

SOUTH FORK BAPTIST CHURCH

SUNDAY SCHOOL CURRICULUM



JUNE & JULY

2018



READ SCRIPTURE

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

June & July (Sundays in Bold)

Psalms & Sunday School Reading Plan

Community Reflection & Job (Part 2)

□ Week 22 (5/28-**6/3**) - Psalms 143-149, Job 38-39

The Proverbs

□ Week 23 (6/4-**6/10**) - Psalm 150, Psalms 1-6, Proverbs 1:1-7 and Proverbs 8-9

Ecclesiastes

□ Week 24 (6/11-**6/17**) - Psalms 7-13, Ecclesiastes 9:1-10 and Ecclesiastes 12

Prophets in Pain: Jeremiah - Part 1

□ Week 25 (6/18-**6/24**) - Psalms 14-20, Jeremiah 7

Prophets in Pain - Part 2

□ Week 26 (6/25-**7/1**) - Psalms 21-27, Skim Jeremiah (or watch the Bible Project video)

Prophets in Pain - Part 3 - Learning to Lament

□ Week 27 (7/2-**7/8**) - Psalms 28-34, Lamentations 1-3

Prophets in Exile: Ezekiel - Part 1

□ Week 28 (7/9-**7/15**) - Psalms 35-41, Ezekiel 1, 11:14-25, 33:21-33

A New Way: Ezekiel - Part 2

□ Week 29 (7/16-**7/22**) - Psalms 42-48, Ezekiel 34, 36:22-37, 37, 39:25-29, 47:1-12

The Remnant of God in the World: Ezra & Nehemiah

□ Week 30 (7/23-**7/29**) - Psalms 49-55, Ezra 4-6 and Nehemiah 9

The Remnant of God in the World: Daniel

□ Week 31 (7/30-**8/5**) - Psalms 56-62, Daniel 7

Mutual Invitation & Unity Prayer Explanation (last page)

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

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	
7/2	Lam 1-2	28	Lamentations
7/3	Lam 3	29	
7/4	Lam 4-5	30	
7/5	Ezk 1-4	31	Ezekiel 1-32
7/6	Ezk 5-8	32	
7/7	Ezk 9-12	33	
7/8	Ezk 13-15	34	

7/9	Ezk 16-18	35	
7/10	Ezk 19-21	36	
7/11	Ezk 22-24	37	
7/12	Ezk 25-27	38	
7/13	Ezk 28-30	39	
7/14	Ezk 31-33	40	Ezekiel 33-48
7/15	Ezk 34-36	41	
7/16	Ezk 37-39	42	
7/17	Ezk 40-44	43	
7/18	Ezk 45-48	44	
CHAPTER 11 - THE RETURN FROM EXILE			
7/19	Ezra 1-3	45	Ezra-Nehemiah
7/20	Ezra 4-7	46	
7/21	Ezra 8-10	47	
7/22	Neh 1-3	48	
7/23	Neh 4-6	49	
7/24	Neh 7-9	50	
7/25	Neh 10-11	51	
7/26	Neh 12-13	52	
7/27	Esth 1-5	53	Esther
7/28	Esth 6-10	54	
CHAPTER 12 - PROPHETS after the exile			
7/29	Dan 1-3	55	Daniel
7/30	Dan 4-6	56	
7/31	Dan 7-9	57	
8/1	Dan 10-12	58	
8/2	Haggai	59	Haggai
8/3	Zech 1-4	60	Zechariah
8/4	Zech 5-8	61	
8/5	Zech 9-14	62	
8/6	Mal 1-2	63	Malachi
8/7	Mal 3-4	64	

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 today. 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 looked 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.

The Proverbs

Week 23 (6/4-6/10) - Psalm 150, Psalms 1-6, Proverbs 1:1-7 and Proverbs 8-9

2. RECAP & PREPARING FOR CG

Daily Reading for Week

- Proverbs 1-3, Psalm 148
- Proverbs 4-6, Psalm 149
- Proverbs 7-9, Psalm 150
- Proverbs 10-12, Psalm 1
- Proverbs 13-15, Psalm 2
- Proverbs 16-18, Psalm 3
- Proverbs 19-21, Psalm 4

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Proverbs
- Read: Proverbs 1:1-7 and Proverbs 8-9

3. FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To get a proper understanding of the Book of Proverbs, notice the ways we have seen the general principles of the Book of Proverbs to be true or untrue in our lives, and reflect on how our community shares and receives wisdom.

4. GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Ground rule: Our ground rule for the week is to not interrupt someone when they are speaking. Before jumping in with our thought or opinion, ask the person who was sharing if they have had the time and space to finish expressing their full thought.

5. CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

Share in one minute what you are bringing into the room from this week.

6. OPENING PRAYER

Read the following prayer aloud slowly:

God, grant me the serenity

To accept the things I cannot change;

Courage to change the things I can;

And wisdom to know the difference.

7. INTRO TO DISCUSSION

This week, we continue our look at the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament in the Book of Proverbs.

The Book of Proverbs is often misinterpreted as either a set of exact prescriptions for how to act or a list of promises that will always be true. This leads to confusion when, for instance, two proverbs seem to contradict each other, like Proverbs 26:4-5:

*Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
or you yourself will be just like him.*

*Answer a fool according to his folly,
or he will be wise in his own eyes.*

What are we to make of this seeming contradiction? First, we must understand that the Book of Proverbs is not prescriptive for how to act in every circumstance or situation — nor are they promises for the rewards you will definitely receive if you act rightly.

Rather, the Book of Proverbs is presenting observations of the world that are generally true but not always true. It is trying to form in the reader a level of understanding and wisdom to know when it is right and good to say or do a certain thing. In that sense, part of what the Book of Proverbs is trying to do is build emotional intelligence in the reader — the ability to say the right thing at the right time, do the right thing at the right time, and feel and express the right emotion as is appropriate to the situation.

