) and was remarkably durable as it repelled insects. People saw cedar as a symbol of wealth, stability, and power. This superior regard for cedar lasted for centuries. Even today builders still see it as premium wood.

See in verses 9-16 the extent of the “house” (dynasty) God promised David. It is massive and extensive, spanning over centuries. It centers around David and his direct descendants, but all Israel benefits. When God is doing something special, he does it big. Matthew 1:1 and 1:17 put the blessings on David’s “house” in the context of generations. Read and appreciate what those verses say. We can take God at his word.

Verses 14-16 highlight a truth immature Christians fail to recognize in their haste to emphasize God’s goodness. God’s promises are covenants in which both parties have obligations. Implicit in the divine promise is a condition that the people in the promise remain faithful to God and his commandments. When the people to whom God made the promise fail that condition, God will act in judgment, which will be unpleasant. However, the intent of that judgment is not

to destroy the people. It is an aspect of God's grace designed to bring the people back into alignment with God so that the promise comes true, and God gets the glory.

SANKOFA

King David's vision of a magnificent "house" (temple) of worship for God resurfaced in the minds of other leaders later in history. One leader who had a similar vision was the great Ethiopian King Lalibela. According to historical records, King Lalibela ruled Ethiopia in the late 12th or early 13th century AD. The traditions say the king was a devout Christian who envisioned recreating Jerusalem in Ethiopia. That was in the period when Muslim invaders had temporarily halted pilgrimages to the Christian holy land. Therefore, King Lalibela's dream was to provide in Ethiopia an alternative Jerusalem for Christian pilgrims.

From that dream, he built 11 stone churches which historical journals regarded as the "Eighth Wonder of the World." These famous stone churches included the internationally acclaimed Church of Saint George, also known as Bete Giyorgis. One website described this church as "one of Lalibela's most awe-inspiring creations." International travel advisors say no visit to Ethiopia is complete without a visit to the Church of St. George. In 1930, in the sacred space of St. George, the Ethiopians crowned Emperor Haile Selassie king of kings of Ethiopia.

CASE STUDY

King David's dream was to build a permanent (as opposed to movable) sacred space to represent the presence of God. Thinking about this leads us to consider the use and power of sacred spaces. An article addressing the topic (Sacred Spaces) on encyclopedia.com gave this definition: "A sacred place is first a defined place, a space distinguished from other spaces. The rituals that a people either practice at a place or direct toward it mark its sacredness and differentiate it from other defined spaces." This is a simple yet remarkable definition. It reveals a truth that people often miss when discussing sacred spaces (churches, temples, burial sites) and places that commemorate significant religious or national events.

There is no strange magic to the physical place itself. Sacred spaces have no secret mysterious chambers where angels sleep, and God sits to make decisions that control our lives. Underline this aspect in the definition. It is, "The rituals that a people either practice at a place or direct toward it mark its sacredness." In other words, sacred spaces become sacred because people dedicate or consecrate them as sacred (holy) and use them accordingly. For Christians, when we use such spaces, they should represent the presence of God as the Ark did for Israel. The images and settings in the sacred space should reinforce our image of God and what he means to us.

For this reason, throughout human history sacred spaces reflected how the people saw God when the location or item became sacred. Therefore, in the Jewish temples, we had a Holy of Holies, a most sacred place where only the highest priest went. This displayed the judicious God who worshippers had to approach with strict reverence. Approaching the Holy of Holies in an unworthy matter meant certain death.

Against this background, traditionalists have question marks over the design of ultra-modern church buildings. These religious zealots believe that the designs of modern churches are like what they see in secular clubs, concert halls, and sports arenas. For them, the religious “set apart” distinguishing “atmosphere” is missing in the designs of contemporary sanctuaries. To this lament, we quote Romans 14:5: “Let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind” on the appropriateness of a sacred space.

LIFE APPLICATION

God’s promise to King David, as with the promise to Abraham, took several years (generations) to be fulfilled. Consider this soberly within the context of our age of microwave technology and AI. We want to see God deliver instantly on the promises we claim. Do we respect that the promises of God take time (often generations) to reach fulfillment? Ignoring this reality can lead to unnecessary frustrations in our Christian walk.

A traditional view among Christians is that all Christians are spiritual Jews; and, therefore, heirs of the promises God made to King David. Examine your views on this. Consider the extent to which the Davidic promises apply to you, and what are the benefits of these promises you now enjoy or hope to enjoy.

David had a clear view of who God was, his relationship with God, and what he could do to show his gratitude for God's blessings. How clear are your ideas on these issues? To clarify your outlook on these matters, consider keeping a *God Journal*. In this journal write sayings and paste photos that speak to how you understand your relationship with God. Such a practice will help you to clarify any grey areas about the identity and character of God and your relationship and duty towards him.

We cannot get around this fact. God frustrated David's plans to build a holy temple for Israel to worship God. Naturally, David was disappointed. However, God's replacement plans contained bigger and wider blessings for David, his descendants, Israel, and the wider world. Use this backdrop to reconsider when a disappointment in your life led to something great you could never have imagined. Pondering on these events can help to shape a healthier outlook for dealing with disappointments.

QUESTIONS

1. Nathan, King David's spiritual advisor, gave him the green light on

what David had in his heart, but God vetoed the plans. Explain this.

2. What about traditional sacred spaces (e.g., church sanctuaries) makes such places special to you?
3. How can you know if God has given the green light to your plans for your church or your community?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: "Standing on the Promises," AMEC Hymnal #424

Closing Prayer: Gracious God, help me to see the wisdom and find the strength to submerge my plans under your will. I know on occasions this can be hard. But I know your way is always the best way and with your help I can do it. In Jesus' name. Amen

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

December 9-December 15

Monday Psalm 89:1-4, 27-37 (God's Covenant of Love)

Tuesday Luke 1:5-17 (God Has Heard Your Prayer)

Wednesday Luke 1:18-23 (A Message of Promise and Grace)

Thursday Psalm 84 (God Is a Sun and Shield)

Friday Malachi 4 (The Herald of God's Coming)

Saturday Luke 1:57-66 (A Child of Wonder)

Sunday Luke 1:67-80 (Praises to the God Who Saves)

LESSON 3 DECEMBER 15, 2024

THE PROPHET WHO PREPARES THE WAY

Lesson Scripture: Luke 1:5-23, 57-80b

Focus Scripture: Luke 1:67-80

Key Verses: And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.

Luke 1:76-77

LUKE 1:67-80 (NRSV UE)

67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

68 “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his child David,

70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors and has remembered his holy covenant,

73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us

74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear,

75 in holiness and righteousness in his presence all our days.

76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

77 to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of

their sins.

78 Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,
79 to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”
80 The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

LUKE 1:67-80 (KJV)

67 And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying,
68 Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people,
69 And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David;
70 As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began:
71 That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us;
72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant;
73 The oath which he sware to our father Abraham,
74 That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear,
75 In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.
76 And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways;
77 To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins,
78 Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us,
79 To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of

death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

80 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.

KEY TERMS

- **Dynasty** – A line of leaders whose sole qualification for office is their blood relations in a particular family.
- **Tanzania** – A country in eastern Africa with a population of about 66 million.
- **Tanganyika** – The forerunner state to Tanzania (which merged with Zanzibar).

Introduction

Traditions play a significant role in our lives. They prevent us from having to reinvent the wheels we need to roll through life. We naturally use the established “truths” and customs from previous generations as guides for accepted behaviors in worship, work, and general community interactions. The traditions become powerfully authoritative when we see them endorsed by people we regard as experts.

But there can be a downside when we follow traditions slavishly with mindlessness. Traditions can have serious biases that discriminate against certain groups. In this lesson, we will see how for centuries religious leaders- indeed the whole nation of Israel- misinterpreted God’s promise of a liberator (savior). The self-interest of the recognized leaders blinded them to the real identity and work of the promised redeemer. Israel looked for a strong conquering (military) leader who would free them from Roman domination. God sent a lowly savior to redeem the entire world from the bondage of sin.

God acted both within and outside of Israel’s culture in his game plan for the redeemer. God’s game plan stood within the culture as it included an official sponsor to introduce the redeemer and his ministry. The plan went outside the traditions because neither the sponsor nor the redeemer acted within the expected patterns of a redeemer or a sponsor. Both caused a stir in the way they operated

and lived.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

In lesson 2 we saw God's promise of a dynasty to King David. In the books of Kings and Chronicles, we followed the partial fulfillment of God's promise among the kings of Israel and Judah. But the reigns of these earthly kings had limits in both time and scope.

At the juncture of our set text, God is ready to take the dynasty promise to its ultimate dimension. The fulfillment of the promise is now moving from mere physical liberation and security to spiritual and eternal freedom and security. Read the lesson with this perspective in mind.

Then notice the prophecy of Zechariah in verses 68-79. Follow the connection to the divine promises in 2 Samuel 7 and even further back to the promise to Abraham. As the scriptures make clear, God fulfills his promises "in the fulness of time." This is a tenet to remember when we claim God's promises.

Verse 68 notes that Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit. Before Acts 2, general outpouring of the Holy Spirit, being filled with the Holy Spirit, had a restricted meaning. It meant that the Spirit of God empowered the person to make specific declarations or take unusual actions on God's behalf. The special empowerment was usually for a limited period. You see this in places like Exodus 31:3; 35:31-35;

Numbers 11:25-26; 1 Samuel 10:10-11; and Joshua 34:9. We must not confuse this with the gift of the indwelling, residing presence of God's Spirit which believers receive today.

The phrase "horn of salvation" ("mighty savior") in verse 69 needs special note. In the Old Testament (Psalm 75:4-5, 10; 2 Samuel 22:3) writers used the term to refer to strength, particularly military force. In verse 69, Zechariah is describing a strong military-type influential liberator. But this time, as we already know, freedom is moral and spiritual. It is not freedom from Roman domination. Instead, it is a rescue from the bondage of the law and sin.

Verses 1:71-74 carried the parallels a step further. In 2 Samuel 7, the rescue from the enemies and oppression would appear to be natural physical enemies. But the liberator in Luke 1 came to free the world from spiritual enemies and oppression. This is a freedom that stretches into eternity. How do we know? Jesus himself told us in places like John 3:16.

Also, note how Zechariah's prophesy swung between Jesus and his son John the Baptist. Luke 1:76, an echo of Isaiah 40:3-5, clearly speaks of John's role as the way-maker: the one who clears the way for Christ by calling people to repentance and introducing the Christ to the world.

The references in verses 1:76 and 1:79 are noteworthy for another reason. They point sharply to the mission of Jesus the Christ. Often,

we try to pull Christ and the Holy Spirit into every whip and fancy we want to address. Normally, there is no harm in doing this. However, we must never lose sight of Jesus' primary mission. It was quite specific. He came to show us the way to life, real life, the abundant life. This is the joy, hope, and peace of living that supersedes external circumstances. It starts with a relationship with Christ on earth and extends into eternity. This is exactly what Isaiah prophesied: Isaiah 9:2 and 42:7.

SANKOFA

The prophecies about the coming of Christ (liberator/redeemer) were attractive because they offered Israel hope of liberation. Unfortunately, most people read the prophecies with eyes of physical liberation. This is understandable. Any people living under the control or domination of another nation or group of oppressors yearns daily for freedom. Such was the case in Tanzania in the 1960s. Julius Nyerere rode on his people's craving for freedom and improved living standards to become the first prime minister of Tanganyika and later the first president of Tanzania.

Contemporaries of President Nyerere said his rise to power sprang from his ability to feed the hope for freedom that burned in his compatriots. A striking example of this is in what Tanzanians named *The Arusha Declaration*. Read the excerpt quoted below, not with your eyes but with the heart of exploited people.

"We have been oppressed a great deal, we have been exploited a great deal and we have been disregarded a great deal. It is our weakness that has led to our being oppressed, exploited, and disregarded. We now intend to bring about a resolution which will ensure that we are never again victims of these things."

If you can identify with the sentiment behind those words, you can understand why Israel looked forward to the fulfillment of God's promise of a liberator/redeemer/savior. Unfortunately, the nation of Israel could not identify their freedom fighter when he appeared in the form of a poor, helpless child.

CASE STUDY

Zealots of democracy will read God's promise of a Davidic dynasty with curiosity. They question why God favored one-man rulership which put all the powers of government in the hands of one man. However, researchers who study such matters highlighted that dynasties could offer certain advantages to a society. From works such as *Dynasties and Interludes: Past and Present in Canadian Electoral Politics* (Lawrence LeDuc, Jon H. Pammett), we get useful insight into why God may have worked through a dynasty. Among the advantages of a dynasty, we noted three.

First, a dynasty has the power of name recognition. People consciously and subconsciously associate descendants with the

success of their predecessors. This makes acceptance of the descendants easier. Because of the high regard in which Israel held David, his sons started their reigns with powerful name recognition and goodwill. With the Messiah coming in the tradition of King David, Israel presupposed he would be of the character of King David. David's devotion to God was evident, despite his famous blunders. It was, therefore, reasonable to assume that his descendants would have a similar devotion to God. And indeed, Jesus did!

Second, people assume that the descendant has the resources of his father's house. This applies to both physical and mental resources. If the father (or grandfather) was wise, people assume the offspring will also be wise. Yes, we know history shows this is not always the case. Yet, it is a startling assumption people often make.

The new ruler in a dynasty usually starts with the physical resources his predecessors acquired. This gives the dynastic ruler an advantage over a new ruler who must find his own resources for new projects. A dynastic ruler, other things being equal, should accomplish more in a shorter period.

Third, a high degree of stability is associated with dynasties. People with an interest in the dynasty do what they can to keep out intruders. This is natural as they have a vested interest in maintaining the dynasty. Also note, if the dynasty is established along a set philosophy or mode of operation, dynastic rulers seek to

keep that philosophy or style of doing business or governing. This naturally leads to a higher level of stability, and a smoother transition of authority from one leader to another. In assessing this perspective, make allowances for personality differences.

We are aware that dynastic systems of governance may be outside the democratic model that people favor. However, we see certain distinct advantages in countries with ingrained dynasties, like the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia. This is something to note when considering the Davidic dynasty, which culminated in Jesus Christ.

LIFE APPLICATION

Zechariah's song shows a feature of prophetic declarations we must consider when reading prophecy. The language of the prophecy stated the prophesied events as completed events: they have already happened. Prophecy calls us to embrace as certain reality, an event God set for the future. Faith is the bridge we use to connect the divide of time.

With this idea in mind, consider your attitude to "the way of peace" in verse 1:79. Looking at the state of the world today, is this a reality, or yet futuristic? Carefully consider how your faith in God's promises allows you to walk "the way of peace" through the current world.

The word *peace*, as used in the text, has an interesting overtone. In Hebrew it is *shalom*; in Greek it is *eirene*. In both (original)

languages the word signified a wholeness: a contentment and satisfaction that is both personal and communal. This points to a reality that members of the church must never overlook. Our personal peace in life is linked to and affected by the level of peace in our communities. Reflect on the extent to which you see your enjoyment of life interwoven in the affairs of your communities (church and home).

Part of the function of prophecy is to give hope in times of despair. Consider the extent to which you use hope as a resource to face the valleys of life. Recall a time when hopefulness (your faith in God) provided a spiritual resource that helped to pull you through a difficult period. Give thanks to the God of all hopefulness.

