

**Good Word Schedule**  
**“The Least of These”**  
**July, August, September 2019**

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Guests for this series of GOOD WORD broadcasts are Mathilde Frey and Jody Washburn, both members of the Walla Walla University School of Theology. Moderator, host, and study guide author is Alden Thompson, also a member of the WWU School of Theology.

For more information about GOOD WORD contact the School of Theology at Walla Walla University by phone (509-527-2194), fax (509-527-2945), email ([GoodWord@wallawalla.edu](mailto:GoodWord@wallawalla.edu)) or regular mail (Walla Walla University, 204 S. College Ave., College Place WA 99324).

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**Theme: God Created . . .**

**Leading Question:** If you were to look at our created world without any reference to Scripture, where would you place it on a spectrum extending from good to evil?

Our lessons this quarter focus on God’s care for those in need, and by extension, our care for our needy fellow humans. Interestingly enough, our study guide begins with a perfect world where everything was declared by God to be good. Indeed, at the end of the sixth day of Creation, God surveyed everything he had made and declared it to be “very good” (1:31).

**Question:** In Genesis 1, what features of the good created world have within them the potential for being evil? Water and darkness! Is there anything else in that perfect world that has the potential to be sinister?

**Question:** What phrases point to a certain “exuberance” in the newly created world? “Be fruitful and multiply” (1:22) and “Let us make humankind in our image” (1:26).

**Question:** Is there any thing disquieting in Genesis 2?

What about the tree?

“Naked but not ashamed”?

**Question:** How would one characterize the main players in Genesis 3?

Serpent

Woman

Man

God

**Comment:** By the end of Genesis 3, the full Great Controversy setting has been established, the framework within which the “disadvantaged” in God’s world must be addressed.

**Theme: Blueprint for a Better World**

**Leading Question:** How does the divine example help move us toward caring for the needy?

**Comment:** Israel had been slaves for some 400 years when God “finally” came to their rescue. Exod. 2:21, the last verse in the second chapter of Exodus, reads very simply in the original Hebrew: “God looked upon the Israelites, and God knew.” In Exodus 3:7, the text reads, “I have heard their cry.” And when Israel recognized all this, Exod. 4:31 reports, “When they heard that the LORD had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped” (NRSV).

Several times in the Pentateuch, an appeal is made to Israel’s experience as slaves, as a motivation for their being sensitive to others who are being mistreated.

**Question:** Where in Scripture can we point to the most effective passages that show the divine compassion for those in need? Old Testament narratives? The life and teachings of Jesus?

**Comment:** Two passages in Exodus link Israel’s experience as aliens with God’s expectation that they treat aliens with care:

Exodus 22:21-23: “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. 22 You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. 23 If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry” (NRSV).

Exodus 23:9: “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (NRSV).

**Question:** Have you been able to look back on difficult times and see in those experiences a stronger motivation for helping others?

**The Ten Commandments as a blueprint for communal life.** The official study guide suggests that we not read the ten commands too “narrowly.” Indeed, the Sermon on the Mount points to a much more nuanced approach to God’s law. This excerpt from *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (p. 137-139, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition [2016]), suggests a way of understanding law that is both broad and narrow.

***Narrowing the Letter, Broadening the Spirit***

*To understand biblical laws properly, one must first look rigorously at the letter of the law in its original context. That is, we must “narrow the letter.” A close reading of the text, for example, reveals that the command not to kill refers to first degree murder (Ex. 21:12-14; Num.*

35:9-28). It clearly does not exclude the civil death penalty (Ex. 21:15-17), killing done in national defense (Deut. 20:10-18), or killing done in immediate self-defense (Ex. 22:2-3).

Similarly, the command against bearing false witness, when we “narrow the letter,” clearly refers to the telling of falsehoods with the intent to injure innocent people. One passage specifies the penalty for false witness: “Then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother” (Deut. 19:19). This places a different light on the Hebrew midwives’ misleading words to Pharaoh (Exodus 1:19), Samuel’s shading of the truth to Saul (1 Sam. 16:1-3); and David’s use of Hushai against Absalom (2 Sam. 16, 17).

It is not enough, however, to “narrow the letter.” We must also “broaden the spirit,” moving beyond the external code into the heart. Then killing is broadened to include angry words (Matt. 5:21, 22), adultery includes lustful thoughts (verses 27, 28), and false witness covers even the misuse of the truth to hurt others. In the words of Ellen White, “Even the intentional suppression of truth, by which injury may result to others, is a violation of the ninth command” (PP, p. 309).

In short, circumstances may arise when telling the truth or refusing to kill could mean disobeying the letter of God’s law. One thing is clear, however: God never asks us to **BREAK** His law. Our every act must be an obedient one, in full harmony with His law. That is true even if we are called to kill.

You may ask, at this point: Is this situation ethics? Certainly not, if understood in the popular sense of “excuse for sinning”! God never asks us to sin, or even “allows” us to sin. His only call is to obedience. If we think we can use the law pyramid to excuse sin and to do as we please, then we have thoroughly misunderstood and misapplied it.

Admittedly, what I have outlined is a sophisticated approach to the law, one that requires a rather advanced level of mental and Christian maturity. We would not expect young children or new Christians to be able to function at that level. For that very reason, God has given rules and adaptations – a codebook, if you please – for those who need them. And the church, as the body of Christ, responsible for believers of every shape and capability, will always have a list of rules to get us started, so to speak.

The original reasons for progressively adapting law to human need are paralleled in the church today. A brief glimpse at those original circumstances can help us properly apply the law pyramid, for it was that progressive adaptation of the law to human need that gave rise to the pyramid in the first place.

**Question:** How does God’s law provide a blueprint for life that would include care for the vulnerable?

**Question:** Is it possible today to follow the Old Testament example of throwing a party to spend the tithe? Here are the crucial passages:

“Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. 23 In the presence of the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always. 24 But if, when the Lord your God has blessed you, the distance is so great that you are

unable to transport it, because the place where the Lord your God will choose to set his name is too far away from you, 25 then you may turn it into money. With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the Lord your God will choose; 26 spend the money for whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your household rejoicing together. 27 As for the Levites resident in your towns, do not neglect them, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you.

Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; 29 the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake” (Deut. 14:22-29, NRSV).

“When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year (which is the year of the tithe), giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns, 13 then you shall say before the Lord your God: ‘I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows, in accordance with your entire commandment that you commanded me; I have neither transgressed nor forgotten any of your commandments’” (Deut. 26:12-13, NRSV).

**Year of Jubilee.** I don’t know anyone who seriously attempts to follow the rules for the year of Jubilee, a plan that called for all land to be returned to its original owners every 49 years. How much of the Jubilee passage should we attempt to emulate today? Leviticus 25:8-23 gives us the key biblical passage:

8 You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. 9 Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. 10 And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. 11 That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. 12 For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

13 In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. 14 When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another. 15 When you buy from your neighbor, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. 16 If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. 17 You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God.

18 You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely. 19 The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill

and live on it securely. 20 Should you ask, “What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?” 21 I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years. 22 When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating from the old crop; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old. 23 The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.

**Theme: Sabbath a Day of Freedom**

**Leading Question:** How can we transform the Sabbath from a day which tells us what we can't do, to a day that liberates us?

**Comment:** In some ways, the Deuteronomic version of the Sabbath command is more focused on the needs of “the least of these” than the one in Exodus. In Deuteronomy, as noted by Evangelical author, Chris Wright, “The fourth command is the only commandment to have a specific purpose (as distinct from a motivation) attached, which is ‘so that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as you do’ (Deut. 5:14). Wright goes on to say “that it was intended specifically for the benefit of the working population.” He then refers to Harold MacMillan, British Prime Minister from 1957-1963), who is reputed to have called this command “the first and greatest worker protection act in history” (Chris Wright, *Themelios* 19:2 [Jan. 1994], p. 3).

**Question:** The “official” memory text for this lesson on the Sabbath is Mark 2:27. But if we add the next verse, it offers us some tantalizing possibilities for interpretation:

Mark 2:27 Then Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!” (NLT).

The passage emphasizes that the Sabbath is intended to benefit all humankind. But does the Aramaic phrase translated “Son of Man” (*bar nasha*) suggest an even more anthropocentric perspective? *Bar nasha*, in Aramaic simply means “human being.” Would it be too radical to translate the Gospel passage as “Therefore *the human being* is lord of the Sabbath”?

**Sabbath as a gift insuring equality: The Manna.** Exodus 16:16-18 tells us that everyone who collected manna received the same amount, regardless of how much they picked up. In other words, the gift of the manna was the great equalizer. In 2 Cor. 8:10-15, Paul, quotes from the manna story: “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little” (NRSV).

**Question:** Is the gift of the manna just one more way of showing Israel that the Sabbath was an equalizing gift for the whole community?

**Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5: Two reasons for keeping the Sabbath.** In Exodus 20, the rationale for keeping the Sabbath is clearly stated: We honor God as the Creator. In Deuteronomy 5: We honor God as Redeemer, the Deliverer of Israel from Egyptian bondage. That much is clearly stated. But does the larger setting of the Exodus narrative, allow us to link redemption to the Sabbath command in the Exodus 20 account as well? The prologue to the Decalogue places

the whole in the setting of “redemption”: “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Exod. 20:2, NRSV).

**Day of Rest for the Vulnerable.** The Sabbath command in both Exodus 20 and Deut. 5 stresses that it is a day of rest for the most vulnerable members of society: male and female slave, livestock, and resident alien. Deuteronomy is especially pointed: “so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you” (Deut. 5:14, NRSV).

**Question:** How should the principle of equality in Sabbath keeping apply in our modern world?

**Day for Healing.** John Brunt’s insightful book, *Day for Healing*, focuses on the five Sabbath miracles of Jesus that seem to make the point that the Sabbath was really made for healing:

1. The healing of the man with the withered hand (Matt. 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11).
2. Healing of the stooped woman (Luke 13:10-17).
3. Healing of the man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-6).
4. Healing of the man at the pool (John 5).
5. Healing of the man born blind (John 9).

**Question:** To what extent does Jesus’ healing ministry guide our Sabbath-keeping today?

**Sabbath for the land:** In Leviticus 25:1-7 we read of God’s plan for a Sabbath for the land:

1 The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: 2 Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. 3 Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; 4 but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. 5 You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. 6 You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath – you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you; 7 for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.

**Question:** Does the plan for a 7-year sabbatical for the land suggest that we could or should adopt a Sabbath-approach to all of life?



**Theme: Mercy and Justice in Psalms and Proverbs**

**Leading Question:** How do those who know they are sinners, find hope in passages of Scripture that praise a king for promising to root sinners out of his kingdom?

**Survey of Psalms and Proverbs:** In some respects linking Psalms and Proverbs together in one lesson is rather startling because they are such different books. The book of Psalms brings together a host of different genres, from bitter complaint to buoyant praise. Indeed, roughly half of the Psalms in our Bible are complaints. And to bring together mercy and justice in one lesson can be awkward as well, for those who call for God’s justice are not inclined to cry out for mercy.

In general, however, when we hear the phrase captured in our quarter’s lessons, “The Least of These,” we are likely to think of those who have been treated unfairly. That would seem to be a call for justice more than mercy. Yet Scripture admonishes us to practice both.

One final feature has to do with the general nature of the book of Proverbs. Scholars tend to think of Proverbs as a wisdom manual designed for young, upper middle class males. The addressees are more likely to be admonished to avoid the foolish dangers that are a threat to the youth. Thus the primary audience of the book would not be “The Least of These.” Furthermore, the book tends to emphasize personal behavioral ethics rather than social ethics.

**Question:** How can one call for justice and mercy at the same time?

**Comment:** In Psalm 82, the indictment against leaders who have not done what is right stands out with remarkable clarity;

- 2 “How long will you judge unjustly  
and show partiality to the wicked?
- 3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan;  
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
- 4 Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (NRSV).

The focus here is clearly on justice for the oppressed. That fits in well with the theme for this quarter, “The Least of These.” But there is no word from sinners who are crying for mercy from the Lord. Should one conclude that all the culprits, at least in this psalm, are irredeemable?

**Comment on Psalm 82.** Since this quarter’s lessons are based on the foundation of the great controversy between good and evil, the role of Psalm 82 in the unfolding saga is crucial. The preliminary steps are laid out in Alden Thompson’s, *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* The serpent is introduced in Genesis 3, but is not identified as Satan until Revelation 12:7. In Genesis, the serpent is simply described as being “more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made” (Gen. 3:1, NRSV). Here are the steps by which the drama unfolds in the

Old Testament:

1. God steps back to allow Satan freedom to mislead and tempt humanity.
2. Genesis 3-11 documents the avalanche-like effect of human sin: Cain kills Abel, the flood, then the tower of Babel. According to Joshua 11:1, by the time of Abraham, his own family worshiped other gods.
3. Genesis 22 reveals God carefully re-entering the fray, asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, thereby showing that child sacrifice had become the premier gift to the gods.
4. By the time of the Exodus, polytheism had swept the world, necessitating a remarkable half-way house established by Yahweh: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Yahweh does not prohibit the worship of other gods, but insists that Israel worship Yahweh alone. The other gods (*Elohim*) are assigned to the other nations (see the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5) and function under Yahweh’s control as a “heavenly court” (cf. 1 Kings 22). But all evil is represented as coming from Yahweh. Satan as an evil entity opposed to Yahweh only appears in three contexts in the OT (Job 1-2; Zech. 3; 1 Chron. 21). Many gentle Christians struggle with the violence of the OT because it is depicted as coming directly from God.
5. Psalm 82 is the capstone to the OT cosmology. Because of the failure of the (evil) Elohim to care for the vulnerable members of society, they are condemned to die, and Israel’s God is announced as *the* god worthy of the name.