The Book of Proverbs is one of the most universally accessible books in the Bible because much of its wisdom concerns the right, wise way to live in day-to-day life. The principles generally apply whether or not you are “religious” or a Christian. However, despite this universalism the aim of the Book of Proverbs moves deeper than simply good and wise living. The entire book is rooted in the claim of Proverbs 1:7: *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”* Here, “fear” of the Lord does not refer to a type of terror or a constantly cowering for your life but rather a deep awe or reverence for the Creator God. This “fear” is an awareness that you are not the center of the universe, but God is; you are actually a rather small, insignificant being in the scheme of things. This the kind of “fear” in Proverbs 1:7 puts us in a proper mindset to hear God’s teachings and avoid the pride that causes us to reject good instruction. This fear, according to the Book of Proverbs, is the key to living a truly wise, God-centered life.

8. 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.

Proverbs are generally true, but they are not prescriptions or promises. They offer a perspective that, generally speaking, you reap what you sow. How have you seen this to be true? And how have you seen this to be false?

Questions for Listening to Scripture:

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

In Proverbs 8-9, we meet the figures of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly. Wisdom is personified by a woman whose house is on the highest hill in the city, who has been with God since the creation of the universe. In these chapters, Woman Wisdom is associated with YHWH while Woman Folly is associated with idolatry. What the Book of Proverbs is suggesting is when we make choices that are foolish or wicked in a given situation, we are choosing the way of other gods/idols that oppose YHWH. Woman Folly’s path is alluring but, like worship of anything other than the one true God, it ultimately leads to

death and “the realm of the dead.” In contrast, when one acts wisely in a given situation one is truly following the way of God. Woman Wisdom’s path is one that leads to the good life full of the presence of YHWH.

Read Proverbs 8

1. What do you find compelling or off-putting about Woman Wisdom?

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.

Jesus is often associated with the figure of Woman Wisdom in the New Testament.

Dallas Willard once called Jesus “the smartest man who ever lived.” Often, we think of Jesus as fully God and fully Man. We recognize His miracles and His grace and love, but rarely do we reflect on the fact that he was the smartest and wisest man who ever lived. Throughout His entire life, including when He was a child (see Luke 2), Jesus acted in fullness of wisdom. In Proverbs’ terms, Jesus acted in wisdom, in union with YHWH in every situation, conversation, relationship, circumstance, and moment in His life.

1. How can Jesus’ life and teachings help show us the connection between faithfulness to God and wisdom for living well?
2. Are there any gospel stories, parables, or attributes of Jesus that reveal both His faithful reverence for God and His incredible wisdom?

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. The Book of Proverbs is basically Israel’s collection of wisdom sayings that takes the form of advice that a father would give to his son. Consider advice for a moment. What kind of advice do you tend to take in, where do you consume advice, and how much of it do you consume?
2. Now consider the community group. It’s important that we be careful to not prematurely give advice anytime someone offers their personal struggles. We must always try not to offer unsympathetic or insensitive solutions to others’ concerns. However, we must never shy away from giving direct and honest feedback to one another in the form of good, sensitive advice. How can your group grow in its culture of advice-giving? Should you be giving each other less advice, more advice, or better advice? Be honest and give examples if possible.

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.

Having a right perspective on the Book of Proverbs is important because a proverb mistakenly read as a command can potentially lead to ways of living that are actually unwise. Take a proverb like 13:24: “*Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.*” This verse is not a prescription for spanking as the only acceptable form of discipline of a child, as some would suggest. Rather, it is an invitation to consider yourself, your child, the situation,

and the kind of discipline that your child responds best to and how you can best invite and teach your child to see their wrongdoing while also learning what is right and good.

1. Have there been any proverbs that have been offered to you or that you have offered to others as a prescription that did not actually apply to the situation at hand? Or proverbs offered as a promise that did not come true?
2. Describe what you felt when you realized the proverb did not apply or did not come true?
3. What would have been a wiser way to approach the other person, or for the person to have approached you?

10. CLOSING

End your time praying for one another in your small groups.

Ecclesiastes

Week 24 (6/11-6/17) - Psalms 7-13, Ecclesiastes 9:1-10 and Ecclesiastes 12

2. RECAP & PREPARING FOR CG

Daily Reading for Week

- Proverbs 22-24, Psalm 5
- Proverbs 25-27, Psalm 6
- Proverbs 28-31, Psalm 7
- Ecclesiastes 1-4, Psalm 8
- Ecclesiastes 5-8, Psalm 9
- Ecclesiastes 9-12, Psalm 10
- Song of Songs 1-4, Psalm 11

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Ecclesiastes
- Read: Ecclesiastes 9:1-10 and Ecclesiastes 12

3. FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To hear the unique perspective that Ecclesiastes offers, compare the different worldviews presented to us in the Wisdom Literature, and receive Ecclesiastes' invitation to reflect on our life and death.

4. GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Value: Our value to practice tonight is vulnerability. Practice sharing something you would not usually share with the group — especially when reflecting on Ecclesiastes' often confusing and seemingly nihilistic claims that life is meaningless.

5. CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

In one minute, share a time in your life that felt particularly meaningful or meaningless.

6. OPENING PRAYER

Read Psalm 90 together.

7. INTRO TO DISCUSSION

"If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'"

Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:32

The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the most confounding and strange books in the entire Bible. It's constant refrain of "meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless" seems to stand in contrast to the rest of the narrative of Scripture (which suggests that humanity was created by a loving God for a purpose, and the things we do in this life deeply matter). What are we to make then of such a different perspective and odd book as Ecclesiastes?

There are two distinct voices in Ecclesiastes: Qohelet, which is typically translated as "Teacher," whose teachings are presented in Ecclesiastes 1:12-12:7, and a second wise

man who introduces Qohelet's teachings at the beginning (1:1-11) and offers comments at the end (12:8-14). The thrust of Qohelet's teaching can be summed up by the above verse from 1 Corinthians. Basically, life is hard and then you die, so *carpe diem*, because death will swallow the wise and the foolish alike. Yes, there are better ways to live than others, and we should be aware that God gave us life and He rules the universe, but ultimately we all will die. It is a shockingly nihilistic sentiment. Robert Alter, professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at UC Berkeley, suggests Qohelet is a "literary persona of a radical philosopher articulating... a powerful dissent from the mainline Wisdom outlook that is the background of his thought."

