

***Good Word Schedule***  
**In the Crucible with Christ**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter: July-September 2022**

1. **The Shepherd's Crucible**—*June 25–July 1*
2. **The Crucibles That Come**—*July 2–July 8*
3. **The Birdcage**—*July 9–July 15*
4. **Seeing The Goldsmith's Face**—*July 16–July 22*
5. **Extreme Heat**—*July 23–July 29*
6. **Struggling With All Energy**—*July 30–August 5*
7. **Indestructible Hope**—*August 6–August 12*
8. **Seeing the Invisible**—*August 13–August 19*
9. **A Life of Praise**—*August 20–August 26*
10. **Meekness in the Crucible**—*August 27–September 2*
11. **Waiting in the Crucible**—*September 3–September 9*
12. **Dying Like a Seed**—*September 10–September 16*
13. **Christ in the Crucible**—*September 17–September 23*

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# In the Crucible with Christ

## General Introduction

This study guide is meant to accompany the Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath School lesson for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter of 2022. The format of this guide follows a similar pattern for each week's lesson: an introduction to the topic, a short discussion on several verses or a bullet list of concepts for a passage, followed by questions in bold type. Please read through the Biblical passages, and then prayerfully consider the bolded questions. Perhaps you'll find better questions that should be asked, and answered!

This quarter's lesson is dedicated to the task of exploring Christian suffering, trials, and difficulty. The introduction to the lesson claims that the topic of *Theodicy*—the theological study of God's justice and goodness in the face of human pain and evil (indeed of all life?)—will not be explored directly. Yet we cannot in good conscience discuss suffering and pain, especially that of God's people who are under His protection and care, without some reference to the question of “why, oh why would God allow this if He's good, loving, kind, and gracious?”

Certainly, all humans born on this planet can agree with a central tenet of Buddhism, that “life is suffering,” that to exist means to experience pain at some level, whether physical, mental/emotional, social or spiritual. But the Bible suggests more: it isn't just humans who suffer, but God Himself feels pain with His creation. When His children weep, He weeps with them, if we dare anthropomorphize God in this way! When those who trust in Him are made an object of Satan's attacks, He feels their rejection, sense of abandonment, and pain with them.

Yet God's empathy isn't just “sympathetic” in the sense that He can witness our struggles and imagine what it must be like. In the person of Jesus Christ, God enters into our world of pain and sin, and suffers in the most ultimate of ways. He is intimately acquainted with the worst kinds of pain: societal rejection by friends and countrymen; spiritual suffering during temptation to give in to desires of the eyes, flesh, and world and to leave the path of the cross; physical pain in his fasting and final hours of life; and the worst suffering, the one that brought death—his separation from the very source of life. He has experienced the worst of sin's effects, and yet has triumphed. Unlike Buddhism, then, which seeks the enlightened path by bringing an end to suffering, Christians are encouraged to see the crucible of suffering as a refining process for our good, for our benefit.

So this quarter we must ask some important questions along the way:

- Why does God allow it? If “God is Love” and love does not wish pain, how *can* He allow it?
- Can or does pain and toil bring about something good?
- Must our coronation with a crown of life be preceded by the crown of suffering as it did for Jesus?
- What lessons does this difficult path teach?
- Will all true discipleship journeys require hardship?
- When does it end, or does it? Will suffering be part of the recreated world after Christ returns?

Hopefully our study this quarter helps us better understand the most difficult times we go through with heavenly perspective. I pray that those times of challenge and difficulty that you experience will contribute to your growth into the image and character of Christ!

Brant Berglin  
June 9, 2022

*Opening Question*

**When have you traveled through a dangerous area where you felt unsafe?**

*Introduction*

A recent viral video on social media showed a field filled with sheep. Visitors approached the fence and were invited to call the sheep with the exact same phrases as the shepherd used. But when strangers called, the sheep never even looked up from their meal of grass. When the shepherd approached the fence and cried out the same call, the sheep lifted their heads, then ran down to the fence to meet him. The sheep knew the shepherd's voice.

Our study this week explores the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and the role of the shepherd. But as our lesson focuses on the crucible, we must deal with the fact that the shepherd in Psalm 23 appears to us through the valley of death, and the presence of enemies. How should we best understand a "good shepherd" who takes us through difficult places, challenging times, and even experiences that leave us broken and wounded, and maybe dead?

*Shepherd Language in Scripture*

One of the earliest mentions of a specific animal in scripture is Genesis 4:2-4, where Abel tends sheep and offers one as a sacrifice. There is a possibility of understanding Genesis 3:21 as God offering lambs as a sacrifice for Adam and Eve's sin and clothing the human pair with their skins.

Throughout the Old Testament, shepherding plays a significant role in the lives of God's people. This makes sense in several ways: sheep and goats convert grass and water into wool (for clothing, blankets, tents, etc.) and food, and satisfy the religious role of sin offerings. The shepherd's relationship with the less-than-intelligent animals seems an apt description of God's relationship with His oft-erring people. The Andrews Bible Commentary notes the breadth of this imagery:

**The image of the king as a shepherd was known throughout the ANE [Ancient Near East] and served as a paradigm for just kingship. Egyptian kings held a flail and a shepherd's crook to demonstrate their might and protective responsibilities. The Babylonian King Hammurabi (1792-1750 BC) called himself "the shepherd of the oppressed and of the slaves."**

It can be hard for us today to make the leap to shepherd imagery. Our associations today, especially in urban and suburban areas are usually household pets, not animals used functionally for fur or food.