For more extensive discussion, see the third chapter in *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament?* “Whatever happened to Satan in the Old Testament?” (attached).

**Point of Psalm 82: Israel’s God reigns over the entire earth.** One doesn’t have to understand the idea of the heavenly court to appreciate the point of Psalm 82: Israel’s God is the only one worthy of the name and the only one who cares for the vulnerable members of society.

**Judgment in the Psalms:** The standard quarterly cites C. S. Lewis’ observation, that in the Psalms of the OT, the suffering members of society appeal directly to God, the one who has promised justice and fairness.

**Judgment against sinners proclaimed in the Psalms.** The psalms present a dilemma for believers by proclaiming the justice of God’s condemnation of the wicked. The dilemma lies in the fact that “repentant sinners” do not figure largely in the rhetoric of the psalms. The psalms proclaim judgment, a concept that gentle sinners may find difficult.

**Mercy and judgment in Proverbs 30:7-9.** This unusual Proverb shows the spiritual danger that lurks when there is imbalance in society. In short, it tempts both rich and poor, but in different ways to reject God’s active role in their lives.

- 30:7 Two things I ask of you;  
do not deny them to me before I die:  
8 Remove far from me falsehood and lying;  
give me neither poverty nor riches;

feed me with the food that I need,  
9 or I shall be full, and deny you,  
and say, “Who is the Lord?”  
or I shall be poor, and steal,  
and profane the name of my God (NRSV).

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Chapter 3, “Whatever happened to Satan in the Old Testament?”

Alden Thompson, *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (1988, 1989, 2000, 2003, 2011)

Available from [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com) and [www.adventistbookcenter.com](http://www.adventistbookcenter.com)

## CHAPTER 3

### **Whatever happened to Satan in the Old Testament?**

*Now the serpent was more subtle than any other  
wild creature that the Lord God had made. –  
Genesis 3:1*

If the suggestion developed in the last chapter is correct, it would be quite appropriate to say that God created a good world, but let it go wild. If he is a freedom-loving God, his creatures must have the right to rebel, in spite of all the tragic consequences that can come from such a course. But then God seeks to win his creatures back. He meets them where they are and seeks to draw them step by step along a better path.

All that sounds fine – until I actually turn to the Old Testament. There I find descriptions of God’s activity that make me very uncomfortable. At first sight, some of the incidents seem to suggest that he is not a freedom-loving God after all, but is quite arbitrary. Let’s note some of the more disturbing problems.

In the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the biblical account says on more than one occasion that “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (Ex. 7:3; 9:12). Now that sounds like something much more appropriate to Satan than to a good God. Why would God want to harden a man’s heart, setting him on a self-destructive course which would also bring others to ruin? Taken at face value, the words present a real problem for those of us who claim that God is good.

A story that is perhaps even more curious is found in 2 Samuel 24. It deals with a census ordered by King David. Although the biblical story does not offer an explanation, David was apparently keen to find out just how large an army he could field, an act that would have been seen in that era as stemming from wrongful pride. Even his crusty general Joab knew such a course to be wrong (2 Sam. 24:3), but David went ahead. According to the story in 2 Samuel, even though David belatedly confessed his sin, the Lord announced to David through the prophet Gad, that punishment was on the way, though David would have the “privilege” of choosing the mode of punishment. All that seems a bit strange to us, but the most difficult part of the whole story is the introduction which explains God’s role in the incident: “Again the anger of the Lord

was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them saying ‘Go, number Israel and Judah’” (2 Sam. 24: 1). Then as noted above, the Lord punished David for his act (2 Sam. 24:10 ff). Now how could a good God actually incite a wrong act which that same God would then proceed to punish? From our point of view the story is inexplicable.

Moving to a slightly different type of incident, we could list numerous examples of God’s stepping in and directly administering punishment. We might be more comfortable with a view which says that God *allows* the sinner to receive the punishment which his sin merits. Why does God have to wade in with his own scorpions and serpents? Does not sin bring its own punishment? One example should be sufficient to illustrate the point. Numbers 21 describes one of Israel’s repeated rebellions. Rather than providing a picture of a God who reluctantly allows his people to flaunt his protecting care, to be pummeled about by the harsh realities of life, the biblical writer gives us a quick glimpse of the anger of the Lord: “Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people so that many people of Israel died” (Num. 21:6). This type of description has led some to conclude that the Old Testament God is indeed arbitrary: “If you don’t do it my way, I’ll send out my serpents to bite you.” Some Christians react against such a picture, while others actually use these very passages to shore up an authoritarian view of religious life: “Don’t ask any questions. Do it because say so.”

Now in each of the examples noted above, if I simply take the words at face value without placing the incidents in a larger framework, the resultant view of the Old Testament God can be a harsh one indeed. That is why it is so important to develop the overall framework within which we can interpret the Old Testament. In the last chapter I suggested that the great degeneracy evident in the Old Testament is to be understood against the background of a great cosmic struggle between good and evil. That the universe may be more secure in the end, God provides the freedom necessary for evil to develop. The process is slow and dangerous when viewed from a human point of view and it seems as though God is taking great risks with his reputation. But the end result is the vindication of God against all the accusations of his Adversary.

Yet even if one accepts that type of framework within which one may interpret the Old Testament, one of the great surprises in the actual reading of Scripture is the very poor publicity which the Adversary receives in the Old Testament. In fact, if I were in his place I think I would complain rather vigorously. There are hints of his activities in such places as Genesis 3 and of course in the book of Job, but if you really make a careful search of the Old Testament, specific references to the demonic, to Satan, or the Devil are very sparse indeed. As a matter of fact, a concordance will reveal only three passages in all of the Old Testament where a specific demonic being named Satan appears: Job 1-2, 1 Chron. 21:1, and Zech. 3:1-2. Traditional Christian theology assigns a fairly significant role to Satan, and he certainly is quite prominent in the New Testament. Why then does he have such a low profile in the Old Testament?

Before exploring the possible reasons for Satan’s infrequent appearance in the Old Testament, we need to take a closer look at the Old Testament word for “Satan.” The English word “Satan” is in fact a straight transliteration of the Hebrew word *Satan*. And though the word normally suggests to us a supreme evil personality, Satan with a capital “S,” the earlier Old Testament usage applies the term to any “adversary” or “accuser.” For example, when Solomon turned away from God, “The Lord raised up an *adversary (satan)* against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite” (I Kings 11:14). The RSV has translated the Hebrew word *satan* as “adversary” and it clearly refers to a human being. Likewise, when the Philistines went up to battle against Israel, a

number of the leaders were reluctant to have David join them, even though he had been living in their midst: “Lest in the battle he become an *adversary (satan)* to us” (1 Sam. 29:4). So David could turn into a *satan*! But perhaps the most fascinating use of the word is in the story of Balaam. There the angel of the Lord opposed Balaam and “took his stand in the way as his *adversary (satan)*” (Num. 22:22). Thus the biblical writers could apply the word *satan* to Hadad, an enemy of Solomon, to David, and to the angel of the Lord. But in each of these incidents the word simply means something like “adversary” as most of our English translations indicate.

In the later use of the term, biblical writers begin to think of a supreme Adversary, *the Satan* with a capital “S,” representing the great opponent of God. But many Bible scholars hold that even in the three Old Testament passages where the Hebrew word *satan* clearly refers to an individual superhuman adversary, the English word “satan” should still be written with a lower case “s.” The seeds of the New Testament understanding of Satan are clearly there, but Satan’s supreme status as chief of all demons is not yet really clear.

Now when we cite evidence suggesting that the Old Testament understanding of Satan developed gradually, we need to remind ourselves that God has not given all truths to all men at all times. If Old Testament people have fallen far from God, then we must not expect everyone everywhere to have the same understanding. The Old Testament was written over a long period of time and this is reflected in the way that the various writers describe God’s activities. A single event may be described by two later writers, both quite removed in time from the original event. The emphasis and interpretation of each writer will reflect his own special circumstances and, at times, two accounts may even appear to be contradictory. But if we make the necessary adjustments for time and place, we can discover the underlying harmony that is important for understanding God’s activities. Perhaps the best examples of differing emphasis and interpretation is provided in the comparison between Samuel-Kings and Chronicles in the Old Testament, and in the comparison of the gospels in the New.

Now as far as Satan’s role in the Old Testament is concerned, both Jewish and Christian writers have assumed the presence of Satan in many biblical incidents even though the original account without Satan and the later interpretation with Satan can be very useful. One writer has simply chosen to define the role of the demonic, while the other has elected to focus on the omnipotence of God.

If, however, the demonic is indeed a force to be reckoned with in life, the existence of the Devil cannot depend on whether or not a given writer mentions him. Either Satan has been at work in the history of this world or he has not. Without question, traditional Christian doctrine assigns a definite role to Satan. Hence the pertinence of the question: Whatever has happened to Satan in the Old Testament?

## DANGERS OF EMPHASIZING THE DEMONIC

As a first step in answering that question, perhaps we could ask about the possible dangers that might arise in a primitive society from an emphasis on the demonic. By looking at various primitive cultures where the demonic plays a much more visible role, we can discover some interesting implications. Pagan religions are often dominated by fear. By definition, demons or evil deities cannot be trusted, so primitive people took all manner of superstitious precautions to protect themselves from the demonic. In ancient Israel, however, the use of magic

and consultation with ‘wizards that peep and mutter’ was strictly forbidden (cf. Lev. 19:31; Isa. 8:19). Israel’s God could be trusted. Such trust, however, was not possible when the authority of demons held sway.

From a more strictly theological point of view, an active awareness of the demonic runs the risk of developing into polytheism or dualism. Ancient Israel emerged from a thoroughly polytheistic society in Egypt. Had God chosen to highlight the role of a satanic figure, the condition of the people could have made dualism, if not polytheism, a likely threat to the purity of the faith that God was seeking to establish. Thus the wording of the first command at Sinai may be more significant than a superficial reading might suggest: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). Note that in this instance, God does not expressly deny the existence of other gods. He simply asks that Israel worship him exclusively. Other passages in Scripture greatly ridicule the worship of other gods and the worship of idols (cf. Deut. 29:16-17; Is. 44:9-20), but the evidence from the Old Testament is that the people in general had a difficult time focusing their attention on the one true God. Even when they were right with him, the threat of neighboring deities was a real one. Thus, for practical reasons, God treated Israel very much as a wise father might treat a young son if the two of them were to set out on a jaunt through the woods. To warn a small lad of wildcats, bears, and snakes, could be quite unsettling. So the father simply says: “Trust me. Whatever happens, I will take care of it.”

That is very much what I see happening at Sinai and in much of the Old Testament. The first great step that God asked Israel to take was: “Worship the one God who brought you out of Egypt.” The knowledge about Satan would have to come later when their faith was more stable. And this late appearance of Satan seems to be precisely what we find in the Old Testament, for as we look at the three Old Testament passages where a specific *Satan* is mentioned as God’s opponent, in each case, the passage appears in a book that was either written or canonized late in the Old Testament period. But the question of early and late and the matter of canonization requires at least a brief explanation before we proceed.

## CAN WE DATE OLD TESTAMENT MATERIAL?

Any attempt actually to date Old Testament material is fraught with difficulty, for the Old Testament books themselves give very little direct information about the time of writing. The only clear-cut dating material comes from the prophetic books where specific prophetic oracles are often assigned to the reign of a specific king (e.g. Jer. 25:1; 26:1; 27:1). But a great many of the Old Testament books remain anonymous. In some cases earlier stories are retold, as when the book of Chronicles retells some of the stories from Samuel and Kings. But how do we know that Chronicles is retelling the stories of Kings and not the other way around? That is particularly a problem for the uninitiated reader who happens to be reading in Kings and finds references to the “Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah” (cf. 1 Kings 14:30). In this particular instance a more careful reading of the books of Kings and Chronicles clearly suggests that Kings comes before Chronicles and that the “chronicles” mentioned in Kings are official court records, not our book of Chronicles in the Old Testament.

One of the more helpful ways at arriving at early and late for all of the biblical books, at least in a very general way, is to look at the canon of Scripture as held by the ancient Hebrews. Where the indications of the time of writing are slim, the place of a book within the canon can be

enlightening. That term “canon,” however, also requires at least a brief explanation.

In its early usage, the word “canon” simply means “rule” or “norm.” With reference to Scripture it means those books accepted by a particular community as authoritative, the books providing the norm or rule by which the community chooses to live. Other books may be held to be just as “true” and in some cases just as “inspired,” but for reasons that are seldom known to us, the community did not accept them as canonical, that is, as permanently authoritative. Presumably there are sayings of Isaiah and Jeremiah, of Paul and of Jesus which did not find their way into our Scriptures, but are just as true and just as “inspired” as the ones which did, or at least the early recipients of those words would have held them just as true and just as “inspired.”

Protestant Christians generally accept the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments as their canon. Roman Catholics accept certain of the so-called Apocryphal books in addition. The Jewish believers accept only the thirty-nine Old Testament books (twenty-four by their reckoning), and even within those books the Jewish community sees different levels of authority, depending on the section in which a book appears. And that is the part that is of particular interest to us.

A New Testament reference actually identifies the three major sections of the Hebrew canon: “the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms” (Luke 24:44). The process by which God worked among his people to designate particular books as “Scripture” is one that will always remain mysterious. We must simply admit that the Spirit led the community of God’s people to recognize certain books as containing the word of the Lord in a way that would be enduring for all time. The Old Testament canon was certainly complete by New Testament times as Luke 24:44 suggests. Furthermore, scholars would generally assign the following, dates for each of the three sections: 400 BC for the Law (Genesis through Deuteronomy); 200 BC for the second section, the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea-Malachi); and 100 BC for the third section, the Writings (designated in Luke by its largest book, Psalms: Ruth, Ezra to Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Daniel, Chronicles). These dates are really just educated guesses; the canonization of the various sections may have been complete earlier or later, but for our purposes it is significant to note that canonization took place in three steps and that it took place over a period of time.

