

SOUTH FORK BAPTIST CHURCH

SUNDAY SCHOOL CURRICULUM



APRIL & MAY

2018



READ SCRIPTURE

This material can be accessed for free at:
www.southforkbaptistchurch.com/sundayschool
(originally from: bible.realitysf.com/small-group-material)

April & May (Sundays in Bold)

- Week 13 (3/25-4/1) - The Demand for a King
Week 14 (4/2-4/8) - The Rise and Climax of a Kingdom
Week 15 (4/9-4/15) - The Decline of a Kingdom
Week 16 (4/16-4/22) - The Kingdom Destroyed
Week 17 (4/23-4/29) - Prophetic Rewind Part 1 (Isaiah 1-39)
Week 18 (4/30-5/6) - Prophetic Rewind Part 2 (Isaiah 40-66)
Week 19 (5/7-5/13) - Prophetic Rewind Part 3 (Hosea)
Week 20 (5/14-5/20) - Prophetic Rewind Part 4 (Jonah)
Week 21 (5/21-5/27) - Community Reflection & Job (Part 1)
Week 22 (5/28-6/3) - Community Reflection & Job (Part 2)

Mutual Invitation & Unity Prayer Explanation (last page)

Psalms & Sunday School Reading Plan

(Sundays are the last date in parentheses)

- Week 13 (3/25-4/1) - Psalms 85-91, Deuteronomy 17:14-20 & 1 Samuel 8
- Week 14 (4/2-4/8) - Ps92-98, 2 Sam7&23:1-7; 1Kings2:1-4,9:1-9,&10:23-29
- Week 15 (4/9-4/15) - Psalms 99-105, 1 Kings 11-12; 16:29-18:2; 18:16-45
- Week 16 (4/16-4/22) - Psalms 106-112, 2 Kings 17:5-23; 24-25:1-12; 18-21
- Week 17 (4/23-4/29) - Psalms 113-119:1-32, Isaiah 6 & 30
- Week 18 (4/30-5/6) - Ps119:33-121, Isa40:1-10, 52:1-12,60:1-5, 63:7-64:12
- Week 19 (5/7-5/13) - Psalms 122-128, Hosea 3-4
- Week 20 (5/14-5/20) - Psalms 129-135, Jonah
- Week 21 (5/21-5/27) - Psalms 136-142, Job 1-3
- Week 22 (5/28-6/3) - Psalms 143-149, Job 38-39
- Week 23 (6/4-6/10) - Psalm 150, Psalms 1-6, Proverbs 1:1-7 and Proverbs 8-9
- Week 24 (6/11-6/17) - Psalms 7-13, Ecclesiastes 9:1-10 and Ecclesiastes 12
- Week 25 (6/18-6/24) - Psalms 14-20, Jeremiah 7
- Week 26 (6/25-7/1) - Psalms 21-27, Skim Jeremiah (or watch the Bible Project video)

Ways to Go Deeper!

Daily Text Messages (from South Fork)

- Text @sfbchville to the number 81010

Podcasts - thebibleproject.com/podcasts/

Blog - thebibleproject.com/blog/

Videos - thebibleproject.com/all-videos/

Weekly Email Newsletter (from Bible Project)

- thebibleproject.com/account/register/

Reading Plan on YouVersion (minus the Psalms readings)

- “The Bible Project | The Bible” <http://bible.com/r/1Fk>



READ SCRIPTURE



YEAR OF
BIBLICAL
LITERACY

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Full Bible Reading Plan

4/1	2 Sam 16-18	91	
4/2	2 Sam 19-21	92	
4/3	2 Sam 22-24	93	
4/4	1 Kgs 1-3	94	1 & 2 Kings
4/5	1 Kgs 4-7	95	
4/6	1 Kgs 8-10	96	
4/7	1 Kgs 11-13	97	
4/8	1 Kgs 14-16	98	
4/9	1 Kgs 17-19	99	
4/10	1 Kgs 20-22	100	
4/11	2 Kgs 1-3	101	
4/12	2 Kgs 4-7	102	

4/13	2 Kgs 8-11	103	
4/14	2 Kgs 12-14	104	
4/15	2 Kgs 15-17	105	
4/16	2 Kgs 18-19	106	
4/17	2 Kgs 20-22	107	
4/18	2 Kgs 23-25	108	

CHAPTER 8 - THE PROPHETS BEFORE THE EXILE

4/19	Isa 1-4	109	Isaiah 1-39
4/20	Isa 5-8	110	
4/21	Isa 9-12	111	
4/22	Isa 13-17	112	
4/23	Isa 18-22	113	
4/24	Isa 23-27	114	
4/25	Isa 28-30	115	
4/26	Isa 31-35	116	
4/27	Isa 36-38	117	
4/28	Isa 39-41	118	Isaiah 40-66
4/29	Isa 42-44	119:1-32	
4/30	Isa 45-48	119:33-64	
5/1	Isa 49-51	119:65-96	
5/2	Isa 52-54	119:97-128	Gospel of Kingdom
5/3	Isa 55-57	119:129-152	
5/4	Isa 58-60	119:153-176	
5/5	Isa 61-64	120	
5/6	Isa 65-66	121	
5/7	Hos 1-5	122	Hosea
5/8	Hos 6-10	123	
5/9	Hos 11-14	124	
5/10	Joel	125	Joel
5/11	Amos 1-5	126	Amos
5/12	Amos 6-9	127	
5/13	Obadiah	128	Obadiah
5/14	Jonah	129	Jonah
5/15	Micah 1-4	130	Micah
5/16	Micah 5-7	131	
5/17	Nahum	132	Nahum
5/18	Habakkuk	133	Habakkuk
5/19	Zephaniah	134	Zephaniah

CHAPTER 9 - THE WISDOM OF ISRAEL

5/20	Job 1-3	135	Job
5/21	Job 4-7	136	
5/22	Job 8-11	137	
5/23	Job 12-15	138	
5/24	Job 16-19	139	
5/25	Job 20-23	140	
5/26	Job 24-28	141	
5/27	Job 29-31	142	
5/28	Job 32-34	143	Wisdom: Job
5/29	Job 35-37	144	
5/30	Job 38-39	145	
5/31	Job 40-42	146	
6/1	Psalms 1-2	147	Psalms
6/2	Prov 1-3	148	Proverbs
6/3	Prov 4-6	149	
6/4	Prov 7-9	150	Wisdoms: Proverbs

DATE	READINGS	PSALM	VIDEO
6/5	Prov 10-12	1	
6/6	Prov 13-15	2	
6/7	Prov 16-18	3	
6/8	Prov 19-21	4	
6/9	Prov 22-24	5	
6/10	Prov 25-27	6	
6/11	Prov 28-31	7	
6/12	Ecc 1-4	8	Ecclesiastes
6/13	Ecc 5-8	9	
6/14	Ecc 9-12	10	Wisdom: Ecclesiastes
6/15	Song 1-4	11	Song of Songs
6/16	Song 5-8	12	

CHAPTER 10 - THE PROPHETS OF THE EXILE

6/17	Jer 1-3	13	Jeremiah
6/18	Jer 4-6	14	
6/19	Jer 7-9	15	
6/20	Jer 10-13	16	
6/21	Jer 14-17	17	
6/22	Jer 18-22	18	
6/23	Jer 23-25	19	
6/24	Jer 26-29	20	
6/25	Jer 30-32	21	
6/26	Jer 33-36	22	
6/27	Jer 37-39	23	
6/28	Jer 40-44	24	
6/29	Jer 45-48	25	
6/30	Jer 49-50	26	
7/1	Jer 51-52	27	

Week 13: (3/26-4/1)

The Demand for a King

1. Recap & Preparing for Sunday School

- 1 Samuel 25-27, Psalm 85
- 1 Samuel 28-31, Psalm 86
- 2 Samuel 1-3, Psalm 87
- 2 Samuel 4-8, Psalm 88
- 2 Samuel 9-12, Psalm 89
- 2 Samuel 13-15, Psalm 90
- 2 Samuel 16-18, Psalm 91

Resources for Week

- <http://bible.realitysf.com/read-scripture-videos>
- Read Scripture Video: Samuel
- Read: Deuteronomy 17:14-20 & 1 Samuel 8

2. Focus of the Time Together

To understand the significance of Israel's demand for a king to rule over them and to ponder why God granted their request.

3. Ground rule/goal/value for the week

Our goal this week is to faithfully interpret the Scriptures that we will look at. Specifically, we want to resist the temptation to over-spiritualize our text from 1 Samuel in order to make it about our individual lives. The primary question we should have in mind when reading these historic stories about kings is not "What is in this for me?" but "What is going on in the story of God and Israel?" This does not mean that the Holy Spirit cannot connect themes from the stories we read to what is happening in our lives, but we must aim to understand the unique story that the text is relating rather than trying to distort it into some allegory for our lives. Once we've interpreted the story and sought its significance on its own terms, then we can ask the Holy Spirit if there is any application for us today.

4. Connection and Unity Exercise (MUTUAL INVITATION)

Share in one minute what has surprised you so far about the story of God and Israel. Something that you rediscovered or that was new to you.

5. Opening Prayer

Read Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 aloud as a prayer.

6. Intro to Discussion

This week, we transition from the Judges period of Israel's history to the beginning of the kings. The king-centric narratives begin with the simple and beautiful story of Ruth, where we see God's kindness to a faithful Moabite (i.e. foreigner) woman through Boaz. The book of Ruth previews the coming story by providing us a genealogy that tells us that she is the great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king, David.