**How can we better understand the shepherd imagery since many of us in America and the West don't have any contact with those who own and tend sheep?**

*Psalm 23*

This is a well-known and loved psalm, whose lyrics have brought comfort to many people going through difficult situations. But what makes this psalm especially noteworthy for our lesson is the implication that the shepherd's path leads us through places of difficulty.

Read through Psalm 23 and answer the following questions:

**Does God lead us “into,” or just “through” the valley of the shadow of death? Or do we take ourselves there, and God promises to be with us, guiding? Are they a detour or a purposely planned path?**

**Why does God lead us to feast in the presence of our enemies? Consider 2 Kings 6:8-23 as a parallel to this idea.**

**Can we trust a God who expects us to face trial and difficulty?**

**According to Psalm 23, what provisions, resources and blessings has God promised to provide that make our journey through the valley of death possible, and even victorious?**

*Closing Comments*

Psalm 23 pledges God's presence, direction, and blessings as we traverse a world with moral, physical, and spiritual enemies, and the ultimate enemy, death! The psalmist concludes his song by showing the hospitality of God as a gracious, divine host. He spreads out a table, gives his people all they need. What a God!

*Opening Question*

**Why do people often blame themselves for a painful loss or suffering even when they had no control over such events?**

*Introduction*

This lesson describes the effects of the crucible used in chemistry and engineering processes. It's valued for its ability to create generous tremendous heat, to purify, separate, mix, and transform base metals and other elements.

Although the terms *crucible* or *kiln* or *melting pot* are not used in Genesis 4:22, the implication of Tubal-Cain as a metalworker in bronze and iron implies the use of such an instrument. The process of smelting and refining metal begins early in the Biblical text, and the spiritual lessons from the crucible become quickly obvious. The crucible involves heat and transformation. Everyone passes through some kind of fire, and we'll explore in this lesson the origin of a number of these trials.

*Crucibles as Surprises?*

No letter in the New Testament speaks more about suffering than 1<sup>st</sup> Peter. The theme rings out in all five chapters. Peter himself knew the pain of both his own sin and weakness with the natural results, as well as the testing, persecution, and tribulation imposed on him by others because of his faith in Christ and fearless preaching about Jesus Christ.

*The Variety of Crucibles*

This week explores several ways in which trials come to us. Some are of our own making, others we have no control over, yet God can use for His glory and our benefit.

1. 1 Peter 5:8-10 – Satan, the adversary of God and His people, is described as a hungry predator, seeking prey. Much is said in the gospels and other places in the New Testament about the power Satan can have over people through demon possession.

**What is the role of Satan in our trials? To what degree does he have power to influence us? Are all of our temptations caused by him, or are we carried away with our own desires now without his help? How far does God let him go? Some say the devil is God's "henchman"...**

2. Romans 1:21-32 – When people reject God as creator and Lord, He hands us over to the consequences of our choices. The record of sacred history in both testaments reveals the results of sin and the problems people face as a result. (take for instance Jesus’ words to the man healed at the pool of Bethesda in John 5) Betrayal, faithlessness, deceit, murder, loss, grief, slavery to addiction, and a host of other pains result from our sin.

**How hard must it be for God to allow his children to make mistakes that bring pain, to us, to Himself, and even to His creation? Why doesn’t God just bring the consequences of our bad choice to an end? Can experiencing the full consequences of our sin play a role in repentance?**

3. Jeremiah 9:7-16: God uses trials as opportunities for our purification. This seems equivalent to our understanding of God disciplining us for our good (see Hebrews 12:1-11)

**Some Christians are not comfortable talking about becoming “holy” or “pure” or “blameless.” Can we reconcile the process of purification through trial with our fear of “perfectionism?”**

4. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10: God gave Paul a “thorn in his flesh” to make his life more difficult. But it was intended to make Paul more reliant on God’s graciousness, and to bring him down a notch. The lesson said this was to produce maturity, but that seems quite akin to #3 above, where purification and maturity are similar.

**Have you ever considered the trials of life to be sent from God specifically for your growth and benefit? We often seek an easy life without challenge, and we strive to make life better for others, at the same time. Can these efforts be working against God at times?**

**What can keep me from turning my back on God when He doesn’t remove painful trails, but instead asks us to trust in Him even more?**

### *Closing Comments*

This quarter’s lesson begins to explain the reasons distressing situations arise: our own sin and choices, the work of evil/demonic forces, and the willingness of God to lead us into or permit such trials for our spiritual growth and development. We sometimes joke around with each other when going through hard times or tests that “it’s just character development,” but while said lightheartedly to bring humor, there is certainly truth in the statement, and perhaps it shouldn’t be overused in jest, as it could just undercut the very purpose of the trial.

*Opening Question*

**Can our most severe trials be opportunities for God's greatest miracles and victories?**

*Introduction*

The lesson introduces a passage from Ellen White's book, *The Ministry of Healing*, about how a bird caged and covered will learn to sing in the darkness a song unable to be learned in the light. While I love the book, as a Biblical scholar, I prefer to focus on Scripture. The examples for today's lesson about the birdcage do in fact come from the Bible, and exemplify God's victories even after leading His people intentionally into trials.