Qohelet's famous opening words "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless" are regularly repeated and eventually close his teachings, and they beautifully encapsulate his message. In Hebrew, the word translated "meaningless" is "hevel" and literally refers to the thin, flimsy vapor that comes out of your mouth on a cold or foggy day before immediately disappearing. "Hevel" stands in contrast to the Hebrew word "ruah" or life-breath, the eternal substance that God breathed into humanity in Genesis 1-2. Qohelet's suggestion is that not only is life meaningless but it is insubstantial, elusive, and ultimately quickly forgotten. True, there is some temporary meaning and substance to life, but as the beautiful and haunting Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 poetically suggests, God gifts us with a short, fleeting life. Our bodies will decay and we will grow old and die.

This leaves us with an interesting dilemma. Are we to take Qohelet's message at face value and live as if life is ultimately meaningless? Do we hold his teachings alongside the other wisdom literature as well as the prophets and Torah which suggest that our lives are not insubstantial "hevel" but that God has breathed his "ruah" into humanity and given us a purpose? Much of your interpretation of Ecclesiastes will depend on how you view the closing verses of the book. In Ecclesiastes 12:9-14, we find another wise man (NOT Qohelet) suggesting to his son,

*"Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.
For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil."*

Some scholars believe this closing section is a pious attempt to deflect readers from the potentially uncomfortable skepticism and nihilism consistently repeated throughout the book. Other scholars, such as our recent lecturer Tremper Longman, believe this section at the end of book is the ultimate message of Ecclesiastes. Yes, life is hard and yes, you will die. In light of this, fear God and keep his commandments. Regardless of how you interpret its closing, Ecclesiastes is a beautifully original book that invites us into deep contemplation about God, life, purpose, meaning, reality, and our place in it.

8. 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. Think back to the other Wisdom Literature books we have read:
2. As a group, try to sum up Job's message/perspective.
3. Next, sum up the message/perspective of the Proverbs.
4. Finally, have someone sum up the message/perspective of Ecclesiastes.
5. Why do you think these three different perspectives are presented alongside each other in the Old Testament?

Questions for Listening to Scripture:

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

When you hear Qohelet's repeated refrain of "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless!" how do you respond?

Ecclesiastes, and especially the beautiful poem about dying in chapter 12, invite readers to reflect on the seeming futility of life and inevitability of death. How might thinking about these things invite us into interaction and dialogue with God?

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. When you read Ecclesiastes, do you find its nihilism depressing, strangely comforting, or both?
2. How might "meaningless, meaningless" coexist with the rest of the story of Scripture, which says our lives are deeply meaningful to God? How have you seen this tension lived out as you reflect on your own life?

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. Sit for 3-5 minutes in silent prayer. Imagine that you are seventy-five years old and dying. See the events of your life flash before you.
 2. *For what are you grateful?*
 3. *What would you hope would have been true of your life?*
 4. *What do you wish you had done differently?*
 5. *Pay special attention to the years between your present age and your death.*
 6. *Does the Book of Ecclesiastes offer you anything as you imagine these things?*
 7. Share your responses with one another.
10. CLOSING - End your time together by offering a prayer that confides in God about aspects of life that feel meaningless. But also in your prayer, seek to articulate hope, bringing to God the things from your small-group reflection time which you hope will be true of your life. For example: "God, I acknowledge the way ____ feels meaningless, and I turn to you in hope for beauty and purpose in ____."

Prophets in Pain: Jeremiah - Part 1
Week 25 (6/18-6/24) - Psalms 14-20, Jeremiah 7

2. RECAP & PREPARING FOR CG

Daily Reading for Week

- Proverbs 22-24, Psalm 5
- Proverbs 25-27, Psalm 6
- Proverbs 28-31, Psalm 7
- Ecclesiastes 1-4, Psalm 8
- Ecclesiastes 5-8, Psalm 9
- Ecclesiastes 9-12, Psalm 10
- Song of Songs 1-4, Psalm 11

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Jeremiah
- Read: Jeremiah 7

3. FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To understand and empathize with the Kingdom of Judah as they try to make sense of their suffering and eventual exile.

4. GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Practice listening well and being present. Let people finish their thoughts and don't be quick to respond. Give others time to think and speak. If you are slower to speak, give yourself time to think about what you want to say, but commit to contributing something to tonight's discussion.

5. CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

Share in a one minute or less how you experienced reading and learning about Wisdom Literature.

6. OPENING PRAYER

Read Psalm 75 together.

7. INTRO TO DISCUSSION

After our journey through the Wisdom Literature, we now begin looking at the books of the prophets that were written during Israel's exile — first, Jeremiah. The Book of Jeremiah can be overwhelming and disorienting. Jeremiah the prophet relays God's repeated, and at times, punishingly grim warnings to Israel. But at the same time, he expresses the urgent existential questions Israel was grappling with before and then during exile.

Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiyah, the priest at Anathoth, and served as a prophet to Judah through the reign of Josiah, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah, and he continued some time after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Jeremiah was a young man when he received God's prophetic call in 625 B.C. ("I do not know how to speak; I am too young." Jeremiah 1:6), and he was tasked with warning Israel that because of their

constant covenant disobedience and sin, they would soon be sent into exile. This message grieves Jeremiah, who deeply loves Israel. He writes, *“My grief is beyond healing, my heart is sick within me; I hurt with the hurt of my people. I mourn and am overcome with grief; If only my head were a pool of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, I would weep day and night for all my people who have been slaughtered.”* (Jeremiah 8:18, 21;9:1 NLT).

In addition to relaying warnings from God, Jeremiah also voices the questions of his people. In 9:12, the people of Judah ask, *“Who is wise enough to understand this? Who has been instructed by the LORD and can explain it? Why has the land been ruined and laid waste like a desert that no one can cross?”* Again in 14:19: *“Have you rejected Judah completely? Do you despise Zion? Why have you afflicted us so that we cannot be healed? We hope for peace but no good has come, for a time of healing but there is only terror.”* Jeremiah 5:19 succinctly sums up the core question of the people: *“Why has the LORD our God done all of this to us?”*

The people of Judah can't fathom why they were experiencing first drought, then starvation, and finally eventual destruction by the Babylonian army. What did it all mean? It is into this confusion and despair that Jeremiah is sent with very clear answers: this is punishment from Yahweh because Judah has broken the covenant they made with Him, done evil and injustice, relied on evil alliances with pagan nations rather than rely on God, and committed adultery against Yahweh. The disaster of exile was both the natural consequence of their sin and foolishness as well as divine judgement personally orchestrated by God.