Continuing the matter of hopefulness, consider how your hope in Christ is framing your outlook on current and future events. When you look at world events and trends in the church, politics, and family life, what hope do you see for the future? Does the prospect of the future fill you with anxiety or hope? If you can see prospects of hope, consider how you can share these prospects with others in your communities. If you notice your heart has significant amounts of despair and anxiety, make this a matter of personal devotion. If this bleak outlook persists, consider discussing the matter with people you consider qualified to help you.

QUESTIONS

1. What do you consider was at the root of Zechariah's doubt of the angel's message?
2. In general, Israel had mistaken expectations about the identity and work of the long-awaited strong liberator/redeemer. To what extent may church members today be confused/mistaken about God's work in our era?
3. What characteristics, if any, did King David and Jesus Christ have in common?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: "Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It" (Fanny Crosby)

Closing Prayer: Dear Father, help me to identify you and your work in events around me. Steer me away from deceptions and delusions designed to take my eyes off the Christ, my redeemer. My prayer for today, in Jesus' name. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

December 16-December 22

Monday Isaiah 11:1-9 (The Coming King of Peace)

Tuesday Isaiah 43:14-21 (God Is Doing a New Thing)

Wednesday Isaiah 64 (O God, Come Down and Save Us!)

Thursday Micah 5:1-6 (A Great and Peaceful King)

Friday John 1:1-5, 9-14, 16-18 (The Word Became Flesh)

Saturday Hebrews 1 (Christ Is King! Worship Him!)

Sunday Luke 2:1-16 (Christ Is Born! Glorify Him!)

LESSON 4 DECEMBER 22, 2024

BORN IN THE CITY OF DAVID

Lesson Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

Focus Scripture: Luke 2:1-16

Key Verse: When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” Luke 2:15

LUKE 2:1-16 (NRSV UE)

- 1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.
- 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.
- 3 All went to their own towns to be registered.
- 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.
- 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.
- 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.
- 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.
- 8 Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.
- 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.
- 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:

11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger.

LUKE 2:1-16 (KJV)

1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the

Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

KEY TERMS

- **Humility** – Having a modest or low view of one's own importance; not prideful or haughty.
- **Paradox** – An apparent contradiction; things that do not appear to go together.
- **African Socialism** – A theory of governance where leaders use the resources of a country for the collective good of all its citizens rather than for the benefit of a privileged few. Applying this concept in an African context is African Socialism.

INTRODUCTION

Today, news networks bombard us constantly with reports of news that shock us. The more horrible the stories of murders, shootings, fraud, rape, and corruption, the more frequently and boldly the media report them. We may be unaware of the effect these reports have on our psyche. But in that environment, even believers develop vicious appetites for shocking news.

Yet in our soul, we yearn for good news. We want words and events that lift our sights and hearts about the negative and hurtful events of living. Yes, we long for stories that highlight our value as humans; stories that shout of our importance and place in the universe. We want to know that there is more to life than what we see in the material world. This is where the good news of Christ comes in. And it is “Good News” that Christ commanded us to share with a hurting world. This is the church’s core mission noted in Mark 16:15.

As you work through this lesson, consider the magnificent news that unfolded in the Christmas story. Challenge yourself to understand why the events told a wonderful, divine love story. And step beyond the mere reading or hearing of the story. Consider the variety of ways in which you can become a reporter of the good news of God’s great love.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Scholars have varying views about the location of the “inn” around which Christ was born, and why Mary and Joseph traveled there. We

start by noting that in those times, cities had no hotels and motels as we have today. Nevertheless, a careful study of the language of the text gives useful insights.

Because the census they were responding to was based on ancestry, Joseph and Mary were likely going to stay with relatives in Bethlehem. From that basis, it would appear that when the couple arrived at their relatives, the guest rooms were already fully occupied. A reasonable reading of the Greek text lends itself to using the term “guest rooms” for what popular translations call the “inn.” In this scenario, Mary and Joseph would have stayed in the only vacant available space on their relative’s property: the stable where they keep the animals.

The exact timing of Jesus’ birth has always been a point of debate. Verse 2:8 gives a useful hint. If everything was happening according to customs, Jesus was actually born in early spring. This conclusion we can infer from the shepherds being out in the night watching their sheep. Traditionally, watching sheep at night only happened during the lambing season, in early spring.

The inclusion of shepherds in the Advent narrative would be significant to Israel. Sheep rearing was a major activity in the life of Israel. The Bible has hundreds of references to sheep and shepherds in the history of Israel. The stories of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, and Amos all have sheep and shepherd references.

Also, note those times when the scriptures describe God using shepherd terms (e.g., Zechariah 11), and Israel in terms of being sheep (Psalm 100:3).

Therefore, using the shepherds as witnesses to the birth of the savior was significant in two important ways. First, it underscored the caring shepherd-sheep relationship between God and his people. The shepherds were symbols of care. In Jesus, we got the ultimate in care – the care for our souls – from the good shepherd.

Second, the shepherds highlighted the humility God wanted to project around God's Son, the king of kings (Luke 1:52). The king was born in lowly circumstances and surrounded by the lowly shepherds. The circumstances of Jesus' birth reflected the message of humility he taught his disciples (e.g., Matthew 20:25-28).

Verse 2:11 when connected to verse 1:32 paints a striking image of Jesus. There can be no doubt about his identity. Indeed, he was the promised Messiah, the Son of God, the true heir in the Davidic promise. It is as if Luke is screaming, "Let us be clear about this birth. It is God fulfilling the promise he made to David. This is the Messiah." This is a point every believer must be clear about. If we are not fully persuaded in our hearts about this, we cannot step onto the salvation path. Without that conviction, membership in a church is meaningless, and Christmas is just an excuse to have a party.

A huge theme in Luke's gospel is the concept of being a witness

(2:17-18). This is a natural human response when people see or hear of an extraordinary event. They want to share it, tell the world. We see this every day on social media platforms. Something as amazing as the birth of the savior of humankind had to be shared by witnesses.

Note this is exactly the assignment Jesus gave to people who have had an experience with him. Believers must tell the world what they witnessed through their relationship with Jesus Christ. This is the message of Acts 1:8-9 and Matthew 29:18-19. It is a message to all disciples of Christ, irrespective of formal titles in the church.

Mary's response to the unfolding events is instructive. She had received the advanced warning from the angel. She had seen how events played out with Elizabeth and John's birth. Yet she was in unfamiliar territory. Nothing had prepared her for these supernatural events. She could not fully understand all that was happening around her. So, at verse 2:19, we find Mary in a reflective mood. As the events unfolded, she carefully observed them, stored them in her heart, and reflected on their significance. She was trying to make sense out of these astonishing developments in her life.

There is a lesson here for us. When the hand of God is at work in our lives, we must take note and relax, even when we do not grasp the full significance. Everything will not make sense all at once. But as we allow God to do what he has predetermined, everything will

fall into place for our benefit and God's glory.

SANKOFA

The story of Jesus' birth is a paradox of greatness and humility. The king of all kings was born in a lowly stable, wrapped in lowly clothes, with lowly shepherds as witnesses. As he grew and did ministry, this picture of humility never became blurred in Jesus' life. People whose life experiences have built a strong association between powerful leaders, pride, and arrogance, cannot easily grasp this picture. History rarely shows Strong powerful leaders who are humble, accommodating, and caring.

One great leader, who broke that mold of prideful arrogance, was Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, who we met before. President Nyerere went against the normal image associated with powerful African leaders. He lived a simple lifestyle in a modest home, without the elaborate trappings of wealth and power. The diamond he displayed to the world was personal integrity, not an array of personal wealth.

During his reign, President Nyerere emphasized the importance of humility, and communities working together for the common good of all the people. This came from his personal philosophy of Pan-African Socialism. His clothes, his speech, and his emphasis on education and training of his people all reflected Nyerere's shepherd's heart.

But probably the way he left the presidency was his greatest display of humility. In 1985, Nyerere voluntarily stepped down from the presidency. This was a rare act of surrendering power in a region where presidents cling to power, sometimes at the expense of civil wars. By that time, it was obvious that his approach to governing, African Socialism, had not yielded the desired results. Nyerere saw it was time for a new generation of leaders. So out of his respect for democracy and the will of the people, President Nyerere retired. Contrast Nyerere's act of stepping away from the seat of power with leaders who try to hold onto power, or gain power, at any cost.

When Julius Nyerere died in October 1999, the world paid tribute to his humble yet outstanding example of leadership. His love for his people, commitment to African unity and development, and unassuming life drew stirring tributes from world leaders and international organizations. This points to a great truth more leaders should learn. Great leadership and humility can sleep in the same bed.

CASE STUDY

The place of Jesus' birth reinforced his prophetic connection to the lineage of King David. In the ancient Near East, residents named cities as we do today. People named cities after the names of their conquerors, founders, significant sites, or memorable events related to the city. Hence Israelis called Jerusalem the "City of David"

because King David conquered and developed it.

The earliest mention in the Old Testament of Jerusalem as the “City of David” comes in 2 Samuel 5:7 when David led his men to capture the fortress Zion (the previous reference name) from the Jebusites. After the victory, David made his home in the city and called it the “City of David.” However, before we give too much credit to King David, reflect deeply on 2 Samuel 5:9-10. David went on from that conquest and became greater, not because he was the greatest warrior. His greatness had one source, “The Lord God of hosts was with him.” That is always a winning combination. We also want to note that David later brought to the city the Ark of the Covenant, which represented the presence of the Lord in Israel.

The importance of the term, “City of David,” is obvious by its frequent use in the Bible. Depending on your Bible version, the Old Testament uses the phrase 45 times. It seems that Israel understood that the city bearing David’s name had God’s stamp of approval. In the New Testament, we find the name only twice. Once it refers to Bethlehem, and this is super important. It was in Bethlehem, that small town in Judah, where King David was born. And in the same Bethlehem, Christ was born. This had to be a divine setup.

LIFE APPLICATION

Traditionally, Christian believers celebrate the birth of Jesus with elaborate fanfare at Christmas. However, the paradox surrounding

the celebrations is worrying. The birth of Christ marks one of the biggest displays of humility known to humanity. Yet in our Christmas celebrations, it is rare to see significant displays of humility. Indeed, the opposite is often the order of the day. Consider this observation and think about ways to make humility a feature of the Christmas celebration. Discuss this observation with members of your family, church, and community. Then, brainstorm the various ways believers can show more of the humility of Christ this Christmas.

The witnessing of the shepherds was an integral part of the first Christmas. Privately and in small discussion groups, assess the degree to which we are credible witnesses of the good news of Jesus' birth at Christmas. Apart from the traditional Christmas celebration services, what can we do to emphasize that Christmas is indeed about Christ and the love of God for humanity?

Another paradox of the Christmas celebrations is that when we celebrate Christ, people have less time for the activities that draw them closer to Christ. Acknowledging this, churches usually suspend their usual weekly activities, because people are too busy to attend the events. Think seriously about this. Plan how you can break from the traditional pattern of Christmas busyness. Resolve to spend more time, rather than less, praying and meditating on the Christ of Christmas.

The image of the shepherd is that of a caregiver, a pastor, someone

with a heart for people. Reflect on this and consider people around you who may need a level of care. The shepherds went out of their way to be part of the first Christmas and to share the good news. Consider how this Advent you can be a shepherd to someone in need.

QUESTIONS

1. To what extent do the traditional Christmas celebrations reflect the story of humility and divine care God put on display in Bethlehem?
2. What are the main drivers in determining how we celebrate Christmas?
3. The Christmas season, despite its themes of joy and peace, can be a period of great loneliness for various people. Why is this?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: “Away in a Manger,” *AMEC Hymnal* #113

Closing Prayer: Loving God, we thank you for Jesus and the thrilling display of divine love his birth signaled. Guide us in celebrating wisely this good news. Strengthen us to be bold witnesses for the Christ of Christmas. We ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

December 23-December 29

Monday Luke 4:14-21 (Mercy for Those Who Suffer)

Tuesday Luke 6:27-36 (Show God's Mercy to All)

Wednesday Micah 7:14-20 (God Delights in Compassion)

Thursday Psalm 25:1-10 (Remember Your Mercy, O Lord)

Friday Psalm 25:11-22 (God Relieves a Troubled Heart)

Saturday Luke 18:9-14 (Mercy for Sinners)

Sunday Luke 18:35-43 (Lord, Let Me See Again)

LESSON 5 DECEMBER 29, 2024

THE MERCIFUL SON OF DAVID

Lesson Scripture: Luke 18:31-43

Focus Scripture: Luke 18:35-43

Key Verse: Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he shouted even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Luke 18:39

LUKE 18:35-43 (NRSV UE)

35 As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.

36 When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening.

37 They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.”

38 Then he shouted, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

39 Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he shouted even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

40 Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him, and when he came near, he asked him,

41 “What do you want me to do for you?” He said, “Lord, let me see again.”

42 Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.”

43 Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God, and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

LUKE 18:35-43 (KJV)

35 And it came to pass, that as he was come nigh unto Jericho, a certain blind man sat by the way side begging:

36 And hearing the multitude pass by, he asked what it meant.

37 And they told him, that Jesus of Nazareth passeth by.

38 And he cried, saying, Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on

me.

39 And they which went before rebuked him, that he should hold his peace: but he cried so much the more, Thou son of David, have mercy on me.

40 And Jesus stood, and commanded him to be brought unto him: and when he was come near, he asked him,

41 Saying, What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee? And he said, Lord, that I may receive my sight.

42 And Jesus said unto him, Receive thy sight: thy faith hath saved thee.

43 And immediately he received his sight, and followed him, glorifying God: and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise unto God.

KEY TERMS

- **Sacrificial Lamb** – In Judaism, Israel sacrificed lambs in rituals to gain forgiveness for sin. God chose Jesus as the (human) lamb who would die once for all our sins.
- **Contiguous** – The ability or tendency to spread from one person to another.
- **Catalyst** – A person or thing that starts a process or reaction.
- **Insignificant Person** – A person without a recognized name/title/status, or significant resources (money or property).

Introduction

In all generations, we find people with disabling illnesses and injuries. Naturally, the question arises about God's love for people with serious disabilities. Our Christian love should move us to assist those persons when and where we can. But the set text shows a case where a person with a serious physical disability reached out to Jesus and received the healing he desired. But note in this text two crucial supporting planks. The beggar was clear and firm on the identity of Jesus and in his response to Jesus' query.

A question to ponder is what would have happened if the blind beggar had not reached out to Jesus. We can only speculate, but we are glad the man made the effort to stop and engage the Lord. Even when others tried to dissuade him, he persisted. Look beyond the usual superficial reading of the text and see the powerful messages his determined effort still shouts to us. Also, look at the ripple effect that flowed into the community when one insignificant person reached out in faith to the Lord through whom all things are possible.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

The set text is rich with profound revelations about Christ and his ministry. We take it in two parts: verses 18:31-34 and verses 18:35-43. In the first portion, we find Jesus in a private teaching session with the disciples. He was sharing details with them about the culminating focal point of his ministry. Jesus was known for his

profound spiritual teachings and miracles. However, those activities were peripheral to the main purpose of his physical stay on earth. He came to sacrifice his life to redeem the sin-soaked souls of humanity. The prophets had foretold this for years. Yet not even the experts in religious matters (scribes and Pharisees) could recognize that Jesus was the promised sacrificial lamb. Up to this point, the disciples, the people closest to Jesus in ministry, could not accept the revelation that the teacher they had grown to love was about to be sacrificed.

Verse 34 is challenging. The language suggests that something blocked the disciples' understanding so they could not grasp (or accept) what Jesus explained. One explanation is that the disciples were still locked on the concept of an earthly kingdom where they would have privileged positions. Their picture certainly did not involve the murder of their (rabbi) master.