It is also important to remember that canonization is not particularly concerned with authorship. A book may have been written long before it was canonized or a book may tell a story that happened many centuries before the book was finally accepted as canonical. At least the process of canonization gives us some guide as to when the community was willing to accept a particular book as authoritative for all time.

Now let us return to the three Old Testament passages which mention Satan and look at them in the light of the statement made earlier, namely, that the books in which these passages occur were either written or were canonized towards the end of the Old Testament period. A comment on each passage might prove helpful.

## SATAN AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

*1 Chronicles 21:1* Of the three passages, this one is in some ways the most important and interesting because it is part of the retelling of the story of David’s census mentioned at the

beginning of this chapter (2 Samuel 24). Not only is Chronicles in the third section of the Hebrew canon, but it is also the very last book in the Hebrew Bible. Hence it contains the very last interpretation of Old Testament material. And, in fact, the book of Chronicles is just that, a final interpretation of the period of the monarchy. In the course of retelling that story, the biblical writer makes a startling modification to the story of David's census. The earlier account said that the LORD (Yahweh) was responsible for the census, but in Chronicles, "*Satan* stood up against Israel, and incited David to number Israel" (1 Chron. 21:1). The inspired writer now sees that an Adversary was responsible for the evil deed, and not the Lord, a remarkable difference indeed.

Now if we are too concerned about harmonizing biblical accounts, we may miss the significance of this passage, so let us pause just a moment to consider the implications. There is a sense in which both passages can be seen to be true. If God is truly all-powerful, then he is ultimately responsible for everything that happens. Both the author of Chronicles and the author of Samuel would most assuredly agree with that. But whereas the earlier author was still operating with the view that the Lord is the *active cause* of everything, the later writer sees evil events happening with the *permission* of the Lord. Perhaps an illustration can clarify the point: instead of taking whip in hand to punish the children for munching green apples, the Lord allows them to receive the stomach ache which is the appropriate reward for eating forbidden fruit. And there is quite a difference in those two approaches.

I am much more comfortable with the way that 1 Chronicles tells the story, but I must also recognize the implications of the story as told in 2 Samuel, namely, that the Lord was willing to assume full responsibility for evil. Perhaps the reason was, as suggested above, his pastoral concern for his people. And if the Lord was willing thus to portray himself as responsible for evil, then suddenly we have a handle for understanding a whole group of problem passages in the Old Testament, including the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and the sending of the serpents. There is a sense in which the Lord is still responsible for all that happens; but now I have a biblical basis for saying that he *permits* instead of *causes* evil, even in those passages where he is actual described as causing it.

Now some may be uncomfortable with this approach and might suggest that I am putting my own interpretation on the words instead of taking the Bible "just as it reads." I will admit that I have put an interpretation on the biblical account. Upon reflection, we would probably all admit that every single word in Scripture, in fact, every word everywhere, must be interpreted. No word or sentence has meaning by itself. It is always read by a person with a particular background and infused with particular meaning. That is why "father" can mean something quite different to me from what it does to someone else. When I hear the word "father." I think of my Dad and have a very positive picture. But someone with a cruel father would see things quite differently.

So we must interpret Scripture. We have no choice. That is why the Christian admonition to approach Scripture always in the attitude of prayer is so very important. If I do not seek the Lord and ask him to guide me into the knowledge of himself, I will certainly misinterpret and misapply Scripture. When I come to interpret his Word I must use all the mental machinery that I can muster, but whether or not I use that machinery in the proper manner depends on my vision of God. It is not a question of faith or reason, but rather, whether or not I will choose to use my reason faithfully.

Now my reason tells me that there is a difference between 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1



Chronicles 21:1. The more I have reflected on that difference, the more significant it has become. As a matter of fact, you could perhaps “blame” this entire book on those two verses. At least it would be safe to say that these two verses provided the catalyst for the method of interpretation which I am suggesting in the book. That was why I said earlier that, of the three passages which mention Satan in the Old Testament, 1 Chronicles 21:1 is the most significant one. That was a personal testimony.

*Zechariah 3:1-2* This passage requires only a short comment. Although the book of Zechariah is in the second section of the Hebrew canon, the book itself provides the information which allows us to say that it was one of the very last of the prophetic books. In fact, it was written well after the close of the Babylonian exile. In this passage, Satan appears as the adversary of Joshua. The setting is evidently a judgment scene; the Lord rebukes the Adversary, restoring Joshua to right standing. Hence the passage provides a helpful illumination of the cosmic antagonism: the Lord is for us; the Adversary is against us. In the end, good triumphs as the Lord rebukes the Adversary and restores his people.

*Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7* These verses in Job are certainly the best known of all the Old Testament passages which mention Satan. Scripture nowhere tells us who wrote the book of Job or when it was written. More traditional Christian writers have often tended to adopt the dominant Jewish tradition about the book, namely, that Moses was its author. Actually, Jewish speculation about the book was wide-ranging. When the rabbis discussed the question of when Job lived, they propounded suggestions that ranged all the way from the time of the great patriarch Abraham to the post-exilic Persian period and the time of Esther. In fact, the rabbi who suggested that Job was a contemporary of Esther used a clever piece of logic which is likely to elude anyone who has not been immersed in rabbinic logic: Job lived in the time of Ahasuerus because the book of Job says that Job’s daughters were the fairest in all the land. When was the time of fair women? The time of Esther. Therefore, Job lived at the time of Esther. [See the Babylonian Talmud: *Baba Bathra 15b*, English translation by the Soncino Press London.] Perhaps it is not difficult to see why the tradition of Mosaic authorship seemed more convincing.

Regardless of who wrote the book, it appears in the third section of the Hebrew canon, suggesting that it was not accepted as authoritative until very late in the biblical period. The story itself bears every mark of being a most ancient one and perhaps it was the very mention of Satan that proved a hindrance to its general acceptance since Satan is not explicitly mentioned in the Law, and only once in a late prophetic book. Yet you will notice that Satan actually makes a very limited appearance even in the book of Job, a point which merits further comment.

One of the fascinating aspects of the book of Job lies in the fact that Job himself, his wife, and his friends, apparently know nothing of the satanic attack; at least there is no evidence for such knowledge in the book itself. Furthermore, when Job begins to realize the seriousness of his problem and when his friends attempt to needle him into repenting of his sins, sins which were non-existent from Job’s point of view, Job argues with God, not with Satan. He clearly sees God as the author of his difficulties (cf. Job 16:7-17; 19:6-13). Even in one of the passages where Satan does appear, God says to Satan: “You moved me against him, to destroy him without cause” (Job 2:3). So in the book of Job, the figure of Satan makes only a very cautious appearance. God is still responsible for what happens, and all the primary actors in the drama see God as all in all.

In looking a little more closely at the two passages where Satan does appear in Job, we

must recognize how important the structure of the book is for its interpretation. The book of Job consists of a prose prologue (1-2) and a prose epilogue (42:7-17). In between is the poetic body of the book, consisting of a lively dialogue between Job and “friends” (3-31), a monologue by the young man Elihu (32-37), followed by the divine response out of the whirlwind (38-42:1-6). In the prologue there are five separate scenes, three depicting Job’s situation on earth, interspersed with the two heavenly scenes where Satan and God discuss Job’s integrity. Taking away scenes two and four, the ones where Satan appears, leaves the world scene as Job saw it. Only the addition of these two scenes gives the setting of the cosmic struggle between God and his Adversary, between good and evil. As is the case with every disaster scene in the earth, the causes and responsibility for the events are terribly difficult to untangle. We sometimes suffer because we deserve to, but often the troubles seem so undeserved. The book of Job attempts to provide some framework for handling the problem: a cosmic struggle in which the very character of God is under attack. We have already seen some evidence thus far in our discussion as to just how significant the cosmic struggle is for the method that I am suggesting one should use in approaching the Old Testament. The forces of evil must have their day in court if God is going to win in the end.

Before moving on to further implications of the disappearance of Satan from the Old Testament, I would like to comment just briefly on those passages in the Old Testament which do not explicitly mention Satan, but which have been interpreted within the Christian community as applying to Satan: Genesis 3; Isaiah 14:12-15; and Ezekiel 28:11-19.

In Genesis 3, an unbiased reader will strongly suspect the animosity which exists between the serpent and God, pointing in the direction of a full-fledged Adversary relationship. But the serpent figure is, in fact, an ambiguous one in the Old Testament. The serpent attack recorded in Numbers 21 is successfully warded off by Moses’ raising a brass serpent, the later symbol of the opponent of God! There is even evidence to suggest that the people began to worship this serpent; thus it had to be destroyed (2 Kings 18:4).

The first clear identification of the serpent as Satan in Judeo-Christian writings does not come until Revelation 12:9. There there is no doubt: the Dragon, the Serpent, the Devil, and Satan are all one and the same. Considering the strong role that the serpent plays in Christian interpretation, it is perhaps surprising that his identity is never really clarified in the Old Testament. An explanation might lie in the fact that in Egypt, the serpent is both a symbol of a good deity and of an evil one. The biblical writers thus could not really develop the serpent motif without raising the specter of dualism or something worse.

Turning to Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19, we find two passages which share several similar characteristics. Both passages have been applied to the “prehistory” of Satan and both appear in prophetic oracles or “taunt-songs” against heathen kings. Isaiah 14 is directed against the king of Babylon; Ezekiel 28 is directed against the prince or king of Tyre. Modern scholarship has been very much intrigued with the parallels between these passages and similar passages in the literature of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Two general conclusions can be drawn from the research done on these passages. First, that the parallels in pagan cultures are striking indeed; second, that the prophets themselves are speaking of the historical enemies of Israel, not of the supernatural realm. The supernatural appears only by way of analogy. In other words, most modern scholars would say that these prophetic oracles would not have been understood by an Old Testament audience as describing Satan. That conclusion seems to be

verified by the fact that the first clear application of the Lucifer passage, Isaiah 14:12-15, to Satan, was not made until the time of Tertullian, a church father who died in AD 240.

The history of the interpretation of Ezekiel 28:11-19 is less clear, for the passage has been applied not only to a supernatural being, but to the first man as well (cf. RSV), a problem of interpretation which stems from ambiguity in the original text. In any event, the application to Satan was apparently not made until several centuries into the Christian era.

The question naturally arises: is it legitimate to apply these passages to Satan when such was apparently not the intent of the original author? That is a difficult question to answer, for within the Christian tradition, an interpretation has often been drawn from a biblical passage which was clearly not the one intended by the original writer. A second meaning may have been implied but that is quite a different matter from saying that such a meaning was the one intended by the original writer. Nevertheless, as long as we do not use a second application to obscure our study and understanding of the author's original intent, such second meanings can be useful. Certainly if we choose to stand within traditional Christianity we must be willing to admit that such secondary meanings have been very popular within the Christian community, and to a certain extent, we must be resigned to such an approach even if we aren't very happy with it. But the problem has been that such traditional interpretations have often obscured or even replaced the original meaning. I actually suspect that the vehemence with which traditional Christian positions are sometimes attacked is a direct result of Christian reluctance to admit the first meaning of the text. Thus, one of my concerns as I write this book, is to show that it is possible to stand within a conservative Christian tradition and still be able to read the Old Testament for the purpose of discovering its most likely original meaning.

But after admitting that the original intent of Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19 was probably not to outline the pre-history of Satan, I still suspect that Satan is lurking somewhere in those passages. Connected with that suspicion is the probability that the prophets have apparently borrowed from cultures other than their own. We must make it clear, however, that prophets are free to "borrow" whatever they choose and from wherever they might wish. It is the final product that is the result of the divine inspiration, not the bits and pieces. Yet even if that is the case, what right do we have to suspect that pagan religions had bits and pieces of a sort that could be used? That is where I think we ought to take the events of Genesis 3-11 more seriously. Whatever mankind may have originally known about the cosmic struggle would have certainly made its way into pagan cultures and would have come in a distorted fashion to that line of patriarchs which retained the slender thread of the knowledge of the true God. Suddenly, here in prophetic literature, bits and pieces of that cosmic struggle begin to appear, but in a way which does not threaten God's first concern, the development of faith in him as the one true God. Certainly Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19 do define the *issues* of the cosmic struggle, namely, that selfishness and pride are the supreme distortion of the will of God and lead inevitably towards full opposition to God himself. The personality of the Adversary, however, is certainly well hidden behind the mask of his quite human proteges. Perhaps, then, the primary criticism of the Christian usage of these passages stems from the impression that has often been given, that these passages must have clearly outlined in the Old Testament audience the knowledge of God's Adversary. Within the context of the approach of this book, I would say that such a knowledge was still too hot for the Old Testament to handle; it had to come later.

One further passage should perhaps be added here as touching on the demonic in the Old

Testament, and that is Leviticus 16, the chapter that describes the ritual of the scapegoat (indicated in the RSV as the goat “for Azazel” – Hebrew, *azazel*). Christian interpretation of this passage has often seen both goats, the one that was sacrificed and the one that was led into the wilderness, as types of Christ. But another interpretation of this passage with ancient as well as modern support suggests that the goat led out for or to Azazel represents a demonic element. This interpretation seems to find fairly early confirmation from the intertestamental book known as 1 Enoch, for when the unknown author of 1 Enoch wished to select a name for the leader of the fallen angelic spirits, he chose the name Azazel. Now if the demonic element was indeed part of the original ritual, then perhaps here is an additional glimpse of the cosmic struggle between God and his Adversary; one goat was for the Lord and one for Azazel.