The king narratives begin in earnest in 1 Samuel, where we find Israel under the leadership of the priest/prophet/judge Samuel. Samuel is surprisingly faithful to God, considering the other judges we've seen. As Samuel grows old, he appoints his sons to fulfill the role of judges, but they are unfaithful and "pervert justice." Israel, threatened by the many enemies surrounding them and also sick of leaders who continually act unjustly and lead them into sin and destruction, ask Samuel to appoint a king over them.

Now there is a lot implied in this request. On the one hand, it is understandable for the people to desire an end to the mostly calamitous line of judges. They perceive the nations around them as having strong, mighty kings as leaders, and they desire to be led similarly. The request for a king is not wrong in and of itself; indeed, it was anticipated in Deuteronomy 17:14-20. There we find Moses describing the type of king Israel is to appoint once it entered and dwelt in the promised land. Moses describes a king that is to be decidedly opposite from the king Israel had been enslaved by and just escaped from in Egypt (Pharaoh). But Israel's request for a king in 1 Samuel 8 is at its core a rejection of their God-given identity. Israel was the people which God chose as His own in order to bless the whole earth. They were to be holy, meaning to live differently than all the nations around them according to the law God gave them, so that the nations would be drawn into relationship with YHWH, the one true God. Part of this differentiation was the fact that the nation was to be led by YHWH. In the ancient world where a king was often the biggest, strongest, richest and most powerful man around, Israel was to rely on God as their true king. Even the type of king described by Moses in Deuteronomy is to be something of a priest/theologian bringing the people back to their true king, YHWH, rather than a great warrior who rules with an iron fist.

Israel's demand for a king is motivated not out of a desire to be set apart, but to be like the nations around them. Before granting Israel's desire for a king, Samuel issues a warning, a dire preview of what life under a king will be like: he will lord over you, take your children and send them into battle, take your money and land, force you and your children into labor, and make you his slaves. Samuel is warning, in no uncertain terms, that Israel will be as they were under Pharaoh in Egypt: crushed and enslaved. Israel ignores these warnings and demands a king anyway, rejecting YHWH and essentially choosing to live under a Pharaoh instead.

7. Group Discussion

Questions for Basic Understanding:

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

1. One of the hermeneutic guidelines for reading Biblical narrative is to pay attention to the pace of the story, especially noticing when it slows down dramatically to zoom in on a particular time or event. Typically, this indicates a particularly important chapter of the story. Why do you think the narrative slows down so much in Ruth & 1 Samuel after racing through hundreds of years of history in Judges?
2. Why is this a specifically important chapter in the theological story of Israel's history?

Questions for Listening to Scripture:

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

1. Read Deuteronomy 17:14-20 again. What kind of king is Israel supposed to have? Do you think Samuel embodies well the type of king Deuteronomy 17 describes?
2. Now read 1 Samuel 8. What kind of king does Israel desire?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture:

These questions are to help us slow down to taste and notice Scripture, savor its richness, and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

What does it say about Israel and its leaders at this point in the story that they desire the Pharaoh-like king Samuel warns them against versus the priest/prophet king described in Deuteronomy 17 and embodied by Samuel?

8. Personal Application

Questions for Self-Examination:

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware and honest about who we are in light of our interaction with Scripture, and consider any appropriate action.

1. Do you feel any sympathy for Israel in this story? If you were in their shoes, what kind of king would you want ruling over you?
2. God calls us, like Israel, to live differently (or as holy) from the world and the culture around us. With this in mind, in what ways can you identify with Israel's rebellious desire to instead follow the ways of the world?

9. Closing

Spend some time praying for one another in your small groups. Every member should be invited to share whatever he or she feels comfortable with, whether it be for specific needs or circumstances, updates from previous prayer requests, or things to thank God for.

Week 14: (4/2-4/8)
The Rise and Climax of a Kingdom

RECAP & PREPARING FOR Sunday School

Daily Reading for Week

- 2 Samuel 13-15, Psalm 90
- 2 Samuel 16-18, Psalm 91
- 2 Samuel 19-21, Psalm 92
- 2 Samuel 22-24, Psalm 93
- 1 Kings 1-3, Psalm 94
- 1 Kings 4-7, Psalm 95
- 1 Kings 8-10, Psalm 96

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings
- Read: 2 Samuel 7 and 23:1-7; 1 Kings 2:1-4, 9:1-9, and 10:23-29

FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To understand the climatic significance of David and Solomon's kingships within the story of Israel's covenant relationship with God and to reflect on the true nature of this kind of "golden era" of prosperity.

GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Our goal this week is to practice honest critique of ourselves, our community, and our culture in light of any challenging themes or ideas we see in the Scriptures. As you read, discuss, and pray, try as hard as you can to keep from being defensive. Desire growth and reform more than self-protection; and therefore, risk seeing things about yourself and society that can be hard to look at.

CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

If you could choose anyone you know to be king (or president), who would it be and why?

OPENING PRAYER

Read David's praise song in 2 Samuel 22 (which is also Psalm 18) aloud as an opening prayer.

INTRO TO DISCUSSION

After the request for a king in 1 Samuel — and God’s cryptic warning through Samuel about the tragic nature of what they were really asking for — God raised up Israel’s first king, King Saul. Almost from the very beginning, Saul’s life and reign fell apart. Therefore, God chose and anointed the shepherd boy David to be Saul’s future replacement. Over many tumultuous years, David remained loyal to Saul despite Saul’s multiple attempts to kill him. David’s loyalty and leadership caused much of the nation to call him their leader despite King Saul’s kingship. This caused the first nationwide political cracks that would later lead to the tragic Judah-Israel divide and civil war.

Eventually, Saul died and David was announced as king over all of Israel. The ugly beginning of the monarchy now took a sharp turn for the better. David was faithful to God, defeated Israel’s enemies, restored worship and justice in the nation, finally overtook the previously occupied city of Jerusalem to become his capital city, and even brought the Ark of God back from the Philistines. The Hebrew Scriptures describe David not as perfect (see stories of Bathsheba, Uriah, the census, etc.) but as faithful, loyal, and incredibly merciful. He trusted God and led with justice and righteousness over God’s people. Tellingly, 3,000 years later, most Jews today still point to David as Israel’s greatest leader. And because David was exactly the kind of leader God had hoped Israel would have and appreciate, He made a covenant promise with David to bless him by keeping the royal line within his family, so long as each generation loved and obeyed the Lord as David had.

God’s conditional covenant promise to Israel at Sinai to bless them so long as they obeyed His Torah provided the framework for reading through Joshua and Judges. It constantly put the questions before us, “Did Israel obey God? Will they obey as the story moves on? And will God be forever merciful to them, or will He eventually bring about the consequences He warned them about in the desert?” This covenant with David provides the exact same lens through which to read 1 & 2 Kings. Will the kings of Israel follow in David’s footsteps by worshiping God alone and obeying His commands? And if not, how long until something really bad happens? Even further, Samuel’s lament to Israel in 1 Samuel 8 warns them to “be careful what you wish for.”

More specifically, he warns them to be careful how you go about seeking that which you want. God doesn't disallow them a king or even challenge their desire for material prosperity, but He deplores their effort to seek success through the same means and methods as the violent nations around them. So when David dies and his son Solomon is made king, and he leads Israel to the pinnacle of its success and prosperity, the sense of joy and celebration is couched in a tone of foreboding. According to all we've seen from Israel thus far, will they really be able to sustain this success?

More precisely, in the midst of long-awaited peace and prosperity, will they be able to sustain faithfulness? Will wise, rich, and increasingly lavish King Solomon really stay true to Yahweh, or will he go the way of all the other nations? And further, is this success a long-term result of being faithful to God, or is it rather a temporary perk of playing by the rules of the world, in which case the threat of punishment and collapse lurks around the corner? In other words, is this the beginning of a new and permanent state of grace in which Israel will be exalted over the nations forever, or will this "golden age" rather prove to be a tragically short blip in history in which they "played Egypt" for a season and therefore went the way of the Egyptians?

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

Questions for Listening to Scripture:

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

- 1 Reflect back on your readings in 1 & 2 Samuel. What kind of actions and choices justified the Scriptures' assessment of David as a righteous man and leader?
- 2 Think about the fact that Israel's most exalted king, whose life is given more detailed attention than any other Old Testament character, is also the person who created about half of the Psalms (such as the praise song of Psalm 18). What connection can you make between the internal character and heart expressed in the prayers of the Psalms and the external character and heart illustrated in David's life and actions?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture:

These questions are to help us slow down to taste and notice Scripture, savor its richness, and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

- 1 Read Deuteronomy 8:10-18. What does this warning about forgetting God in the long-awaited time of prosperity say about the danger of Israel's "golden age"? What about the danger of prosperity in general?
- 2 Read 1 Kings 10:14-29. Considering Moses' warning in Deuteronomy 8 and Samuel's warning in 1 Samuel 8, what kind of attitude should we have toward this new era of "progress" and prosperity established under Solomon?
- 3 Should we celebrate this prosperity as the blessing of God or be concerned that it is the result of a new kind of Jewish pharaoh figure?
- 4 If you put yourselves in the shoes of an ancient Jew, who would you prefer as your king: David or Solomon? Would you want the prayerful musician-king who humiliates himself by worshiping God in his underwear, or the kind of global political and economic powerhouse who establishes you and your people above the other nations and exacts from them such wealth that "silver becomes like just another stone," no matter what the cost?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Questions for Self-Examination:

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware and honest about who we are in light of our interaction with Scripture, and consider any appropriate action.