8. 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. Read Jeremiah 7:1-29. Why did the people of Judah think that they were safe in Jerusalem and that the temple would never be destroyed?
2. What do you think it was like for the Jews entering the temple to hear Jeremiah proclaim that God would actually destroy the temple Himself in response to their evil hypocrisy?
3. Read Jeremiah 25:29 and 49:12. These verses and chapter 7 highlight Judah's stubbornness in their belief that they were safe from God's wrath simply because they were God's people living in God's city (Jerusalem) and worshipping in God's house (the temple). How did Jeremiah challenge this notion of Judah's safety and security from suffering?
4. Read Jeremiah 44:15-18. After the exile, how was the remnant of Judah trying to make sense of the nation's extreme suffering (including drought, famine, violence, war, rape, enslavement, and deportation)? In other words, why did they think they were suffering?
5. Read Jeremiah 44:20-23. How did Jeremiah challenge this understanding? In other words, according to God and Jeremiah, why was Judah suffering exile?

9. SMALL 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.

The scene in Jeremiah 7 is shocking. Jeremiah, a priest, stands at the entrance to the temple and proclaims incredible judgment upon those entering to worship Yahweh. Specifically, he deplores the hypocrisy of their worship and their feeling of being safe because of their performance of religious rituals: “Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, ‘We are safe’—safe to do all these detestable things?” This would be like having a greeter at church on Sunday declaring to those entering, “You think you’re safe from God’s judgment because you show up at church even though when you’re done here, you steal and murder and commit adultery? Yeah right!”

1. Is there any way in which your faith imitates the faith of those whom Jeremiah was challenging at the temple?
2. Is there any hypocrisy in your faith/religion that warrants rebuke?
3. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, the prophet explains that Israel and Judah have been punished for three interconnected reasons: 1) Committing idolatry; 2) Breaking the terms of the covenant; and 3) Doing evil and injustice rather than righteousness and justice. Jeremiah summarizes the foolishness of the people by saying, “**They** do not know **the** way **of the** Lord, **the requirements of their God**” (Jeremiah 5:4). In what way do the harsh and challenging words of Jeremiah offer you an invitation to reassess what it is that God requires of you?

10. CLOSING

Close CG still in your small groups.

Recall these words from Jeremiah 7:

“If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever” (Jeremiah 7:5-7).

God’s invitation to repentance and restoration has been available since the beginning. Reflect for a moment on tonight’s discussion and then express to God any confession, repentance, or other kind of prayer that you feel led to pray.

Prophets in Pain - Part 2
Week 26 (6/25-7/1) - Psalms 21-27, Skim Jeremiah
(or watch the Bible Project video)

2. RECAP & PREPARING FOR CG

Daily Reading for Week

- Jeremiah 23-25, Psalm 19
- Jeremiah 26-29, Psalm 20
- Jeremiah 30-32, Psalm 21
- Jeremiah 33-36, Psalm 22
- Jeremiah 37-39, Psalm 23
- Jeremiah 40-44, Psalm 24
- Jeremiah 45-48, Psalm 25

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Jeremiah and The Law (themed video)
- Bring: Bible, pen, and paper

3. FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To try to really grasp the events and emotions of Israel's exile in order to orient ourselves in the world of Jeremiah and the prophets.

4. GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Value: Our values for this week are attentiveness and empathy. When others are sharing, be aware of your posture toward them. Don't be on your phone or thinking about what you are going to say next. Practice giving the person speaking your undivided attention and try to empathize with what they are saying.

5. CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

Is there anyone in the group who has ever been forced to flee from their home or witnessed their family or someone close to them forced to flee from the country or place they grew up?

- If so, ask this person if they'd be comfortable sharing what that experience was like.
- If there isn't anyone with a story like this, have each person share in 1 minute what they imagine it would feel like if they had to flee home tonight to escape danger. If everyone shares, use mutual invitation.

6. OPENING PRAYER

Read Psalm 130 as your opening prayer.

7. INTRO TO DISCUSSION

Many of us have been disoriented and weary of the prophets, especially in Jeremiah. You're not alone. In *Interpreting the Prophets*, scholar Aaron Chalmers says: "Many Christians remain confused and frustrated by these works. They are full of dramatic imagery whose meaning is not always clear. Sometimes there appears to be little rhyme or reason in the flow of their thought. They include numerous references to

events from Israel's history and life, the significance of which we do not grasp. It is perhaps little wonder, therefore, that the prophets are so frequently misunderstood and misapplied by many within the Church."

Specifically, to understand the prophets we need to understand Israel's exile. Jeremiah in particular lives through and helps chronicle the many phases of exile. Before we begin, let's take a few extra minutes to try to understand what the exile really entailed.

First, there was a severe drought which led to severe and large-scale famine. As an agrarian culture entirely dependent on each year's harvest for food, a few years of drought meant absolute tragedy. The first several chapters of Jeremiah take place in the context of this drought. Though unrelated to any of the political or military strife that is yet to come, this drought was the first part of Judah's divine punishment for their sin and idolatry. To get a feel for what it was like, compare it to the Dust Bowl in Depression-era America or the many African famines that still occur today.

In addition to this natural disaster, incredible social chaos had begun to unfold. Sandwiched between the mighty empires of Egypt and Babylon, tiny little Judah laid exposed and vulnerable to violent exploitation. During the next couple decades, which the book of Jeremiah chronicles, the country became a place of utter chaos and injustice. Jews who lived rurally on farms and in small villages had zero protection from military troops and armed villains. Violence spread throughout the countryside, and the people themselves devolved into a state of self-destructive chaos. There was no justice in the land. Someone could enter your home and murder your family and no government or police force was there to help. Many who could afford it fled to Jerusalem to live behind the protection of the city walls, but many others suffered and perished. Perhaps compare it to living in Syria or the ISIS-haunted Middle East — or, sadly, in Israel today.