But after demonstrating just how little explicit information the Old Testament contains about Satan, we must turn our attention to the way in which the Old Testament writers handled the problem of evil in Satan’s absence. Although they would often simply attribute violent acts directly to the Lord, they sometimes softened this picture by depicting other supernatural beings as the active agents in destroying and punishing. These beings belonged to a “heavenly court” which was under the direction of God. The role of this “heavenly court” is something that we must look at more closely.

If Satan’s role is not clearly defined in the Old Testament, then we might also expect to find a description of the celestial economy which differs in some respects from the traditional Christian view which builds more directly on New Testament data. Revelation 12:9 provides the essentials of the New Testament view and the one which generally has been adopted in Christian interpretation: Michael and his angels versus the Dragon and his angels. The cosmic struggle is full-blown. In the Old Testament, however, everything must take place under the direction of the one God. Thus the “dragon and his angels” must be seen to be under divine management, though we can still catch glimpses of their misbehavior.

Perhaps an illustration from the human realm would be helpful in describing, the difference between the Old Testament view and the New Testament one. In the New Testament, the forces of good seem almost to represent a government in exile; the rulership of this world has been usurped by the dragon, the ruler of this age. The tension is deep, leading to open war, as is evident in the battleground description of Revelation 12. In the Old Testament, however, the situation would perhaps be similar to the tension between two political parties, one in power, the other in opposition. Both still operate within the one government, but the opposition at times betrays signs of disloyalty to government policy. We shall return later to the Old Testament view, but first we need to look at another aspect of the Old Testament which is quite pertinent to our discussion, an aspect which is both intriguing and difficult, the names for God.

## OLD TESTAMENT NAMES FOR GOD

As Christians, we are quite accustomed to the view that there is only one God. In my own case, for instance, I was so steeped in this belief, that it was surprising and difficult for me to recognize that for much of the Old Testament period, such a view was not so self-evident. I was aware that Israel’s pagan neighbors worshiped other gods, but I had assumed that Israel clearly saw the absoluteness of the one God. To be sure, the Old Testament tells how Israel often turned aside to worship Baal; even with my “high-road” orientation, I recognized that. But what about Israel

when she was right with God? How strong were her convictions then? That was the part that I found surprising. For even when Israel was right with God, she apparently tended to look at her God as the God of Israel, but perhaps not really the God of her neighbors. It is in this context that the discussion of the names of God in the Old Testament becomes pertinent.

One of the ten commandments declares that God's name is not to be taken in vain. The later Jewish community was so serious about that command that it decided the safest course would be simply never to utter the name of God at all. That habit of scrupulously avoiding the name of God established a tradition that has continued right down to this very day even in the Christian community. Thus users of the standard English translations (KJV, RSV, NEB, NIV) always read a substitute for the actual name of Israel's God. The story is a very complex one, but for our purposes we simply need to understand that, given Israel's situation in a world where there were many gods, the simple name "God" was not specific enough for Israel's God. Thus, when God instructed Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt, he gave a personal name for Israel to use when addressing him, their own personal God. Most scholars now agree that this name was originally something like "Yahweh." Some modern translations (e. g, The Jerusalem Bible), actually use this name throughout the Old Testament, adding a most interesting flavor to familiar stories. Thus when we read the Old Testament, we discover that the Philistines had their Dagon, the Moabites had their Chemosh, the Syrians had their Rimmon, but Israel had Yahweh. And Israel also clearly understood that whatever the other nations claimed or believed, she herself was to have no other gods before this Yahweh.

Our modern English Bibles deliberately avoid using the name "Yahweh," but by a very clever method, they do make it possible for the reader to know where an original Yahweh appears in the Hebrew: wherever you find LORD or GOD (written in small capital letters), that indicates the name Yahweh in the original Hebrew Bible. When you find "Lord" applied to God (written with only the first letter capitalized), that is generally a translation of the word *Adonai*, a close equivalent to our English "lord" in that it can refer to God or a human being, depending on the context; any authority figure could be an *adonai*. As for the word "God" (written with only an initial capital), this represents the Hebrew *Elohim*. *Elohim* is like our English word "god" in that it can refer to the one true God or to false gods. But *Elohim* is also peculiar in that it is *plural* in form, so that precisely the same word could signify God, god, or gods, depending on the context. The above distinctions are important and can be quite helpful in illuminating some Old Testament passages; perhaps a diagram would be appropriate:

*Usage in English Bibles    Application to Hebrew Old Testament*

LORD or GOD	= Yahweh, the specific name of Israel's God
Lord	= Adonai, the general for any authority figure, human or divine
God	= Elohim, the general word for "god," plural in form, but can be plural or singular in meaning; only the context determines whether it should be translated as God, god, or gods.

The name "Yahweh" as given to Moses is closely tied up with God.'s deliverance of his

people from Egypt (Ex. 3:13-15; 6:2-8). This name had great potential for reminding Israel of an intimate personal relationship, just as any personal name when used by close friends yields much more warmth than “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” or “Ms.” *Elohim* could be used to refer to God and was used a great deal, but it was the name “Yahweh” that carried the personal message and was the one name that could never be misunderstood as belonging to another more ordinary god.

But for understanding the way that the Old Testament handles the problem of evil, the word *Elohim* is the important one. In many ways it is almost like our English word “angel,” but unlike the common use of our English word “angel,” *Elohim* is often used for the supreme God. In some passages in Scripture, the expression “sons of God” (*Elohim*) shades into the supernatural sense of “angels.” This is quite clearly the case in Job, not only in the prologue where the “sons of the Elohim” met before the Lord, Satan among them (Job 1:6; 2:1), but also in the poetic portion where “sons of God” and “morning stars” are parallel, suggesting supernatural beings who sang at the creation of the earth (Job 28:7).

## THE HEAVENLY COURT

It appears that these *Elohim* or sons of the *Elohim* are members of a heavenly court. In Job, Satan was one of these “sons of God” and qualified as a member of the heavenly court even though he was clearly not a wholehearted supporter of the heavenly government. That tension within the heavenly court also occurs in other places in the Old Testament, even when the figure of Satan does not appear. Of particular interest is the story of Micaiah and the false prophets, told both in 1 Kings 22 and in 2 Chronicles 18. Let us note some of the key features.

As the story is told in 1 Kings (the Chronicles version varies little), Jehoshaphat, king of Judah (the southern kingdom) has gone north to join Ahab, king of Israel (the northern kingdom) in an attempt to regain Ramoth-Gilead for Israel from the Syrians. By reputation, Ahab ranks low as a worshiper of the true God, Yahweh, being constantly tempted by his wife’s Baal worship. But the biblical writers generally give Jehoshaphat good marks for his efforts in the service of Yahweh. Why Jehoshaphat decided to link up with the ungodly Ahab is a curious matter, but he had done so. Yet having decided to help Ahab, the king’s religious scruples began to work on his conscience. “We need to inquire from Yahweh, first,” he said. “No problem,” replied Ahab, and he summoned four hundred prophets, all of whom confidently declared “Yahweh will give Ramoth-Gilead into the hand of the king” (1 Kings 22:6).

These four hundred prophets apparently left Jehoshaphat even more uneasy, so he asked if perchance there might possibly be one more prophet. “Well, yes, there is Micaiah,” admitted Ahab. “But I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil.” Jehoshaphat got his wish, though, and Micaiah arrived, amidst a show of convincing visual aids by one of the other prophets – iron horns to push the Syrians (1 Kings 22:11).

With a touch of sarcasm, Micaiah told the king to go ahead (1 Kings 22:15), but Ahab caught the tone and commanded him to tell the truth. Micaiah did just that, confirming Ahab’s suspicions as to the nature of Micaiah’s prophecies, for he predicted the king’s death. For our purposes, however, what is significant is the way that the heavenly court figures in Micaiah’s reply. Part of Micaiah’s reply is couched in terms of a vision:

I saw Yahweh sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his

right hand and on his left, and Yahweh said, “Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?” And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before Yahweh, saying, “I will entice him.” And Yahweh said to him, “By what means?” And he said, “I will go forth, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.” And he said “You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go forth and do so!” Now therefore behold, Yahweh has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these our prophets; Yahweh has spoken evil concerning you (1 Kings 22:19-23).

The parallel with Job is striking, for though the Lord is still clearly responsible for what happens, the actual performance of the evil deed is carried out by a member of the heavenly court. But, of course, there is a notable difference between the experience of Ahab and that of Job, for Job is a blameless and upright man. Such is hardly the case with Ahab, even though the specific deed which precipitated his downfall is not indicated in connection with Micaiah’s vision.

From our point of view, the charade of the heavenly court looking for some way to make Ahab fall seems a strange way for the God of the universe to carry on. But that is the beauty of a vision: God can use whatever imagery is necessary to get the point across in a particular circumstance. For ancient Israel, the scene of the heavenly court was very useful, for it maintained the view of the omnipotence of Yahweh, while allowing some of the deeds to be carried out by lesser members of his entourage. The evil spirit who misleads Ahab is not yet cast in the role of a “Satan” who is the “accuser of the brethren,” but the picture is not all that far removed from such a view.

This idea of the heavenly court is used for another purpose in the Old Testament, namely to “control” the gods of the other nations. It may be difficult for Christian theologians to visualize the gods of the other nations as something more than mere sticks and stones. Yet even in our modern era, conservative Christians can live quite comfortably with a belief in a demonic kingdom, while at the same time viewing all the gods of the pagans as nonexistent. We probably wouldn’t be quite so ready to say that the gods of the pagans were evil angels, but the Old Testament view is perhaps close to that point of view. Let us look at some of the key passages.

At the outset we need to recall a suggestion made earlier, namely, that God did not immediately set himself before Israel as the only true God of the universe. There are many passages in the Old Testament that declare that Yahweh is the only God worthy of the name. The creation account in Genesis 1 and numerous psalms declare that there is one God who made the world and all that is therein. But for the average Israelite the problem was faced at a much lower level: “You shall have no other gods (*Elohim*) before me.” Where do the other gods (*Elohim*) fit in? They are the gods (*Elohim*) of the other nations. Yahweh is the *Elohim* in Israel and for Israel; Dagon is the *Elohim* for Philistia, Chemosh is the *Elohim* for Moab, and so on. The biblical evidence for such a position is not extensive, but when brought together it provides a reasonably clear picture.

One of the most fascinating and pertinent passages is Deuteronomy 32:8-9, rendered in the RSV as follows:

When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the

sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the people according to the number of the sons of God. For the LORD's (Yahweh's) portion is his people. Jacob his allotted heritage.

So here is a poetic passage suggesting that Israel (Jacob) belongs to Yahweh, but the other peoples belong to the sons of God. But you will notice a curious footnote in the RSV. The standard Hebrew text which was passed down through the official rabbinical line actually reads, "he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the sons of *Israel*," a reading that makes very little sense and seems rather puzzling. The Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), however, had rendered this passage as "angels of God," instead of "sons of Israel," leading a number of scholars to surmise that in the original Hebrew, the phrase "sons of God (*Elohim*)" had appeared. Apparently the devout and monotheistic scribes could not accept such an interpretation, so they modified the text to read "sons of Israel." But when the Dead Sea Scrolls came to light, one of the more sensational discoveries was a portion of a Hebrew manuscript with this passage included. In short, the conjecture of the scholars who had looked at the Greek Old Testament was correct; the manuscript read "sons of God." So the rendering given above by the RSV is most certainly correct and is one of the most helpful passages for establishing the Old Testament concept of the heavenly court.

Moving into narrative portions of the Old Testament, additional passages confirm the view that Israel sometimes saw Yahweh as one of the *Elohim* instead of the supreme and only *Elohim*. Judges 11:24 indicates that Jephthah, one of the judges, held such a view; at least such is indicated by his diplomatic correspondence with the Ammonites "Will you not possess what Chemosh your *Elohim* gives you to possess? And all that *Yahweh* our *Elohim* has dispossessed before us, we will possess."

This view is indicated also in the story of David. When he was fleeing from Saul, he had opportunity to kill the king, but settled for his spear and jar of water. When Saul realized what had happened, he and David carried on a moving conversation – across the valley from each other – but moving nevertheless. In his appeal to Saul, David makes the following pathetic observation:

If it is *Yahweh* who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering; but if it is men, may they be cursed before *Yahweh*, for they have driven me out this day that I should have no share in the heritage of *Yahweh*, saying, "Go, serve other *Elohim*" (1 Sam. 26.19).

Driving David out of the land of Israel was tantamount to saying: "Go serve other *Elohim*. You are no longer in Yahweh's land."

Further hints of this view of the heavenly court appear in a most curious story in 2 Kings 3. The story describes Israel's attack against Moab. Moab was on the run as Israel pursued them right into Moab itself. In fact, circumstances had become so bleak for the Moabites that their king felt constrained to do something drastic: sacrifice the crown prince, his eldest son. When Israel saw this sacrifice taking place, they apparently recognized that here was *the* supreme sacrifice that a king could make to Chemosh. But note the strange way that the biblical writer has recorded the story for us:



Then he took his eldest son who was to reign in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering upon the wall. And there came great wrath on Israel and they withdrew up from him and returned to their own land (2 Kings 3:27).

The biblical writer is apparently afraid to admit that Israel had granted any kind of power to Chemosh, yet he does tell us that the army hastened back to their own land. When we put this story alongside the other passages in the Old Testament which touch on the *Elohim*, the conclusion becomes clear that Israel's army was not at all sure that Yahweh was with them on foreign soil. Yahweh was *Elohim* in Israel, but was he also *Elohim* in Moab? They weren't taking any chances and headed for home.