- 1 Take 3 or 4 minutes to reflect on the parts of your life where you are currently experiencing prosperity. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you brutal honesty and clarity as to the nature of your prosperity. Do you think you have gained prosperity because you and your part of society have faithfully followed the commands of God to live humbly, justly, mercifully, and lovingly? In what way might you be "winning" right now, not because you are being faithful to God, but because you are reaping the benefits of being part of a society that is exacting wealth from others through violence, power, injustice, or oppression?

- 2 Next, take 2 minutes to try to discern the specific communal, societal, or global costs of your prosperity. If you acknowledge any such costs, pray a prayer of confession, admitting the specific costliness of your life, naming any negative effects your lifestyle has on others. If you can't recognize any such costs, pray to God to open your eyes to such realities.
- 3 Finally, take 2 minutes to reflect on how God might be inviting you to sacrifice your own personal prosperity in order to alleviate these costs. Soberly count the cost of such repentance. Then pray honestly, either declaring to God your will to make certain changes or telling Him honestly that you're not willing to make those changes at this time.

CLOSING

Close your small-group time with a brief unity prayer, expressing what you've heard each person share with God.

Week 15: (4/9-4/15)
The Decline of a Kingdom

2. RECAP & PREPARING FOR CG

Daily Reading for Week

- 1 Kings 11-13, Psalm 97
- 1 Kings 14-16, Psalm 98
- 1 Kings 17-19, Psalm 99
- 1 Kings 20-22, Psalm 100
- 2 Kings 1-3, Psalm 101
- 2 Kings 4-7, Psalm 102
- 2 Kings 8-11, Psalm 103

Resources for Week

- Read: 1 Kings 11-12; 16:29-18:2; 18:16-45

3. FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To study a few key chapters in Israel's downfall in order to: 1) Understand the narrative significance of its decline and 2) Begin considering the crucial role of the prophets in Israel's story.

Note: This week's material intentionally has lots of questions in order to help us dive into both of these crucial topics before moving on in the story.

So plan your time accordingly.

4. GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Ground rule: please remember to be slow to speak and eager to listen to one another.

5. CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

Share the group a favorite podcast or something else you enjoy listening to.

6. OPENING PRAYER

Read Psalm 75 aloud as a prayer.

7. INTRO TO DISCUSSION

This week, we take an even deeper dive into Israel's troubled history. The 400 years or so between first entering the Promised Land and the good reign of King David was ugly and disturbing. If you recall, the book of Judges ended with the horribly grotesque stories of a fatal gang rape and a bloody call to civil war, followed by the premeditated kidnapping of 400 young women. The book concluded with the line, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." (Judges 21:25). The project of living as a free and holy nation that serves as a light of justice and righteousness to the rest of the world hadn't panned out well so far. Overall, Israel had failed its God-given vocation. The conclusion to Judges begged the

question, “Will things turn around if Israel can just have kings to lead them?”

Samuel’s warning that we discussed last week foreshadowed a sad answer to that question. So as we read about the “Golden Age” of prosperity and faithfulness under David and Solomon, we were rightly a bit reluctant and suspicious. Specifically, last week we left off with the celebratory lines of 1 Kings 10 describing the height of Solomon’s splendor. In the very next verse, though, we see a tragic conjunction: The word “however.” “King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter - Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites” (1 Kings 11:1). After about 400 years of slavery and then about 400 years as a troubled theocratic nation, Israel experienced a few short decades of the kind of blessing promised long ago to Abraham. But then the forewarned downward spiral begins. Solomon turns away to worship other gods and the nation begins to crumble as a consequence. From this point on, the rest of 1 and 2 Kings describes Israel’s continued sin and failure for hundreds of years, with just a few brief eras of partial faithfulness. Since the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12, there are a total of 30 chapters of Scripture (2 Samuel 5 - 1 Kings 10) given to chronicling Israel’s period of faithfulness and the resulting blessing. The rest is a long, repetitious story of waywardness, evil, and systemic injustice.

The questions that the book of Kings ask us to chew on as we continue reading are: How long will the Lord withhold His anger and punishment from Israel? Will He be patient with them forever, or might He eventually revoke His covenant and start the project over with another people? It was the role of Israel’s many prophets to help steer the people and their leaders to return to faithfulness to God and obedience to the Sinai covenant. The nation’s often violent response toward these prophets is just one further step in their decline. Not only had they gone astray, but they persecuted those God sent to rescue them. As generations of faithless kings and courageous prophets passed and the same stubborn idolatry and injustice persisted, those scary questions about exhausting God’s patience grew even more important. Eventually, as Israel and Judah further unraveled, prophets like Isaiah were sent to warn them of an impending judgment. Next week, we’ll see where the spiral leads God’s people. But this week, try to wrap your mind and heart around the sudden fall from prosperity, the nature of Israel’s stubbornness, and the narrative tension building throughout 1 and 2 Kings.

8. LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

Part 1: Read 1 Kings 11 and 12:1-24

Questions for Basic Understanding:

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

- 1 What is happening here?
- 2 Why, according to the author(s) of the book of Kings, did the kingdom of Israel split in two?
- 3 What significance does this split have in the story of God's intention to bless the world through Israel?

Questions for Listening to Scripture:

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

- 1 Does it surprise you to see how short Israel's "Golden Age" of prosperity is? How quickly, within one generation, they go from "Golden Age" to a civil war that divides the kingdom in two?
- 2 Zooming out and considering the 1,000+ years that have passed since God first promised His blessing to Abraham (and putting yourself in the shoes of an Israelite), how tragic would these events have felt and why?

Part 2: Read 1 Kings 16:29-18:2

Questions for Basic Understanding:

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

- 1 What is Elijah's role and purpose as a prophet in confronting King Ahab and the prophets of Baal? In other words, what did God send him to accomplish?

Questions for Listening to Scripture:

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

- 1 How does the story of God sending Elijah to the Widow of Zarephath, a foreigner in the neighboring nation of Sidon, shed light on God's ultimate redemptive plan for the world?
- 2 How do you think an Israelite would have responded to this man Elijah who claimed to be sent by Yahweh, Israel's God, and yet was blessing foreigners and condemning Israel and its leaders?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture:

These questions are to help us slow down to taste and notice Scripture, savor its richness, and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

- 1 Read Luke 4:16-30 and consider why Jesus referenced these two stories from 1 and 2 Kings, comparing himself to Elijah (and Elijah's disciple Elisha) in this way.
- 2 How was Jesus' ministry similar to that of Elijah's?
- 3 How was Israel's response to Jesus similar to their response to Elijah nearly a millennium earlier?

9. SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Questions for Self-Examination:

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware and honest about who we are in light of our interaction with Scripture, and consider any appropriate action.

- 1 Where do you find yourself in the many stories covered tonight? Which character or experience do you identify with? (For example: Do you feel like King Ahab, having your sin called out and confronted? Or do you feel like the widow who has seen God work unexpected miracles in her life and now trusts in Yahweh?)
- 2 What is it about your life at this moment that leads you to identify with this character or experience?

10. CLOSING

Pray for a few minutes together, sharing whatever thoughts, feelings, or calls-to-action this time has stirred up in you. Listen silently for any directions or invitations that the Holy Spirit might have for you or for someone else in your small group

Week 16: (4/16-4/22)
The Kingdom Destroyed

RECAP & PREPARING FOR Sunday School

Daily Reading for Week

- 2 Kings 12-14, Psalm 104
- 2 Kings 15-17, Psalm 105
- 2 Kings 18-19, Psalm 106
- 2 Kings 20-22, Psalm 107
- 2 Kings 23-25, Psalm 108
- Isaiah 1-4, Psalm 109
- Isaiah 5-8, Psalm 110

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Isaiah 1-39
- Read: 2 Kings 17:5-23; 24-25:1-12; 18-21

FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To understand how and why Israel and Judah were both eventually conquered and sent into exile and to reflect further on the role of the prophets.

GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Ground rule: Be conscious about how much you are or are not speaking during discussion. If you notice that you talk a lot, focus on listening to others speak. If you notice that you tend to be quiet, take a step of courage and offer something to the group during sharing times. Also note: You will end your time together with a corporate unity prayer, so pay careful attention to the intimate emotions expressed during your conversations.

CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

Share in one minute how you're coming into the room this week. (Are you exhausted from work? Are you in the middle of some relational strife? Are you having a great day?)

OPENING PRAYER

Take a few minutes to corporately thank God for different aspects of His character that you have seen reading through the Old Testament or experienced in life recently. For example: "Thank you God for your kindness," or "Thank you God for your honesty."

INTRO TO DISCUSSION

Last week, we looked at one of Israel's most famous prophets, Elijah. As prophets, men spoke with the passion and authority of God, constantly calling Israel and its kings to be faithful to the covenant. By the end of this week, we will have finished 2 Kings and seen the Northern Kingdom's (Israel's) destruction at the hands of the Assyrian Empire and the eventual destruction of the Southern Kingdom (Judah) at the hands of the Babylonian Empire. Through hundreds of years of history and scores of kings, the book of Kings points us again and again to Israel's covenant with YHWH. Kings that were evil rejected the covenant, worshiped other gods, and did not follow the Law God gave Israel. Good kings were faithful to the covenant, destroyed idols, returned Israel to worshiping YHWH, and obeyed the Law. We see a familiar pattern: a bad king rejects God and the covenant and leads the people to worship idols and false gods and a prophet is sent to persuade this king back to covenant faithfulness. Though a few good kings such as Hezekiah heeded the the prophetic warnings (2 Kings 18-20), most ignored them and even persecuted those God sent to help them.