Consequently, Babylon, the biggest bully of them all, resolved to overthrow Judah entirely by sacking Jerusalem, which was their capital and fortress. Ancient warfare was slow and painful. When Babylon set out to "attack" Jerusalem, this means that they dispatched an army of soldiers with loads of supplies to set up camp around the walls of the city. As the army approached, the Jews fled in retreat to Jerusalem, after which they shut the gate. But all of the food supply was outside in the fields. So Babylon simply waited while the people of Jerusalem slowly starved to death. Tragically, the terrible prediction that mothers would eat their own children (Jeremiah 19:8-9) began to come true (Lamentations 2:20). Anyone who tried to flee from the city was killed by the troops outside, and those who stayed faced the horror of famine (Lamentations 1:20).

After four months, many inhabitants of Jerusalem decided to make a break for it. They waited until nighttime and broke a hole in the wall and ran (Jeremiah 39:2, 52:6-9). Even the king fled! Some escaped, but many were captured. And while they ran, the Babylonian army came flooding into the city, setting buildings on fire, murdering many, and capturing Jewish survivors. The fatal blow came when the mighty and sacred

Temple — Solomon’s great house for God — was pillaged and destroyed. Mighty Babylon leveled little Judah to the ground.

Finally, for those who weren’t executed on the spot, two forms of exile occurred: most were forcefully deported to Babylon while the poor were left in Judah to try to keep the vineyards and crops alive. Those who remained did so having lost their family, their homes, their government, and to the Jewish mind, even God’s presence since the Temple had been destroyed. Those who were deported would have struggled to survive as poor, marginalized foreigners in a land not their own. Much like the diaspora of Africans sold in the slave trade, this exile violently weakened the Jews’ sense of national and religious identity. The people of God were made nobodies. To try to picture this, consider the horrors of the Holocaust, American slavery, or the Cherokee Nation’s Trail of Tears. Consider also the millions of undocumented immigrants currently living in America with the fear of deportation.

This was Israel’s experience that we summarize as exile. It was indeed a very dark period of history. And particularly, it was a dark lowpoint in the Bible’s story of God’s people. Much earlier in the story, after their rescue from Egypt, God warned Israel that if they broke their side of the Sinai Covenant, “I will scatter you among the nations and will draw my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid to waste, and your cities will lie in ruins” (Leviticus 26:33). Despite this early warning, Israel arrogantly believed that because God chose them as the nation to demonstrate His saving love to the nations, they would always be safe from destruction and exile. This belief continued into the time of Jeremiah despite continued warnings and corrections from different prophets. Exile seemed an impossible outcome, but it was actually forewarned from the beginning. In other words, we should read the book of Jeremiah and the rest of the prophetic books which take place in the context of exile in light of this overarching story.

8. 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.

Aaron Chalmers, in *Interpreting the Prophets*, describes the experience of those that were led away as follows:

“We need to be careful of glossing over the significant suffering and trauma which would have been raised by the experience of exile. Recent anthropological research has shown that such forced migrations constitute a serious socio-psychological crisis which would have ‘forced the deportees into destabilizing recalibrations of their communal and theological understandings’ (Moore and Kelle, 2001: 364). The loss of their homeland, the destruction of the Temple, and the physical sufferings and psychological terror inflicted by enemy armies must have led to intense theological ferment among the exiles in Babylon as they sought to find meaning in the series of tragedies they had suffered and discern the future of their relationship with Yahweh.”

1. How does walking through the details of Israel’s exile and trying to wrap your mind around the felt experience help shine new light on what you’ve been reading?

2. Have someone read Psalm 137, a psalm written in exile, aloud. How does a sufficient understanding of the sheer agony of exile help you understand and even empathize with the brutally honest prayers of this psalm?

In the intro we recognized how difficult and disorienting the prophets can be. Because of this, we often read a book like Jeremiah and halfway through feel desperate to grab onto any verse that can be meaningful for us today, even if we aren't quite sure of its context. It's not a coincidence that one of the most popular verses from Jeremiah is 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you", declares the Lord, "*plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.*"

When you consider that this is written to someone who just experienced being captured by the enemy and led into exile, how does it change your understanding of this popular verse?

9. SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Remain in your small groups and finish with the closing prayer.

Consider the modern examples we referenced in the intro to try to contextualize the different phases of Israel's exile: starving to death in the Dust Bowl, fleeing from the horrors of ISIS, being deported from your homeland and forced to assimilate into a foreign culture, or being made into a slave.

1. Which of these forms of suffering strike at your heart?
2. What would such an experience make you feel?
3. In that situation, what would you want to tell God?
4. What would give you hope?
5. What would you want God to do if you knew this was going to be your reality for 70 years? (cf. Jeremiah 29:10)

10. CLOSING

Often, it is incredibly difficult to look suffering in the face. We tend to want to distract, medicate, deny, shutdown, etc. Instead, the prophets model for us what it means to honestly face suffering and to bring our cares to God. Spend one minute in silence and then pray honestly to God what you feel about the suffering around you. Confess any resistance you have coming up and ask God for help.

Prophets in Pain - Part 3 - Learning to Lament
Week 27 (7/2-7/8) -Psalms 28-34, Lamentations 1-3

2. RECAP & PREPARING FOR CG

Daily Reading for Week

- Jeremiah 23-25, Psalm 19
- Jeremiah 26-29, Psalm 20
- Jeremiah 30-32, Psalm 21
- Jeremiah 33-36, Psalm 22
- Jeremiah 37-39, Psalm 23
- Jeremiah 40-44, Psalm 24
- Jeremiah 45-48, Psalm 25

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Jeremiah and The Law (themed video)
- Bring: Bible, pen, and paper

3. FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To try to really grasp the events and emotions of Israel's exile in order to orient ourselves in the world of Jeremiah and the prophets.

4. GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Value: Our values for this week are attentiveness and empathy. When others are sharing, be aware of your posture toward them. Don't be on your phone or thinking about what you are going to say next. Practice giving the person speaking your undivided attention and try to empathize with what they are saying.

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Is there anyone in the group who has ever been forced to flee from their home or witnessed their family or someone close to them forced to flee from the country or place they grew up?

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8. 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.

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2. What would such an experience make you feel?
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4. What would give you hope?
5. What would you want God to do if you knew this was going to be your reality for 70 years? (cf. Jeremiah 29:10)

10. CLOSING

Often, it is incredibly difficult to look suffering in the face. We tend to want to distract, medicate, deny, shutdown, etc. Instead, the prophets model for us what it means to honestly face suffering and to bring our cares to God. Spend one minute in silence and then pray honestly to God what you feel about the suffering around you. Confess any resistance you have coming up and ask God for help.