Another story which has a bearing on the discussion is that of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. Naaman apparently felt that it was necessary to travel to Israel if he was to be healed by Israel's God. His testimony after his healing is remarkable, both with respect to the claims that he makes for Yahweh and for the parallel but somewhat contradictory recognition that back home in Syria Yahweh was not really in charge:

“Behold I know that there is no *Elohim* in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant.” But he said, “As *Yahweh* lives, whom I serve, I will receive none.” And he urged him to take it, but he refused. Then Naaman said, “If not, I pray you, let there be given to your servant two mules' burden of earth; for henceforth your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any *Elohim* but *Yahweh*. In this matter may *Yahweh* pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, *Yahweh* pardon your servant in this matter.’ He said to him, “Go in peace” (2 Kings 5:15-19).

Yahweh is the only true *Elohim*, but he is still the *Elohim* of Israel. Hence, some of Israel's land must be taken to Syria so that Naaman can worship Israel's *Elohim* properly, on Israel's land.

Still further evidence for the heavenly court comes from the book of Daniel. Daniel 10 describes how Daniel prayed for divine assistance. The angelic response was delayed because ‘the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, so I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia’ (Daniel 10:13). Daniel 10:20-21 also mentions the “prince of Persia,” who will be followed by the “prince of Greece.” Furthermore, Michael “your prince contends by my side against these.” Now without the other evidence for the concept of the heavenly court in the Old Testament, one might be tempted to see these princes as mere human rulers. Yet the figure of Michael seems to suggest that we are, in fact, dealing with the supernatural. If that is the case, then the book of Daniel also reflects the concept of the heavenly court: Michael and Gabriel on Daniel's side against the Prince of Persia and the Prince of Greece. The tensions are deeper here, approaching the full break as seen in New Testament times, but the interesting thing from the standpoint of the heavenly court is the fact that each nation has its prince.

The crowning piece of evidence for the concept of the heavenly court is provided by

Psalm 82. Without the concept of the heavenly court, the psalm is quite inexplicable, but when set against the background of the heavenly court it can be seen as a significant step towards the position which is so important to Christians, namely, that there is really only one *Elohim* worthy of the name, and that is Yahweh, the God of Israel.

This psalm is one of the best places to see the dual usage of *Elohim* as singular and as plural, for the psalm begins: “God (*Elohim*) has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods (*Elohim*) he holds judgment” (Ps. 82:1). God then proceeds to condemn roundly these *Elohim* for failing to establish justice. They have judged unjustly, showing partiality to the wicked and failing to give justice to the weak, the fatherless, the afflicted and destitute. Then in a glorious climax which prepared the way for the exaltation of the one true God, the psalmist quotes his God: “I say, You, are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless you shall die like men, and fall like any prince”(Ps. 82:6-7).

So the reluctant members, the unjust members, the “satans” in the heavenly court, are finally brought to justice for their failures. What then is the only conclusion that can be drawn? In the words of the psalmist: “Arise, O God, judge the earth; for to thee belong all the nations!” (Ps. 82:8).

No longer will Naaman have to haul his mule loads of Israelite soil to worship the one true God. Cast down are Chemosh, Dagon, and Rimmon. Vanquished are the princes of Persia and Greece, for there is one God to whom all the nations belong, the God of Israel. That, of course, is a sentiment with which Christians would most heartily agree. Although the demonic is present in the world, there is one God who is over all, above all, and the creator of all that is.

Why did it take so long for Israel to see the truth? And why did God not make it clear all along? The answer lies in the character of our God. A freedom-loving God must grant his creatures the right to rebel. Furthermore, he must allow the principle of selfishness to manifest itself clearly if righteousness is ever to gain the upper hand. As God led Israel along the path of restoration, he sought to win the hearts and minds of his people. In a world permeated with polytheism, convincing Israel that there is one true God in heaven who is God over all was no easy task and the route may seem to us to have been circuitous. But as Israel grew towards the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the principles of the great cosmic struggle began to emerge more clearly, until finally in the New Testament the issues and the key protagonists stood out in bold relief for all to see.

Nor should we overlook the significance of that New Testament climax as it is so vividly described in Revelation 12. The war in heaven and the thrusting out of the dragon is often seen only in its primeval significance, but the book of Revelation clearly sees the struggle climaxing at the cross. As the Devil is cast down to the earth a loud voice in heaven proclaims:

Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death (Rev. 12:10-11).

The cosmic struggle may have been of long standing, but regardless of when the war in heaven began, it was won at the cross. Though the skirmishes on earth must continue (cf. Rev.

12:12), the heavenly court has been purified and is now composed solely of Michael and his angels. The banished accuser is no longer one of the “sons of God.” Thus, in a sense, Revelation 12 marks the transition between the Old Testament concept of the heavenly court and the New Testament portrayal of the battle between Christ and Satan, the great struggle for the hearts and lives of men – for the rulership of this world and the universe.

**Theme: The Cry of the Prophets**

**Leading Question:** Given the fact that the harsh judgments of the prophets were rarely successful in reforming God’s people, is there any clue from Scripture as to what might have happened if the prophets had been more gentle, more affirming?

**Comment:** The official study guide has dedicated one lesson to the “Cry of the Prophets.” So how can we encompass the messages of three “major prophets” (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel – Daniel is apocalyptic prophecy, and is found in the Writings, not the Prophets), and twelve “minor prophets”?

The author of the official study guide has focused on just a sample from the prophets, choosing Isaiah (ca. 745 - 685) and Ezekiel (ca. 593 - 570) from the three “majors,” and Amos (ca. 757 - 753) and Micah (ca. 740 to 700) from the twelve “minors.”

Amos was the earliest of these prophets and the only one who “officially” served both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, at a time when both kingdoms were rich and prosperous under kings who reigned nearly half a century, Israel under Jeroboam II (ca. 793 - 753) and Judah under Uzziah (ca. 790 - 739). But note the dates: After Amos’s ministry, Israel would have only some thirty years before it would be conquered and sent into exile by the Assyrians in 722. Without exception, the prophets would say that Israel was destroyed because it failed to meet the needs of “the least of these.”

Isaiah began his five-decade ministry to the southern kingdom of Judah soon after Amos concluded his. Isaiah served under one of Judah’s best kings (Hezekiah, ca. 729 - 686) and one of the worst (Amon ca. 641- 639), and was probably put to death by Judah’s all-time worst king, Manasseh (ca. 696 - 641), almost as soon as Manasseh took the throne.

[Note: The authors of Kings and Chronicles differ in their convictions about “worst” king. The author of 2 Kings bluntly states that destruction “came upon Judah at the command of the Lord, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, for all that he had committed, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord was not willing to pardon” 2 Kings 24:3, 4, NRSV.

By contrast, the Chronicler records Manasseh’s exile to Assyria/ Babylon, where he repented and was then restored to his kingdom in Jerusalem. The Chronicler records Manasseh’s earnest efforts to undo the damage that his apostasy had caused (2 Chron. 33:10-17). The author of Kings tells us nothing about any exile, repentance, and restoration.]

Micah’s four-decade ministry in Judah (ca. 740 - 700) closely paralleled that of Isaiah. He condemned the same social and religious evils that Isaiah did.

Ezekiel’s ministry lasted some twenty years (ca. 593 - 570). He was an exilic prophet, calling Judah to account from Babylon, where he and a number of Judah’s elite had been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar.

If the official study guide has given us a four-prophet sample of the prophets, this study guide will narrow our study even further to just a sample from each of the four prophets

<b>Prophets</b>	<b>Kingdom</b>	<b>Reigning Kings</b>
Amos (ca. 757 - 753)	Judah	Uzziah: Judah (ca. 790 - 739)
	Israel	Jereboam II: Israel (ca. 793 - 753)
Isaiah (ca. 745 - 685)	Judah	Amon: Judah (ca. 641 - 639)
Micah (ca. 740 - 700)	Judah	Hezekiah: Judah (ca. 729 - 686)
Ezekiel (ca. 593 - 570)	Judah	Zedekiah: Judah (ca. 597 - 586)
	Babylon	Nebuchadnezzar: Babylon (ca. 605 - 562)

**Dangers of royal power.** According to 1 Samuel 8:10-18, when Israel first demanded a king from Samuel, he warned them of the dangers:

10 So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. 11 He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; 12 and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. 13 He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. 14 He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. 15 He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. 16 He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. 17 He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. 18 And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”

**Question:** Does the acquisition of power pose a threat to any authority, leading them to abuse and/or neglect “the least of these”?

**Amos: Trampling on the needy.** The standard study guide list several passages from Amos that vividly describe how God’s people abused the poor (Amos 3:9-11; 4:1, 2; 5:10-15). But the one that is our focus here in 8:4-6:

4 Hear this, you that trample on the needy,  
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,  
5 saying, “When will the new moon be over  
so that we may sell grain;  
and the sabbath,  
so that we may offer wheat for sale?  
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,

and practice deceit with false balances,  
6 buying the poor for silver  
and the needy for a pair of sandals,  
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.”

**Question:** What principles should govern whether or not and when we can draw on biblical passages to apply to our day?

**Micah: A clear word.** Micah 6:8 is one of the most famous passages in the prophets: “The Lord God has told us what is right and what he demands: ‘See that justice is done, let mercy be your first concern, and humbly obey your God’” (CEV). Like Amos, Micah records a number of pointed rebukes for the people’s neglect of those in need (e.g. 2:8-11; 3:8-12). But perhaps we should take this opportunity to cite a promise of restoration to the people after God had announced judgment against them. Micah closes with these hopeful words (7:18-20):

18 Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity  
and passing over the transgression  
of the remnant of your possession?  
He does not retain his anger forever,  
because he delights in showing clemency.  
19 He will again have compassion upon us;  
he will tread our iniquities under foot.  
You will cast all our sins  
into the depths of the sea.  
20 You will show faithfulness to Jacob  
and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,  
as you have sworn to our ancestors  
from the days of old.

**Question:** In the popular mind, do these hopeful words tend to lessen the impact of the prophet’s more confrontational and sobering words?

**Ezekiel: False shepherds.** Ezekiel is particularly noteworthy because he served the people before Jerusalem and Judah fell to Babylon. After the fall, he continued to minister to them. Thus he gives us a before-and-after view of prophetic ministry. But one of the more vivid passages in Ezekiel is an indictment of the false shepherds (34:2-4):

2 Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them – to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? 3 You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. 4 You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.

**Question:** Ezekiel’s words are highly critical of the shepherds for not being gentle enough with

the sheep, but could it not also be said the more strident messages of the prophets might be just as damaging to the wounded sheep as the shepherds failure to heal the sick and bind up the injured?

**Isaiah: The people's choice.** Both Isaiah and Ezekiel are in the top six "longest" books in our Bible, but they are quite different. Isaiah includes some significant and unique messages: the "Child " (Isa. 9:6-7), the vegetarian kingdom (Isa. 11), the "Servant" songs, especially Isaiah 53, the Sabbath fast (Isa. 58), the new earth (Isaiah 65, 66). In one way or another, each of these addresses the theme, "The Least of These." But what would be *your* choice, your favorite from Isaiah, and how might it fit in with the theme for this quarter?

**Theme: Worship the Creator**

**Leading Question:** Does religion – things done in God’s name – tend to liberate or oppress?

**Comment:** If God is the Creator of all, then it stands to reason that we are all his children and all equally free before him and before each other.

But curiously, some of the greatest oppression of human beings is done in the name of religion (God), but also some of the greatest acts of liberation are a result of a commitment to God. Luke 4:18-19 reports a remarkable incident in the synagogue at Nazareth when Jesus read from the book of Isaiah before his hometown people. Quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2, this is what Jesus read:

18 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

That is religion at its best: a liberating force for those who are burdened and oppressed.

But Jesus can also point us to religion at its worst. Matthew 23, Jesus’ list of woes against the scribes and Pharisees is a sobering narrative of how religion can go wrong. These lines, in particular (Matt. 23:2 - 4), represent a sorry story about the ability of human beings to distort religion to their own purposes:

2“‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.”

These are the same religious functionaries that accused Jesus of Sabbathbreaking when he healed the sick and infirm on the Sabbath.

**Question:** What is at work here that, in God’s name, his liberating gift becomes a burden?



**The Sabbath fast:** Isaiah 58 is powerful narrative that describes how God’s gift can be turned into a curse:

- 1 Shout out, do not hold back!  
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!  
Announce to my people their rebellion,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.
- 2 Yet day after day they seek me  
and delight to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness  
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;  
they ask of me righteous judgments,  
they delight to draw near to God.
- 3 “Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”  
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,  
and oppress all your workers.
- 4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.  
Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high.
- 5 Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?
- 6 Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?
- 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
- 8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
- 9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
10 if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.  
11 The Lord will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail.  
12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.

13 If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,  
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;  
if you call the sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;  
if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;  
14 then you shall take delight in the Lord,  
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;  
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

**Question:** How can one do ordinary (secular?) things on the Sabbath as a means of helping others while retaining a sense of the sacred that God seems to have intended when he gave us the Sabbath?

**Jeremiah's temple speech.** Though Jeremiah is not one of the "official" texts for this week's lesson, Jeremiah's temple discourse (Jer. 7 :1-15) is a powerful example of how religious symbols can become a deadly camouflage for a wicked heart:

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord. 3 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. 4 Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

5 For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, 6 if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or

shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, 7 then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

8 Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. 9 Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, 10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are safe!”—only to go on doing all these abominations? 11 Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord. 12 Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. 13 And now, because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, 14 therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh. 15 And I will cast you out of my sight, just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim.

**Question:** What can be done to prevent the catastrophic double-standard that Jeremiah’s temple discourse describes? Are we equally vulnerable to such a double standard?

**Theme: Jesus and Those in Need**

**Leading question:** If someone just sat down with Luke and read it through, what would they likely discover about Jesus’ treatment of those in need?

**High points in the life and teachings of Jesus.** The following passages are ones have shaped our thinking about Jesus:

**Luke 1:46-55: Mary’s Vision for her child.** Mary’s song celebrates how the small and the weak have been instruments of God’s grace.