As this cycle of sin, warning, and proud stubbornness repeats over and over for hundreds of years in Israel's history (the monarchy lasted for about 470 years between Saul's inauguration in 1050 BC and the fall of Jerusalem in 580 BC), the narrative tension that began in the Torah is building. When Israel was rescued from Egypt and became a nation, God set before them blessing and cursing, life and death, to obey God or to deal with His righteous judgment. They were free to choose their own destiny. So suspense builds with each new generation, and the question lingers, "For how many generations will God's immense patience and mercy toward His people cause Him to withhold His just judgment?" When we read through the books of the prophets over the next few months, we'll see two distinct postures toward this question: Much of Israel, especially Jerusalem, believed that as God's people, they were forever immune to judgment. But prophets like Isaiah, whose ministry became prevalent in this era preceding the exile, came specifically to convince them otherwise. God and His judgment are near indeed. They must repent or perish.

And this is precisely what we see made shockingly clear in 2 Kings as we see the nation's decline reach the point of total demise. First, the entire northern nation of Israel is conquered by mighty Assyria (2 Kings 17). The story of Judah's subsequent near-fatal encounter with Assyria and Isaiah's

prophetic exhortation in 2 Kings 19 displayed, however, that God would do mighty deeds to preserve and protect those willing to repent and be faithful to Him and His covenant. And so because Hezekiah heeded Isaiah's words, Judah was protected for a time from the same catastrophe as their kin Israel. But just one generation later, Hezekiah's son Manasseh begins the generational cycle of pride and sin all over again. So the ultimate, unthinkable lesson was finally made clear: Not even Jerusalem, the prized capital city where God's very presence dwelled in the temple atop Mt. Zion, was immune to God's justice and free to live without consequence forever.

About 160 years after the Assyrian invasion, Jerusalem falls to the Babylonian Empire and the survivors of Judah are taken into exile (2 Kings 24-25). The entire nation is lost from the Promised Land. Does this mean God's promise itself has failed? Will He give up trying to redeem the world? Is God not faithful to His promises?

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

Questions for Basic Understanding:

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

- 1 Paying attention to 2 Kings 17 and 24-25, what exactly does it mean for Israel to have been sent into exile? What was actually experienced?

Questions for Listening to Scripture:

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

- 1 Reflect back on your readings in 1 and 2 Kings. What stood out to you most from story after story of kings "doing what was evil in the eyes of the Lord"?
- 2 As you read through the stories, did you find yourself hoping for God to bring judgment upon Israel and punish them for their sins, or for God to continue to show them patience and mercy?
- 3 How would it have felt, emotionally and physically, to have been a Jew living in Jerusalem during this exile?

- 4 If you were one of the lucky ones to have survived the downfall and were trying to make sense of things in exile, what kinds of questions or confusion or theological frustrations would this catastrophic turn of events have brought up in you?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture:

These questions are to help us slow down to taste and notice Scripture, savor its richness, and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

- 1 What kind of story do you wish you would have read in the Old Testament so far? If you had a magic wand, what would you have naturally wanted to change about the way the Biblical authors tell Israel's story?
- 2 How does the way the Bible tells this story reveal God's character?
- 3 In what ways does it reveal something about humanity?

Questions for Examining Ourselves:

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware and honest about who we are in light of our interaction with Scripture and consider any appropriate action.

- 1 Take a few minutes to try to "find yourself" in the story of Israel thus far. Through this first journey through Israel's turbulent national history (we'll do it again in 1 & 2 Chronicles), who do you feel you should identify with? In other words, are you and the culture you belong to more like early Israel, a group of poor, marginalized, recently-freed slaves? Or are you more like Egypt or Canaan or Assyria or Babylon, enjoying the temporary benefits of being the dominant cultural power which just happens to have been established through violence and oppression?
- 2 More personally, as you try to learn wisdom from the story and stories of the Old Testament, which characters should you try to identify as? Do you identify more as a frustrated slave in exile, a wanderer (physically and existentially) such as Abram, the poor foreign widow in Zarephath, one of Israel's kings or prophets, like Bathsheba being taken advantage of and unprotected, or like King David using your power to take advantage of others for your pleasure, etc.?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

There will be no small group discussion this week.

CLOSING

Close your time together with the unity prayer exercise, expressing through short one-sentence prayers some of the sentiments and emotions you've heard shared by others in the group during discussion. Have one person begin the time by praying, "Lord, hear our _____ (gratitude, for example)." Then, one at a time, take turns sharing similarly formatted prayers.

Week 17: (4/23-4/29)
Prophetic Rewind Part 1 (Isaiah 1-39)

RECAP & PREPARING FOR Sunday School

Daily Reading for Week

- Isaiah 9-12, Psalm 111
- Isaiah 13-17, Psalm 112
- Isaiah 18-22, Psalm 113
- Isaiah 23-27, Psalm 114
- Isaiah 28-30, Psalm 115
- Isaiah 31-35, Psalm 116
- Isaiah 36-38, Psalm 117

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Isaiah 1-39
- Read: Isaiah 6 & 30

FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To become oriented with Isaiah and the pre-exile prophets in general through reading several chapters of Scripture together in order to explore the profundity of the prophets and their thinking around communal sin and guilt.

GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Goal: Practice empathetic listening. As we read accounts of Israel's history, practice empathizing with what their felt experience would have been. And as you read this way, allow that practice to help you also listen empathetically to the felt experience of each person in your community. By the end of your time together, try to know and feel what it is that others are longing for, weary of, frustrated with, or excited about, and try to put yourself in their shoes to be able to better know and love them.

CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

This week's connection and unity exercise will take place after the opening prayer.

OPENING PRAYER

Have one person read Psalm 79 aloud, and as you listen to the psalm, try to discern how much you are able to identify and empathize with the psalmist's sentiments.

Then use **mutual invitation** to answer the following question: What parts of the psalmist's thoughts and feelings were you able to feel and empathize with? What parts felt foreign, uncomfortable, or difficult to connect with?

INTRO TO DISCUSSION

Last week, we finished reading 2 Kings, which ended in the dramatic and tragic exile of Judah into Babylon. Though the northern tribes of Israel had been conquered by Assyria about 140 years earlier, now even the southern remnant of Judah has been besieged and removed from their place in the land. This event is what will now be referred to as "*the exile.*" It was the painful and disorienting event that meant God's promise and plan to redeem the world through making Israel a special people to live as a light to the nations in the Promised Land had somehow fallen apart. Israel had failed, and God had finally lost His patience, leaving them to suffer violent consequences. This catastrophic turn of events should shock us as readers just as it shocked ancient Israel. Exile was never part of the plan.

Psalm 77 voices the questions that this downfall produced:

Will the Lord reject forever?

Will he never show his favor again?

Has his unfailing love vanished forever?

Has his promise failed for all time?

Has God forgotten to be merciful?

Has he in anger withheld his compassion?

(Psalm 77:7-9)

Psalm 79 further expresses Israel's bewilderment:

O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance;

they have defiled your holy temple,

they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.

They have left the dead bodies of your servants

as food for the birds of the sky,

the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild.

They have poured out blood like water

all around Jerusalem,

and there is no one to bury the dead.

We are objects of contempt to our neighbors,

Of scorn and derision to those around us.

How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?

How long will your jealousy burn like fire?
(Psalm 79:1-6)

Appreciating this sentiment of bewilderment and despair, of faith mixed with incredible doubt, is crucial to understanding the Old Testament. It is the worldview from which the historical books, books of the prophets, and even much of the wisdom literature were written and compiled. As we read through the rest of the Old Testament over the next few months, try to stay grounded in what it would have felt like to be part of Israel during this time.

Over the next four weeks, we're going to do a sort of rewind with the pre-exile prophets. This means we're going back into the same part of Israel's story that we just read through in 1 & 2 Kings, reading the poetic, prophetic books that recount the ministry of the special men called by God to rebuke and exhort Israel on His behalf. Much of what we'll see is that this horrific exile shouldn't have come as a complete shock. God had given them more than a fair warning. Through the prophets, He gave Israel numerous chances to repent.

As we begin this rewind this week with first Isaiah (Isaiah 1-39), try to orient the prophetic message within Israel's historical timeline. You've already read the high-level story of what was happening. And you've met Isaiah before in 2 Kings 19-20. Now we're going backward and zooming in a bit, approaching the story from a different vantage. The messages of Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea, for example, aren't tacked on to the end of this history, but rather were the representation of God's heartfelt response to Israel's actions *during* their history. They were the gracious communication of God to His people, meaning there is much to be learned through them about God, humanity, religion, judgment, mercy, and what it does and doesn't mean to be God's people in the world.

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

Questions for Basic Understanding:

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

To help ourselves get oriented by placing the content of the prophets within the context of Israel's history, we're going to spend much of the time this week reading together.

Read Isaiah 1:1 & 6:1, 2 Kings 15:27-18:13, and Isaiah 36-39.

Underline passages that seem significant as you read along and write down any thoughts or notes that jump out to you. (A few notes: King Azariah and King Uzziah are the same person just with different forms of the name. Also, Isaiah 36-39 – the closing chapters of the first part of Isaiah – are almost identical to 2 Kings 18-20, which helps clearly align the two texts. Compare if helpful.)