Prophets in Exile: Ezekiel - Part 1
Week 28 (7/9-7/15) - Psalms 35-41, Ezekiel 1, 11:14-25, 33:21-33

2. RECAP & PREPARING FOR CG

Daily Reading for Week

- Ezekiel 9-12, Psalm 33
- Ezekiel 13-15, Psalm 34
- Ezekiel 16-18, Psalm 35
- Ezekiel 19-21, Psalm 36
- Ezekiel 22-24, Psalm 37
- Ezekiel 25-27, Psalm 38
- Ezekiel 28-30, Psalm 39

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Ezekiel 1-33
- Read: Ezekiel 1, 11:14-25, 33:21-33

3. FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To hear Ezekiel's awe as he encounters a vision of God's glory and to understand his (and Israel's) grief when God's glory leaves the Temple and when the Temple is destroyed by Babylon.

4. GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Ground Rule: The ground rule for this week is to respect the boundaries we have agreed to as a group. For instance, if our group agrees to meet from 7-9 PM, we should start promptly at 7 and end our time at 9. This allows us to enjoy our time together and respect the host home's space in a hospitable way.

5. CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

Share in a few words that describe what makes you feel welcomed to this group?

6. OPENING PRAYER

Pray Psalm 13 aloud.

7. INTRO TO DISCUSSION

For the past three weeks, we have been reading the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations — two books addressing Israel in different phases of their Babylonian exile. Jeremiah and Lamentations deeply grieve the consequences of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness, and at certain points, find hope in the promise of a day when God will once again rescue Israel out of exile.

Ezekiel wrestles with similar questions and realities and does so primarily through vivid and strange visions. In order to equip the prophet for his prophetic task, "the hand of the Lord came on" Ezekiel to give him a (quite bizarre) visual conception of God's glory and cherubim (see Genesis 3:24). He even gets a kind of visionary virtual tour of Jerusalem from his refugee home in Babylon. He describes a scene so awe-inspiring, so overwhelming, it is hard for him to put it into words. He sees a kind of moving vehicle

(think chariot) made of heavenly creatures. Sitting on this vehicle made of heavenly beings, Ezekiel sees a vision of YHWH in the fullness of His glory, sitting on a great sapphire throne. The sapphire description, “lapis lazuli” in some translations, matches a similar experience of Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel when they saw the glory of God in Exodus 24:10: “Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky.”

This vision of God’s glory is an important narrative thread throughout the Book of Ezekiel, one that reappears multiple times in the beginning, middle, and end. When Ezekiel has a vision in chapters 10-11 of God removing His glory from the Temple, it is portending a monumentally catastrophic moment in Israel’s history. God’s presence and glory had been with them through the Exodus, through their years in the wilderness housed in the tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant, and through the years spent conquering the Promised Land. Later, when Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 6), God’s glory dwelt in the center of the Temple. His presence had always been with them, leading them, guiding them, protecting them, and providing for them.

And yet, throughout the prophets there had always been a warning. If Israel did not return to covenant faithfulness, they would be handed over to conquering nations and taken into exile. What’s worse, at a certain point their rescuing God would remove His glory from their presence (Jeremiah 7 is a good example of this kind of language). Ezekiel’s incredible vision in chapter 1 of God’s glory is offset by a foreboding warning.

The evil of Israel is so great, warns God, that in addition to the exile they had already experienced at the hands of Babylon, He would soon remove His very presence from the Temple in Jerusalem, leaving it and the city unprotected (Ezekiel 7). This warning becomes reality in Ezekiel 8-11. Ezekiel has a vision of God’s glory, His very presence picking up and leaving first the Temple, then the city of Jerusalem, and finally moving eastwards (an important distinction). Soon afterwards (Ezekiel 33:21-33), the Israelites exiled in Babylon hear that Jerusalem and the Temple had been burned to the ground and utterly destroyed by their captors.

And yet, despite all the warnings and destruction we read about, there are small moments of hope in these chapters in Ezekiel. God’s glory moves out of the city and towards the East, that is, in the direction of Babylon. The text suggests that God is departing from Jerusalem not to completely abandon Israel but to be with His people in exile in Babylon. Ezekiel’s initial vision (Ezekiel 1) describes God surrounded by something like a rainbow, a callback to God’s faithfulness in His Genesis 9 promise to Noah after the flood. As one commentator writes, *“What the rainbow asserts is the faithfulness of God even in the midst of overwhelming judgement. It is a sign of God’s self-commitment to His promise. God’s judgement must fall on His rebellious people, yet because of commitment to His covenant, He will not wipe them out. In the darkness of exile, God’s covenant faithfulness... was Israel’s only hope.”*

8. 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.

Read Ezekiel 11:14-25. (Note: This chapter describes a portion of a vision that Ezekiel has beginning in chapter 8, where God shows him a scene in Jerusalem and a depiction of God's glory — through a strange cocktail of imagery — coming to the Temple, then departing from it, and exiting Jerusalem altogether.)

1. Ezekiel's repeated visions of God's "glory" might be better thought of as visions of God's presence. The Israelite perspective was that God was present with them because His glory was living near them in the Temple. So when Ezekiel shares his vision of God's glory leaving, this would have meant to a Jew that God's very presence among His people was gone — that He had left, and in His place was an empty vacuum. What do you imagine it would have felt like for an Israelite to even consider this possibility?
2. Three years after Ezekiel's Temple vision, Jerusalem was besieged (chapters 24:1-14). And three years after that, the exiles received news that their capitol city had fallen (chapters 33:21-22). What do you imagine that the Exiles' reaction would have been like, having heard that their city and Temple had actually been destroyed (meaning that God truly had abandoned His dwelling place)?
3. Ezekiel 11:14-21 indicates that in the midst of God's presence leaving, there was still hope for a small remnant of Israelite survivors to one day be restored as a nation again. Is there any way in which you can anticipate or imagine this experience of exile being a refining process, contributing to covenant faithfulness among the Israelite survivors?

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.

How have you traditionally thought about God's presence? Where His presence is, the kind of spaces God inhabits, and who He is present with?