*At the End of the Road*

Exodus 1-13 tells the story of God's deliverance of His Israelite people from their bondage and slavery in Egypt. After the Passover, ch. 14 tells how God led them specifically into a trap. Yahweh God was present in the pillar of fire/cloud and led their way. It was not Moses who accidentally and ignorantly took them in the wrong direction.

Israel were brought to the Dead Sea, hemmed in by the water in front, walls on each side, and the armies of Egypt pursuing from behind. They were essentially without any human way out. They had come to a place where only God could deliver them. No human response would bring victory, not engineering or tactics could help them escape. It is in just such places where God comes through, opening a way through the waters with supernatural power.

**Would the victories of God in Egypt have given you greater faith in God's power when brought to the edge of the Red Sea? Or does human nature cause us to easily forget God's mighty acts in History?**

**Is there a reason we should see the Red Sea crossing as just a tall tale, a legend, if you will, or a myth teaching a certain truth, but not historically accurate? Or does the *truth* of the story depend on its actually occurring in our world, in time and place?**

*Led to Thirst*

Israel's continuing journey after their miraculous crossing of the Red Sea brings them through the wilderness (likely the Sinai Peninsula, or possibly the Saudi Arabian desert, according to some Archaeologists and Biblical Scholars). The greatest need of humans in such an environment is for water, then shelter from the sun. Marah is a place with water, but not the kind they could drink. Read Exodus 17. Two stories of trial are presented in here: Moses' struggle with the people whom he fears will kill him, and the people's thirst after three days without a new water source, their skins running dry.

**How does God's miracle answer each of their trials? Look again at vs. 5: why is it significant that God would point out that Moses' staff is the same one "with which you struck the Nile?" How important is remember God's previous actions when we face trial?**

### *Jesus as New Israel*

Jesus' own ministry brought Him through the waters of baptism (just as Israel was baptized in the Red Sea: see 1 Cor 10:1-6) and into the wilderness. Instead of 40 years, Jesus was there 40 days, fasting and facing extreme hunger, and then being tempted. Matthew 4:1 specifically says that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into that place by who had just manifest himself as a dove descending on Jesus at His baptism.

**How many parallels can you find between Israel's wilderness experience (think broadly from Exodus through Deuternonmy) and Jesus' wilderness experience?**

**Jesus' closing statement in His well-known prayer asks, "lead us not into temptation," yet Jesus Himself was led into such a situation. Should we see these as contradictory? Is there a better way to understand God's leading into places where we can be tempted?**

**Does it give you encouragement that Jesus overcame the temptations He faced? Are you more moved by His perfect victory and sinless life as our Savior, or His example of overcoming as hope for personal victory our own weak condition?**

### *Trial by Fire*

1 Peter 1:6-9, the introduction of Peter's 1<sup>st</sup> letter, begins with an affirmation that his audience "have been distressed by various trails," but then gives some encouragement.

**List the positive results that come from the trials faced by the first-century Christians to whom Peter was writing...**

### *Closing Comments*

Can God lead us into situations out of which we have no power of ourselves? The answer seems to be yes. In fact, it seems He wants us to come to such tests, because only then do we see evidence of His power. We don't see the miracles unless we're at our own end, when necessity demands we turn to divine help, not human agency.



*Opening Question*

**What would you be willing to endure if you knew the result would be a character like Christ's?**

*Introduction*

By now, most people know the basics of the story that introduces the lesson this week. A refiner knows then Gold or Silver is pure when the face of the refiner is perfectly reflected back by the hot, liquid metal. The implication is that only through intense heat and refinement will the metal become all it should be, with all impurities burned away or skimmed from the top. Does this harmonize with Scripture? How does God restore His "image" in sinful people?

*Human Nature: Perfect or Marred?*

Genesis 1:26-28 speaks about God's original creation of humanity, that we were created in God's image, and we get further hints from Genesis 1-3 as a whole. The "imago dei" has been debated for centuries, but if we let the text of Genesis itself inform us, there are qualities that His image implies:

1. A plurality – Male, Female, and procreated offspring together make demonstrate fully the image of God
2. Creative – Just as God creates, so people create
3. Dominion – Although often abused, people were given a sphere of responsibility and care—this earth and its life forms.
4. Relational – God created people in order to have a relationship with them, and would love to see us respond to Him, and to love each other.
5. Boundaried – There are limits to human freedom, even if the only law is not to eat of a certain tree. God has limits as well: He cannot sin, lie, or otherwise go where love forbids.

**Are there other aspects of the image of God that you would add here? How closely were Adam and Eve to resemble the character, morals, ethics, and values of God?**

**How did sin affect these "God-like" attributes? To what degree is man marred or altered by sin, by Adam and Eve's separation from God passed on? How does the Great Controversy play a role in understanding the fall of mankind?**

*Job's Gold Analogy*

The lesson directs us to Job's fiery trial and His hope in Job 23:1-10. Read this passage (especially vs. 8-10) and then consider the following question:

**How could Job, one of the most oppressed of humans in history, come to a place where He recognized that God was testing Him, and that His test would have a purifying aspect? What habits, beliefs, or experiences could prepare Him for such a mature response?**

### *Daniel and Maturity*

The lesson focuses on maturity and character this week to a large degree and notes the final generation of wicked and righteous in Daniel 12. But Daniel Himself is a remarkable example of faithfulness during trial. Skim through the narratives in Daniel. Look again at the rough places he and his friends were brought through, the tests of the Image and the law against prayer, consider their exile and re-education attempts, the test at the King's table. Daniel's own tests as a prophet—whether to give the whole message to King Nebuchadnezzar even though the news was bad, and messengers of bad news could be executed.