- 1 When did Isaiah's ministry take place? Where in the story are we when we read the first part of Isaiah? Who was he addressing and where?
- 2 What was the state of the nation (both kingdoms) at the time he was commissioned, and what important events did he witness?
- 3 Recall Isaiah 36 and 37 (or 2 Kings 18:13-19:37). How did Isaiah's relationship with King Hezekiah successfully thwart Judah's destruction at the hands of Assyria?
- 4 Recall 2 Kings 17:1-23. Why was the northern kingdom of Israel unable to avoid falling to Assyria in this way?
- 5 Recall Isaiah 39 (2 Kings 20:2-21). How did witnessing the exile of the northern kingdom and the waywardness of Judah allow Isaiah to consider even the possibility that Jerusalem itself would one day fall?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Questions for Self-Examination:

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware and honest about who we are in light of our interaction with Scripture and consider any appropriate action.

- 1 Jewish thought and theology adheres to a much stronger sense of communal social identity than we modern Americans do. We typically think very individually, asking "What sin have I done, and what does God feel toward me? But as an Israelite, the sin of your people was also your sin, and you would have to take ownership and responsibility for how God felt toward not just you but also your community.
- 2 Considering this, how can Israel's history and the prophets teach us to think about and respond to evil and injustice in our society or community that we haven't personally committed but have potentially benefitted from? In other words, what should we do with sin that we haven't overtly committed, but that we are complicit to just by the nature of the community to which we belong?

- 3 Specifically, how does it make you feel to think about owning your community's sin? Are you able to embrace this idea, or do you feel resistant to it?
- 4 Where does your mind immediately go when you think of your community's sin? Your family, your city, your nation, company, community group, subculture, etc.

Questions for Practicing Community:

These questions are to help us reflect thoughtfully on our felt experience together in light of our shared ground rules, goals, and values.

- 1 Are there any sins or failures for which your community group or this small group should consider communal conviction, confession, and repentance?
- 2 Are there any ways that you have felt hurt, frustrated, or unloved recently because of how you've experienced others in community? If so, what would you like to ask of the group? Is it one person or the community as a whole that you'd like to acknowledge and take responsibility for the offense?

CLOSING

Have one person close your small-group time with a brief prayer, expressing what you've heard each person share with God.

Week 18: (4/30-5/6)
Prophetic Rewind Part 2 (Isaiah 40-66)

RECAP & PREPARING FOR Sunday School

Daily Reading for Week

- Isaiah 39-41, Psalm 118
- Isaiah 42-44, Psalm 119:1-32
- Isaiah 45-48, Psalm 119:33-64
- Isaiah 49-51, Psalm 119:65-96
- Isaiah 52-54, Psalm 119:97-128
- Isaiah 55-57, Psalm 119:129-152
- Isaiah 58-60, Psalm 119:153-176

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Isaiah 40-66 and The Gospel of the Kingdom (theme video)
- Read: Isaiah 6 & 30

FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To examine the second part of the book of Isaiah and to spend time training ourselves as a community to think and reflect corporately rather than individualistically.

GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Goal: Practice being present. During your time together, fight to stay mentally and emotionally present to each other, to God, and to your own mind and heart. Resist all distractions such as phones, thinking about things you need to do later, etc. Be wholly present.

CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

Take a minute, be silent and notice how you are actually feeling. Share with the group how you are feeling and what you are bringing in the room.

OPENING PRAYER

Have one person read the prayer in Isaiah 63:7-64:12 aloud as a prayer.

INTRO TO DISCUSSION

Last week, we studied the first part of Isaiah. We looked at the overlap with 2 Kings and how the prophet Isaiah lived before the exile of Judah and spent his life warning the people to recognize their sin and repent, or else even Jerusalem would fall. As we know, the people for the most part refused to listen. Now, beginning in Isaiah 40, the text is looking at Israel and its history from a totally different vantage point. The exile has already occurred — Jerusalem and its temple have been destroyed and most of the Israelites are living in captivity in Babylon. Whereas Isaiah 1-39 was indeed a rewind back to a few generations before the exile, these later chapters actually come from further along in the story. They're speaking and reflecting from within the suffering and

despair of the exile and looking forward toward what will happen next. Again, Psalm 79 captures the despairing mood of this moment:

O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple,
they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.
They have left the dead bodies of your servants
as food for the birds of the sky,
the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild.
They have poured out blood like water
all around Jerusalem,
and there is no one to bury the dead.
We are objects of contempt to our neighbors,
Of scorn and derision to those around us.
How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?
How long will your jealousy burn like fire?
(Psalm 79:1-6)

Earlier in the story, while exile was looming, the prophets warned of future judgment and destruction; now that the punishment has befallen them, they mostly speak of a future hope. Rather than berating the people to change their ways, God and the prophets now comfort the remaining remnant of Israel, responding to those questions with great, great news. Isaiah 57:17-19 is an example.

“I was enraged by their sinful greed;
I punished them, and hid my face in anger,
Yet they kept on in their willful ways.
I have seen their wars, but I will heal them;
I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel’s mourners,
Creating praise on their lips.
Peace, peace, to those far and near,”
Says the Lord. “And I will heal them.”

What we see in the second part of Isaiah is the arrival of the great news of God’s gracious faithfulness toward His servants. He is on His way to set them free and will restore them, remain “married” to them, and bless them forever. This good news, or gospel, is what they’ve been hoping and praying for as we read the prayer in chapter 63 and 64 — for God to come down, judge the violent nations oppressing them, forgive their sins, and deliver them from captivity into freedom once again. When we pick up in the post-exile historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we’ll see how this is exactly what happened. But in these profound chapters, we also see that the pain of exile was intended to teach and transform Israel so that the remnant who would return and rebuild the nation would be strengthened and purified as silver refined by fire. Exile wasn’t just punishment, but also intentional chastisement, meant not to bring Israel’s story to a halt but to propel it forward into new territory. Isaiah is proclaiming that God is planning to usher in a very new season in the life of His people, but that it all depends on allowing the exile to change their hearts and minds.

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

Questions for Interacting with Scripture:

These questions are to help us slow down to taste and notice Scripture, savor its richness, and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

- 1 As you read Isaiah this week, what parts left you confused and what did you find really profound, beautiful, or worth meditating upon?

Questions for Listening to Scripture:

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

- 1 Read Isaiah 40:1-10, 52:1-12, and 60:1-5. If you picture an Israelite watchman sitting upon the ruined walls of Jerusalem scanning the horizon for any sign of news or hope, what do you imagine he/she would have been hoping to see or hear? Or imagine you're a Jewish slave in chains in Babylon — what would have been the best news imaginable?
- 2 Read Luke 4:14-20. In what way did Jesus believe He was personally bringing about this same kind of much hoped-for good news?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture, part 2:

These questions are to help us slow down to taste and notice Scripture, savor its richness, and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

- 1 Much of Isaiah speaks about the nature of being the “servant of the Lord,” typically referring to Israel’s identity and vocation, as well as a “suffering servant.” Consider Israel’s calling to help God redeem the broken world through living as a holy priesthood and leading the nations to God. How do you think the experience of suffering in exile helped shape this understanding of a suffering servant (Isaiah 52-53)?
- 2 How do you think Jesus’ understanding of Israel’s identity and His own unique vocation as the true Israel and Israel’s true king was shaped by these texts in Isaiah?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Note: You will return to the large group after 15 minutes in order to share what you thought of in the small group discussion.

Questions for Practicing Community:

These questions are to help us reflect thoughtfully on our felt experience together in light of our shared ground rules, goals and values.

We modern Westerners tend to think about life and interpret the Scriptures through an incredibly individualistic lens. However, as we’ve pointed out, most of the Old Testament’s focus on sin and guilt and subsequent forgiveness is primarily at the corporate level (nation, people group, society) rather than private, individual level. Isaiah explained that God punished Israel with exile for her collective sin of idol worship, child sacrifice, violence, oppression, and covenant unfaithfulness. The whole

nation suffered even though it's very likely that not every single person was idolatrous, violent, and unjust. In other words, God cares not just about individual piety but also and perhaps even more about large-scale systems and societies that we are a part of and accountable for. Ancient Jews, including the prophets, saw themselves as inseparably connected to and accountable for the actions of their nation. Isaiah gasped, for example, when he saw the Lord, saying "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5).

- 1 Can you think of a time you have experienced feeling the corporate weight of the sin committed by a community you were a part of even though you personally didn't commit the sin?
- 2 An ancient Israelite like Isaiah felt a kind of guilt on behalf of his sinful community and expected the entire nation, himself included, to suffer the consequences unless the nation as a whole repented. Have you ever felt like you've suffered the consequences of your community's sin? How did this make you feel?
- 3 Now focus specifically on your community group. Are there any sins or shortcomings that the community group as a whole could identify with and become accountable for, even if not every member is personally guilty of such things? If you can't think of anything concrete worth addressing, reflect for a few minutes on Jesus' example and teachings of what it means to truly be God's servant community. How could your group together recognize corporate room for improvement and strive together toward being a more Christlike community?

CLOSING

Gather once again in one large group and have one representative from each small group share what you came up with. Be gentle and gracious but forthright and direct. After every small group has shared, close in a form of the unity prayer, allowing time for people to offer short prayers of confession or repentance on behalf of the group. Even if the shortcomings acknowledged do not feel like your own individually, seek to own your connection to the group and pray in love as an inseparable part of the community.

Week 19: (5/7-5/13)
Prophetic Rewind Part 3 (Hosea)

RECAP & PREPARING FOR Sunday School

Daily Reading for Week

- Isaiah 61-64, Psalm 120
- Isaiah 65-66, Psalm 121
- Hosea 1-5, Psalm 122
- Hosea 6-10, Psalm 123
- Hosea 11-14, Psalm 124
- Joel, Psalm 125
- Amos 1-5, Psalm 127

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Hosea, Joel, Amos
- Read: Hosea 3-4

FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To understand and feel God's heart for Israel, despite their constant disobedience, through the story and words of Hosea.

GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Value: To practice the act of empathizing with God and others. To empathize with someone is to identify yourself with them and to feel what they are feeling. As you read through and reflect on Hosea, try to put yourself in his and God's shoes emotionally.

CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

Share with the group in one minute a high or a low from this week.

OPENING PRAYER

Pray a unity prayer together. Pay special attention and try to feel what other people voiced during the Connection and Unity Exercise. Offer these feelings to God.

INTRO TO DISCUSSION

Congratulations! You made it through the first major prophet, Isaiah. This week, we get to dive into some of the so-called minor prophets. The first one we get to meet is Hosea. While Isaiah spoke to the kingdom of Judah, the southern kingdom, Hosea's prophecies are for the people of the northern kingdom, Israel. Hosea's life and ministry took place a few generations before Isaiah — and therefore, before Israel was destroyed by Assyria. Israel, or Ephraim or Jacob as Hosea referred to it, was under the reign of Jeroboam II when Hosea started his ministry. Over the next 20 years, Israel saw four of its kings assassinated or forcefully removed from kingship. Hosea takes place during this incredibly tumultuous, unsettling time. Not only was Israel in the midst of political upheaval but it was also in a state of deep moral decay. Hosea describes it this way: Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites, because the LORD has a charge to bring

against you who live in the land:
“There is no faithfulness, no love,
no acknowledgment of God in the land.
There is only cursing, lying and murder,
stealing and adultery;
they break all bounds,
and bloodshed follows bloodshed.
Because of this the land dries up,
and all who live in it waste away;
the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky
and the fish in the sea are swept away.
But let no one bring a charge,
let no one accuse another,
for your people are like those
who bring charges against a priest.
You stumble day and night,
and the prophets stumble with you.
So I will destroy your mother—
my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.
“Because you have rejected knowledge,
I also reject you as my priests;
because you have ignored the law of your God,
I also will ignore your children.
The more priests there were,
the more they sinned against me;
they exchanged their glorious God for something disgraceful.
They feed on the sins of my people
and relish their wickedness.
And it will be: Like people, like priests.
I will punish both of them for their ways
and repay them for their deeds.
They will eat but not have enough;
they will engage in prostitution but not flourish,
because they have deserted the LORD
to give themselves to prostitution;
old wine and new wine
take away their understanding.
My people consult a wooden idol,
and a diviner’s rod speaks to them.
A spirit of prostitution leads them astray;
they are unfaithful to their God.
They sacrifice on the mountaintops
and burn offerings on the hills,
under oak, poplar and terebinth,
where the shade is pleasant.
Therefore your daughters turn to prostitution

and your daughters-in-law to adultery.”

Hosea 4:1-13

God speaks to Israel through Hosea in the midst of the corruption of its kingdom and people. Hosea is ministering to an Israel that had become just like every other nation, doing whatever was right in their own eyes and prostituting themselves to other gods rather than worshiping and following YHWH, their Rescuer, who had led them out of Egypt and made a covenant with them. Hosea is given the unenviable and dreadful task of not only calling out Israel for her sin, but also living firsthand God’s emotional experience of being cheated on by His people (or bride). God actually calls Hosea to marry a “promiscuous woman.” In doing so, God is inviting Hosea to experience what it is like to be in a marriage covenant with an unfaithful spouse, which is what God is experiencing with Israel.

The significance of this command is profound. This wasn’t about God calling Hosea into symbolic behavior that would prove a point to the people. Rather, God asked Hosea to spend several years of his life embodying the experience of being cheated on by a disloyal spouse. God did this in order to instill in Hosea a deep, whole-body empathy with God’s heartache over Israel’s idolatry. Only after this experience was Hosea then fully able to communicate God’s anguish to Israel on His behalf. As we read and reflect, consider how important it is for us to empathize with God’s emotional response toward the world and His people.

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

Questions for Basic Understanding:

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

1 God tells Hosea to marry a “promiscuous woman” and name their kids “not loved” and “not my people.” And then, after Hosea’s wife is unfaithful, God tells him to buy her back and remain married to her. How do you think the community around Hosea viewed him?

2 Reading Hosea 4 in the Introduction and remembering what you read in the book of Hosea and in the latter part of the book of 2 Kings, try to paint a picture of the current state of the northern kingdom. What do you imagine day-to-day life in Israel looked like in those days?

Questions for Listening to Scripture:

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

1 What do you think Hosea must have felt when he heard God’s command to marry a “promiscuous woman”?

2 Read Hosea 11:1-12. What does this chapter show you about the heart of God over Israel?

3 What is God wrestling with in this chapter?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture:

These questions are to help us slow down to taste and notice Scripture, savor its richness, and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

1 What is it like for you to engage with such an emotional God as depicted in Hosea? Does it bother you or comfort you to consider God experiencing heartache, jealousy, and humiliation?

2 Do you typically interact with God on such emotional terms, or do you find that your relationship tends to assume a pattern where you and/or God are simply calm, cool, and collected?

3 Hosea married a promiscuous woman not merely as a symbol for what Israel was to God — unfaithful to their covenant — but to actually experience what this felt like for God. Have you ever had an experience where you felt God's disturbed yet gracious heart toward you and your people? How did you feel in that moment, and what did it bring up in you?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Questions for Self Examination:

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware and honest about who we are in light of our interaction with Scripture, and consider any appropriate action.

Hosea 6:6 says, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God, rather than burnt offerings." Abraham Heschel writes:

The relationship between God and Israel, conceived by Hosea in terms of marital love, desertion, and the hope of new betrothal, calls not only for a right action, but also for a feeling for each other on the part of those involved. It implies not only a legal obligation, but also inner attitudes. In the light of his own complete emotional solidarity with God, Hosea seems to have seized upon the idea of sympathy as the essential religious requirement. The words *daath elohim* means sympathy for God, attachment of the whole person, his love as well as his knowledge; an act of involvement, attachment or commitment to God. The biblical men knew of no bifurcation of mind and heart, thought and emotion. He saw the whole person in a human situation. "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, *daath* of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6); *daath* corresponds to *hesed* or love. What is desired is an inner identification with God rather than a mere dedication to ceremonies. Thus the expression *daath elohim* must be understood in the framework of Hosea's thinking of the God-Israel relationship as of engagement, marriage, betrayal, and remarriage.

Guided Empathy Exercise:

1 Have you ever been cheated on? Or have you ever cheated on someone else? Whether you have or haven't, sit for five minutes in silence reflecting on the felt experience of betrayal. If you find yourself completely unable to identify with this feeling, spend these few minutes mentally putting yourself in the shoes of someone like Hosea whose spouse is cheating on them and try to imagine what it would feel like.

2 Spend five more minutes in silent reflection. This time, ask yourself what this causes you to feel toward the person who did the cheating? Alternately, what do you feel toward the person cheated on?

3 Now do one final five-minute reflection, this time focusing your attention toward God, your loving Father and the “husband” of the church. Are you able to picture God as the victim of such betrayal? What does it feel like to picture the King of the universe experiencing the humiliating heartache of being cheated on? Are you able to identify with the feelings of the cheater who cheats on God in this sense?

4 Share what you are feeling and processing with your small group. Who did you empathize with and what was it like to go through this reflection? How are you feeling right now?

CLOSING

Finish your time together by praying Hosea 6:1-3 aloud together:

Come, let us return to the Lord.

He has torn us to pieces

but he will heal us;

he has injured us

but he will bind up our wounds.

After two days he will revive us;

on the third day he will restore us,

that we may live in his presence.

Let us acknowledge the Lord;

let us press on to acknowledge him.

As surely as the sun rises,

he will appear;

he will come to us like the winter rains,

like the spring rains that water the earth.”

Week 20: (5/14-5/20)
Prophetic Rewind Part 4 (Jonah)

RECAP & PREPARING FOR Sunday School

Daily Reading for Week

- Amos 6-9, Psalm 127
- Obadiah, Psalm 128
- Jonah, Psalm 129
- Micah 1-4, Psalm 130
- Micah 5-7, Psalm 131
- Nahum, Psalm 132
- Habakkuk, Psalm 133

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Jonah
- Read: Jonah

FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To understand one of the most unique books in the Old Testament and to see what it reveals about our own hearts and God's surprising grace.

GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Goal: Our goal is to take an honest look at the people or people groups whom we don't want God to love and forgive. It is often easy to assume you would act differently if you were in the shoes of characters in a story. Jonah (and many other books in the Bible) challenge this assumption and invite us to search our hearts with the help of the Holy Spirit for the ugly, vengeful places that actually get angry with God's grace toward our enemies.

CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

Share in one minute what you remember or know about the book of Jonah and what you may have been taught or assumed its meaning or moral was.

OPENING PRAYER

Pray the following prayer together. Make the words of this prayer your own.

I am, oh God, a jumbled mess of motives.

One moment I am adoring You, and the next I am shaking my fist at You.

I vacillate between mounting hope, and deepening despair.

I am full of faith, and full of doubt.

I want the best for others and am jealous when they get it.

Even so, God, I will not run from Your presence.

Nor will I pretend to be what I am not.

Thank You for accepting me with all my contradictions.

Amen.

INTRO TO DISCUSSION

Reprimand To A Naive Deity by Thomas John Carlisle

I will not advertise

this crazy scheme

of Yours,

God, what a farce

that men should sin and find

escape.

I mean, of course,

not me

but all our mutual

antagonists.

Dear God, kind God, don't listen

to their prayers.