Another explanation is that the teachings in Judaism had blocked them. The Jewish rabbis could not enlighten the Jews about an event that the rabbis themselves did not understand. Whatever the reason, even after Jesus' private teaching, the disciples could not understand his pending death and resurrection.

In the second section (18:35-43), we have two insightful disclosures. The nameless man who was blind recognized Jesus as the Son of David. This man lacked physical sight but had great spiritual insight. He knew that Jesus was the promised Messiah: the God-Man with

unlimited authority to heal, resurrect, and save. Sometimes Christians overlook this truth in the rush to make this section a simple story of Jesus healing a man who was blind.

Now focus on verse 43. Having received his sight, the man followed Jesus and glorified God. His response to Jesus' gift of healing spurred others to praise God. Remember this chain reaction. This is one good reason we cannot keep silent when God does a work in our lives. This is the route that opens the salvation door to others. Evangelists take note.

The healing of the beggar who was blind has greater implications than we normally recognize. In the first century, people saw blindness as a judgment from God for sins committed (for example, John 9:2). Therefore, when the beggar received his sight, onlookers interpreted it as a reversal of God's judgment. That was an occasion for rejoicing.

In verse 42 Jesus noted that the man's faith made him well. What was Jesus saying? It is a statement that Bible students often misunderstand. Jesus meant that the man's belief in Jesus' ability/authority to restore his sight was intact. That declaration must never mean that believers have the power to compel Jesus to do what they want. Whatever our level of faith, we must respect the sovereignty of God to decide the appropriate answer to each situation. Matthew 8:2 properly expresses this sentiment.

SANKOFA

A posting on the Christianpost.com website carried a story (August 25, 2023) about a court ruling in northern Nigeria. That court order protected an 18-year-old Christian convert from threats to her life by family members. The significance of this ruling was that it emphasized that Nigerians had a fundamental right to change religions. In that case, the change was from Islam to Christianity.

Although this and related stories pointed to the risk of being a Christian in northern Nigeria, they also have relevance to the text in this lesson. Like the disciples in Luke 18, timid believers cannot face the reality of the risk associated with following Christ. Scholars like Raymond Brown suggest the disciples in Luke 18:31-34 could not grasp Jesus' teaching because they could not embrace what it implied: the dangers of standing firm for faith in Jesus without Jesus' physical presence.

In your own country, you may not face death for following Christ. However, in our modern societies, believers still face serious risks when they try to live traditional Christian values. The threats range from social ostracizing to physical death. Sadly, the AME Church annals carry heartbreaking evidence of this risk.

Celebrity preachers often try to downplay this risk of following Christ by diverting viewers to the more "pleasant" side of Christianity. One skillful way ministers do this is to preach a sanitized gospel where

they peddle only blessings and prosperity. The risks of being a Christian, swimming upstream against popular secular values, they deliberately ignore or deny. Crafty preachers take this course because they think their audience cannot, or do not want, to face the risks of being identified too closely with Jesus and traditional Christianity. This is a suitable time to consider the extent to which we embrace the full Christian message, which includes the risks of rejection and persecution by persons who do not share our Christian perspective.

CASE STUDY

“Praise allows us to get out of our self-centeredness to focus on others. So, the next time you appreciate someone’s kindness, a job well done, or a positive quality, try to make your mark with praise. That person will receive it in a much more positive way than you think and you can even make his or her day.”

The above quote was an outrider for an article on Psychology.com about praising. We shared the idea at the end of the last sentence. When we praise people, we help them to frame their days in brighter colors.

In the text (Luke 18:43), the healed man’s praises to God sparked a chain reaction of praise. This confirms that praising is contagious. Our praises to God can influence other people to praise God. This is one reason Christians must share with non-Christians their positive testimonies about their experiences with God. Positive praise begets

more positive praise. People in the entertainment world know this and use it effectively to promote secular concerts and shows.

But the reverse is equally true. Complaints and lamenting spur more negative sentiments. And the effects of the negative comments we initiate can last longer and do more damage than we had imagined when we started to complain. What do these observations teach us?

The first lesson is that even when we do not recognize it, our words and actions can influence people around us. We can be the catalysts that spark either joy or gloom in other people's lives. Before he started thanking God for his healing, the nameless blind beggar was a nobody. But his praises to God were enough to turn other people's attention to God. Soberly consider this. Even without a title or a formal position in your church or community, you have in your mouth the power to frame other peoples' days, even their life paths.

LIFE APPLICATION

We have already hinted at this point: despite his physical handicap, the beggar who was blind had a clear and accurate picture of who Jesus was. In the privacy of your meditation, consider your view of Jesus. Based on your firsthand experiences, can you convincingly share with others that you know the Jesus Christ of the scriptures? If you are sure you do, follow the beggar's example, and thank the Lord. If you have doubts, make this a matter of prayer, and meditation. Also, consult with others who you think may be able to help you to sharpen your image of Jesus Christ.

Apply the story of the beggar's healing to your own life. In real terms, all believers were at the beggarly point of sinful living until Jesus passed by. Walk back to your beggarly point in life. Stop a while to consider the truths you could not see at that point. Then walk forward to where you are in Christ today. That mental retracing of your spiritual healing should awaken in you the same emotions it stirred in the healed beggar. Your heart should overflow with praise for the savior who lovingly stopped to answer your plea for spiritual sight.

Jesus told the beggar who was blind that it was the beggar's own faith that sparked the healing. Consider the implications of this for your life. The beggar who was blind saw the impossible being possible. Consider any need or desire in your life which now seems outside the limits of possibility. In thinking about this, remember that the beggar who was blind had no money and no special connections to influential people. He had no name recognition and no title in the church or community. All he had was a faith that recognized Jesus as the Messiah. What about you? Can your faith draw what you desire within the range of reality?

Verses 36 and 37 give a lesson you will miss if you are not wearing your spiritual glasses. The beggar was aware of what was happening around him. There is a school of thought that Christians must shut themselves off from the world. If the beggar had done that, he would have missed Jesus and the opportunity for his healing. Take time to

think about your level of awareness about the happenings and trends in your community and the world at large.

QUESTIONS

1. The title Son of David was a powerful personal reference for the beggar. What name or title of God/Jesus is most powerful to you?
2. How do you consider the faithfulness of persons with disabilities who may not experience physical healing?
3. How seriously have you considered the risks of being a Christian?
4. Can you identify times when your praise or complaint spurred others to do the same?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: "Take My Life, and Let It Be," *AMEC Hymnal* #292

Closing Prayer: Gracious God, grant me the wisdom and strength to embrace all aspects of the Christian life. In the good times, remind me to praise you; in the troubled times, remind me to look for you as the blind man did. With your strength and guidance, I know I can be all you have called me to be. Thank you, Lord! Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

December 30–January 5

Monday Revelation 11:14-19 (The Kingdom Belongs to the Messiah)

Tuesday Psalm 9:1-9 (A Heart Full of Thanks)

Wednesday Psalm 9:10-20 (A Plea to God for Grace)

Thursday 1 Timothy 1:12-17 (Immortal, Invisible)

Friday 1 Timothy 6:11-16 (The Life of Faith)

Saturday Psalm 10:1-11 (God's Judgments Are True)

Sunday Psalm 10:12-18 (God Will Arise and Hear Us)

LESSON 6 JANUARY 5, 2025

THE LORD IS KING

Lesson Scripture: Psalms 9, 10

Focus Scripture: Psalm 10:12-18

Key Verse: O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear. Psalm 10:17

PSALM 10:12-18 (NRSV UE)

- 12 Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed.
- 13 Why do the wicked renounce God and say in their hearts, “You will not call us to account”?
- 14 But you do see! Indeed, you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands; the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan.
- 15 Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers; seek out their wickedness until you find none.
- 16 The Lord is king forever and ever; the nations shall perish from his land.
- 17 O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear
- 18 to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more.

PSALM 10:12-18 (KJV)

- 12 Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up thine hand: forget not the humble.
- 13 Wherefore doth the wicked contemn God? he hath said in his heart, Thou wilt not require it.
- 14 Thou hast seen it; for thou beholdest mischief and spite, to requite it with thy hand: the poor committeth himself unto thee; thou art the helper of the fatherless.

15 Break thou the arm of the wicked and the evil man: seek out his wickedness till thou find none.

16 The Lord is King for ever and ever: the heathen are perished out of his land.

17 Lord, thou hast heard the desire of the humble: thou wilt prepare their heart, thou wilt cause thine ear to hear:

18 To judge the fatherless and the oppressed, that the man of the earth may no more oppress.

KEY TERMS

- **Injustice** – The absence or denial of justice, fairness, or equity to certain people in a society or a group of persons.
- **Vulnerable People** – People who may fall into the class of poor, needy, fatherless, handicapped, homeless; people who cannot help themselves in the normal course of life.
- **Acrostic Psalm** – A type of poetic song where each verse or line begins with a successive letter of the alphabet.
- **The Septuagint** – The ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.
- **Principality** – Territory or area ruled by a prince or secondary authority.

INTRODUCTION

Until we leave this world for glory, we will encounter incidents of distress and injustice. As followers of Christ, we know that God hates injustice. Accordingly, Christians must take a stance against

injustices in society, especially as it affects the vulnerable people in our society.

As individuals, we will face times of distress in our lives. The distressing events can be overwhelming. Because of this reality, the question arises about how believers should deal with these bleak, challenging situations. The standard response to that question is that believers must look to God.

But what does “look to God” look like in reality? What practical steps, if any, should believers take while looking to God, and how should they show their disdain for injustice? The set text guides us in finding meaningful answers to these questions. Still, the first step in dealing with injustice and oppressors is to know, without a doubt, God is king. No person, no power, and no principality in heaven or earth can stand in the way of God’s will. With that outlook, we will find the wisdom and strength to do the right thing against those who practice oppressing vulnerable people.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

To get the full impact of the text, try reading both psalms in one sitting with Psalm 10 as an extension of Psalm 9. In their original use, people read Psalm 9 as a background for Psalm 10 because the two psalms are treated as one acrostic psalm in the Septuagint and share common themes.

The images we see in the background text reflect King David's profile of God. These images came from David's life experiences where he proved God's faithfulness to righteous people and the Lord's hatred of evildoers. The God David experienced was a God who keeps promises and dispenses justice. These characteristics prompted David to trust God.

In the text, we see David calling down God's wrath on evildoers (Psalm 10:12,15). Such righteous anger is a healthy response to injustice. It is fuel that energizes people to resist and fight against evil and injustices. But verses 14, 17, and 18 show we must not be reckless in responding to injustice. Our response must be rooted in godly wisdom, being fully confident that God will be our partner in our struggles against injustice.

“The nations” David mentioned, in verse 16, scholars take as a reference to the neighboring nations like the Philistines, which had a long history of hostilities against Israel. Verses like 1 Samuel 17 and Judges 13:1 support this. However, we can freely apply the sentiment against any nation or group of people who oppose God's people.

In Psalm 10 David seems to place a special focus on injustices against the vulnerable and powerless: people who cannot defend themselves (Psalm 10:14, 18). This stance is consistent with the Old Testament picture of God acting as a special protector of the poor,

widows, and fatherless. God's people must help defend these vulnerable people, who are dear to God. On this issue, Psalms 68:5, 146:9; Exodus 22:21-24; Isaiah 1:17; and James 1:27 are useful references.

SANKOFA

"Few political leaders who successfully transition from activists to lawmakers do so without losing the fire and focus on the causes that brought them to prominence. But Civil Rights icon and U.S. Rep. John Lewis, the 17-term Georgia Democrat, was that kind of rare leader, never wavering from his original mission, to see that Black people in America were treated justly, equally, and with dignity."

*(“Remembering John Lewis, Civil Rights Icon, and Teller of Truths,” from *The Harvard Gazette*, July 19, 2020)*

In the text, the injustices King David saw meted out to poor and helpless people enraged him. He wanted the evil to stop. He wanted justice and called on God for help in this regard. No doubt all of us want justice. However, only a few – the John Lewis’ of the world – dare to do something to get the desired justice.

In the safety of the church’s sanctuary, and behind a Zoom screen, we shout our commitment to justice. But often our devotion to justice does not move beyond those safe zones. That is the reason people like John Lewis stand out as exemplary beacons of hope for justice.

John Lewis, and his colleagues, knew that taking a stance against injustice was risky. They understood that they would attract the fury of the offenders. They would be at risk of serious harm. Yet, in the spirit of a modern King David, they ignored the risk and pushed forward in their fight for a just society.

CASE STUDY

Notwithstanding the fear factor noted in the previous section, as a rule, people hate when vulnerable people suffer injustices. Humans seem to have an innate consciousness that burns hot when evil and injustice are features of a society. Even rulers and their enablers who perpetuate systems of injustice must turn off in themselves the natural conscience that flares up when people dish out evil to the poor, hungry, homeless, and helpless.

Over the centuries, psychologists and other social science researchers attempted to analyze and explain the natural rage that grips people who witness human's inhumanity to humans. One such study and theory is *The Moral Foundations Theory*. This was a social psychology theory aimed at explaining "the origins of and variation in human moral reasoning on the basis of innate, modular foundations." The people leading this inquiry were psychologists Jonathan Haidt, Craig Joseph, and Jesse Graham. Their theory utilized the earlier work of cultural anthropologist Richard Shweder.

Using this theory and related studies, we can conclude that in all

people there exist innate moral systems that rise and scream, if only within us, against injustices. Indeed, how and when this innate moral monitor becomes activated varies among individuals. Yet, it is there. Social scientists may explain this moral monitor using social conditioning, customs, and religious influences. However, from a Christian perspective, this monitor is likely an aspect of the image of God ingrained in the human heart. Injustice infuriates believers because it infuriates God, our creator.

LIFE APPLICATION

Occasionally, we hear a view that believers should not become discouraged, angry, or frustrated. But scripture texts like the one in this lesson show that godly people experience valleys and dark times. Think about your views concerning Christians facing hard or dark times. When considering the lives of godly role models like King David, do you find encouragement and strength to face situations that depress or infuriate you?

In your private devotions think about times when you experienced God as a secure refuge in times of trouble, pain, or despair. Reflect on the ways those experiences enhanced your spiritual maturity. If you keep a prayer journal, you may find it useful to make rough notes on this matter. As the opportunities arise, share your experiences and the related spiritual growth with people in their own life struggles.

In Psalms 9 and 10 we see the raw emotions of King David as he appealed to God to intervene in cases of injustice. David did not use special prayer language or recite set prayers from a liturgy. He poured out his heart with raw emotion to God. Consider this approach when seeking God's help in matters that infuriate or depress you. Sincerity, rather than linguistics, is the key consideration in pleas to God.

In Psalm 10, David painted a picture we see too often in our society. It appears that the ways of people who show gross disrespect for God and godliness "are always prospering" (verse 5). The NLT version says these wicked people "succeed in everything they do." They show no fear of God and his judgments. How do you explain this? David was confident that eventually, God would deal with the evildoers. Consider the extent to which you share his outlook. How can you reconcile to yourself that the wicked seem to prosper while godly people must struggle to live?