**What preparation did Daniel go through to become a faithful prophet and representative of God? Not once was Daniel ever shown to sin, and thus becomes a type of Christ; yet his own trials led to God saying that Daniel would “rest and rise to receive his allotted inheritance.” To what degree did Daniel's tests in Babylon purify him, and make his character like His Lord's?**

### *Closing Comments*

We didn't really explore Jesus' parables in Mathew 25, but you may want to go back and look at the 10 Virgins and the Sheep and the Goats. Those two parables answer the question about “readiness” for Christ's return, an event of which nobody knows either day or hour. Thus readiness must be *TODAY!* How is God refining *you*?

*Opening Question*

**Do you ever fear that God isn't who you hope He is?**

*Introduction*

The examples this week of "crucible" experiences are Abraham, Job, Hosea, and Paul. Each were asked to endure hardship, but each also was faithful. But the lesson is more concerned about how God might be perceived through these experiences than the lessons learned by each hero of faith.

*Abraham's Test*

When Abraham was asked to sacrifice Isaac, all hope in God's promise to make Abraham the father of many nations would seem to have been squelched. Today, most modern people recoil at such a request, and some people and faiths believe it was Satan, not God, who demanded the child-sacrifice. Certainly there were nations around Canaan who offered human sacrifices to various gods, and around the world for that matter. But the Creator God would be different, wouldn't he? Abraham's willingness to give up Isaac is made more remarkable when coupled with Isaac's consent to *be* the sacrifice. Read Genesis 22 again.

**What would have been Abraham's conception of a God who at once promised him children, performed a miracle healing Sarah's womb, then asks Abraham to take the promised one's very life?**

**How does Hebrews 11:17-19 inform our understanding of Abraham's faith during testing? Are we at the point where we believe God can and will raise the dead, even giving life to our dead hearts now?**

*Hosea*

After reading Hosea 1-2, we can learn a number of things about God's character, and also Israel's. But as our lesson asks, we need to consider Hosea's picture of God. Gomer returned again and again to unfaithfulness, and Hosea was asked to do more than just accept the pain of rejection, but to put himself in a place to be repeatedly hurt, and suffer again and again. Surely a good God of love wouldn't ask him to do such a thing...

**What made Israel's sin so hurtful to God, and how does Hosea experience that pain? What must Hosea have thought of a God who asked him to be hurt repeatedly? How does the book itself paint God's love for Israel, assuming Hosea had a role in it's recording?**

**Does God expect us to act in similar ways to people who hurt us today or are unfaithful? Or was this just a one-time example for Hosea-Gomer and God-Israel?**

### *Job Again*

Read through the first couple chapters of Job. While one of the most ancient documents in Scripture, it is certainly not primitive. In fact, literarily, Job is one of the most complex pieces of literature in the world. The narrative drives the later poetry and is resolved in a return to narrative. The opening verses tell us of the reasons for his suffering. And God not only allows it, but brings Job's name up intentionally as an example of righteousness and faithfulness in the midst of a crooked, Satan-led world.

**What can we know of Job's view of God as the "Great Controversy" rages without his full knowledge? Why does he continue to trust and worship God in spite of the loss and grief?**

### *Missionary Pain*

A family joined Adventist Frontier Missions, and traveled to a foreign land, all with the hope of sharing the good news of Christ's love and soon return. While there, the father and husband died tragically. How could God let missionaries, those serving Him, suffer and even die in their mission? Why didn't He intervene, and protect? We ask prayers of protection, but sometimes it appears God ignores them and instead lets people suffer.

The stories in Acts and the Pauline Epistles make clear that Paul and other early missionaries faced similar difficulties. Read 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, 6:1-10, and 11:20-30.

**Paul continued on through tremendous opposition to his ministry. What drove him? Why didn't He just give up? And how in the world could he maintain his faith in a God who led him "by the Spirit" into such conditions? Surely God could have spared him...**

### *Closing Comments*

Each of these figures suffered, sometimes without knowing fully why, but never lost faith that God was still worthy of following, of worshipping, of honoring. It may feel like such faith is beyond you, but remember that each trial that comes is preparation for greater faith!

*Opening Question*

**In a world where emotions drive behavior, how can we keep a balance between mere reaction and taking God-approved action?**

*Introduction*

Some of the most difficult theological conversations revolve around salvation as “God’s work” and the role of human will in both responding to His grace and in continuing Christian experience. The old classic work by Pastor-Speaker Morris Venden “Salvation by Faith and Your Will” takes this topic head on. How do we best understand the role of God in purifying and remaking us in His image and our own in allowing him to do that work, in obeying His commands, and in following his lead? A major assumption of this week’s lesson, of course, is that humans have free will. Adventists have not been too keen on any kind of predestination or fate.

*The Spirit of God*

While the greatest number of references to the Holy Spirit occurs in the book of Luke (and its sequel, Acts), the most direct teachings about the Holy Spirit can be found in John 14-16. Here, Jesus tells us who the Spirit is and what is His role. Examine each of these passages and note the ways Jesus describes the Holy Spirit, or the actions which he does:

John 14:14-20:

Descriptions:

Actions:

John 15:26-27:

Descriptions:

Actions:

John 16:7-15:

Descriptions:

Actions:

Some features are worth noting here: first, the Holy Spirit is called “comforter,” but the same word (paraclete) is used in 1 John describing Jesus as an “advocate.” This is someone called to be present beside us to give advice, to encourage, comfort, intermediary, etc. Second, the Holy Spirit brings conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment. As the lesson notes, we can experience conviction for sin, and yet the turning from it is up to us. God’s Spirit does not do that work for us; He cannot, even though repentance itself may be called a gift.