This week, we have begun reading a number of the minor, pre-exile prophets. These prophets were sent by God to very specific people (often kings) or situations to speak words of warning and comfort and to encourage Israel to covenant faithfulness. During our time, we will focus in on the most unique and strange of the minor prophetic books, Jonah.

Jonah begins like most prophetic books in the Old Testament (Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai) but as you continue reading you notice right away this is less a book of prophecy and more a book about a prophet. This is a narrative story and a very strange one at that. Scholars disagree as to whether this is a story describing actual events or if Jonah is an allegory contrasting Israel's hard-heartedness and God's abundant love. Jonah was certainly an actual historical figure (we met him in 2 Kings 14:25 when he was prophesying a message of land expansion/prosperity to Jeroboam II, one of Israel's most evil kings) but it remains unclear if these events happened to him or if he is being used as a stand-in for Israel here. Regardless, most scholars agree the book of Jonah is written as a parody or satire of prophetic books — albeit one that highlights, as the other prophets do, Israel's (and humanity's) stubborn heart and God's patience, judgement, mercy, and steadfast love.

From the onset, nothing in this story acts as it is supposed to. Think of it like an SNL sketch where the characters and scene are familiar but everything is backwards. Jonah is called by God to preach a message of repentance to the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire and the most powerful and brutal empire that the ancient world had known at the time. Instead of obeying and setting off for Nineveh, Jonah, God's chosen prophet, boards a ship going to Tarshish (modern-day Spain), which is the exact opposite direction of where God told him to go. The opening line of Jonah is a punchline: Jonah (whose name means "dove", an Old Testament symbol of purity) son of Amittai (whose name means "faithfulness") within 3 verses proves to be faithless, disobedient, and impure in every way.

As the story progresses, we see the character of Jonah (hint: he is ridiculous and a horrible jerk) and the character of God unveiled. Jonah, God's chosen prophet, is reluctant, bitter, and literally curses God for God's steadfast love and mercy. God on the other hand is exceedingly patient and merciful with all parties in the story. God calls Jonah to tell the most violent and powerful empire in the world to repent of their violence and evil. Jonah runs away. God pursues. Jonah reluctantly preaches a 5-word sermon with no mention at all of God in the hopes that Nineveh won't repent and be destroyed. Yet the people of Nineveh repent. Jonah throws a temper tantrum because his message actually worked and God patiently reasons with him like a parent with a child.

The book of Jonah reveals the confounding stubbornness of humanity and the equally confounding love of God. It is a satire meant to expose the reader's own hard heart while we laugh (and you are meant to laugh) at Jonah's. It uses exaggeration, surprise, drama and almost comic-book-like imagery (everything is either huge, "great city," "great wind," "great fish," or tiny, "the worm") to create a story where the God who is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love is put on full display. And in doing so, the book of Jonah anticipates Jesus' command to love even our enemies while confronting us with just how hard it is to actually do that.

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

Questions for Basic Understanding:

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

- 1 Thinking back to how most prophets in the Old Testament are portrayed, why is Jonah's immediate disobedience in v. 1-3 so surprising?
- 2 The Assyrians were known for their brutal and shocking violence. They regularly skinned people alive in the cities they conquered and would eventually do the same to Israel. Think of them as the Nazis of the ancient world. Hearing this, why does Jonah refuse to go where God wants him to go?
- 3 Read Jonah 4:1-2. Is it surprising that this is why Jonah is so angry with God, and not because he is afraid of the Assyrians?
- 4 How is Jonah's character consistent with the character of Israel and its leaders/people throughout the Old Testament?
- 5 In the next few weeks we will leave the pre-exile prophets and dive into Old Testament wisdom literature. As you recall reading through the history books and pre-exile prophetic books in the past two months, how does the book of Jonah creatively encapsulate the condition of Israel before its exile to Assyria and Babylon?

Questions for Listening to Scripture:

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

- 1 Again and again in the prophets, we hear of God's desire for Israel to turn from their disobedience and be faithful to him. In Jonah, we see God directly interacting with a character who is actively disobedient, even antagonistic towards God. What surprises you about God's reaction to Jonah?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture:

These questions are to help us slow down to taste and notice Scripture, savor its richness, and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

- 1 What part of Jonah did you find most surprising? Perplexing?
- 2 Was there a particular part of Jonah you found funny?

Questions for Self Examination:

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware and honest about who we are in light of our interaction with Scripture, and consider any appropriate action.

It takes being at the lowest of low, quite literally the bottom of the ocean, for Jonah to come to a place where he prays Jonah 2. Read Jonah 2. Can you remember times in your life where you similarly were brought low and prayed a similar prayer? What was God's response to you?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Questions for Self Examination:

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware and honest about who we are in light of our interaction with Scripture, and consider any appropriate action.

Jonah's rage at God for being "merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster" is supposed to make us laugh but it should also reveal an uncomfortable truth about our own hearts. Take a few minutes to sit in silent reflection and ask the Holy Spirit to bring clarity to the darker parts of your own heart.

Ask Him:

- 1 Who are the people or people groups I feel do not deserve God's grace, mercy, and love?
- 2 Why do I feel they do not deserve it?
- 3 On a more macro, cultural level, who are the people or people groups our western American society says do not deserve God's grace, mercy, and love whether explicitly or implicitly in the way it treats them?
- 4 If God was gracious, merciful, and loving with them, how would I honestly react?
- 5 How am I feeling now as I observe these ugly parts of myself and our culture?

Confess your answers with your small group.

CLOSING

End your time praying together, confessing the ways your hearts are like Jonah's and asking the Holy Spirit to transform your hearts toward people you find hard to love.

Week 21: (5/21-5/27)
Community Reflection & Job (Part 1)

RECAP & PREPARING FOR Sunday School

Daily Reading for Week

- Zephaniah, Psalm 134
- Job 1-3, Psalm 135
- Job 4-7, Psalm 136
- Job 8-11, Psalm 137
- Job 12-15, Psalm 138
- Job 16-19, Psalm 139
- Job 20-23, Psalm 140

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Job
- Read: Job

FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To reflect on the last ten weeks as we've journeyed together through the Year of Biblical Literacy and to take an honest examination of how the community has been relating, interacting, and loving one another.

GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Our goal for the week is to learn and practice the skill of community examen, where we corporately reflect on our health as a group and consider any communal repentance or reform that may be necessary, especially around our shared value of humility.

CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

The Connection and Unity Exercise will take place in our Questions for Large Group Discussion section this week.

OPENING PRAYER

Read Psalm 131 aloud to open your time together.

INTRO TO DISCUSSION

This week, we transition from the pre-exile prophets to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. As we did ten weeks ago, we want to use this transition between literary genres to pause and thoughtfully reflect on how our community is relating to one another as we journey through the Bible together. We will attempt to use Job and his friends as a framework to examine how we view, interact with, and speak to one another.

The book of Job begins our look at the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. One of the unique aspects of Job among the Old Testament books is that it is a story that on the surface does not involve Israel or Israelites at all. We don't know much about Job, only that he was wealthy and righteous and lived in the land of Uz east of Israel. Early in the book, God gives permission to the Accuser to take Job's children, wealth, and eventually

health away from him. The Accuser is convinced Job will curse God once his many blessings are removed. Puzzlingly, God not only gives the Accuser permission to torment Job but singles out Job in the first place in Job 1:8. From Job 3-42:6, the book is comprised of a series of poetic discourses. The bulk of these come from Job and are directed at God and his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, who come to comfort and offer Job “wisdom” in the midst of his suffering. There is a brief section in Job 32-37 where a fourth friend (Elihu) speaks, which most scholars recognize as being added at a later time. Interestingly, God himself doesn’t even reply to Elihu when he speaks in Job 38-42:6.

Job raises profound theological questions and also profoundly human questions which every person must wrestle with. Throughout the Old Testament narrative and Israel’s history is the repeated refrain of God responding to covenant faithfulness with blessing: be faithful, do good, act wisely, and you will prosper. Be unfaithful, do evil, act foolishly, and you will reap the consequences. But this religious logic isn’t the picture painted in the Book of Job. In fact, it is likely that Job was written in part to caution against this dangerously simplistic version of an Old Testament theology of sin, suffering, and God. While living righteously/well does indeed typically beget well-being and living unrighteously/poorly typically leads to suffering, life cannot be boiled down to a few simple rules about rewards and consequences. Indeed in Job’s case, it is his faithfulness and righteousness that cause him to be singled out for suffering in the first place. This raises the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Or more pointedly, “Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?” The book of Job touches the shared human experience of inexplicable suffering and dares to ask the question, “Why, God?” — a question ultimately (and frustratingly) God does not answer.

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

There will only be large group discussion today.

Questions Self Examination:

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware and honest about who we are in light of our interaction with Scripture, and consider any appropriate action.

To begin our discussion, we are going to do a reflection exercise involving two readings of Job 3 and several minutes of silent reflection and/or journaling. After this, we will use mutual invitation to invite every person to share their reflections with the group. Have someone read the following reflection and Job 3 aloud:

Imagine Job is a friend expressing the following to God in your presence. Pay attention to what is going on inside of you as you hear Job’s words. What do you feel as Job cries out in his despair? Does his frankness make you uncomfortable? Do you think it is acceptable to speak this way to God?

Read Job 3.

Then have the same person read it a second time, slowly, as the group reflects on the same questions. Then continue in silence to meditate and journal for 5 minutes.

Using the discussion technique of mutual invitation, share your answer to one of the questions you were reflecting on during the time of silence.

Questions for Practicing Community:

These questions are to help us reflect thoughtfully on our felt experience together in light of our shared ground rules, goals, and values.

Read Job 2:11-13.