QUESTIONS

1. What motivates people like John Lewis to risk their lives to fight for justice for vulnerable people?
2. God seems slow in dealing with the contempt from the wicked. Why is this?
3. Consider two things that currently infuriate you. What steps can

you take (individually or collectively) to address these?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: “O God of Every Nation”

Closing Prayer: Dear God, show me the injustices you have equipped me to address. Guide and strengthen me to do my part, as an individual or a part of the body of Christ, to let the perpetrators know your stance against injustice. This is my prayer, in Jesus' name! Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

January 6-January 12

Monday Revelation 19:11-21 (Faithful and True)

Tuesday 1 Chronicles 29:10-20 (God Makes Great and Gives Strength)

Wednesday Isaiah 52:1-12 (Our God Reigns)

Thursday Psalm 47 (Shout Joyfully to God)

Friday Philippians 2:1-13 (Exalted Through Obedience)

Saturday Mark 4:35-41 (The Wind and Sea Obey Jesus)

Sunday Psalm 93 (Robed in Majesty)

LESSON 7 JANUARY 12, 2025

THE LORD IS ROBED IN MAJESTY

Lesson Scripture: Psalms 47, 93

Focus Scripture: Psalm 93

Key Verse: The Lord is king; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed; he is girded with strength. Psalm 93:1

PSALM 93 (NRSV UE)

- 1 The Lord is king; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed; he is girded with strength. He has established the world; it shall never be moved;
- 2 your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.
- 3 The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring.
- 4 More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the Lord!
- 5 Your decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O Lord, forevermore.

PSALM 93 (KJV)

- 1 The Lord reigneth, he is clothed with majesty; the Lord is clothed with strength, wherewith he hath girded himself: the world also is established, that it cannot be moved.
- 2 Thy throne is established of old: thou art from everlasting.
- 3 The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their waves.
- 4 The Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters, yea, than the mighty waves of the sea.
- 5 Thy testimonies are very sure: holiness becometh thine house, O

Lord, for ever.

KEY TERMS

- **Holiness** – The idea of the reverence, awe, and purity which sets God apart from humans.
- **Yahweh** – Consider the personal name of God that emphasizes his holiness and recognize him as the creator.
- **Majesty/Majestic** – The splendor and dignity associated with being royal (a king).
- **Ontological** – Relating to the concept of something or someone's existence. The best scriptural example of this is in Exodus 3:14 where God referred to himself as “I AM” meaning the God with no beginning and no end; self-existing.
- **Astrologer** – A person who studies the stars and planets and their effects on human life.

Introduction

Leadership is a feature of human existence. For any group of people (society) to move forward in an orderly fashion, there must be a leader (person or small group) who sets the values and behaviors that will govern how people operate and are treated in the wider group (society). In the Israel of King David's era, the people looked to the king for guidance and help in times of trouble. They continued to do so, once they were confident that the king had the strength, skills, and resources needed for the task of governing effectively.

But the king, because of his human limitations, also needed guidance and help. In King David's case, although he had an array of human advisors, his primary advisor was Yahweh, the God of Israel. King David consciously chose to look upwards to the eternal God for the wisdom and confidence he needed to lead his people.

In the set Bible text, we see why David decided to trust the God of Israel. To appreciate this point, consider that the surrounding nations had other gods, and at times the leaders of Israel fell into worshipping these false gods. King David stuck with Yahweh, in good times and in horrible times. What explained this loyalty? King David was sure about God's existence, might, and holiness. This lesson, therefore, challenges us to examine how deep the roots of our faith in God are. Further, we must have a comprehensive view of God. As the lyrics of the song "God on the Mountain" tell us, we must

know beyond reasonable doubt that the God in the good times is also the God in the bad times.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

To understand the sentiments in 93:3-4, we need to appreciate how people in the Middle East regarded the sea. At that time, the sea symbolized the seat of uncontrollable destructive powers and chaos. When the psalmist declared that the Lord is mightier than the noise (roar) and waves of the sea, he attributed to God complete superiority over the worst powers of evil. This is a God we can trust to protect us.

We must also note the natural extension of the idea that David's God was more powerful than the worst powers of the sea. If Yahweh can dominate the worst powers of the sea, Yahweh must also have superiority over the gods and evil powers associated with the sea.

In 93:1-2 the psalmist gave the basis for his firm confidence in God. Unlike earthly kings whose reigns are periodic and limited, God's kingdom is everlasting, forever secured, and forever strong. By linking his reign to God's secure kingdom, David claimed security and stability for the nation of Israel.

In verse 93:5 David highlighted why we can rely on God's laws. Unlike the laws of human rulers, which change over time, God's royal decrees cannot change. They stay the same from eternity past

to eternity future. This feature of divine laws brings surety, stability, and predictability to outcomes when we follow God's laws.

The term "holiness" in verse 93:5 is more encompassing than people convey in normal conversation. As used here, it is that quality of being set apart far beyond the everyday events and outcomes of human life. Holiness speaks to the divine character and presence of God. The word focuses on God's perfect strength, power, unquestionable justice, and trustworthiness. These qualities are so distinctively perfect, they set God in a unique position far beyond our human ability. When we see God set apart like this, it stirs awe and wonder in us. We see this picture of majestic perfection in Psalm 18:30 and 119:137-144.

In Psalm 93, David is seeing God in ontological terms. He saw God as the essence of existence: just existing without beginning and end, with perfect knowledge. Genesis 3:4-7 flirts with this concept of the self-existing, totally wise God.

SANKOFA

Secularists argue that there must be a wall of separation between church and state. Likewise, some famous philosophers argued there is a similar divide between science and belief in a creator God. Yet, history shows renowned scientists who subscribed to the ontological view of God. Probably the best-known among these is Isaac Newton. This celebrated scientist and theologian believed, "We must not seek

knowledge about the laws of nature from uncertain conjectures but learn them from observations and experiments.” This view flowed from his firm belief in a creator God who set the “laws of nature” in place.

George Washington Carver, a freed slave and lifelong Christian, held similar beliefs. That faith helped to guide his research on sustainable agriculture and food production in the American South. Carver attributed the insights he gained from research to the inspiration that came from God.

Great people of science have no difficulties in seeing the forever existing God in the world of science. Accordingly, we should reject all concepts that drive a wedge between God and science. While not a renowned astrologer, David still saw that the heavens declared the glory of God, and the skies announced what God’s hands had made (Psalm 19:1)

CASE STUDY

In the **Telling the Bible Story** section, we made a passing reference to the ontological view of God. This view became formalized into the *Ontological Argument* for God’s existence. The argument (or proposition) starts with the idea of the existence of God and projects the idea into the reality of God. The argument is credited to St. Anselm in his “Proslogion” (1077-78). The argument starts with the concept of God as that Ultimate (Perfect) Being above which there is

no greater. If we reduce the argument to its most basic form, it says that because we can conceive of such a being, such a being must exist.

How can we make sense of that idea in our world today? Fortunately, we do not need complex formulae from science or a Ph.D. in theology to grasp the outworkings of the *Ontological Argument*. Just think about the greatest, sharpest, wisest thinker you know or read about. About that person, you must choose one of two assessments. First, you can conclude that the person is the most brilliant, wisest mind in existence. If you do not make that assessment, then you must choose the alternative. Sheer common sense tells you in the second case that somewhere in existence is a person with a mind that is superior to the mind of the most brilliant person you can identify.

When we push that idea to its ultimate limits, it identifies God, the ultimate perfection in every attribute. This is what David saw and expressed in Psalm 19. A world that is so perfectly created, coordinated, and operated, could only come from a God that is greater than all the created things and beings we see in the universe. The existence of perfection in what we see attests to a perfect creator.

LIFE APPLICATION

The opening statement in Psalm 93:1 sets the tone for the short

psalm. However, you can miss the opening impact if you read the statement in a bland modern version which just says, “The Lord Reigns,” or “The Lord Is King.” Consider this expression: “Yahweh (the Creator) Reigns as the Sovereign Being.” It is a bold statement, an absolute statement that leaves no doubt about who God is and his place in the affairs of the universe. Meditate on that idea and consider if you have doubts about the identity of God or his sovereignty in the affairs of people and this world.

The themes of the eternal nature of God and the absolute authority of his reign run through the scriptures. Spend time over the week reflecting on verses that support these two core traits of God. Here are seven you can use to start this reflection: Psalm 90:2, Isaiah 40:28, Daniel 4:34-35, Revelation 1:8, 1 Timothy 1:17, Psalm 145:13, Lamentations 5:19.

Psalm 93:3 is symbolic language for fierce, rising opposition. The psalmist saw or felt a vicious attack. In the following verse, he takes comfort in his knowledge of the sovereign God. Consider the degree to which you can identify with this approach. When floodwaters of troubles rise in your life, do you know how to draw strength from the character of God? Can you be as sure, as the psalmist was, that your God is mightier than the troubles and the source of the troubles? Ponder this and take whatever action you think will help to build your confidence in God.

QUESTIONS

1. In your everyday activities, what things and/or events do you notice that reaffirm your belief in the existence of a mighty God?
2. What things inspire you to praise God?
3. Why do you think skeptics may see a conflict between science and faith?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: "Majesty, Worship His Majesty"

Closing Prayer: Dear Father, in those times when troubles arise in my life, remind me that all authority in heaven and on earth rests in my savior the Lord Jesus Christ. This I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

January 13-January 19

Monday Revelation 4 (God's Heavenly Throne)

Tuesday Revelation 22:1-14 (Life Springs From God's Throne)

Wednesday Isaiah 6:1-8 (My Eyes Have Seen the King)

Thursday James 4:1-10 (Draw Near to God in Humility)

Friday Hebrews 4:11-16 (Boldly Approach the Throne of Grace)

Saturday Isaiah 66:1-14 (Heaven Is God's Throne)

Sunday Psalm 103:1-11, 19-22 (Bless God's Holy Name)

LESSON 8 JANUARY 19, 2025

THE LORD'S THRONE IS ESTABLISHED

Lesson Scripture: Psalm 103

Focus Scripture: Psalm 103:1-14

Key Verse: The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. Psalm 103:6

PSALM 103:1-14 (NRSV UE)

- 1 Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.
- 2 Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—
- 3 who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,
- 4 who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
- 5 who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- 6 The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.
- 7 He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.
- 8 The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- 9 He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.
- 10 He does not deal with us according to our sins nor repay us according to our iniquities.
- 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
- 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

13 As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

14 For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.

PSALM 103:1-14 (KJV)

1 Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

2 Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits:

3 Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases;

4 Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies;

5 Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's.

6 The Lord executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed.

7 He made known his ways unto Moses, his acts unto the children of Israel.

8 The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.

9 He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever.

10 He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.

11 For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him.

12 As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.

13 Like as a father pitith his children, so the Lord pitith them that fear him.

14 For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.

KEY TERMS

- **Vindication** – The act or process of clearing a person of blame for something.
- **Crescendo** – The climax, high point, or loudest part in a song, play, or argument.
- **Liberia** – A country in West Africa with a population of about 6 million; Africa's oldest republic.
- **Stimuli** – Something that induces or triggers a particular reaction.
- **Critical Thinkers** – People who analyze and evaluate information.

Introduction

Naturally, we feel grateful towards people who do good things to or for us. Out of that gratitude, we praise them. When we understand this, it takes the mystery out of praising God. At its root, praise is not the result of outward stimulation by music, although we accept that music can help to enhance our praise. Rather, praise is an outward expression of the gratitude we feel in our hearts. People with a low sense of appreciation towards God have difficulty offering praises to God. Conversely, the people who deeply appreciate God's mercy and grace towards them praise God lavishly.

Keep this basic truth in mind and watch how it plays out in the text. David did not praise because he was a "natural worshipper," as praise team leaders assert. The intensity of his praise was rooted in his knowledge and appreciation of God's character and works in people's lives. This is a cue for us to examine the degree to which we appreciate what God has done or is doing in our lives. The insight from that examination will help us to understand the quality of our praise to God.

But we should also note the reverse. Although people may acknowledge God's goodness, they can become complacent about those blessings. From there a sense of entitlement develops that stops people from praising God. This is like when children acknowledge the good that their parents contributed to their lives.

However, if the children believe that the parents acted out of a sense of duty, the children will not praise the parent for the sacrifices the parents made to care for them. So, the question naturally arises about how we see God's goodness towards us. Are God's blessings a discretionary favor, or is God just doing what God must do for us? Your answer to that question determines the level of praise you offer to God.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

In the opening verses (verses 1-2) David encourages, indeed commands, himself to bless/raise the Lord. What is astonishing about this call is that David had great reasons to praise the Lord. Yet his praise was not automatic. When we catch this point, we understand that at times we must, by deliberate effort, encourage ourselves to focus on God's goodness and praise him accordingly.

Verses 4-6 highlight a truth praise teams need to note. Calling people to "just praise the Lord" falls flat when people are not focusing on the reason for the praise. People do not offer praises to God in a vacuum. They need reasons to praise. This is what David set out in these verses. Also, examine how the reasons to praise hit the major Christian themes: God's unshakeable faithfulness to his people, how God addresses our deepest fears, and meets our core needs.

Ponder verses 3-5 and mark the topics David claimed God

addresses for us: forgiveness, healing, life, significance, happiness, endurance for living, and justice. God is concerned about the issues of life that concern us. Hence, this is a God that is worthy of our praise. Follow how the psalmist expanded on these matters later in the psalm.

But why is David so intense in his praise for God? To use modern jargon, he had “the receipts.” The first clue is that David knew the history of Israel and how God demonstrated his faithfulness to the nation (verses 7-9). The second hint is David’s own experiences with God (verses 10-18).

Verses 17-18 when taken together reach back to the earlier point of having a solid reason for obeying and praising God. In simple terms, our faithfulness to God pays off in the outflows of God’s steadfast love for us.

The psalm ends in a wonderful crescendo. David’s exuberance about the identity and works of God fired him up to call for everyone and everything everywhere to bless the Lord. This is the joy believers experience as they meditate deeply on the eternal God’s character, works, and steadfast love. Let us bless the Lord.

SANKOFA

King David’s call to praise God he first directed to himself, then extended to all of Israel, and by implication to the entire universe.

Liberians, it would seem, heard and heeded the call. History tells us Liberia is the only African state founded by African American immigrants – freed American slaves. Naturally, the settlers brought with them to Liberia their American traditions, which included the Thanksgiving celebrations. However, Liberia's Thanksgiving is not a carbon copy of America's.

The Liberia celebration is on the first Thursday in November, and it focuses on thanking God for the harvests that sustain the nation. Liberians use Thanksgiving Day as a special day to praise God in the churches and other sacred places of worship. As part of the praise rituals, worshippers take to the churches' thanksgiving services fresh fruits from their harvests. These fruits are auctioned at the end of the service. Then the people return home for the traditional Thanksgiving meal.

But we must also note the central idea behind the Liberian Thanksgiving. The people are praising God for freeing the slaves and enabling them to come to Liberia, where they built a country where people can live in freedom. They see the creation and development of their country as a work of God's grace. Those sentiments about the goodness of God are the same thoughts that inspired King David to call people everywhere to bless the Lord. The Liberian example should likewise stimulate us to consider the goodness of God to us. Yes, we too have great reasons to bless the

Lord.

CASE STUDY

Over the centuries, a practice has developed in certain churches where praise teams (or choirs) attempt to “get people into the mood” to praise or worship God. Often worshippers crudely referred to this as “pumping up” the people. Praise team leaders, who are skilled at this “pumping” of congregations, receive high respect, recognition, and rewards.

Critical thinkers often wonder why congregations must be “pumped” or “hyped” to praise God. Without a doubt, music can and does enhance our praise of God. We see this in several of the psalms. Yet genuine praise to God flows from within the heart of gratitude rather than a response to outside stimuli. People who feel grateful to God will naturally express praise to God.