**Luke 2:1-19: Jesus’ birth.** The humble origins of the Ruler of the universe.

**Luke 4:16-30: The synagogue at Nazareth.** When Jesus read in his hometown synagogue, the message focused on bringing the good news to the poor.

**Luke 7:18-23: Messengers from John the Baptist.** Jesus pointed to his ministry to the poor and lowly as evidence of his divine mission.

**Luke 10:17-24: Return of the Seventy.** Jesus rejoiced that the message was received by the lowly.

**Luke 19:45-46 [= Matthew 21:13-17]: Cleansing of the Temple.** Matthew’s version of the cleansing of the temple is intriguing, for it tells how Jesus’ anger drove the evil people from the temple, but the poor and the children came running to him. O that our anger could have that kind of effect in the world.

**The message nobody wanted to hear: Isaiah 53.** When Jesus said that he had come to suffer and die, no one wanted to hear it. Only after the resurrection did this message break through:

He was despised and rejected by others;  
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;  
and as one from whom others hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

4 Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases;  
yet we accounted him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted.

5 But he was wounded for our transgressions,

crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way,  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

**Question:** Are God's people ready to recognize the Suffering Servant today?

**Theme: “The Least of These”**

**Leading Question:** In Jesus’ judgment story of the sheep and the goats, the sheep are rewarded for doing good things. Why isn’t this salvation by works?

**Comment:** Of the 13 lessons in this quarter’s plan, two of them focus specifically on the life and teachings of Jesus as seen in the Gospels. But our study guide has given us an impossible task: this one lesson includes the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 - 7), the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-27), the parable of the “Rich man and Lazarus” (Luke 16:19-31), and the judgment parable of “The Sheep and the Goats” (Matthew 25:31-46). That’s like trying to eat a restaurant’s whole menu at one meal!

This study guide focuses on the last parable because of its enormous significance for the Adventist community and for Christians in General.

**Context in Matthew 24-25.** In Matthew, the parable of the judgment is the last word in two chapters that focus on the time of the end. Matthew 24 emphasizes two points: Signs and Surprises. The signs warn us that the end is near, but the chapter concludes with warnings that the end will come as a surprise. The chapter that follows includes three stories: the story of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) – even the wise ones slept while they waited; the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) – the servants were commended for staying on the job, even though the master’s return was delayed; and the parable of the judgment (Matthew 25:31-46), posing the question: what have you been doing while you waited? To over-simplify, we could say that an end-time agenda consists of three simple principles: sleeping nights, working days, and helping those in need. Sounds suspiciously like life as usual, doesn't it?

But now let’s look at the last story and pose three questions:

**Question #1:** Is the story telling about what God’s people are doing at the end of time or about what everyone is doing?

**Short Answer:** It is addressed to every person on earth. Everyone.

**Question #2:** Does this story teach salvation by works?

**Short Answer:** No. Those who are rewarded are caught totally by surprise.

**Question #3.** Does this story move in the direction of a certain kind of universalism?

**Short Answer:** The story stops short of full universalism, but does open the door of salvation for

those who have never heard of Jesus.

The article that concludes this lesson, “Living in the End Time,” seeks to interpret this story in the context of the Matthew 24-25.

**Two significant Ellen White quotations, based on this story.** Both quotations are drawn from chapter 70 in *The Desire of Ages*, “The Least of These My Brethren” (pp. 647 - 651). Key words are highlighted:

Christ on the Mount of Olives pictured to His disciples the scene of the great judgment day. And He represented its decision as turning upon **one point**. When the nations are gathered before Him, there will be but two classes, and their eternal destiny will be determined by **what they have done or have neglected to do for Him in the person of the poor and suffering**. (*Desire of Ages*, 637)

Those whom Christ commends in the judgment may have **known little of theology, but they have cherished His principles**. Through the influence of the divine Spirit they have been a blessing to those about them. Even among the heathen are those who have **cherished the spirit of kindness**; before the words of life had fallen upon their ears, they have befriended the missionaries, even ministering to them at the peril of their own lives. **Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish**. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God. (*Desire of Ages*, 638)

Both these quotations help explain why Seventh-day Adventists insist that salvation is not directly linked with hearing the name of Jesus. In other words, there is room in the kingdom for those who do not follow him or even know of him.

That position differs sharply from the traditional evangelical argument that only those who confess the name of Jesus can be saved. And since Adventists do not believe in an eternally burning hell, their “motivation” for evangelism is not rooted in fear, but in hearing of the great blessings offered by the Gospel.

**Question:** Given the plain teaching of Jesus’ parable, how can one understand the intensity of the evangelical conviction that only “born-again” Christians can be saved?

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## Living in the End Time

By Alden Thompson

(*Signs of the Times*, June 1984, pp. 8-10)

[originally submitted to *These Times*]

Somewhere in our town lives a man with 150 guns tucked away at home. Is he a collector or a crook? Neither, actually. He simply believes the world is about to fall apart. And when it does, he intends to protect himself from the rabble.

Because our local gunman is not alone in his fear of hard times, survival stores are hot items right now in several parts of the country. Our local newspaper quoted the owner of one such store in southern Oregon as claiming that 90% of his business came from the sale of firearms and self-defense items.

Now if a man sees his home as his castle, fortified against the imminent collapse of civilization, he probably won't wander very far afield. In fact, a friend told me recently of one man in our valley who is so gripped by the fear of the end that he refuses to travel any further from home than the distance he can cover with his car on a half tank of gas. The other half tank in reserve is his protection from being stranded when the crisis strikes.

This survival mania poses interesting questions for Christians. Would you, for example, expect the gunman, the survival store owner, and the man with the half tank of gas to worship together on the week-end? And if they sat beside you in your pew in your church, what you want them to hear?

Somewhere along the line the man with the guns probably should hear Jesus' word about turning the other cheek (Matt. 5:39). The man with the half tank of gas probably should hear about going the second mile (Matt. 5:41). All three would no doubt profit from a sermon based on the text, "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). But what about the underlying assumption that the world is on the verge of collapse? Does a Christian have something to say about that?

He should – for Scripture says a fair bit about the demise of civilization. But the New Testament hardly envisions a simple slide toward anarchy. Instead, Scripture tells of a clean sweep followed by a fresh new world – "a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Rev. 21:1). In such a scenario, 150 guns or a half tank of gas won't offer much comfort.

Because I grew up steeped in the fervent hope of the return of Christ and the end of the world, the reaction of some Christians to the biblical teaching puzzles me. In Scotland, for example, I had the privilege of becoming acquainted with a fine Christian gentleman, a Protestant and deeply committed to his faith. But when we talked about the end of the world, he simply confessed to being quite mystified.

On another occasion, a devout Roman Catholic woman attending classes on the campus of our Adventist college, exclaimed, "I have never lived with this sense of expectancy, destiny or urgency."

Now living without a sense of expectancy has one great advantage – one never faces the specter of disappointment. And Adventists do know something about disappointment. Born out of the Millerite movement of the nineteenth century, Adventists are the spiritual heirs of those who unflinchingly expected their Lord to come and the world to end on October 22, 1844. But they were disappointed – keenly disappointed. In the words of the Adventist pioneer Hiram



Edson, “Our fondest hopes and expectations were blasted, and such a spirit of weeping came over us as I never experienced before....We wept, and wept, till the day dawn.”

In the agonizing days which followed, Adventists had to learn to live expectantly – but with disappointment. Fortunately, Jesus prepared his disciples for just such a situation and his counsel is recorded for us in Matthew 24 and 25.

The essence of the first of these chapters, Matthew 24, is a tantalizing paradox: signs will tell us the end is near, yet the end will catch us by surprise. Then from the three stories in Matthew 25, we discover an end-time agenda consisting of three simple principles: sleeping nights, working days, and helping those in need. Sounds suspiciously like life as usual, doesn't it? Let's take a closer look.

When the disciples asked about the signs of his coming and the end of the world, Jesus described the difficult times to come, but cautioned, “Don't be alarmed; all this has to happen, but the end is not yet” (Matt. 24:6). In fact, wars, famines, and earthquakes would be “but the beginning” of troubles (Matt. 24:8). Nevertheless, these signs would show the disciples that his coming was “near, at the very gates” (Matt. 24:33).

But then the surprise – in spite of warning signs, the end would come as a thief in the night, “at an hour you do not expect” (Matt. 24:43-44).

Now if the Lord's return is going to catch us by surprise, is it safe simply to continue to live life as usual? Jesus' answer to that question is found in his final illustration of Matthew 24. There he tells of two servants, one “faithful and wise,” because he consistently fulfilled his responsibilities; the other “wicked,” because he said, “My master is delayed,” using that as an excuse to beat his fellow servants and to adopt a reckless, drunken lifestyle (Matt. 24:49).

The “wicked” servant apparently was counting on some kind of warning, something buying him time so he could shape up before his master returned. Surprise. The master returns “when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know” (Matt. 24:50). The moral of the story is clear enough – the one safe course is a faithful “life as usual.”

And does the text say anything about stashing away weapons? Not a peep. The wise servant knows that times will be difficult. Yet Jesus had counseled, “Don't be alarmed” (Matt. 24:6). Thus the formula for end-time living is surprisingly simple: no fear, no special preparations, just a faithful life as usual.

“Wait a minute,” you say. “When times get tough my body begins pumping adrenaline. What's the Christian's antidote for that?” Good question and one to which we must return. But first a quick look at the other half of Jesus' end-time counsel, Matthew 25.

Immediately following his discussion of signs and surprises (Matthew 24), Jesus tells three stories to conclude his “last days” discourse. Telling of high hopes, disappointment, and delay, these stories also raise the question of accountability – how have we lived in a time of expectancy and disappointment?

The first story tells of an oriental wedding party – ten virgins to be more precise – eagerly awaiting the bridegroom (Matt. 25:1-13). But the hours slip by. No bridegroom appears. Disappointment.

The virgins not only slumber, they sleep – all ten of them. Now if we were telling the story, we would probably let the five foolish virgins sleep and keep the wise ones awake. But Jesus even put the wise ones to sleep. He wanted to show that a prepared person doesn't need to panic when the Lord returns.

When the bridegroom actually came, the wise virgins had oil for their lamps and were ready to go. Only the foolish virgins panicked; the delay had burned up all their oil.

The second story, usually known as the parable of the talents, describes a businessman who entrusts his estate to his servants while he departs on a long journey (Matt. 25:14-30). In contrast with the parable of the virgins, no dramatic sense of expectancy dominates the story. The focus is rather on accountability. Giving no clue as to how long he will be gone, the owner simply expects his servants to manage his estate during his absence.

He finally returns to settle accounts, but only “after a long time” (Matt. 25:19). Two of the three servants had doubled their assigned capital, one converting five talents into ten, the other, two into four.

The master calls both of these servants “good and faithful” (Matt. 25:21, 23). For them, his arrival had occasioned no panic, no frenzied burst of activity. From the day of his departure they had been prepared for his return.

But one servant did panic and right from day one. In his fear he did nothing with his one talent except bury it in the ground. Upon returning, his master called him “wicked and slothful,” chiding him for not making at least minimum effort by investing his one talent with the bankers. The master wasn’t asking for brilliant achievement or extraordinary effort; he would have been quite happy with “ordinary” faithfulness. But the man did nothing at all – except panic.

The final story in Matthew 25 is a judgment scene, the separation of the sheep from the goats. Jesus, represented by the king sitting in judgment, catches the “sheep” by surprise in quite a different sense. He welcomes them to his kingdom, commending them for all the acts of kindness which they have done to him personally: feeding him, slaking his thirst, welcoming him when he was a stranger, clothing him, and visiting him both when he was sick and when he was in prison (Matt. 25:35-36).

The saints are nonplussed, saying, in effect (politely), “We don’t know what you are talking about.” Then the surprise: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40). By their faithful “life as usual,” caring for the needs of those close by, the saints had ministered to the king himself.

How could Jesus have outlined a clearer plan for living in the endtime? A follower of Christ must be prepared for delay. Prudent planning is therefore essential: we should always maintain an adequate supply of “oil” (for our “spiritual” lamps, not for our cars!). But then we should be able to sleep nights, to work days, and to continue ministering to those in need.

And in times of crisis, what is the antidote for our adrenaline? It is both simple and mysterious. Everyone burdened with the cares of this wild world is invited to come to Jesus for rest (Matt. 11:28). Knowledge of his love casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

But wait. Let’s not be too hasty in choking off the adrenal glands. The troubles in the world are signs of the end. Such signs are God’s warning signals to those who are drowsy and unprepared. A shot of adrenaline could save their lives.

**Theme: “Ministry in the New Testament Church”**

**Leading Question:** Jesus was always gentle with needy people, but is there evidence in the New Testament that he or his followers could or should use the heavy hand?

**Comment:** This quarter we have hurried through the Old Testament, spending one week on the prophets; we have raced through the life and teachings of Jesus in two lessons. And now we are looking at “Ministry in the New Testament Church.” It seems to be clear *what* we should be doing, but is the *how* clear? To borrow Paul’s words from the last verse of 1 Corinthians 4: “Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (1 Cor. 4:21, NRSV).

**Question:** When it comes to the theme of this quarter’s lessons, “The Least of These,” is the *how* or the *what* the more challenging issue for the church?

**Comment:** Let’s see if we can look at the New Testament church from the perspectives of the *what* and the *how*. Then, under how we can consider several possibilities. Finally we can consider the *why*.

1. *What* should we be doing?
  - A. Words without comment – mere description without praise or blame.
  - B. Stories without comment – but which imply praise or blame.
  - C. Strong words of rebuke (Paul’s “stick”).
  - D. Encouraging words (Paul’s “love in a spirit of gentleness”)
3. *Why* do we do what we do?