One of our foundational Sunday School values is humility. Humility in SS is a posture which seeks to approach SS with intellectual humbleness, resisting the notion that you have a better or purer perspective than others. Job's three friends are not bad friends. They show up in Job's suffering and weep with him for a full seven days and allow Job to speak and mourn first. However, when they do speak, they do not speak with humility but with a misguided piousness and proverb-like platitudes, convinced that Job must have sinned against God in some way. It is a piercing example of how a sense of religious over-certainty, even when our theology is widely considered orthodox, can actually hinder us from loving people well.

Take a moment to reflect on the past two months in community group. Have there been any moments in SS where someone has shared as rawly and emotionally as Job did? How did the group respond? Specifically, what attitudes were expressed and what words were shared? How loved and known did the person who shared feel?

If you can't recall such a moment, imagine it. Based on how the group habitually engages with one another, how safe do you think it would feel for someone feeling like Job to show up as their true self to SS? How do you think your group would emotionally, physically, and verbally respond to such sharing?

Specifically consider how the group has read and studied and discussed the Bible together. Are there any ways that the pursuit of theological truth during the Year of Biblical Literacy has actually hindered us from loving one another well and humbly? In other words, have there been moments where someone's conviction about a religious idea has caused them to listen poorly or speak proudly or to fail to connect altogether with others?

How might we as a community adjust the way we regularly interact in order to better live out our value of humility? Be specific. Name actions or habits that hinder humility or expose a lack of humility and describe the kind of actions that you desire instead.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

There will be no small group discussion this week.

CLOSING

Close your time by corporately praying for your community. Acknowledge what was voiced during your discussion and ask the Holy Spirit to grow your capacity to relate and love one another in humility.

Week 22: (5/28-6/3)
Community Reflection & Job (Part 2)

RECAP & PREPARING FOR Sunday School

Daily Reading for Week

- Job 24-28, Psalm 134
- Job 29-31, Psalm 135
- Job 32-34, Psalm 136
- Job 35-37, Psalm 137
- Job 38-39, Psalm 138
- Job 40-42, Psalm 139
- Psalms 1-2, Psalm 140

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Job
- Read: Job 38-39

FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To reflect on the last ten weeks as we journeyed together through the Year of Biblical Literacy and to take an honest examination of how the community has been relating, interacting, and loving one another.

GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Our goal for the week is to learn and practice the skill of community examen, where we corporately reflect on our health as a group and consider any communal repentance or reform that may be necessary, especially around our shared value of faith.

CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

The Connection and Unity Exercise will take place in our Questions for Large Group Discussion section this week.

OPENING PRAYER

Have someone open your time in prayer. Pray specifically for the Holy Spirit to bring your group clarity as you reflect on and discuss the ways your CG interacts and relates to one another.

INTRO TO DISCUSSION

Last week, we began a two-week communal reflection centered on the book of Job. We read Job's words of despair in Job 3, saw the way his three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) came alongside him in good and bad ways, and asked the question: if Job were to voice what he does in Job 3 in our CG, how would we have responded to him? Would we have had the humility and hospitality to allow him to be in pain and grieve without offering cheap platitudes, unfounded judgement, or dismissing him?

This week, we will focus on God's response to Job in Job 38 and see how it dovetails with our communal value of faith. In Job 38, God finally responds to Job and his three friends after 37 chapters of silence. His words are surprising, and perhaps, disquieting. He reminds Job in a powerful and beautiful poetic discourse of His immensity and

power. His language recalls the language of Job 3 and offers a direct response to Job's use of darkness and death imagery. In Job 3, Job paints a picture of grief and gloom so all consuming that it darkens the stars and makes him wish for death or worse, non-existence. In direct response, God's words, especially in chapter 38, are full of life and light. He draws Job back to creation itself, to the stars, angels, moon, sun, and the dawn; to brightness and birth and life-giving rain. "Who are you?" God asks Job in so many words. "Are you the Creator God who has spoken everything into existence and whose very being sustains all life and the universe?"

God's response leaves us as readers with a lot to interact with. Robert Alter, professor of Hebrew literature at Cal observes, "Many readers over the centuries have felt that God's speech to Job is no real answer to the problem of undeserving suffering, and some have complained it amounts to a kind of cosmic bullying of puny man by an overpowering deity." It is easy to feel this way when you remember that God is speaking to a man who has lost not just his fortune but multiple children at the beginning of the story. However, we would be wrong to read God's words as bullying or cruel. Alter continues, "God's thundering challenge to Job is not bullying. Rather, it rousingly introduces a comprehensive overview of the nature of reality that exposes the limits of Job's human perspective, anchored as it is in the restricted compass of human knowledge and the inevitable egoism of suffering."

Ultimately, God's response to Job is a challenge and invitation to practice a kind of faith that moves far beyond cheap, shallow expressions of wishful thinking. God allows Job to cry out and rage and weep for nearly 35 chapters. When He does reply, God responds directly to Job's initial cry of despair in chapter 3. The implication is that God has been present to Job from the very beginning and subsequently throughout his many cries and prayers. While God does not answer Job's question of "Why?" He also does not rebuke Job for asking the question, expressing his doubt, voicing his rage, or questioning God's motives. Instead, He reminds Job of His unlimited power and Job's limited perspective. God invites Job, after he has had the space to mourn, complain, doubt, rage, and ask all his questions, to practice a deep abiding faith.

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

There will only be large group discussion tonight. Please be sure to save enough time to answer the Practicing Community questions.

Questions for Examining Ourselves (Mutual Invitation, 30 minutes):

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware and honest about who we are in light of our interaction with Scripture, and consider any appropriate action.

To begin our discussion, we are going to do a reflection exercise involving Job 38-39 and several minutes of silent reflection and/or journaling. After this, we will use mutual invitation to invite every person to share their reflections with the group. Have someone read the following reflection and Job 38-39 aloud:

Job as a character is an archetypal figure. He represents humanity as a whole and the ways we are confronted with the reality of suffering and pain during our lives.

Imagine you are Job and this is what you hear God say to you after you have spent many nights expressing your hurt, anger, doubt, and suffering. It may help to think of

a time in your life where you have suffered deeply. Notice what is going on inside of you when you hear God's words.

- 1 *What do you feel as God replies to Job's despair?*
- 2 *Does His response make you uncomfortable or angry?*
- 3 *Does it bring comfort and relief?*

Read Job 38-39. Then continue in silence to meditate and journal for 5 minutes.

Using the discussion technique of mutual invitation, share your answer to one of the questions you were reflecting on during the time of silence.

Have you ever voiced your anger, pain or doubt to God in times of deep suffering in your life? If yes, what was God's response to you? If you have not, what would it have been like to direct your anguish to God?

Questions for Practicing Community (30 minutes):

These questions are to help us reflect thoughtfully on our felt experience together in light of our shared ground rules, goals, and values.

One of our foundational SS values is faith. Faith in SS is the belief that God is in control and we are not. It is remembering and believing that the Holy Spirit is at work in every person's story in our SS whether we can recognize it or not. This means for instance, if there is a disagreement of opinion in SS and both parties cannot come to an agreement, there is a shared belief that God is still at work in each person and loves them deeply.

- 1 Take a moment to reflect on the past two months in community group. Have there been discussions or moments where your community has been in disagreement? For instance, maybe it was a disagreement about an interpretation of Scripture or a practical decision such as what the group's next social outing should be — even a difference of conviction about what is a good life decision or what God requires of our lives. Did the parties involved (and the community as a whole) practice our shared value of faith in this moment? What would it look like for each person involved and the community as a whole to practice faith?
- 2 How has your group done over the past ten weeks in practically living out our value of faith in discussion? In prayer? During meals?
- 3 How might your community adjust the way it regularly interacts in order to better live out our shared value of faith?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

There will be no small group discussion this week.

CLOSING

Close your time with a Unity Prayer.

What is Mutual Invitation?

Mutual Invitation is a discussion technique. To practice humility and becoming aware of your tendencies in group discussions, we are going to utilize a special discussion technique. We've borrowed the exercise from Eric Law's book *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb*. Law calls it "Mutual Invitation" and uses it to reveal and equalize the power dynamics that exist in groups. He finds it especially effective in multicultural communities because it helps reveal how often the white majority members perceive greater personal power within the community than do many minority members. It is very helpful in making group members aware of how they interact within the group and then also assisting them to reflect on how this affects the community. It may be useful for your group to use this discussion format on a regular basis, or you may decide just to practice it a few times as a training of sorts.

Here's how it works:

1. The discussion leader should let the group know approximately how much time will be allocated for this particular portion of discussion.

2. Then the leader will introduce the topic or question to be discussed.

3. Next, the leader introduces or reminds everyone of the discussion process which is as follows:

"The leader or a designated person will share first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. Whom you invite does not need to be the person next to you. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share. If you don't want to say anything, simply say 'pass' and proceed to invite another to share. We will do this until everyone has been invited."

What is Unity Prayer?

A Unity Prayer is a corporate prayer exercise where one person opens the time by praying a simple, one-sentence prayer that begins with "Lord hear our...". Share a sentiment or feeling or longing that was expressed by a part of the group either directly or indirectly during your time together. For example, you may have heard someone express loneliness and you can pray "Lord, hear our loneliness." After the first prayer, the rest of the group can voice additional one-sentence "Lord hear our..." prayers aloud. You can pray your own feelings or those of others. The hope of this prayer is to help us remember and intentionally think through what we have heard expressed and entrust it all to God. We will close each meeting with this exercise, hoping that it bonds us through recognizing and holding one another's felt experiences and teaches us to be better listeners during our time together.