So how can we get into an attitude where we are ready to praise God when we enter places of worship? We simply do what the Liberians did. They saw their accomplishments not in terms of their own achievements. They did not take for themselves the credit for what they achieved in moving to and settling Liberia. They gave the credit to God. This is a foundational principle. When we are grateful to God, we take the focus off ourselves and put it firmly on God. This is what is meant by the expression “We decrease, and God increase” during praise rituals.

Astonishingly, as our focus on God grows, our praise becomes sweeter and more intense. With such a focus, humility grows in us and spurs more praise. It is a self-generating cycle. But what is behind this phenomenon? Our hearts cannot have two focal points at the same time. We cannot be prideful (about ourselves) and humble before God at the same time. This is the root of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:21-24. Our actions follow our hearts. When the focus of our hearts is on God, our mouths, feet, and hands automatically express what our hearts see. Understanding these principles gives us the keys to exciting praise services. We must go to church services not focused on the praise team skills. We go "focused on God." God alone.

LIFE APPLICATION

One hindrance to free-flowing praise to God is unresolved issues in our hearts. We must constantly remind ourselves that God helps us to resolve these painful issues. So, if your praise to God is not what you desire, seek God's healing so your heart will be free to praise the Lord. The process may be painful at times, but so, too, is the formation of a pearl.

Psychology and other social sciences tell us we do not see certain things because we are not looking for them. King David saw the glory of God in the heavens because his heart was so focused. Spend time observing the beauty of the world and the grace of God

that is evident in the events around the world. The more we look for the fingers of God, the greater the impression of the divine hand in our hearts. These observations become the wells from which spontaneous praise flows.

Psalm 103 addresses ordinary, everyday issues that concern us. Select a verse from this psalm that is meaningful to you. Memorize the selected verse. Draw on this verse when you think about the issue to which it relates. Knowing that God has an answer for this issue will inspire you to resolve it in the right way. You will also find it useful to praise God in advance for his wisdom in addressing the matter.

Certain people miss the joy of God's presence because the guilt of past sin distorts the focus of their hearts. As we noted before, our minds have difficulty in embracing conflicting emotions. We cannot praise God out of gratitude when we feel condemned by past sin. Accept what Psalm 103 says about God's forgiveness of our sins. Resolve to accept God's offer of forgiveness. Read and reread what the psalm says about God's forgiveness. Then repent of your sinful action and move forward into God's forgiveness. Thank God for forgiving you.

QUESTIONS

1. What prevents you from praising God as freely as you desire?

2. How do you view the claim in verse 2 that God heals “all your diseases”?

3. Why do unresolved issues in our hearts affect our praises to God?

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about the long arc of the universe bending toward justice. How do we praise even when it is hard to see the bend toward justice?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: “Bless the Lord, O My Soul,” *AMEC Hymnal* #594

Closing Prayer: God of justice and love, please help me to remove from my heart any unresolved issues that hinder me from praising you freely. Thanks for loving me and making it possible for me to praise you with a free heart, despite my messy past. In Jesus’ name. Amen!

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

January 20-January 26

Monday Daniel 2:31-45 (The Kingdoms of This World)

Tuesday Colossians 1:11-20 (The Kingdom of God’s Son)

Wednesday Colossians 1:21-29 (Christ, the Hope of Glory)

Thursday Zechariah 14:8-11, 16-21 (The Lord Reigns Over the Earth)

Friday Hebrews 12:18-29 (An Unshakable Kingdom)

Saturday Matthew 6:25-34 (Seek First God’s Kingdom)

Sunday Psalm 145:1-10, 17-21 (Bless God's Name Forever)

LESSON 9 JANUARY 26, 2025

MY GOD, THE KING

Lesson Scripture: Psalm 145

Focus Scripture: Psalm 145:1, 10-21

Key Verse: Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. Psalm 145:13

PSALM 145:1, 10-21 (NRSV UE)

Psalm 145:1

1 I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever.

10-21

10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you.

11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your power,

12 to make known to all people your mighty deeds and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.

13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The Lord is faithful in all his words and gracious in all his deeds.

14 The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.

15 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.

16 You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.

17 The Lord is just in all his ways and kind in all his doings.

18 The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

19 He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them.

20 The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.

21 My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

PSALM 145:1, 10-21 (KJV)

Psalm 145:1

1 I will extol thee, my God, O king; and I will bless thy name for ever and ever.

10-21

10 All thy works shall praise thee, O Lord; and thy saints shall bless thee.

11 They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom, and talk of thy power;

12 To make known to the sons of men his mighty acts, and the glorious majesty of his kingdom.

13 Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations.

14 The Lord upholdeth all that fall, and raiseth up all those that be bowed down.

15 The eyes of all wait upon thee; and thou givest them their meat in due season.

16 Thou openest thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing.

17 The Lord is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works.

18 The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth.

19 He will fulfil the desire of them that fear him: he also will hear their cry, and will save them.

20 The Lord preserveth all them that love him: but all the wicked will

he destroy.

21 My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord: and let all flesh bless his holy name for ever and ever.

KEY TERMS

- **Exuberance** – A blend of energy and excitement.
- **Sovereignty** – Supreme power and authority, especially of a ruler.
- **Atheist** – A person who denies the existence of God.
- **Skeptic** – A person with doubts about God's existence and claims relating to God.
- **Proffer** – To offer or claim something for acceptance (subject to validation).

Introduction

All of us, Christians, atheists, skeptics, like to share our life experiences. We share our bad experiences to get sympathy and to prove our ability to survive adversities. Our positive encounters we share eagerly to publicize our blessings and invite others to taste what we tasted.

People who recognize our innate eagerness to share pleasing events and outcomes, expect Christians to delight in sharing their positive experiences of God's greatness. In the text, we see David's exuberance to share his knowledge and experiences of God. Further, he called everyone to do the same. The text gives insight into what fueled David's eagerness to praise God. As you ponder what the psalmist shared about his mighty God, consider if the Christians you meet are excited about their relationship with God. The conclusion we get from reading Psalm 145 is that no one could have stopped David from singing God's praises. The world had to know David loved God and wanted the world to love the Lord the same way. This impression challenges us to inquire why so many believers are only lukewarm about praising the great God they serve. What can we do, individually or collectively, to get where David was in praising God? David was so excited about the greatness of God; he was eager to praise Yahweh routinely wherever he was. A stirring lesson to believers today!

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

The psalm is easy to analyze as King David laid its foundational plank at the start (verse 1). David is a king, so he knows the power and authority of sovereignty. Therefore, when David acknowledged God as his sovereign, he exalted God light years above all earthly thrones. King David's pledge to serve God forever is a vow to humble himself to the sovereign will of God all his life.

The remainder of Psalm 145 is David's explanation of why he rejoiced in God's sovereignty. Note how God's goodness and faithfulness are recurring themes. It is natural to place unlimited trust and give lavish praise to such a great and faithful God (verses 3-7).

Unlike other psalms that point to specific events, Psalm 145 does not focus on specific historical actions by God. Rather, this psalm speaks of general actions that naturally and consistently flow out of God's character. These are the things God will always do because they are a natural outworking of who God is (145:8-9, 14-20).

Bible students may find it challenging to grasp the significance of verses 14-16. To put those verses in their true context, we must look at life in King David's day. At that time, most Israelites were subsistence farmers/herders. Therefore, they had natural concerns about having enough food for themselves and their herds. So, to know a God who would ensure an adequate food supply was an enormous reason for rejoicing and praising. The fact that we have

more reliable food supply chains today should not blind us to the fact that it is the Lord who supplies our needs.

Verses 145:18-19 are pivotal in the psalm. Certain people claim that they do not experience the presence and favor of God. These verses help us to understand why. Contrary to social media's twisted pop theology, God is not devotionally close to everyone. Look at the traits/qualifications of people who experience closeness with God. As if to bring this principle into the New Covenant age, James 4:8-10 echoes it. God attaches a great premium to humility and honesty.

It is tempting to end our review of this psalm in verse 19. Doing so would be in line with the approach prosperity preachers take today. They emphasize only the "positives of God's love." As appealing as that approach is, it is not wholesome. Scriptures like verse 20 tell us God has two hands: a right hand of love and a left hand of judgment. As harsh as it may sound, we cannot ignore, disrespect, or disobey God without dire consequences. God does destroy the wicked. We must always keep this balanced view of God before us.

SANKOFA

In David's era, a great king was a ruler who cared for his people. In Psalm 145 that is the image David painted of King God. It is an image that believers in general have attested to over the ages. The husband and wife team of Walter and Civilla Martin gave a similar profile of God in the lyrics of the hymn "God Will Take Care of You."

The story behind this hymn is inspiring.

Walter had a preaching assignment but thought about giving it up because he was concerned about leaving his wife who was sick. Hearing his parents' concern, their nine-year-old son offered striking advice. He challenged his father to believe in the majesty and goodness of God. The son's faith came in a simple question: "Father, don't you think that if God wants you to preach today, he will take care of mother while you are away?" This settled the matter in Walter's mind, and he went to the preaching engagement leaving the fate of his sick wife in the hands of God.

When Walter returned home, not only was his wife in better health, but her son's faith had motivated her to write the lyrics to the well-known hymn. The power in the lyrics prompted Walter to put music to them quickly. "God Will Take Care of You" was born. It was published in 1905. Today, mainline Christians still regard this hymn as one of the 20th century's best-loved hymns of faith and assurance. Its message echoes the message of Psalm 145. This golden hymn reminds us that in whatever situation we find ourselves in, God has the interest and power to care for us.

CASE STUDY

If you are keen, you will hear between verses 10 and 12 a call for Christians to testify of God's goodness in the ears of people outside the church walls. In verse 10 we see that only people who belong to

God will bless him. This makes good sense as people who do not recognize God's majesty cannot see the goodness of God in everyday life. Therefore, we should not look to the skeptics to hear praises to God. It is the believers who must shout the blessings of God. Verse 11 tells us what the testimony of believers will focus on: the glory and power of God and his kingdom.

Verse 12 explains the power and effect of our testimony. This is how people in general, everyone (the sons and daughters of men), hears about the mighty works and glorious majesty of God and his kingdom. Hopefully, the testimonies of the faithful believers will awaken in people the desire to be associated with this great God.

King David's, and later apostle Paul's, ministry efforts came out of this overpowering desire to make the goodness of God known to all people, especially those outside the body of believers. We see this driving desire throughout the Psalms: 57:9, 62:5, 96:10, 100:4, 119:27. For Paul, we see the same drive in Romans 1:14-16, 1 Cor. 9:19-23, Acts 20:24, and Colossians 1:28-29.

This information shouts a loud message to believers today. We cannot expect the world at large to know of the goodness of God if testimonies about God's goodness are like patent products served in polished packages within the walls of closed-door churches.

Today, we see the push to evangelize through public media promotions. However, available data shows that of the people who

come to faith in Christ, the vast majority responded to personal testimonies and invitations from friends and families. Yes, we know that social media postings, Zoom meetings, and website content can sensitize people to the gospel message. Still, these media do not get people across the line to a personal commitment to Christ. Believers who engage people on a personal level, and share the mighty works of God, are still the greatest way to get people to know about the majesty of God. Without a doubt, personal evangelism (direct person-to-person witness) is still the most effective way to raise the echoes of praise to our great God. Please underline that!

LIFE APPLICATION

In verse 1 David declares a profound commitment. It is both a daily and lifetime commitment to praise God. Consider what experiences would move a person to such a commitment. Then use that reflection to assess your own resolve to give God praise. Think about how often you actually praise God, and what would have to happen for you to give God meaningful praise throughout your day.

It is obvious from the set text, and related text, that David had a routine for praising God, even when he dealt with affairs of the state. Let this thought inspire you to assess your routine for raising praises to God daily. Our daily praise should not be a diversion (a sideshow) from our daily routine. Rather, giving daily praises to God must be an integral part of our daily activities. Consider what you must do to

make this a reality in your life.

Psalm 145 cites core attributes of God. Make a list of these: “great” (verses 3, 6); “good” (verses 7, 9); and “merciful,” “compassionate” (verses 8, 9). We should not gloss over these or reduce them to one general term. To cement these attributes in your heart, choose one for each day of the coming week and meditate on it. During the meditation, try to find the distinguishing features of each attribute, and why these features are important to the profile of God. The best way to do this assessment is to consider what God would be like without these attributes.

Verse 14 challenges the theology of persons who believe that once they are in Christ, life must be rosy, and no trouble can come their way. This verse suggests that even for the godly times of struggle (falling and “bowing down”) will come. But God is still faithful in those valley experiences. Consider how this sits with your basic theology of God’s protection for the Christian. Do you see that weapons may form against us, but because of God’s protection, those weapons shall not destroy us? Your outlook on this issue will frame your reactions to challenges in your life.

Verse 16 (and Psalm 136:25) proffers that God’s provisions “satisfy the desires of every living thing.” When you consider the level of hunger and homelessness in your country, and worldwide, how do you make sense of this assertion? Pretend you are a defense lawyer

for David, and you must justify that statement. What explanation can you give to yourself and skeptics?

QUESTIONS

1. What is your main motivation for praising God?
2. What is a practical way God helps the faithful in their daily struggles?
3. Why would personal testimony from family and friends be the most effective way to evangelize the world?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: "Be Not Dismayed (God Will Take Care of You),"
AMEC Hymnal #437

Closing Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, help me to remember that you are indeed King of all kings, President of all presidents, Pastor of all pastors, and Provider of all suppliers. Lord, help me to keep my eyes on you and your boundless goodness in my life. All praises to you, in Jesus' name. Amen!

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

January 27–February 2

Monday Matthew 11:25-30 (Come, All Who Are Weary)

Tuesday Psalm 4 (God, Answer Me When I Call)

Wednesday Luke 18:1-8 (Cry Out Continually for Justice)

Thursday James 5:13-20 (Pray for One Another)

Friday Psalm 91 (God Is My Refuge and Fortress)

Saturday Psalm 92 (God Will Deliver You)

Sunday Matthew 6:5-15 (The Prayer That Jesus Taught)

LESSON 10 FEBRUARY 2, 2025

PRAYING FOR RELIEF

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 6:5-15

Focus Scripture: Matthew 6:5-15

Key Verse: May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth
as it is in heaven. Matthew 6:10

MATTHEW 6:5-15 (NRSV UE)

- 5 "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.
- 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.
- 7 When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.
- 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.
- 9 Pray, then, in this way: Our Father in heaven, may your name be revered as holy.
- 10 May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
- 11 Give us today our daily bread.
- 12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
- 13 And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.
- 14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,

15 but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

MATTHEW 6:5-15 (KJV)

5 And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

6 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

7 But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.

8 Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

10 Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

11 Give us this day our daily bread.

12 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

14 For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:

15 But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

KEY TERMS

- **Plagued** – Tarnished to the point of corruption or destruction.
- **Hellenistic** – Relating to Greek culture that flourished before the Roman Empire.

- **Quid Pro Quo** – Bargaining; one thing offered for another thing.
- **Spurious** – Of face value only; false or fake.
- **Pound of Flesh** – A figure of speech for revenge or strict enforcement of a legal right.

Introduction

Prayer is the activity people use to enlist help from God. However, over the centuries the art of praying became mystified in jargon and rituals. Jesus saw this confusion about prayer. For the sake of his followers, Christ called people back to the simplicity and sincerity of praying.

Further, we must note that as it was in Jesus' day, so it is today, regarding money and property. People try to bridge the gap between the money for things they desire, and their lack of income or resources, by borrowing. At times, for any one of a variety of reasons, borrowers fell short of their legal repayment obligations. In those default cases, the lender had two options. He could forgive the debt, or enforce his remedies under the lending agreement.