**Have you ever felt the convicting power of the Holy Spirit? What occasioned the need for conviction? How did you respond?**

**What happens if we ignore the conviction of the Spirit regarding sin? Do the effects go beyond the spiritual? Are there mental and physical health results?**

### *Feelings vs. Facts*

It seems reasonable that we live in a world where our feelings and the reality of the world around us are congruent; that is, our feelings follow the truth and facts of our environment. Yet this is rarely how feelings come. Someone may make a comment about how I’m dressed, and though they mean it as a compliment, if I’m already self-conscious about my clothing, I may feel slighted or demeaned. My feelings will not be in harmony with reality.

When God makes statements about our condition as sinful humans, my feelings might lead me to either deny that reality, or to be so discouraged, I no longer feel worthy of His promised forgiveness. Further, when God says “you’re saved by your faith in my work for you,” and “you’re forgiven,” I may have trouble reconciling my hearth with His statements of reality.

**How can I keep from being deceived by my emotions, while at the same time recognizing how I feel at the moment? What steps can I take to live with the reality of God’s promises even (or especially) when my heart has a challenging time accepting them?**

### *Imperatives*

Throughout the New Testament, the apostles constantly use the imperative mood, that is, they give commands to live and act in certain ways.

**How should we take understand these imperatives? Are they “works” we must do to be saved? Are they just “fruit” of the sanctified life? Does the Holy Spirit use them to build conviction and obedience in us, in harmony with our own will to do His good pleasure? How do you think about them?**

### *Closing Comments*

This week’s study challenges us to see God’s work, and our willing submission to His leading. This may be one of the most strenuous crucibles a Christian will endure. Our will is not naturally bent toward His.

## *Opening Question*

**What is your greatest hope in this life, and perhaps the afterlife?**

## *Introduction*

Throughout our struggles and challenges and life of pain or suffering, we long for hope that it is temporary. The lesson this week looks at some of the hope God's people have experienced in the past. In a previous lesson, we looked at Hebrews 12 in more detail, so rather than look at the specific passages of the lesson, this study guide will examine the aspects of hope when things seem darkest.

The lesson begins with Habakkuk and God telling him that things will get worse before they get better. News like that can destroy a person experiencing suffering. When hope is dashed, how can a person endure?

## *Revelation 6*

The Seven Seals of Revelation 6 follow a similar trajectory to other parts of Revelation (such as the churches in chs. 2-3) where they start out good, but end badly. The 5<sup>th</sup> seal pictures souls of the faithful shown to be "under the altar" where the sacrificial blood was poured out, and they are crying out for judgement and avenging. God gives them bad news: 1) they must wait a while longer, and 2) there are more who will be slaughtered before the end. Their experience mirrors Habakkuk's story.

**What would you say to someone with a terminal disease, suffering intense pain, who just received news that no amount of pain-killers will reduce their suffering, and things will get worse before they eventually die?**

## *Matthew 24*

When Jesus' disciples asked him about the signs accompanying His return as King, he noted that many disasters were to come on the earth. Then He told them that the end was not yet; that was only the beginning! A time of trouble was ahead, so grievous, that nothing in history could or would ever compare. Even then, more trouble and deception awaited Christ's disciples.

**Why would God even warn us that things will get worse before they ever improve?**

**How can we have any hope that our suffering will end?**

### *Reasons for Hope*

The return of Christ is called “the blessed Hope” (Paul to a young pastor in Titus 2:13). For Jesus’ disciples, having the presence of God in the person of His Son was their greatest comfort and encouragement. They learned to suffer with Him, to follow God’s leading, even when it resulted in their own deaths. Yet they believed in a future where righteousness and peace dwelled.

**Consider the following and explain how each provides hope:**

- **Christ’s victory over the world, sin, and Satan**
- **God’s ongoing presence through his Spirit**
- **Christ’s literal return**
- **resurrection**
- **restoration to Christ’s image**
- **earth remade in perfection**
- **a time of no more mourning, death, or pain**

### *Closing Comments*

Our hope should sustain us during our crucible moments. But we cannot rely on hope that is not firm and sure.



*Opening Question*

**Is there anything you cannot see in the physical world, but believe exists anyway?**

*Introduction*

Our lesson takes on the topic of faith and believing in the unseeable and guarding against doubt. If the crucible teaches us anything, it is that our difficulties will give way to positives at some point. But that can be hard to believe, and God can be hard to trust if, as we have already noted, He Himself leads us into the fire.

*Trusting God's Graciousness*

Even in trials, we can ask God for succor, for relief, or at least for endurance and wisdom. Jesus asks us to make our requests known to God, and believe we have received what we ask. We can assume our father wants to give good gifts to His children. Paul assures us of God's love, presence, and desires for a world free from bondage to sin in Romans 8:18-39.

**Can the path to all these desires lead through the valley of the shadow of death?**

*Asking God's Will*

We are still encouraged to ask God for good gifts (Matthew 7:11, Luke 11:13). Jesus encourages His disciples just after they see the cursed fig tree (see Matthew 21), "and all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." John also encourages us to ask, using the power of Jesus own name and credit (John 14:13-14), and God will do it.