Here are some NT passages we can use to fill out the picture:

**Gospel Commission** (Matt. 28:19-20)

19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age (NRSV).

### **The founding days of the early church: (Acts 2:42-47; 4:42-37)**

Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (NRSV).

Acts 4: 32 Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33 With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. 35 They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. 36 There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). 37 He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet (NRSV).

### **Ananias and Sapphira: (Acts 5:1-11)**

Acts 5:1 But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; 2 with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" 5 Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. 6 The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." 9 Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." 10 Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things (NRSV).

**Dorcas:** (Acts 9:36-43)

36 Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. 37 At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. 38 Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." 39 So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. 40 Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. 41 He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. 42 This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. 43 Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

**Paul:** (2 Cor.8:1-14)

8 We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; 2 for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3 For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, 4 begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints – 5 and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, 6 so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. 7 Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you – so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

8 I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. 9 For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. 10 And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something – 11 now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. 12 For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has – not according to what one does not have. 13 I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between 14 your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. 15 As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little" (NRSV).

**James: (2:1-9)**

2:1 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7 Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

8 You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 9 But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors (NRSV).

5:1 Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. 2 Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. 4 Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. 5 You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter (NRSV).

**Question:** In the light of a wide variety of New Testament passages, what do we find most difficult today? Knowing *what* is right? Or, *how* to treat others in such a way as to make them *want* what is right?

**Theme: Living the Gospel**

**Leading question:** Once we realize that we are God’s children, how do we protect ourselves (and the world around us!), from the arrogance that lurks so near?

**Comment:** Once a upon a time, when I was a young man, several of us theology faculty at Walla Walla College (now University) used to play racquetball together. Each of us had a particular strength. One of my colleagues had the reach. With his long arms he could stand in the middle of the court and reach almost anything. Another colleague had the power; another claimed to have the brains (!). I had the speed. We had great fun together.

And I must admit that over the years I have learned a great deal of good theology from the game and from my colleagues. For example, one day the colleague with the power and I played a game of singles. Afterwards, as we got into his car, he spoke a truth that made a lasting impact on me. “Speed on your feet,” he said, “is like perfect pitch in music: either you have it or you don’t.”

The more I thought about it the more I realized the profound implications of his statement. I’m no expert on perfect pitch, but I do know something about running. If you watch kids running on the playground you can always spot the fast ones. And the ones who just plod can’t plod any faster. They were born to be plodders just as the speedsters were born to be fast.

But arrogance seems to be one of the dangerous side effects of speed. For me, there is no more deliciously wicked feeling than turning on the afterburners and leaving those other guys in the dust! Fortunately for me (and for my character development), my hands weren’t ever quite as good as my feet. So I could scamper into the end zone ahead of everyone – and drop the ball!

Law enforcement officers do not hesitate to tell us that speed kills. But is also truth that speed thrills. At the Olympics, for example, spectators of all kinds are drawn like a magnet to the 100 meter and 200 meter dashes. In virtually every sport, a premium is placed on speed.

The theological point of all this is embodied in a couple of painfully true lines from Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:6-7: “I want you to stop saying that one of us is better than the other. 7 What is so special about you? What do you have that you were not given? And if it was given to you, how can you brag?”

That surge of excitement that comes when I leave the other guys in the dust feels like a great accomplishment that I have earned all by myself. Not so quick, says Paul. “What is so special about you? What do you have that you were not given? And if it was given to you, how can you brag?” Do you excel in school? It’s a gift from God. All that we do and all that we are come as gifts from God.

And that brings us to our theme for this week: “Living the Gospel.” Several biblical passages are crucial, some more practical, some more theological. Let’s consider several of them so that we can gain insights as to what it means to “live” the Gospel:

**Ephesians 2:8-10.** Here Paul gives in a more theological form the same truth suggested in 1 Corinthians 4:

Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

In short, all that we do should be rooted in gratitude for what God done for us.

**Question:** To what extent do we need the “revealed” or “inspired” Word of God to tell us that those who brag are not loved by their fellow humans? Put that question to Matthew 6:1, here in the lively words of the Contemporary English Version: “When you do good deeds, don’t try to show off. If you do, you won’t get a reward from your Father in heaven.”

**Comment:** One doesn’t need a “revelation” or an “inspired word” to know the” truth of Matthew 6:1 – no one admires a braggart, not the secular person, not the religious person. Here the sacred and the secular blend together as one.

**John 3:16-17:** With reference to this famous verse, could we perhaps say that the Gospel not only saves us in a “religious” and “eternal” sense, but also saves us from ourselves?

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (NRSV).

**Salvation from arrogance, but also from condemnation in judgment.** Religiously, we are so accustomed to thinking of salvation in the religious sense, i.e. being saved from condemnation in the great judgment day, that we often overlook the fact that it also saves us from our arrogance and condemnation by our fellow human beings

**Question:** How do the following passages address our shortcomings and cultural biases? How does the Gospel address those impulses?

**Galatians 3:28:**

28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (NRSV)

**1 Corinthians 12:13**

13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.



**The three great subjugations in historical perspective.** In Galatians 3, Paul addresses the three great subjugations that came about as a result of sin and which Jesus came to reverse, moving us all toward oneness in Christ. The list that follows indicates the historical stages by which the subjugations took place

**1. Female subjugation to the male.** Genesis 3:16 describes the fate that overtook the woman as the result of sin: “Your husband shall rule over you.” Is it ironic that Genesis 3:16 is reversed by John 3:16? Those who support male dominance, usually do so from a theocentric perspective, arguing that the husband should rule over the woman because of her sin. But the Hebrew is wonderfully ambiguous here: It can be taken as an imperative or as mere description. Surely, in the light of John 3:16, the Christian’s goal should be to return to the ideal of Genesis 1:27 where male and female are both created in the image of God.

**2. Slave subjugation to the free.** In the New Testament there is scarcely a clue that the slaves should be given their freedom. During the American civil war, all the preachers in the American South are recorded as defending slavery *from the Bible*. It would be nearly 2000 years after the resurrection before slaves would be given their freedom.

**3. Greek subjugation to the Jew.** Of the three, this is the only subjugation addressed in the New Testament. Acts 10 and 11 give a glimpse of Peter’s deep anxiety when the “vision” showed him that Jews and Greeks were equal before God. One can almost hear him hyperventilating as he responds to Cornelius in the presence of the assembled Gentiles: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. 29 So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?” And all this happened perhaps six years after the resurrection. In short, the full meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection in bringing us together as one, was slow in coming.

**Summary:** The one remaining subjugation is female to the male. And it is not just a “religious” matter. Culture in general has been slow to respond. Here is a statement about the gradually changing status of women at Cambridge University:

**Women’s education at Cambridge:** Originally all students were male. The first colleges for women were Girton College (founded by Emily Davies) in 1869 and Newnham College in 1872. The first women students were examined in 1882 but attempts to make women full members of the university did not succeed until 1947. Although Cambridge did not give degrees to women until this date women were in fact allowed to study courses, sit examinations, and have their results recorded from the nineteenth century onwards. In the twentieth century women could be given a “titular degree”; although they were not denied recognised qualifications, without a full degree they were excluded from the governing of the university. Since students must belong to a college, and since established colleges remained closed to women, women found admissions restricted to colleges established only for women. All of the men’s colleges began to admit women between 1960 and 1988. One women’s college, Girton, also began to admit men, but the

other women's colleges did not follow suit. In the academic year 2004-5, the university's student gender ratio, including post-graduates, was male 52%: female 48% (Source: Cambridge University Reporter). – Wikipedia, "University of Cambridge" (09-06-06)

**Revelation 14:6, 7:** Worship of the creator God, judgment, and Gospel all rolled into one

Revelation 14: 6 Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people. 7 He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

**Question:** How might the cluster of things mentioned in the first angel's message motivate Christians to be more thoughtful of the needs of "the least of these"?

**Theme: Living the Advent Hope**

**Leading question:** Is it possible to live on hope rather than on the basis of proof?

**Comment:** Our lesson for this week affirms that Second Coming of Jesus. But remarkably, it opens on a note that could almost be described as “despair.” The author has unearthed no less than six biblical passages in which believers utter the cry: “How Long?” That cry from the souls under the altar in Revelation 14:6 is familiar. The others are less so. Let’s look at each one with a brief analysis to show how they are similar and how they differ:

**Zechariah 1:12:** This is a surprising passage because the “angel” of the Lord – in some passages of the Old Testament a seeming euphemism for Yahweh himself – asks the “skeptical” question (“How long?”) of Yahweh himself. Here the answer seems to have been immediate as the Lord responded with “gracious and comforting words.”

Then the angel of the Lord said, “O Lord of hosts, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which you have been angry these seventy years?” (NRSV)

**Psalms 94:1-3:** Here the question is posed by the psalmist. Yet his “skepticism” is countered at the end of psalm when he himself testifies to his firm commitment: “But the Lord has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge.” (Ps. 94:22, NRSV)

O Lord, you God of vengeance,  
you God of vengeance, shine forth!  
2 Rise up, O judge of the earth;  
give to the proud what they deserve!  
3 O Lord, how long shall the wicked,  
how long shall the wicked exult? (NRSV)

**Habakkuk 1:2-4:** Here the prophet puts forward two complaints about the injustice in the world. The Lord responds, but doesn’t satisfy Habakkuk. Finally the Lord appeals for patience, and Habakkuk does seem to be more content. Indeed, he moves into praise before he is through.

2 O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not listen?  
Or cry to you “Violence!”  
and you will not save?  
3 Why do you make me see wrongdoing  
and look at trouble?  
Destruction and violence are before me;

strife and contention arise.  
4 So the law becomes slack  
and justice never prevails.  
The wicked surround the righteous—  
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

**Luke 18:1-8:** Tantalizing may be the best word to describe this parable. Two things are notable; 1) the “truth” is put in the mouth of an unjust judge; 2) Jesus makes the point of the parable clear: Pray always and don’t lose heart.

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 2 He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3 In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ 4 For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” 6 And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8 I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

**Romans 8:18-24:** Paul admits the pain in the world, and says that “hope” is the answer – probably as close as we can get to a “real” solution.

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

**Revelation 6:9-10:** In the last book of the Bible where a new heaven and a new earth are promised, God still allows his people freedom to ventilate without fear of recrimination.

9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; 10 they cried out with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?”

**Question:** Is a God who allows that much discontent to surface, one that we could live with forever?

**1 Corinthians 15:13-19: Resurrection hope.** Paul claims that without the resurrection hope, there is nothing worth living for. From the standpoint of theodicy, there can be no satisfactory response without a future life. But one could question Paul's conclusion that the Christian life is not worth living without that hope.

13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. 17 If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. 19 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

**Question:** If one cannot believe in a restoration, is there anything left to believe in? In short, is there no value in Christian living without a future hope?

**Ecclesiastes 8:14: Judgment hope in Ecclesiastes?** Given the fact that Ecclesiastes is on the fringes of faith – there is no trace of prayer or praise in the entire book – it is surprising to find this verse in conjunction with a lesson on the “blessed hope.” Admittedly, however, whether or not one sees Ecclesiastes as inspired, the book's author is close to the truth when he describes the injustices in the world.

14 There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.

**Note:** At least one evangelical author is willing challenge the “inspiration” of Ecclesiastes because of its skeptical perspective. Walter Martin was no doubt trying to avoid the SDA use of Eccles. 9:5 (“The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing.”) when he registered this critique of Ecclesiastes:

“It is almost universally agreed among Biblical scholars that Ecclesiastes portrays Solomon's apostasy and is therefore virtually worthless for determining doctrine. It sketches man's 'life under the sun' and reveals the hopelessness of the soul apart from God. The conclusion of the Book alone mirrors the true revelation of God (chap. 12).” – *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventists*, 1960, p. 127, note #11.

**Question:** How can one affirm the value of doubt in a community that does not value the inquiring mind? Note this quote from George MacDonald:

To deny the existence of God may...involve less unbelief than the smallest yielding to doubt of His goodness. I say *yielding*; for a person may be haunted with doubts, and only grow thereby in faith. Doubts are the messengers of the Living One to the honest. They are the first knock at our door of things that are not yet, but have to be, understood... Doubt must precede every deeper assurance; for uncertainties are what we first see when we look into a region hitherto unknown, unexplored, unannexed. – George MacDonald, *365 Readings*, #152, pp. 66-67

**Revelation 21:1-5; 22:1-5:** The New Testament closes on a triumphant note: the promise of a world restored, one without pain or tears.

**Revelation 21:1-5:** Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true” (NRSV).

**Revelation 22:1-5** Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; 4 they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (NRSV)

**Question:** What is the basis for your hope in the return of the Lord Jesus Christ?

**Theme: To Love Mercy**

**Leading question:** Given all the distractions in our world, what practical steps can we take to help us keep a clear focus on Jesus’ mandate to care for the poor and disadvantaged?

**Comment:** This week’s lesson covers much ground that is familiar. Indeed a number of biblical passages that we have already discussed this quarter appear again. The point is to keep our focus clear.

**Micah 6:6-8: Simply following the prophet’s words.** The psychology of Micah 6:6-8 can be highly instructive for us: one cannot expect to pay an ever higher price to satisfy the divine demands. Even child sacrifice won’t do the trick. Note the big three in verse 8:

“With what shall I come before the Lord,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”  
8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

**Matthew 6:25-34: The worry-free life.** As difficult as it may seem, Jesus makes it clear that our efforts alone can never bring peace of mind. Yet his command is clear: “Don’t worry about tomorrow.”

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not

worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today (NRSV).