This concept of dealing with delinquent debts has application when people hurt us. We can pursue them and demand our "pound of flesh" (revenge and retribution). Alternatively, we can take the road less traveled as commanded by Jesus. We can forgive the offenders/defaulters. The crucial thing to remember is that how we deal with people's debts (offenses) to us affects how God deals with our sin debt to him. Follow the interplay between these two issues of prayer and indebtedness.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

The text (from verse 1) brings into focus an issue that has plagued

religion from ancient times: a public display of religious rituals, versus a heartfelt commitment to the ideals of the rituals. A commentator artfully expressed the issue as fake commitment versus real commitment. People go through the outward motions without real sincerity in the heart. Carefully underline the spiritual practices Jesus addressed in this discourse: giving (charitable deeds) and praying. These are two activities people tightly associate with religious piety.

The text highlights Jesus' mastery as a teacher. First, he clearly stated the current practices. Next, he showed what was wrong with those practices. Afterward, he explained what the right approach was and validated his approach. Most believers can follow that method of teaching. However, the aspect that we often overlook, at times deliberately, is Jesus' frankness. He did not use soothing language to describe the customary practices. He was blunt, calling the people hypocrites. That word said they were performing their rituals to impress the crowds. They were acting out a character they had no genuine desire to adopt. As followers of Christ, is that style recommendable? Something to think about!

Verse 6 can be challenging if not read in its true context. First, note that Jesus was not setting a new doctrine. The Israelites, who knew how to pray sincerely, already followed this approach. We see an example of this in 2 Kings 4:33.

Also, praying in secret does not mean we should not engage in corporate prayer, or we should avoid praying in public spaces. That is not the thrust of the verse. Rather, it means we should not give a display of prayer to draw attention to ourselves or our prayers. Hannah prayed in secret, although her praying occurred in a public space (1 Samuel 1:13). A person must pray as if it were only he (or she) in a private room with God, and only God can hear the prayer. True prayer targets the ears of God only. Be careful to distinguish praying from praising.

Also, consider the nature of prayers the Pharisees would have engaged in. Because of the influence of the Greek culture sweeping the region at that time, prayers had a feature of begging with pleadings to bargain with the gods. We see an example of this at 1 Kings 18:27-28, in Elijah's showdown with the prophets of Baal. Hence, public prayers contained a lavish number of repetitive chants. The Greeks believed those chants would force the gods to grant the prayer requests. This explains the "vain repetitions" comment in verse 7.

Contrast those prayers with the prayers Jesus recommended. Jesus' prayer is simple and appears casual when compared to the pagan Hellenistic prayers people practiced at that time. But the power of Jesus' prayer is not in specific words. There is no magic in reciting the identical words in the text. The power is in the heart submission

that the prayer demands. It calls us to recognize God's sovereignty over us and for us to trust God to care for us as he sees fit. God is not our servant to hurriedly fetch for us what we call for. Instead, we are his subjects waiting respectfully to receive at his pleasure. Before God, we are like convicts in a law court seeking the judge's pleasure. You will embrace this point when you understand Jesus' teaching in Luke 17:7-10.

We must be crystal clear on this point. Contrary to "name-it and claim-it" preaching, we have no power to force God to do our will. In prayer there is no quid pro quo bargaining with God. We approach God humbly in a faith that says, "Father, I know you exist, and you love me. I trust you to provide for me what is right for me. As far as I can see, this is (these are) what I want. However, I accept you know better than I do, so I will accept whatever you provide in your love for me."

Verses 12, and 14-15, we must read together with an eye also on Matthew 18:21-22. Mark 11:25 (NLT) is also relevant to this point. Jesus emphasized a direct link between the forgiveness we seek from God and the forgiveness we practice. This is a hard teaching, and hurting victims may try to dance around it with spurious theology. That is understandable as pain feeds our natural appetite for revenge. Yet forgiveness remains a solid teaching of the master.

To understand this issue, go to Jesus' summary of the Decalogue in

Matthew 22:37-40. Like the cross, Christianity has two planks. One plank reaches upward to the invisible God. The other arm reaches across to our visible brother and sister. God does not accept one-plank Christianity. This is a truth we cannot pray away, tithe away, or reason away. God is so serious about this principle that he ensured Jesus complied with it (Luke 2:52).

We appreciate the principle readily when we consider the havoc unforgiveness plays in our lives. It breeds bitterness, destroys relationships, foster divorces, and even leads to murders. As great ministers have taught before, the act of forgiving offenders does more for the person who forgives than the person forgiven. Still, let us not pretend that it is easy to forgive offenders. Instead, we must ask God for wisdom and strength to comply with this command.

Verse 6:13 is interesting for what it implies. It puts to the lie that godly people will have no problems. The verse clearly acknowledges that trials/temptations and evil plots are in the path of the Christian. The NLT rendition of this verse brings out this context: “And don’t let us yield to temptation but rescue us from the evil one.” This phrasing gives a very thoughtful meaning to the two parts of the verse. When we read them together, they say, “Lord, stop us from falling for the temptation that will come our way. And in those times when we do fall victims to the temptation, rescue us (before the devil destroys us).” That does make sense.

SANKOFA

In the **Telling the Bible Story** section, we acknowledged that practicing forgiveness is never easy. The story of Immaculée Ilibagiza illustrates this point. But the story also showed how trust in God and the power of prayer make forgiveness possible.

Immaculée noted that forgiving the men who killed her parents and brothers was a process, “a journey into deeper and deeper prayer.” First, she said that it was her faith in God and intense prayer that helped her to survive a nerve-racking three-month ordeal. During the incident, she and seven other women lay hidden, crammed into a small bathroom in the home of a Protestant pastor. The pastor’s house was near her home in the western province of Kibuye, on Lake Kivu. Fortunately, the pastor who hid the group of women – Pastor Murinzi, a Hutu – did not share in the ethnic hatred between the Hutus and Tutsis which erupted into the Rwandan Genocide in 1994.

In her books – *Left to Tell* and *Led by Faith* – Ms. Ilibagiza gave details of her challenging faith journey. It took her from the darkness of natural hatred and the desire for revenge that gripped her initially, to the bright place of compassion and forgiveness. Among the notable keys to her success was her focus on the forgiveness requirement in The Lord’s Prayer. As she embraced the Matthew 6:13 principle, it started an inner transformation in her heart. As

someone jokingly noted, God's principles only work for people who work them. Normally, the offensives we must forgive people for never reach the level of the atrocities that Immaculée Ilibagiza suffered in the Rwandan Genocide. If she could forgive people who murdered her family, searched for her to kill her, raped and brutalized her people, who can we not forgive? With the same heart of prayer, we can forgive people who hurt us in relationships, steal our property, deny us economic opportunity, and/or actively discriminate against us because of their racial biases. Forgiving such culprits does not say they were right. It does not mean we are soft as a people, or as Christians. What it does is to clear the way for us to pray effectively to God. Something to think about soberly!

CASE STUDY

The emphasis Jesus placed on the practice of forgiveness and its strong link to God's response to our prayers should be enough to inspire us to forgive people who have done us wrong. However, to be honest, for people bent on revenge, including believers, Christ's teachings are often not enough. Numerous victims of wrong take the position that to forgive evildoers is to let them go free. And the victim's "sense of justice" demands that the culprits "pay" for the wrongs they have committed. Withholding forgiveness, therefore, becomes part of the punishment of culprits. No doubt that is brilliant human reasoning. However, it does not reflect the mind of Christ.

To appreciate the evils of not forgiving others, consider the mental and physical trauma victims take through life. First, they carry a bitterness that takes on a life of its own. After a while, victims, who ignore God's command to forgive, move from being angry about an event they suffered to just being angry. The effects of such anger leak into all aspects of the victim's life. One effect of this is that victims have problems trusting other people. This cancer can stretch as far as their love relationship. The victim thus becomes a victim of his or her own anger.

Time and space do not permit us to give the findings from scientific studies on the practice of forgiving others. However, we share what is an overview of one such study. The extract below is from an online article in *Psychology Today* by Robert Enright, Ph.D. ("The Forgiving Life") on April 11, 2019. It addresses the question, "Is Forgiveness Related to Physical Health?"

"It is well known that when people follow a scientifically valid pathway to forgiving those who have been unjust to them, then positive psychological outcomes are observed. For example, Freedman and Enright (1996) showed that after about a 14-month intervention in which incest survivors forgave their father or father-figure, they then reduced in anxiety and depression and increased in self-esteem. Such results have been observed for people in drug rehabilitation (Lin et al., 2004), in hospice (Hansen, Enright, Baskin,

& Klatt, 2009) and with other populations (see Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015)."

To put it bluntly, when victims CHOOSE to forgive offenders and follow through, they do themselves a great favor. They reduce the risks of chronic anxieties, depression, and lasting damage to their self-esteem. Therefore, if Jesus' call to practice forgiveness is not enough for us to forgive offenders, for our own mental and spiritual health, we must learn to forgive.

LIFE APPLICATION

There is a certain mystery and formality that people bring to praying. Often, people praying in public use special "prayer words" and jargon that are outside their normal vocabulary. Pay attention to your prayer language and consider the extent to which it represents your voice and your heart. Remember sincerity and not the vocabulary is the feature that moves God.

Have you ever had the experience of a friend saying you do not have to return an item you borrowed or repay a loan you owe? If the loan forgiveness or freedom from an obligation was a genuine act of love, you experienced what it felt like to receive love in a practical way. Meditate on those feelings and take them into the realm of God's forgiveness. Deliberately consider the great favor God grants to us when he forgives our sins. Then ponder if this divine forgiveness is enough reason for you to obey God's command to forgive people

who do you wrong. If you catch yourself trying to justify your disobedience to the command to forgive offenders, please repeat the meditation.

One reason it is so hard for us to forgive others is our lack of consideration for others. The good news is that we can develop a heart that considers the interests of others. We start this process by going out of our way to help others in small ways. For example, you can buy a stranger a cup of coffee at your favorite coffee or breakfast shop. When driving, you can allow another driver to cross into your lane ahead of you. Such small gestures train our hearts to be considerate of others.

In the Model Prayer, Jesus asked us to consider God's will and open ourselves to be reflectors of the divine kingdom. Against that background, think about the contents of your prayers. Think about the allowance you make in your prayers for God's will to manifest. When we make no allowance for God's will in our prayers, our prayers become like the prayers of the pagans: vain, selfish, pleadings designed to corner God into action.

QUESTIONS

1. Should we publicize, via the traditional press or social media, our gifts and help the poor and needy?
2. In the Model Prayer, we ask only for a "daily bread" (immediate

needs). What could be the rationale for this?

3. Based on material shared in the **Case Study**, why would hurting people hurt people?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: “The Lord’s Prayer (Caribbean Version),” AMEC Hymnal #632

Closing Prayer: Dear Father, I know you command that I forgive, but at times, this is “oh, so hard.” Grant me the wisdom, faith, and strength to do as you ask even when I feel the pain from hurt inflicted by others. Lord, please help me to do this for my benefit and your glory. My prayer, in Jesus’ name! Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

February 3-February 9

Monday Joshua 1:1-9 (Be Strong and Courageous)

Tuesday Matthew 10:16-30 (As Sheep Among Wolves)

Wednesday Matthew 10:31-42 (Resistance and Reward)

Thursday Psalm 35:1-14 (God Is Our Salvation)

Friday Psalm 35:15-28 (Rescue Me From My Enemies)

Saturday Proverbs 24:8-22 (Don’t Rejoice When Enemies Fall)

Sunday Matthew 11:7-15, 20-24 (The Kingdom Presses On)

LESSON 11 FEBRUARY 9, 2025

RESISTANCE TO THE KINGDOM

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 11

Focus Scripture: Matthew 11:7-15, 20-24

Key Verse: Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent.

Matthew 11:20

MATTHEW 11:7-15, 20-24 (NRSV UE)

Matthew 11:7-15

- 7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?
- 8 What, then, did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.
- 9 What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.
- 10 This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’
- 11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.
- 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and violent people take it by force.
- 13 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John came,
- 14 and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.
- 15 Let anyone with ears listen!”

20-24

20 Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done because they did not repent.

21 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

22 But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

23 And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

24 But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you."

MATTHEW 11:7-15, 20-24 (KJV)

Matthew 11:7-15

7 And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind?

8 But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.

9 But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet.

10 For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

11 Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

12 And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.

13 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

14 And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.

15 He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

20-24

20 Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not:
21 Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

22 But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you.

23 And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

24 But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.

KEY TERMS

- **Affluent** – A lifestyle of wealth, fame, and social influence.
- **Refugee** – A person who flees home and country from violence and is homeless.
- **Mantle** – The covering (in religion, material or figurative) denoting spiritual authority.
- **Messiahship** – Having God's anointing as the Messiah (liberator).
- **Superfluous** – Unnecessary; excessive.
- **Enigmatic** – Mysterious; difficult to explain.

Introduction

Human curiosity makes us interested in new things and the start of new eras. But on the flipside of this desire to have new experiences is the tremendous comfort we find in maintaining the status quo. John the Baptist introduced the new era promised in prophecy which the people were anxiously awaiting. Yet because of Israel's spiritual blindness rooted in the familiar form of Judaism, they could not recognize that what they desired had arrived.

Further, recognize that when people are moving from an old era to a new one, a certain level of hesitation and confusion seems inevitable. This is very much the case when the leaders, who people are looking to for guidance, are themselves unsure of how to assess the new era and associated events.

Do not approach this lesson to form opinions on how the people in Israel responded to Jesus' ministry. Rather, transport the essence of the events into our society today. Then, assess how well, or lacking, is our response to new revelations and unfamiliar works God may be doing among us. Think about this question. Is it possible that today we are missing much of what God is doing among us because we are too comfortable in our traditional ways of worship and ministry? Our answers to this question should force us to examine how receptive we are to the non-traditional ways God may use to reach people today. In our various ministries, can we be making the same

mistakes the Jews made at the start of John the Baptist's ministry?
We hope not!

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

The set text gives powerful insights into how God works in our affairs. John, an ordinary man, nothing spectacular about him in human terms, came to validate the Messiahship of Jesus. At the time Jesus spoke about John's ministry, John could not speak for himself. So, Jesus was validating the ministry of John. You will miss the power of this event if you evaluate it in isolation. Remind yourself that John the Baptist introduced and validated Jesus' ministry. In the text, Jesus is now returning the favor. So, what do you see? Man (John) validated God (Jesus), and God in return validated man's ministry. Try to see how this principle still plays out today.

See verses 11:7-8 in this context. Jesus' questions here set the runway for the teaching. John's ministry was not about an ordinary, weak, unstable man (reed), or a person living the affluent lifestyle (soft clothing). Still, the people flocked to hear John because they recognized something special about his ministry.

In verses 9-14 Jesus put John's ministry in its true perspective. Yes, John was a prophet but not an ordinary prophet. He was a special prophet, the last of the great foretelling prophets, who had a special place in the ministry of Christ. John's ministry closed the age of the prophets and opened the age of the Messiah. And, in the Messiah's

era, God's revelations to believers are no longer restricted to specially anointed prophets as in the Old Testament period. The Holy Spirit, who is available to all believers, can give any believer divine messages.

"Let anyone with ears listen!" (verse 15) is the language of riddles. It invites people who were listening to consider the truth in the statements. This seems superfluous until we look at the history of Israel. The nation, for varying reasons, was not always ready to hear God's truths. Isaiah 6:10, Jeremiah 6:10, Ezekiel 12:2, and related texts confirm this.