Watch the following video from The Bible Project on Heaven & Earth before breaking up into small groups:

9. SMALL 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. How has exploring this Old Testament Jewish conception of God's presence changed or informed your Christian appreciation of the idea that we are each individual temples of God's Spirit in the world? (See 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:18-20, and John 2:19-22.)
2. What questions does the Old Testament view of God's presence leave you with?

10. CLOSING

Close your time in prayer together.

A New Way: Ezekiel - Part 2
Week 29 (7/16-7/22) - Psalms 42-48, Ezekiel 34, 36:22-37, 37, 39:25-29,
47:1-12

2. RECAP & PREPARING FOR CG

Daily Reading for Week

- Ezekiel 31-33, Psalm 40
- Ezekiel 34-36, Psalm 41
- Ezekiel 37-39, Psalm 42
- Ezekiel 40-44, Psalm 43
- Ezekiel 45-48, Psalm 44
- Ezra 1-3, Psalm 45
- Ezra 4-7, Psalm 46

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Ezekiel 34-48
- Read: Ezekiel 34, 36:22-37, 37, 39:25-29, 47:1-12
-

3. FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To identify the promise God made to Israel through Ezekiel and other prophets of bringing about a new, mysterious way for Israel to faithfully follow their covenant with Him. Also, to reflect on the implications of this promise for all humanity.

4. GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Goal: Our goal this week is to act as priests towards one another, being aware of ways we can thoughtfully invite others into interaction and dialogue with God.

5. CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

Share which of the recent books we've read in YOBL over the last month that you enjoyed the most and why (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel).

6. OPENING PRAYER

Read Ezekiel 34:25-31 aloud.

7. INTRO TO DISCUSSION

*Great deathly powers have passed:
The black and bitter cold, the wind
That broke and felled strong trees, the rind
Of ice that held at last*

*Even the fleshly heart
In cold that made it seem a stone.
And now there comes again the one
First Sabbath light, the Art*

That unruled, uninvoked,

*Unknown, makes new again and heals,
Restores heart's flesh so that it feels
Anew the old deadlocked*

*Goodness of its true home
That it will lose again and mourn,
Remembering the year reborn
In almost perfect bloom
In almost shadeless wood,
Sweet air which neither burned nor chilled
In which the tenderest flower prevailed,
The light made flesh and blood.*

-Wendell Berry III (1980), from *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979-1997*

Last week, we looked at the first half of Ezekiel and saw the culmination of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness and continued idolatry. Not only were they defeated and sent into exile to live as slaves to first Assyria and then Babylon, but the glory of God left the heart of the Temple in Jerusalem. God's faithful guiding presence, always with them since the Exodus, picked up and left. Soon after, Babylon burned Jerusalem and the Temple to the ground. The curses which God made clear would happen if Israel was unfaithful to the covenant were now fully realized.

This is the darkest moment in Israel's history. Israel (and Ezekiel) are left with many questions. What does it mean that they are God's people if they are no longer in the land, no longer have the Temple to worship in, and the presence of God no longer dwells among them? Was it even possible for Israel to be faithful to the covenant when generation after generation had failed? How is God going to bring about the renewal of the world and the nations *through* Israel (see Genesis 12) if Israel is utterly destroyed? In the midst of this despair, God's answer is one of surprising hope. Yes, Israel is reaping the just reward of their evil, idolatry, and covenant unfaithfulness. But God is still faithful to His covenant.

Ezekiel 34-48 are God's promises of hope and restoration to Israel at their lowest. In Ezekiel 34, He promises to replace their bad leaders and to lead (shepherd) the people Himself back from exile into the land He promised them. In Ezekiel 36, He addresses the inability of Israel to uphold covenant faithfulness. He will purify them, sprinkle them with clean water (language tied to purity laws in Leviticus), and replace their hearts of cold, stubborn stone with ones of warm, responsive flesh. In Ezekiel 37 (the infamous and often misunderstood Valley of Dry Bones, which is not a passage about bodily resurrection), God promises to revive and restore Israel as a nation from a state of complete deadness to one of new, Spirit-breathed life. In Ezekiel 39:25-29, He promises that as a newly renewed nation, Israel will reflect God's holiness to the nations around them, thus fulfilling the vision of Genesis 12. In Ezekiel 40-48, He promises through symbolic architecture that He will once again dwell among His people. In Ezekiel 43, God's glory returns to dwell in this newly rebuilt Temple after having left in Ezekiel 10-11. Finally, in Ezekiel 47, there is an Eden-like picture of a river of pure water

flowing from the center (where God's glory dwells) of the Temple outward. Everywhere it goes, this river brings abundant life — even reviving the Dead Sea from a state so salty that no life can exist to a place teeming with fish and life. Israel's restoration will lead to the restoration of God's creation itself.

8. 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.

Imagine yourself as an Israelite in exile in Babylon. You have heard that the Temple and Jerusalem have been burned to the ground. In light of this reality, what would it be like to hear the promises in Ezekiel 34-48?

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.

We are going to take the next 60 minutes to hear and reflect on the promises of God to Israel in exile. Try to place yourself in the shoes (or sandals) of an Israelite living in exile in Babylon. As each promise is being read, pay attention to the images and language. Feel free to write down any particular phrase or verse that stands out in your mind as particularly beautiful or hopeful.

Have multiple people open to the following passages in the Book of Ezekiel and read:

- Ezekiel 34
- Ezekiel 36:22-37
- Ezekiel 37
- Ezekiel 39:25-29
- Ezekiel 43:1-9
- Ezekiel 47:1-12

Using mutual invitation, invite each other to share your answers to the following questions:

1. What strikes you about the tone of Ezekiel 34-48 compared with the tone of Ezekiel 1-33?
2. Which of the images and promises given in Ezekiel 34-48 do you find most striking and affecting? What is it about this image or promise that is connecting with you in this moment?

9. SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

There will be no small group discussion today.

10. CLOSING

Close your time by identifying and praying for the places in our lives, community, city, and world that most need to see the kind of hope and revival found in the Ezekiel passages we read. Try to use the language of those particular passages to help guide your prayers.