**Question:** What practical steps can we take to eliminate worry from our lives?

**Note:** Even though Scripture argues against the value of worry, we should be careful not to crush others or ourselves by working too hard (and worrying too much) to reach a worry-free existence. A comparison between Paul’s counsel not to worry and the actual worry in his life should give us some kind of courage when we fall short of our ideals. Here is the striking comparison:

**Philippians 4:6:** “Don’t worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God” (CEV).

**2 Cor. 11:28** “Besides everything else, each day I am burdened down, worrying about all the churches” (CEV).

In short, Paul counsels us not to worry about anything, but then turns right around and tells us that he is burdened every day by his worrying about all the churches. So if you are a “natural” worrier, follow Paul’s counsel and pray about it!

**James 1:5-8: The prayer God always answers: the prayer for Wisdom.** If we read James 1 carefully, we will see that it is not a promise that God will answer all our prayers if we pray intensely. It is a declaration that God will always answer the prayer for Wisdom. So let’s keep up the praying!

5 If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. 6 But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; 7, 8 for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord (NRSV).

**2 Cor. 9:7: God loves generous people.** The author of the official study guide is the world director for ADRA, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency. He could not resist putting in a plug for generosity. This is one of the best biblical passages:

“Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (NRSV).

**Question:** What is the best way to nurture a generous spirit in ourselves and others?



**Peacemaking: A call to peacemaking in a world where war is inevitable?** The official study guide puts two biblical passages together that highlight the challenge of peacemaking:

**Matthew 5:9:** “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (NRSV).

**Mark 13:7:** 7 “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come” (NRSV).

**Question:** How does a believer stay with the peacemaking task when wars are inevitable? Or does Jesus’ reference refer more to interpersonal and local situations?

**Psalms 146: 5-9:** A voice for the voiceless: The official study guide does a marvelous job of bringing together important passages of Scripture that highlight the need to be generous and helpful to “the least of these.” This psalm is one of the best:

Psalms 146:5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the Lord their God,  
6 who made heaven and earth,  
the sea, and all that is in them;  
who keeps faith forever;  
7 who executes justice for the oppressed;  
who gives food to the hungry.  
The Lord sets the prisoners free;  
8 the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.  
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;  
the Lord loves the righteous.  
9 The Lord watches over the strangers;  
he upholds the orphan and the widow,  
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin (NRSV).

**Question:** What is the best way for Christians to keep the needs of a broken world uppermost in their thoughts and plans? Is it more a personal task or a communal one?

**Theme: A Community of Servants**

**Leading question:** Can we accomplish more by ourselves or by working as a community?

**Comment:** The final lesson this quarter is one that offers a host of intriguing possibilities for discussion. Some ideas are more explicit in Scripture, some are implicit. In some case modern insights reinforce what we find in Scripture. For those who are obedient, a biblical command is enough motivation. “The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it – and I do it!”

**1. The value of community life: Responding to a biblical command.**

**A. Church as body of Christ: 1 Corinthians 12**

**B. Church as the temple of God: 1 Corinthians 3:16-17**

1 Cor. 3:16 “Don’t you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? 17 God will destroy anyone who destroys this temple. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (New Living Translation)

**Note:** This is a church passage not a health reform verse. NLT gets it right (most translations don’t show that the initial “you” is plural.) See 1 Cor. 6:19-20 for the health reform verse.

**2. What individuals do best.**

**A. Power of personal example: Abraham, Moses, Jackie Robinson**

**Abraham, arguing with God over Sodom: Genesis 18**

**Moses confronting God over Israel at Mt. Sinai: Exodus 32:9-14**

Exod. 32: 9 The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 10 Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.” 11 But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply

your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.” 14 And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people. (NRSV)

### **Moses asking for help in leading Israel: Numbers 11**

Numbers 11:10 The Israelites stood around their tents complaining. Moses heard them and was upset that they had made the Lord angry. 11 He prayed:

“I am your servant, Lord, so why are you doing this to me? What have I done to deserve this? You’ve made me responsible for all these people, 12 but they’re not my children. You told me to nurse them along and to carry them to the land you promised their ancestors. 13 They keep whining for meat, but where can I get meat for them? 14 This job is too much for me. How can I take care of all these people by myself? 15 If this is the way you’re going to treat me, just kill me now and end my miserable life!”

16 The Lord said to Moses: Choose seventy of Israel’s respected leaders and go with them to the sacred tent. 17 While I am talking with you there, I will give them some of your authority, so they can share responsibility for my people. You will no longer have to care for them by yourself.

**Jackie Robinson:** As the first American black to play major league baseball, Robinson inspired and encouraged all blacks to stay with. The movie, “42” is a powerful testimony to Robinson’s life.

**B. Creativity and productivity:** Susan Cain in *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking* (Random House, 2012) argues persuasively that “group think” works against both creativity and productivity. In particular, she is highly critical of “open office” plans that put people together when they should be working by themselves.

## **3. What the community does best:**

### **A. Social Support! Hebrews 10:23-25, a crucial biblical passage:**

Hebrews 10:23 Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching (NRSV)

**Comment:** Many modern translations prefer a softer word than NRSV’s “provoke.” But the idea of “social support” is one of the most insightful ways of understanding the power of community. The sociology of knowledge people declare emphatically: “That which we consider reasonable, is largely the consensus of those around us.” The author of

Hebrews was no sociologist, but he gets it right.

Two other quotes make the point, one from C. S. Lewis, a literary genius rather than a sociologist, and Peter Berger, a real sociologist!

**C. S. Lewis:** “The society of unbelievers makes faith harder, even when they are people whose opinions on any other subject are known to be worthless.” – “Religion: Reality or Substitute?” in *Christian Reflections*, 43.

**Peter Berger:** “Put crudely, if one is to believe what neo-orthodoxy wants one to believe, in the contemporary situation, then one must be rather careful to huddle together closely and continuously with one's fellow believers.” – *The Sacred Canopy*, p. 164

**Note:** A more extensive and revealing quote comes for Eta Linnemann, who nearly lost her faith as a result of immersion in modern theological study. Here are her observations:

**Eta Linnemann:** “Author’s Introduction,” *Historical Criticism of the Bible*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 17-20 (Scripture citations are from the NIV) [see archives for a self-contained copy]:

“Why do you say ‘No!’ to historical-critical theology?” I have been confronted with this question, and I wish to state at the outset: My “No!” to historical-critical theology stems from my “Yes!” to my wonderful Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and to the glorious redemption he accomplished for me on Golgotha.

As a student of Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Fuchs, as well as Friedrich Gogarten and Gerhard Ebeling, I had the best professors which historical-critical theology could offer to me. And I did not do too badly in other respects, either. My first book turned out to be a best-seller. I became professor of theology and religious education at Braunschweig Technical University, West Germany. Upon completing the rigorous requirements for a university lectureship [<sup>1</sup> Linnemann refers to her *Habilitationschrift*, a scholarly writing which in the USA would amount to something very much like a second doctoral dissertation. It qualifies one to lecture in the German university.], I was awarded the title of honorary professor of New Testament in the theology faculty of Philipps University, Marburg, West Germany. I was inducted into the Society for New Testament Studies. I had the satisfaction of an increasing degree of recognition from my colleagues.

Intellectually comfortable with historical-critical theology, I was deeply convinced that I was rendering a service to God with my theological work and contributing to the proclamation of the gospel. Then, however, on the basis of various observations, discoveries, and a resulting self-awareness, I was forced to concede two things I did not wish: (1) no “truth” could emerge from this “scientific work on the biblical text,” and (2) such labor does not serve the proclamation of the gospel. At the time this was just a practical realization emerging from experiences which I could no longer deny. Since then, God through his grace and Word was given me insight into the theoretical dimensions of this theology. Instead of being based on God’s Word, it had its foundation in philosophies which made bold to define truth so that God’s Word was excluded as the

source of truth. These philosophies simply presupposed that man could have no valid knowledge of the God of the Bible, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Father of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ.

Today I realize that historical-critical theology's monopolistic character and world-wide influence is a sign of God's judgment (Rom. 1:18-32). God predicted this in his Word: "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Tim. 4:3). He also promised to send "a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie" (2 Thess. 2:11). *God is not dead, nor has he resigned. He reigns, and he is already executing judgment on those who declare him dead or assert that he is a false god who does nothing, either good or evil.*

Today I know that I owe those initial insights to the beginning effects of God's grace. At first, however, what I realized led me into profound disillusionment. I reacted by drifting toward addictions which might dull my misery. I became enslaved to watching television and fell into an increasing state of alcohol dependence. My bitter personal experience finally convinced me of the truth of the Bible's assertion: "Whoever finds his life will lose it" (Matt. 10:39). At that point God led me to vibrant 'Christians who knew Jesus personally as their Lord and Savior. I heard their testimonies as they reported what God had done in their lives. Finally God himself spoke to my heart by means of a Christian brother's words. By God's grace and love I entrusted my life to Jesus.

He immediately took my life into his saving grasp and began to transform it radically. My destructive addictions were replaced by a hunger and thirst for his Word and for fellowship with Christians. I was able to recognize sin clearly as sin rather than merely make excuses for it as was my previous habit. I can still remember the delicious joy I felt when for the first time black was once more black and white was once more white; the two ceased to pool together as indistinguishable gray.

About a month after entrusting my life to Jesus, God convinced me that his promises are a reality. I heard the report of a Wycliffe [Bible Translators] missionary who served in Nepal. He reported that while he was away, his newly converted language [18/19] helper was thrown into prison because it is illegal to become a Christian in Nepal. He also reported what this new Christian said at his trial. On the basis of earlier reports which I had heard about this language helper, it instantly became evident that he could never have given such an answer merely on the basis of his own ability. Mark 13:9-11 surged before my eyes [<sup>2</sup> "You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.] – a passage of which I had earlier taken note with only academic interest – and I had no choice but to admit that here was a fulfillment of this promise.

Suddenly I was convinced that God's promises are a reality, that God is a living God, and that he reigns. "For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Ps. 33:9). All that I had heard from testimonies in recent months fell into place at that moment. I became aware of what folly it is, given what God is doing today, to

maintain that the miracles reported in the New Testament never took place. Suddenly it was clear to me that my teaching was a case of the blind leading the blind. I repented for the way I had misled my students.

About a month after this, alone in my room and quite apart from any input from others around me, I found myself faced with a momentous decision. Would I continue to control the Bible by my intellect, or would I allow my thinking to be transformed by the Holy Spirit? John 3:16 shed light on this decision, for I had recently experienced the truth of this verse. My life now consisted of what God had done for me and for the whole world – he had given his dear Son. I could no longer brush this verse aside as the nonbinding, meaningless theological assertion of a more-or-less gnostic writer. [<sup>3</sup> As one might well do if one followed the lead of Linnemann's teacher Rudolf Bultmann; see his *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971).] Faith can rest on God's binding promise; speculative theological principles are of merely academic interest.

By God's grace I experienced Jesus as the one whose name is above all names. I was permitted to realize that Jesus *is* God's Son, born of a virgin. He *is* the Messiah and the Son of Man; [19/20] such titles were not merely conferred on him as the result of human deliberation. I recognized, first mentally, but then in a vital experiential way, that Holy Scripture is inspired.

Not because of human talk but because of the testimony of the Holy Spirit in my heart, I have clear knowledge that my former perverse teaching was sin. At the same time I am happy and thankful that this sin is forgiven me because Jesus bore it on the cross.

That is why I say "No!" to historical-critical theology. I regard everything that I taught and wrote before I entrusted my life to Jesus as refuse. I wish to use this opportunity to mention that I have pitched my two books *Gleichnisse Jesu . . .* [<sup>4</sup> This work appears in English translation as *Jesus of the Parables. Introduction and Exposition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966.)] and *Studien zur Passionsgeschichte*, along with my contributions to journals, anthologies, and *Festschriften*. [<sup>5</sup> In addition to her books, Linnemann's earlier publications included: "Überlegungen zur Parabel vom grossen Abendmahl, Lc 14, 15-24/Mt. 22, 1-14, *ZNW* 51 (1960) 246-55; "Die Verleugnung des Petrus," *ZTK* 63 (1966): 1-32 (in which the historicity of Mark 14:54 and 66-72 is denied); "Der (wiedergefundene) Markusschluss," *ZTK* (1969):255-87 (in which Linnemann proposes that Mark's original ending consisted of 16:8, then two verses preserved in Matt. 28:16f., and finally Mark 16:15-20); "Tradition und Interpretation in Röm 1, 3f.," *EvT* 31 (1971): 264-75; "Die Hochzeit zu Kana und Dionysus oder das Unzureichende der Kategorien. Übertragung und Identifikation zur Erfassung der religionsgeschichtlichen Beziehungen," *NTS* 20 (1974): 408-18.] Whatever of these writings I had in my possession I threw in the trash with my own hands in 1978. I ask you sincerely to do the same thing with any of them you may have on your own bookshelf.– Dr. Eta Linnemann, Professor (retired). July 5, 1985.

**B. Encouragement, a defense against loneliness.** Jesus knew what he was doing when he sent the disciples out two by two. The biblical narrative of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is another powerful example of "encouragement." As they hurried back to Jerusalem to share the good news about Jesus' resurrection, they shared with each other

the wonderful story: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32). Hearts burn with much greater intensity when they are together! And here we could tuck in a quote attributed to the anthropologist Margaret Meade: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Finally I would cite a former colleague, Jon Dybdahl, who has often said, “Theology divides, mission unites.”

**Galatians 6:1-10: A final word of counsel from Paul.** These concluding words from Paul to the church in Galatia, are full of wise counsel for God’s people today.

Galatians 1 My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. 2 Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. 4 All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor’s work, will become a cause for pride. 5 For all must carry their own loads. 6 Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher. 7 Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. 8 If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. 9 So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. 10 So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith” (NRSV).

**Question:** What are our gifts and talents that can help build up a “Community of Servants”?