Even today we see this. People blinded by selfish interests, and political or social biases, cannot see or embrace the truths in scripture that seem to cut across their cherished agendas. When they are in leadership chairs, such people fight to maintain their own agenda despite the urging of the scriptures to follow God's blueprint.

Also noteworthy is the reference to Elijah in verse 14. Although this was clearly foretold, the religious elite (scribes/priests) did not recognize the fulfillment in John the Baptist. Passages like Matthew 17:10-13 and Mark 9:11-13 highlighted this ignorance which Jesus had to explain. Events like this cause us to wonder if in our day we are missing revelations that are unfolding before our eyes.

Verse 11:12 is challenging. Despite rigorous debate over the centuries, varying interpretations persist. The key to understanding

the meaning is discerning who or what is “the violent” that takes the kingdom “by force.” One interpretation is that as the kingdom message, salvation by grace through faith in Christ, started to spread, opposition to it became aggressive (violent) to stop (take) it. In this view, the opponents would include Herod (who imprisoned John); Jewish leaders who tried to sustain Judaism; people who were looking for an earthly political liberator; and false/prosperity preachers, who wanted to peddle material prosperity rather than spiritual well-being and eternal life.

An alternative view is that after John introduced the kingdom message people stormed into the kingdom like soldiers taking a conquered city. This view spurs serious implications. It suggests that only people who are “violent” (serious, aggressive, committed) get into the kingdom. Only “violent” people can conquer the lust of the flesh, the covetousness of the eyes, and the pride of life, which are barriers to kingdom living. Something to consider!

In verses 20-24, Jesus highlighted a game sinners play that can drive unsuspecting evangelists to the psychiatrists. The game is the “Changing Goalpost.” People, to hide their rejection of the gospel, set criteria that evangelists must meet for them to join the body of Christ. When the evangelists meet those criteria or satisfy their stated concerns, they shift the conditions to other concerns. Buyers have played this game with salespeople for years.

This game can become ridiculous, as sinners set unrealistic bars. It is not unheard of for people to tell evangelists, “Come back to me when all your church members are perfect.” The story of the rich young ruler showed that Jesus did not play that game. Neither should we! Follow Christ’s example. He stated his case, introduced people to the kingdom, and left it to them to accept or reject the kingdom. That was his approach in Capernaum, which saw the miracles, yet did not believe or embrace the Christ.

Finally, appreciate that Jesus did not practice “Seekers Sensitive Evangelism”: he did not take his cue of what to preach and how to preach from the people he addressed. As the Messiah, he knew what he was preaching cut across the culture and what the people expected. But, since he aimed to deliver spiritual truths, he gave people what they needed, not what they wanted. So, Jesus listened to God, stayed true to his mission, and preached to glorify God. Both John the Baptist and Jesus addressed the lie: the theory that preachers must dress like the world, speak like the world, and behave like the world, to influence the world.

In asking the people why they followed John, Jesus exposed an enigmatic truth. The very thing that drew people to listen to John, his unorthodox lifestyle and message, was the same thing that caused people to hate him. Later, we see the same things with Jesus’ ministry. People love to hear the truth until it is time to apply that truth

to their lives.

SANKOFA

We had good reason for giving alternate interpretations to Matthew 11:12. Whichever interpretation we use, it has a gripping relevance for believers today. The relevance is shocking because, for Christians living in relative comfort, persecution relates to the minor inconveniences they experience. Maybe they did not get an appointment or election in their church. At times, it is as simple as someone they dislike taking their favorite parking spot. For others, persecution is disdain from people who hold opposing political or religious views.

Such people would be horrified by the 2023 statistics from entities like *Open Door* (quoted in the *Christian Post* online). By these reports, in 2023 at least 5,600 Christians died for their faith, and over 2,100 churches were attacked or closed. Further, about 124,000 Christians were forcibly displaced from their homes because of their faith, and almost 15,000 became refugees. That is what the “violent” storming the kingdom looks like in the first interpretation of Matthew 11:12.

But the bright side is in the alternative interpretation of the verse. Despite these atrocities against Christianity, the faith continues to make serious inroads in the worst anti-Christian countries. For obvious reasons, we will not detail the countries. But this is the

“violent” (aggressive, committed) Christian taking the kingdom by violence. In the face of frightening risks, despite the dreadful persecution, people are still storming their way into the kingdom and holding territory for Christ. This is a commitment Christians living in comfortable circumstances may never understand.

CASE STUDY

Matthew chapter 11 takes Christians with inquiring minds on a roller-coaster with alluring highs and deep drops. Jesus went to great lengths to praise the man and ministry of John the Baptist. John fulfilled his role. He pleased heaven with the sincerity of his ministry. He was a transitional prophet: closing the era of prophets and opening that of the Messiah. John wore the mantle of the courageous and uncompromising prophet Elijah, even though his contemporaries (including religious scholars) could not recognize this. But that is on the upside of the ride.

On the deep-drop side, we must note that John suffered for his faithfulness to God and ministry. His refusal to compromise on godly standards made him an enemy of the state. And for this, he suffered imprisonment. In a fit of excitement that occasioned a careless and senseless oath by the ruler, John lost his life.

Maybe if we could restrict our thoughts to John only, the drop on the roller-coaster would not be too deep. However, we know the story of Stephen is coming shortly in the book of Acts. Here again, for

speaking the truth, and standing firm for Christ, a Christian suffered a stoning death. What does this say to us today?

These events force on us the reality that sooner or later, circumstances will call us to take a stance for or against Christ. Clever believers try to get around this by taking a soft, fluid stance on contentious issues. These smart brothers and sisters recognize the personal risks of speaking the unvarnished truth to power. Therefore, they whisper their truth cautiously around people with wealth and power. Christian zealots can see this approach as compromising the gospel message. But others see it as being “tactful.” The latter group justifies the whispering of truth with the cliché that flycatchers trap more flies with honey than with vinegar. On this matter, let each person be fully persuaded in his (her) own mind.

Still, the time comes when we must take a stance for or against Christ (Matthew 6:24 and 12:30). Jesus is an “all or nothing” Messiah. In addition, the world only tolerates part-time sinners for a while. The time always comes when part-time sinners must show their true allegiance. Both tracks of life (godly and ungodly) demand total commitment. If we had any doubt about this, Jesus clarified it in Revelation 3:15-16. God sees us as either hot or cold.

This can be terrifying. To be hot for God means risking the wrath of man. John’s ministry and Stephen’s speech proved this. To be hot

with the world (lifestyle and values) makes us cold with God. In this case, we get earthly rewards and accolades. However, ultimately we suffer God's rejection. According to a straight reading of the scriptures, we have no middle track. Jesus was clear about this issue: people are either with him or against him. Believers must never lose sight of this.

LIFE APPLICATION

John the Baptist's ministry prepared the way for Jesus' ministry. It is indeed noteworthy that Jesus the Christ needed a human to prepare the way for his ministry. In thinking about this, one wonders that if Jesus needed a forerunner, how much more do we need sponsors at the start of public ministry? Think about this and consider the people who went before you to cut a path for you and others in ministry today. Consider what you can do to honor those trailblazers in whose footprints we now walk.

The **Key Verse** focuses on people who saw evidence of Jesus' Messiahship, his mighty works and exceptional teaching, yet did not repent or embrace him. Let this prompt you to consider how readily you respond to the teaching of Christ. It is easy to condemn the people in Jesus' day for their slow response to his ministry. However, we, in our day, may be guilty of the same tardy response to the messages of the gospel. Reflect on your response to Bible passages

you read and sermons you hear. How do these messages inform your thinking and shape your lifestyle? Think about the quality of your response.

In examining verse 11:12 we noted the opposition believers in Christ faced since the advent of Christ. Use the comments on this subject to check your attitude to people who oppose Christianity, and how you respond or will respond to serious opposition to your faith. Can you foresee a situation where the opposition to the practice of Christianity is so harsh that you would hide your Christianity or abandon it?

Take this consideration a step further. Consider the level of opposition your congregation faces. Try to analyze the reason for the opposition. Appreciate that much of the opposition John and Jesus faced flowed from the effectiveness of their ministry. Therefore, the opposition your church family faces may be a sign that their ministry is effective. Make this a point of prayer, either individually or corporately.

QUESTIONS

1. What explains the indifference people showed to Jesus' ministry?
2. What obligation, if any, do we have to assist Christians under persecution in other countries?
3. John paved the way for Jesus. In what ways can we open clear

pathways in ministry for people who will follow us?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," *AMEC Hymnal* #54

Closing Prayer: Dear eternal Father, help me to be faithful to your truths even in the face of opposition and persecution. Jesus warned us (John 15) that persecution is par for the course of following Christ. Grant me the wisdom and strength to deal righteously with the opposition that comes my way. Thank you, Lord Jesus! Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

February 10-February 16

Monday Matthew 20:1-16 (God Is Generous to All)

Tuesday Proverbs 22:1-9 (Those Who Are Generous Are Blessed)

Wednesday Luke 6:20-26 (Blessings and Woes)

Thursday 1 Timothy 6:17-21 (Be Rich in Good Works)

Friday 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (God Sets All Things Right)

Saturday Psalm 113 (God Lifts Up the Poor)

Sunday Matthew 19:16-30 (All Things Are Possible With God)

LESSON 12 FEBRUARY 16, 2025

THE FIRST WILL BE LAST

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 19:16-30

Focus Scripture: Matthew 19:16-30

Key Verse: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Matthew 19:24

MATTHEW 19:16-30 (NRSV UE)

- 16 Then someone came to him and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?”
- 17 And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.”
- 18 He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness.
- 19 Honor your father and mother. Also, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
- 20 The young man said to him, “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?”
- 21 Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”
- 22 When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.
- 23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.
- 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?"

26 But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

27 Then Peter said in reply, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"

28 Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my name's sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.

30 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

MATTHEW 19:16-30 (KJV)

16 And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?

17 And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.

18 He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness,

19 Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

20 The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?

21 Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.

22 But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.

23 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.

24 And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

25 When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?

26 But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.

27 Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?

28 And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

29 And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.

30 But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.

KEY TERMS

- **Asceticism** – Strict self-discipline and self-denial of worldly pleasures and conveniences.
- **Humility** – An acceptance that you have no special importance that makes you better than others; an absence of self-pride.
- **Philanthropist** – A person who donates freely to the welfare of others.

- **Premium** – Considered to have the highest value; above the usual importance.

Introduction

Multiple themes are jumping out of the set text. Therefore, let us be clear that we can only address a few in this lesson. We want to highlight the implications of a commitment to live godly. At times, we put such a commitment in a neat compartment of our lives, which we open when we want to display religious piety in public. The text shows this is not acceptable to God.

To impress God, the commitment to follow Christ must permeate our whole lives: our prayers, charitable giving, interpersonal relationships, and wealth. This is consistent with Jesus' teaching that to be worthy of friendship with him, we must be willing to sacrifice relationships and devotion to everyone and everything else.

Further, what seems to impress God is not what we do. The deciding factor is WHY we do what we do: our motivation. So, as you work through this lesson consider the depth and width of your resolve to follow Christ and how you show this desire to obey God in the various compartments of your life.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Mark 10:17-22 and Luke 18:18-23 are parallel accounts to today's text. Consult these to fill any gaps you may have in understanding the set text. This helps because each gospel writer emphasized the aspects of Jesus' teaching that interested the audience he was addressing. Reading all the related accounts gives a full picture of

the events and their significance.

The young man's confusion about which commandments (19:18) were most important was understandable when we know the number of commandments Judaism had. Under the Mosaic law people followed over 600 statutes. In addition, Israel had a collection of oral traditions the nation treated as binding. The young man's question highlighted the wisdom behind Jesus' teaching which reduced the commandments to the essential element of love for God and people (Matthew 22:37-40).

The word translated as "perfect" in verse 19:21 has more to do with the idea of completeness than the lack of flaws. You must read Jesus' statement in this verse concerning the original question in verse 19:16. In that context, the statement means, "To complete the requirements to have life, this is what you must do."

Let us be clear, Jesus was not setting material poverty as a condition for eternal life. Rather, he was showing the young man where his devotion lay. It was not in a genuine pursuit of God. His devotion was to his wealth. The man sought only an outward show of repentance and devotion to God. His sorrow in the following verse confirmed this.

Read verses 23-25 as a unit. To understand the disciples' amazement in verse 25, we must appreciate how the people of Palestine viewed wealth then. In that culture, people saw wealth as a

distinct blessing/reward from God. Riches were a clear sign of God's favor. Therefore, Jesus' response in verse 19:23 would have been surprising not only to the disciples. It would have startled most people in Palestine.

So rather than validating the cultural view of wealth, Jesus' response turned the popular opinion upside down. This teaching pointed out that rather than being a blessing, material wealth could be a hindrance to a proper relationship with God. It is a message whose relevance is still applicable today. That teaching sends in a religious coma the pop-theology claim that God wants all his followers to be materially rich. God wants for us something that makes getting into his kingdom almost impossible! That defies logic.

The term "eye of a needle" in verse 19:24 opened speculation on its true meaning. Did Jesus mean a literal (actual) sewing needle? The text and history seem to suggest that. An alternative interpretation that Jesus was referring to "The Needle's Eye" gate in Jerusalem is historically unsound since that gate came later in the Middle Ages.

Nevertheless, grasp the point Jesus is making. It is extremely unlikely, almost impossible, for rich people devoted to their riches to get close to God. This is not the only time Jesus commented on wealth stealing people's hearts and keeping them from a close relationship with God. So, do not sweat the exact terms of the verse. Grab hold of its intended meaning. About that, there can be no

debate.

Peter's response in verse 19:27 demonstrates that he missed Jesus' point about the distinction between material and spiritual wealth. Apparently, Peter and his colleagues were still expecting rewards from Jesus in his earthly material political kingdom. Before his death and resurrection, Jesus' disciples did not catch the nature of Jesus' kingdom as a spiritual entity.

Jesus' teaching in verses 19:28-30 confirmed that people who decide to follow him and suffer loss will be both compensated and rewarded. These verses underwrite the believers' hope that God will honor our sacrifices in this world and in the world to come.

The comment of the first being last and the last being first highlighted the contrast between God's spiritual kingdom and man's material kingdoms. People with material wealth, titles, and fame in the world's system are first in social status and importance. Materially poor and needy people, who are humble and submitted to God, our society often regards as the last, at the bottom of the social order. These are the "Mr. and Mrs. Nobody." Sadly, we see this too often, even in the "churches."

Thankfully, Jesus showed that the order is the reverse in God's kingdom. God assigns rank and status according to our humility and devotion to him. Do not read this comment in isolation or attach to it a doctrine of asceticism. See it in the context of Peter's comments

and question in verse 27.

SANKOFA

In the text, Jesus challenged the young man to separate himself from his wealth. Naturally, this request seemed so high a demand that we wondered if anyone would obey it. We found people in history who did separate their self-worth from material wealth. Keep in mind that the idea was never to send a rich person into poverty. Jesus' aim was to help the young man to see his value system, and to realign it with the values that please God. That was the heart of his query, how to please God.

R.G LeTourneau is a good example of a rich man who saw wealth in its right perspective. This famous inventor and industrialist from Texas used his wealth to honor God, rather than make wealth his god. Mr. LeTourneau was outstandingly successful, wealthy, and famous in the earthmoving equipment business. But he never allowed his fame or wealth to rule his heart. On the contrary, Mr. LeTourneau committed both his life and business to the lordship of Jesus Christ. The outworking of this commitment to Christ was evident to all who knew him. Eventually, this rich inventor gave about 90% of his regular income to Christian missions and charities. Not only was he a generous philanthropist, but his Christian faith framed the principles he used in his business.