**Should we ask God to end our suffering? Knowing as we do that trials and pain can build character, how do I keep from becoming masochistic for spiritual benefit or like Martin Luther who sought penance through pain?**

Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane asked God to relieve Him of the cup of suffering. God's response was not what Jesus wanted physically, yet Jesus conformed to God's will. That was the only path for our salvation and Jesus' ultimate joy. The crown of suffering comes before the crown of glory and victory!

**Does a "no" answer from God regarding ending our suffering contribute to greater distress? Or can**

### *Relief from Anxiety*

Many people today suffer from depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. Then Jesus comes along and tells me not to worry, to stress about where my basic needs of food and water and clothing will come from. Yet I don't stop worrying automatically just because Jesus asks me too. Where does the role of relief from anxiety come in? 1 Peter 5:7 points to a place we can place our anxiety. But the exact way is not described.

**How does someone put their anxiety on God? How can I rid myself of fear and worry? Will God come through and change my mental health even if I am struggling physically? Or can mental disease be part of the crucible?**

### *Closing Comments*

For each situation, God wants us to stay in contact with Him, to ask our desires, to shape them according to His will, and He longs to be gracious as a good father would. But sometimes, the best outcome for me will lead through difficulties. For the same reason I don't step in and relieve my daughter of her anxiety at a huge Chemistry exam or my son's stress at work learning new management skills, God doesn't always step in and intervene in our challenges. But He promises to be with us, and through our faith in what is unseen—His purpose!—we can endure.

*Opening Question*

**When trouble comes to your life, is praising God your first, natural response?**

*Introduction*

This week takes us to another level of faith response—praying and praising when under the worst conditions. Our study guide will examine a few examples of those praising God when most would be cursing.

*Praise in Prison?*

Read Acts 16. Paul and Silas had been doing God's will in preaching to those in Philippi but were harassed by a demon possessed woman; when she was relieved of the evil spirit, those who used her for profit became enraged and had the apostles put in prison. Verse 25 notes that in the middle of the night, Paul and Silas—with feet fastened in stocks, and relegated to the darkest part of the dungeon—were praying and praising. They had been unjustly accused, treated illegally (as Roman citizens), and treated inhumanely and painfully. Yet they could still sing and praise God. Paul tells of his imprisonment in Philippians 1:13-21, yet Philippians is often noted as Paul's most positive and joyous letter.

**What gave Paul and Silas the motivation to sing in prison? Where did they find the reserves of spiritual strength to praise God in such a condition?**

*Praise in Death?*

Another story similar to this is the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7. The closing scenes of his magisterial defense of Christ is of Jews picking up stones to execute him (even without Roman approval!). In that moment, God gave Stephen a vision of heaven, of Jesus standing at God's right hand. Stephen utters a description of the incredible sight of his Lord, exalted, and sitting as King, but the demon-inspired mob rushes him, and began stoning him. Rather than cursing his abusers, he lays his life in Christ's hands and asks forgiveness for those committing the crime, as did Jesus on the cross. For Stephen, the vision of heaven was a martyr's gift, and his testimony has become a blessing to us thousands of years later.

**We know next to nothing of Stephen's life, but what must have been his experience with Christ that led Him to such a stirring testimony, and rather than curses, to bless his abusers?**

**What steps can we take today to be more like Paul, Silas, and Stephen, where praise and prayer is natural in response to mistreatment?**

### *Praise*

The story of Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20 is one of my favorites, because when the people of Israel had no idea what to do, when they were boxed into a corner, they turned to God for answers. Rather than sending their strongest men in the front of the army, they sent their singers and praisers. God answered their call of distress and delivered them. There were times in Israel's history that God asked them to fight. This was not one of them. He asked them to stand and watch God's victory. This indeed led to even greater praise from the people.

What is "praise" to God? How does it look in your life? Do you have habits or traditions such as singing, reading poetry, shouting, dancing, kneeling or raising hands?

Are there types of praise which God is more pleased with? Does He need our praise to be "God"? Some have accused God of being a narcissist, demanding the praise of His creatures, but what do we read in scripture about God demanding His own praise?

### *Closing Comments*

Praising God in the midst of our trials is not natural, but we can begin to cultivate an attitude of praise in the little things, both good and bad, that can lead to praise being natural when thrown into the worst crucibles.

*Opening Question*

**Do you admire people who go through challenges with poise, patience, and humility?**

*Introduction*

The quarterly begins a definition of meekness as “enduring injury with patience and without resentment.” No citation is given for this definition.

Wikipedia has this definition: Meekness is an attribute of human nature and behavior that has been defined as an amalgam of righteousness, inner humility, and patience. Meekness has been contrasted with humility alone inasmuch as humility simply refers to an attitude towards oneself—a restraining of one's own power so as to allow room for others—whereas meekness refers to the treatment of others.

Either way, this word was used far more in the 1800s, then dropped off in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps it's because our western culture didn't prize the quality of responding to others, even those who treat us badly, with patience and kindness. Yet the Bible upholds this as a virtue.

*Sign-Acts*

The lesson notes Ezekiel who becomes a sign for the people. A brief study of his life reveals times he resembles Hosea as a living parable. He has to dig a hole in the wall of Jerusalem, then climb out with a pack on his back. He must build a model of Jerusalem, then besiege it like a child would with army men and Tonka trucks. God asks him to cook his food over a fire made with human excrement; God asks him to lay on one side and then the other for days on end, and worst of all, God demands he watch his wife die and yet refrain from mourning.