One story said that because of cashflow problems in his business,

LeTourneau could not pay his tithes for a year. He saw the missed payments as a personal obligation and vowed to pay the overdue tithes at the earliest opportunity. He kept his vow.

But the central issue in R.G LeTourneau's story is not the money he gave away. It was about the man's commitment to God. Tie this idea to Paul's comment in 1 Corinthians 13:3. If we give ALL we own to the poor without the right motivation, we are doing nothing. It is the motivation God honors.

As someone famously said years ago about wealth, "The problem is not what you own, but what owns you." As 1 Timothy 6:10 teaches, the problem with wealth and greed is not wealth itself. The snare is the love of (devotion/attachment to) money and wealth. The ideal model is for people rich in possessions to be poor in spirit.

CASE STUDY

We live in a culture where preachers and teachers of the Word often strive to have a "fresh word" every week for their congregations. But as orthodox commentators note, the scriptures have only a handful of key themes. This comes out forcefully in Matthew's gospel regarding the subject of humility. See verses 27-30 against this background.

Let us look at a sample of verses or passages in Matthew that point to humility and its value in God's kingdom. Matthew 20:1-16 is a

direct expansion of verse 19:30. Underscore how the exact thought springs forth again in the last verse, verse 16. Here we have an excellent example of scripture explaining scripture.

Matthew 23:12 in like voice, contrasts people who inflate their status and importance with people who humble themselves and allow God to exalt them. In Matthew 18:4 we return to the premium God places on humility. Genuinely humble people, not people who practice humility for the cameras, are the greatest in the kingdom.

Matthew 20:26-27 and 23:11 draw us back to how we become great in God's kingdom. It is by humble service. Social titles and status are great. However, it is our service to God and people that God rewards us for. If you have doubts about this issue, stay in Matthew and turn the pages to chapter 25. How we treat people in need matters to God. You can link this idea to Matthew 6:3 and the teaching to give alms privately without fanfare.

From any angle we view it, humility is the premium quality that commends us to God and gives us status in God's kingdom. In a world that constantly urges us to be strong and successful (in worldly terms), we must remember this. Matthew 16:26 is a flag we should wave before our face daily as we go about our duties. We are sad losers, if, in this life, the only thing we can shout about is material gains and hollow titles.

LIFE APPLICATION

Jesus' advice to the young man must become more than a point of discussion. We must apply the principle to our own lives. From the text, we can deduce that the young man's wealth had become the source of his personal identity, power, purpose, and meaning in life. Jesus' call to him was for him to sacrifice his "idols" and follow Jesus. Use this story as a backdrop to assess if you have any similar idols in your life. For this assessment, an idol is anything or any person that hinders your full devotion to God.

The story of the young man, although reported in the New Testament, is in an Old Testament setting. It highlights the mindset of people trying to please God by keeping the laws of Judaism. In contrast, Jesus called the young man to follow him rather than focus on keeping rules. Reflect on this. What are you trying to do in your Christian walk? Are you hoping to establish righteousness by keeping rules, or are you seeking to establish and develop a living relationship with God through Christ? These are two distinctly different approaches.

It is easy for believers today to look judgmentally at the young man in the text. Few readers would openly admit that they would have reacted to Jesus as he did. Yet, we make similar decisions every day. Consider Jesus' teaching on loving our enemies, forgiving offenders, and worrying. Jesus' calls on these are the same as his call to the young man. In your private meditations, consider your

response to God on these matters. To what extent do you love, forgive others, and avoid worry as requested by Christ?

We are free to conclude that the young man's encounter with Jesus did not have the desired effects. Maybe Jesus' answers stirred questions and re-evaluations in his mind. However, we have no evidence that his life changed. This reflection forces us to ponder the benefits we realize from our association with Christ. From your participation in corporate worship, private prayer and devotion, and Bible study, what transformation have you noticed in your life? The underlying assumption in this meditation is that our encounters with God should lead to discernable transformation. This self-reflection is important because often we hear people claim years of membership in the body of Christ yet display no Christian character traits.

What Jesus asked of the young man seemed impossible, or at least against normal human behavior. This should not have startled us. God has a history of asking people to do seemingly bizarre things. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, and Elijah to shut up the heavens. Jesus asked Peter to walk on water and to fish for money to pay the temple tax. Against this background, consider if there is anything God can ask you to do that would make you turn and walk away from him. In thinking about this, ponder your likely response, if what God demands of you violates your traditional Christian beliefs. (God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, although human sacrifice

is unacceptable to God, Leviticus 18:21.)

QUESTIONS

1. How promptly would you obey a request from God to give to strangers all you own?
2. Was Peter's response in verse 19:27 a primitive form of the prosperity gospel? (He expected a privileged position in God's earthly kingdom because he had shown commitment to God.)
3. How can you connect Matthew 19:30 to Matthew 21:31-32?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: "All to Jesus I Surrender," *AMEC Hymnal* #251

Closing Prayer: Giving God, help me to keep money and earthly wealth in its proper perspective, realizing that heavenly treasure is more valuable than earthly wealth. I understand we should neither glory in earthly poverty, nor serve wealth. Help me to find the perfect balance for my life. This I pray with thanksgiving. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

February 17-February 23

Monday 2 Timothy 3:10-17 (Equipped for Every Good Work)

Tuesday Psalm 119:17-24 (Delight in God's Ways)

Wednesday Matthew 25:1-13 (Keep Awake; the Bridegroom Is Coming)

Thursday Matthew 25:14-15, 19-30 (Praise for a Faithful Servant)

Friday Psalm 119:41-48 (Choose the Way of Faithfulness)

Saturday Isaiah 58 (The Fast That God Chooses)

Sunday Matthew 25:31-46 (Compassion for the Least)

LESSON 13 FEBRUARY 23, 2025

KINGDOM LIFE

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 25

Focus Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

Key Verses: “The king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food...’” Matthew 25:34-35

MATTHEW 25:31-46 (NRSV UE)

- 31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.
- 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,
- 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.
- 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,
- 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
- 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’
- 37 Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink?’
- 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing?’
- 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited

you?’

40 And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’

41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,

42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’

44 Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?’

45 Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’

46 And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.”

MATTHEW 25:31-46 (KJV)

31 When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

32 And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

33 And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

34 Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

35 For I was an hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

36 Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in

prison, and ye came unto me.

37 Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

38 When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

39 Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

41 Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

42 For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

43 I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

44 Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

45 Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

46 And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

KEY TERMS

- **Superfluous** – Unnecessary details.
- **Mutuality** – A two-way relationship; each party caring for the other.
- **CUNY** – City University of New York.

- **Generosity** – A willingness to give freely to people in need or groups serving such people.

Introduction

It is human nature to classify people according to their outward appearances, wealth, and/or their social standing. Likewise, we show a tendency to disregard people on the ground floor of society. However, the text shows that poor and needy people are important to God. Further, narratives like that of the Good Samaritan show that God gives us excellent credit ratings when we care for needy people, as if we were caring for Christ himself.

These considerations make our charitable contributions an important aspect of our Christian service. The text highlights the importance of our charitable giving by putting it higher than religious rituals (Matthew 7). So, what is the key principle to bear in mind? It is this. All we do in the church building in the name of praise and worship is important. We must do our best to maintain true corporate worship and fellowship. But, of equal or higher importance is how we treat people in need. Other things being equal, the way we care for the weak and oppressed in our society is our ticket into the kingdom of God. This lesson will prompt believers to examine how well they reflect this in their daily activities.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

In this passage, Jesus used the familiar imagery of sheep and goats. These mental pictures were familiar to Israel. The reference to sheep appears about 500 times in the scriptures. Goats have about 150

mentions.

Jesus added to the sheep and goats reference another familiar imagery: the idea of two possible paths through life. Under this “Two Ways” philosophy, people who lived wise, God-fearing lives were on the righteous way. People who lived selfish, evil lives were on the evil losing way. Preachers and teachers, please take note. Although understanding the Bible text today may be challenging, when Jesus taught, the masses easily understood his messages. Our difficulty in grasping the Bible text arises because we live outside the culture that prevailed then.

Interpreting the focal passage of 25:35-45 demands surgical skills. Without a doubt, the section speaks clearly to sacrificial generosity. And every believer should take that seriously. Still, that passage is also a dam through which unscrupulous ministers release unbridled abuse. The key to grasping the passage’s true intent is to look at the object of the giving: the people who receive the fruits of the sacrificial giving. It is the poor and needy. It is not the greedy! The passage is crystal clear on this. The details in the passage, food, drink, housing, are not superfluous and cannot be casually generalized. God expects us to relieve poor peoples’ needs, not satisfy the hunger of the ravenous greedy people.

The passage also demonstrates how the master teacher used aspects of the prevailing culture in his teachings. Hospitality was

(and continues to be) a core value in the entire region of Palestine. For centuries, hospitality to strangers was a matter of personal honor. It was just the right thing to do. Hebrews 13:2 underscored this importance. We may be entertaining God's messengers when we entertain strangers.

The nature of the needs Jesus highlighted are all physical. Underscore that Jesus was addressing his core disciples and others who would later make up the church. Without doubt, Christ is signaling that our love for God must find expression in how we cater to the physical needs of the people. The church's primary mission is undoubtedly spiritual: saving souls and guiding people to eternal life. Yet, as Matthew 22:39 highlights, the second mission is equally important. Believers cannot emphasize the spiritual and ignore the physical aspects of ministry. Passages like Acts 2:42-47 and James 2:15-16 tell believers how the early church strove to uphold both arms of ministry. Like love and marriage, as the song says, both aspects (spiritual and physical) must go together like the old horse and carriage.

Even devout Christians struggle to give generously to worthy causes. This is a stark reality even though scriptures adamantly support the blessedness of giving to the needy and charitable causes according to our resources. Before you take issue with that statement, look at the research results. According to available data,

the percentage of Christians who give consistently (tithing, etc.) ranges between 3% and 25%. This is so despite passages like Proverbs 11:24-25, Luke 6:37-38, and 2 Corinthians 8:12-15 which hails the blessedness of giving. But note that 2 Corinthians 8 sets useful rails to stop greedy people from exploiting others. Forcing people to give without respecting those guardrails can be exploitative. Jesus certainly does not support that.

SANKOFA

Often when we talk of charitable giving it is a dry subject without human character. Adding a human face will change the tone of the conversations. Consider the story of Edward (a fictitious name), a student at CUNY in Brooklyn, New York.

Edward and I ran into each other on a train and started a casual conversation. During the chat, I learned, among other things, that “life was hard” for Edward. Yet, he was making a commendable effort to “keep himself out of trouble” and to maintain himself at college. Then he threw a glowing praise on the City Harvest pantry in New York. Edward was sure he would have attended school hungry on many days without City Harvest. Every week he goes to City Harvest and collects a supply of grocery items. Those items form the core of his meals each week.

But it was not only the food he praised. Edward appreciated how the people at City Harvest treated him. They knew him by name and

seemed always to welcome him. As he put it, the workers “never made him feel like a beggar.” And he hoped that one day when he gets his life sorted out, he will be able to do for other people what City Harvest was doing for him. Countless Edwards, in our world, are struggling for food, clothes, and shelter. These are the people we should try to help. These are the people Jesus identified in the set text.

CASE STUDY

Most recent published studies on people giving to churches and other charities agree that charitable giving continues to slide sharply downhill. The usual responses to this disturbing trend is for church and charity leaders to scream the traditional message about the nobility of giving. However, in 2024, it appears that people are tired of the screaming and shaming messages and are ignoring them.

Perhaps a better approach to lift the level of charitable giving is to address the concerns that kill people's inclination to help needy people. *The Classy Blog* (<https://www.classy.org>) under the title “The 4 Barriers That Keep Your Donors From Giving” looked at the generosity killers. The four factors identified in the blog were the *Fear of Regret*, *Bystander Effect*, *Donor Efficiency*, and the *Paradox of Choice*.

In looking at the *Fear of Regret*, we noted this comment: “An important part of fighting the fear of regret is to present your

organization as trustworthy and upstanding.” This is the traditional trust factor. People need assurance that what they give will serve the needs as represented. The *Bystander Effect* calls to mind the age-old adage that the next “Samaritan” will offer the help needed. In *Donor Efficiency*, we noted that people seek a guarantee that “their gift matters and is having an impact.” With the *Paradox of Choice*, the writer said, “Too many choices make it hard to choose.” Each charity must realize it is fighting for a slice of the donation dollar.

Other postings from Barna and Pew researchers give insightful information on what is happening with charitable giving today. It seems wise that church leaders (and other charities) should use these findings when formulating strategies to attract, maintain, and improve the charity dollar. From all indications, the age has passed where leaders can set income budgets by whims and fancies and coerce people to fill them. Budgeting for charities today is a professional skill that leaders of charities must learn and practice. Generally, people still want to give and will give when leaders address their concerns and allay their fears.

LIFE APPLICATION

Often, we help people who show no gratitude for our help. However, there are those precious times when people we help show appreciation. Reflect on such a time when someone said to you, “What you did for me sure helped me a lot” or something similar. Let

that occasion remind you of the impact your giving can have on the lives of others. Were you surprised that your small contribution made such a lasting impact?

Make lists of people, charities, and causes you feel compelled to support. Consider making firm plans to help them with time and/or money. A written plan, however rough, helps us to find time and earmark resources for the causes dear to our hearts. Without a plan, our donations tend to be erratic.

Usually, when people hear about donations, they think about donating money. But in everyday situations, donations of time and skills are more important than dollars. Consider the variety of ways in which you can make non-monetary contributions. These include serving at a soup kitchen, carrying meals to shut-ins, reading to people in a hospital, or helping senior citizens with household chores. Look at your availability of “free time” and consider committing time slots to one or more of these activities.

The sheep in the text got a warm welcome into the kingdom based on their charity to poor and needy people. When you consider this teaching, what impact does it have on you? Are you confident that you already have your “sheep” status, or do you have to take steps to ensure you are in that group? Whatever is your assessment, know that the door is open for you to join the sheepfold. Make the matter a point of prayer and take the steps as directed by the Holy Spirit. You

may have to make major lifestyle and budget adjustments, but for the prize set before you, it is all worth it.

Note that the reward goes to the sheep for caring for the “least of Christ’s brothers and sisters” around them. Accordingly, consider how you presently identify people within that class. More than likely their religious and political views, and lifestyles, you do not share. Consider how, despite these differences, you can still offer these people the help and care they may need.

QUESTIONS

1. Jesus’ comments in the text focused on direct giving to people in need. To what extent should we engage in direct giving to people in need?
2. How do you identify the giving opportunities you should accept?
3. How do you identify people who genuinely need help (as opposed to swindlers)?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: “We Give Thee but Thine Own,” *AMEC Hymnal* #645

Closing Prayer: Gracious Father, help me to identify people who genuinely need my help, and stir in me the heart to give to them according to my resources of time, and money. This I ask in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

February 24–March 2

Monday Revelation 1:3-8 (We Are Priests)

Tuesday Psalm 106:36-48 (Give Thanks to God's Holy Name)

Wednesday Leviticus 19:1-10 (Be Holy)

Thursday Leviticus 19:11-18 (Love Your Neighbor as Yourself)

Friday Revelation 20:1-6 (Priests of God and Christ)

Saturday Micah 6:1-8 (Do Justice, Love Kindness, Walk Humbly)

Sunday Exodus 19:1-14 (Treasured Possession)