**Imagine the most heartbreaking thing imaginable in your life; what loss or pain would be the greatest?**

**What would be your probable response to that situation, based on your responses in the past to painful situations?**

*Grace to the Graceless*

There is one main message of Jesus that asks people to be *perfect*. It is found in the Sermon on the mount, in Matthew 5:43-48. The Greek word used there is *teleios*, and it can also be translated as “meeting the highest standard,” “fully morally developed,” “mature,” “complete,” or “at a logical fulfillment.” The context is the Jewish saying, “love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” Jesus takes issue with this Jewish but non-Torah statement. He turns it around and says that love is truly agape when we treat our enemies with kindness, graciousness, and respect, even praying for those who persecute us. The reason is that even God sends the life-giving rain on the crops of evil and good people, of wicked and kind alike.

Paul goes on to say that treating others with kindness is a fulfilling of the law (Galatians 5:14, Romans 13:10); in fact, that the greatest evidence of God's transforming work in our lives is when we can treat our enemies as if they were our friends. In Romans 12:20, Paul quotes the

Proverb found in 25:21-22, saying that if our enemy is hungry or thirsty, we satisfy their most basic of needs not withholding these necessities. By doing so, we pour hot coals on their heads.

**If this is how we show love to our enemies when we're free to do so, how can we show our love to those who deprive us of basic rights? Do we still have an option to do something good for them?**

**How does Jesus' statement about turning the other cheek or carrying someone's burden an extra mile or giving our shirt when our jacket is taken fit in here?**

**How does Jesus' own example when crucified reveal His love of His enemies?**

#### *Slaves to Masters*

Back to 1 Peter. In 2:18-25 Peter gives advice to slaves (parallel to Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-4:1). They are to be respectful to their masters, especially when their masters are unreasonable. This lays a foundation of love that can transform the life of the master as well, working on their heart as nothing else can do.

#### *Closing Comments*

There is no greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. But perhaps there is a love like it—when we treat with kindness those who mistreat us.

*Opening Question*

**The lyrics of a song say that *waiting* is the most bitter lesson a believing heart has to learn. Do you agree?**

*Introduction*

Delayed gratification. Patience. Waiting. Hoping. Putting our desires behind those of others. Looking to the end-goal rather than now. These are the experiences of people struggling to be all they can be yet mired in difficulty and struggle. We look at the patience of God this week, and trust that God Himself is our model and example.

*Two Long Noses*

In the Old Testament, God declares himself (Exodus 34:6-7, and later in Numbers 14:18) to be the God who is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth. The phrase “slow to anger” or “longsuffering” in some translations is literally “two long noses.” For those who argue for a literal, word-for-word translation of the Hebrew text, we would have no idea what do make of this translation. But when we understand the background of the idiom, it makes sense. The nose was the place of anger and intensity, because from a physical standpoint, our nose gets hot and red when we are angry. The longer your nose, the longer it takes to get angry. But God is not like us. He has two long noses! He is supernatural in his ability to suffer patiently with injustice. He can keep his anger under control much longer than we. God’s wrath is slow to come; He is able to wait!

**How does this picture of God help you understand His reaction to sin and injustice in the world, and even those who would rail against Him?**

*The Fruit of the Spirit*

Paul in Galatians 5:22-23 lists the fruit of the Spirit. One of those fruit is commonly spoken of as patience, but the Greek term *macrothumia* is more closely tied to the Hebrew idea of long-suffering or large-passion. That is, a person with patience suffers greatly. Think about how the fruit of the Spirit actually work: most of them cannot be grown in a vacuum. They require us to be in community where the fruit itself is required! I cannot develop love if there is nobody who requires my love. Likewise, I cannot develop patience unless there are people who push my buttons and tend to make me angry.

Where would you rank your level of patience? What are those subjects of types of people that most try your patience?

What can be our response to those who most require us to be patient and long-suffering?

### *Waiting*

Patience comes when we must wait for someone or something, or a trial to end, or for some joyous occasion. The Bible speaks often of waiting, especially when there is a seeming delay. We see delays in the parable of the 10 Virgins in Matthew 25 and the previous parable of the servants in Matthew 24. Habakkuk reminds us to wait for the vision, though it tarries, wait for it. And the disciples often wanted the Kingdom to come before Jesus was ready to bring it as they had hoped. The lesson notes how David had to wait for years to become King even though he'd already been anointed by Samuel, and how Elijah ran ahead of Jezebel in fear of his life immediately after his victory over the prophets of Ba'al on Mt. Carmel. David also was never able to build the temple, Abraham never built a city in the land he was promised, and my own father and grandparents never saw the return of Jesus, though they'd longed for it.

**The lesson notes a number of benefits to waiting learning patience. How do such learning opportunities help you cultivate the gift of patience?**

### *Closing Comments*

Trials that are painful cannot end quickly enough. We learn patience for such times by learning patience when things are easy. Who is faithful in little will be faithful in much!



*Opening Question*

**What makes people so fearful of dying?**

*Introduction*

Dying is the end of all flesh. Almost every person who has ever lived before this current generation has also died. But death is also a metaphor used for spiritual growth; that is, we must die to our own desires and our self-rule before we can truly live. There is a great paradox here, as Jesus says, the one who seeks to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will find it. So, do we seek to save our lives by dying? Our lesson this week is about dying to self and becoming a seed that will bear fruit.

*The Seed*

There are no parables as such in John's gospel, but here in John 12 we find one that may be like a parable. Jesus was a master at drawing lessons from the natural world His Father had created. And here Jesus speaks about a kernel of wheat. The only way for the wheat—the hard, knarled, knotty little grain—to grow, it must be buried. Metaphorically, Jesus notes the dead, apparently life-less seed must also be put back in the ground. But there, a miracle happens. The seed still has life at its heart, but it cannot grow without the right conditions.

**How else is the seed dying and being buried a metaphor for Christian experience?**

**What aspects of our lives must die if we are to have the life God intends for us?**

*Dying with Christ:*

So human nature must be put to death. We cannot truly live for Christ unless He crucifies us. Paul uses this analogy in Romans 6:1-9. This passage speaks about dying to self and being freed from sin. Perhaps, though, Paul's analogy goes too far... for surely nobody can be free from sin, right? Or do we fail to recognize the power of death to self? Ephesians 2:5-10 affirms that we were fully dead in our trespasses and sins already. What do we have to lose by dying with Christ?

**How can I know that I have died to sin? Will I ever have such evidence?**

**What should happen in my life if I'm certain sin still lives in me and rules over my life?**

**How is Christ's resurrection essential to Paul's analogy between Christ's final hours on earth and my own identity with Him?**

### *Christ's Example*

One of the early church's first hymns is found in Philippians 2:3-11, a song of Jesus' condescension in the incarnation, and ultimate exaltation. Paul asks us to emulate Jesus by having the same attitude.

**What was this attitude and how do I become more like Him?**

**Should I humble myself in order to be exalted, or is the humility complete in itself?**

### *Living Sacrifices—Alive While Dying*

Paul further encourages us in Romans 12:1-2 to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. But this doesn't mean the death of our physical bodies. It means far more to God that we offer our hearts to Him. The Old Testament parallel seems to be Psalm 51:15-17 where the Psalmist cries out, "O Lord, I open my lips, That my mouth may declare Your praise. For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise."

**If someone asked you how to present your body as a living sacrifice to God, how would you respond?**

### *Closing Comments*

If you haven't read the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by C.S. Lewis, consider this an invitation to read the story of Eustace, who through selfishness and pride became very dragon-like; only Aslan (the symbol of Christ) could strip him of his dragonish self. Eustace said it hurt like everything, but felt delicious at the same time. Nothing hurts more than allowing yourself to be sacrificed—your hopes, dreams, motivations, desires, and habits formed throughout life. Asking God to sacrifice the god (little-g) on the throne of my heart hurts like everything.

*Opening Question*

**Why did God allow Jesus to suffer so much?**

*Introduction*

This week, we finally take time to focus on Jesus Christ's own suffering. In reality, this subject should be the guiding principle of the entire quarter. It is God's experience of suffering through the person of Jesus, and the Father's pain in giving Him up, that give us the greatest example to follow. We know our pain is understood, that our Creator is not separated from our or griefs and pain.

*The Servant*

More than 600 years before Jesus was born, Isaiah prophesied that God's "servant" would suffer and bear the sins of humanity. Read through Isaiah 52:13-53:12. This passage is the very one the Ethiopian Eunuch was studying when Phillip was sent to give him understanding about the sufferings of Jesus (see Acts 8). One of three servant songs in Isaiah, this one says the most about the Messiah's struggles.

**Read through this passage, then note how many times suffering, death or pain is mentioned. How does this passage open your eyes to the reality of Jesus' experience?**

*Jesus' Life*

The life of Jesus was not an easy one. He saw everywhere the effects of sin in nature, but especially in the people made originally in the image of God. He dealt with disease and death, demon possession, physical deformities, addictions, and immorality, religious, sexual and ethical. There are several places where we see Jesus weeping (at the tomb of Lazarus and when he came into Jerusalem in Luke 19:41), but never laughing or smiling. Isaiah 53 says Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

**What broke the heart of Jesus most during his years of ministry?**

*Jesus' Death*

At his death, Jesus quotes from Psalm 22. The fact that the opening words of the Psalm make up one of the last seven statements of Jesus from the cross invite us to look at the entire song. Read through it, then answer the following questions:

**In what ways was this Psalm fulfilled in Jesus' death?**

**What metaphors are used that are meaningful? How do "wild animals" surround Jesus on the cross?**

### *The Cause of Death*

Jesus was crucified. Victims of this form of torture typically die of asphyxiation after 2-3 days. But Jesus dies much more quickly. This surprised the on lookers. It had only been a few hours, but Jesus was already gone. His death is confirmed by the Roman legionnaire's lance driven into his heart, a wound He would never feel.

So if Jesus did not die from the crucifixion and Roman instrument of torture, how did He die? Scripture says he gave up His spirit, that He willingly brought his life to an end. But surely there is more.

**How do Jesus' words on the cross express the pain he suffered? What was significant about His relationship to His father while on the cross?**

**Did Jesus die as a righteous man or a sinner's death?**

### *Closing Comments: Sunday's Coming*

While the quarter has been about suffering, it does not seem right to speak about the death of Jesus and His suffering without the reminder that the death of Jesus is the start of real life. The words of Hebrews seem a perfect place to end:

**Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 1fixing our eyes on Jesus, the 2aauthor and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**