The Remnant of God in the World: Ezra & Nehemiah
Week 30 (7/23-7/29) - Psalms 49-55, Ezra 4-6 and Nehemiah 9

2. RECAP & PREPARING FOR CG

Daily Reading for Week

- Ezra 8-10, Psalm 47
- Nehemiah 1-3, Psalm 48
- Nehemiah 4-6, Psalm 49
- Nehemiah 7-9, Psalm 50
- Nehemiah 10-11, Psalm 51
- Nehemiah 12-13, Psalm 52
- Esther 1-5, Psalm 53

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Ezra-Nehemia
- Read: Ezra 4-6 and Nehemiah 9

3. FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To follow the story of God's people post-exile, noticing and considering the complex relationship at hand between following God and navigating political systems.

4. GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Goal: Our goal this week is to practice making room for loving disagreement in pursuit of unity. Disagreements might be about interpretation of Scripture, the world, or personal convictions. We become resources to one another in discerning the truth when we give our disagreements voice in loving dialogue that seeks mutual understanding.

5. CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

What's an unpopular conviction or opinion you hold? To whom is it unpopular? Maybe big or little, maybe cultural, spiritual, or political. Kindly welcome one another to share.

6. OPENING PRAYER

Please stand and read this call-and-response prayer.

Leader: With all our hearts and with all our minds, let us pray to the Lord, saying "Lord, have mercy." For the peace from above, for the lovingkindness of God, and for our salvation, let us pray to the Lord. **Response:** Lord, have mercy.

Leader: For the peace of the world, for the welfare of God's church, and for the unity of all peoples, let us pray to the Lord. **Response:** Lord, have mercy.

Leader: For all the people of our church, Reality San Francisco, for our children, for our volunteers, for our leaders, let us pray to the Lord. **Response:** Lord, have mercy.

Leader: For our President, for the leaders of the nations, and for all in authority, let us pray to the Lord. **Response:** Lord, have mercy.

Leader: For the renewal of this neighborhood, this city, for every city and community, and for those who live in them, let us pray to the Lord. **Response:** Lord, have mercy.

Leader: For the good earth which God has given us, and for the wisdom and will to conserve and steward it, let us pray to the Lord. **Response:** Lord, have mercy.

Leader: For the aged and infirmed, for the widowed and orphans, and for the sick and the suffering, let us pray to the Lord. **Response:** Lord, have mercy.

Leader: For the poor and the oppressed, for the unemployed and the homeless, for prisoners and captives, and for all who remember and care for them, let us pray to the Lord. **Response:** Lord, have mercy.

Leader: For all who have died in the hope of the resurrection, and for all the departed, let us pray to the Lord. **Response:** Lord, have mercy.

Leader: For deliverance from all danger, violence, oppression, and humiliation, let us pray to the Lord. **Response:** Lord, have mercy.

Leader: That we may end our lives in faith and hope, let us pray to the Lord.

Response: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: Defend us, deliver us, and in your compassion protect us by your grace, Lord.

Response: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: In accord with all believers over all time, in our church, and in our community here, let us commend ourselves, and one another, and all our life, to Christ our God.

Response: Lord, have mercy. Amen.

7. INTRO TO DISCUSSION

In recent weeks, we learned about the painful, grievous life in exile, even practicing lament in the way Scripture models in Jeremiah and Lamentations. We explored the Biblical concept of God's glory in Ezekiel and considered what God's presence and promises mean to us today. In parallel, during our Sunday morning series on Esther, sermons taught us about the exiled experience of God's people—the ways that they played along with Persian culture and were victim to it. Likewise, we were challenged to consider our present moment—the ways we wrongly play along with our culture's standards for dating/romance, as well as how we can be loving advocates in the face of racial injustice and death in America. That's where we've been, and here's where we're going.

Over the next few weeks, we will examine “The Remnant of God in the World” by taking a dive into Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These books describe the lives of God's people following the exile, particularly exploring the ways God's people attempted to remain faithful in a sometimes friendly and occasionally hostile world. Today, we begin our journey in Ezra and Nehemiah.

As history in the Old Testament goes, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah mark the end of the story starting in Genesis. We read no more history until the Gospels. Tonewise, Ezra and Nehemiah are historical narratives that sometimes read like a courtroom drama (navigating the political system of royal decrees) mixed with an excel spreadsheet (multiple census and inventory lists), plus a bit of an action thriller (defending the construction of the city walls). At the center of it is a spiritual narrative. A pagan king with a spiritual intuition decrees that a refugee people return to their homeland and seek to honor God by constructing a space for worship. Zerubbabel leads many of those in exile back to Jerusalem to build, Ezra attempts to spiritually purify the people, and Nehemiah rebuilds Jerusalem's city walls. These stories serve as a fulfillment of a prophecy in Jeremiah 25, in which God promises that the exiles will return.

After “the LORD stirred up the spirit” of King Cyrus of Persia, Cyrus decrees that the Temple must be reconstructed (Ezra 1:1-2). Led by Zerubbabel, the people lay the foundation of the Temple, but the glorious presence of God does not return like a cloud and flame to fill the Temple space, à la Exodus 13:21. God’s house is under construction, but nobody appears to be home. The elders, therefore, are left distraught at the absence of God while the younger celebrate their accomplishments thus far (Ezra 3:11-13). In the courtroom drama of Ezra 4-6, the people defeat their legal opponents attempting to block the rebuilding and are given permission to complete the Temple. Construction’s complete, but are Zerubbabel and his builders successful? Perhaps Ezra, an expert in the Law, can be of assistance.

King Artaxerxes sends Ezra to be a teacher of the Law and to make sacrifices and prayers for Artaxerxes and his son’s prosperity (or at least to avoid God’s wrath). Ezra teaches the Torah, which results in a lamenting confession of the masses. Ezra identifies the people’s central sin and lambasts the inter-marrying occurring between returning exiles and those who lived in the lands outside of Jerusalem—even going so far as to demand that these marriages be systematically annulled. It’s forced divorce in an attempt to keep the Law of Moses and honor YHWH (Ezra 10). Though the temple is built and the Law is being established, Jerusalem remains vulnerable without city walls. Enter Nehemiah to help.

Grief-stricken at news of Jerusalem’s disgrace, the king’s cupbearer, Nehemiah, makes a bold and heartfelt request. King Artaxerxes gives Nehemiah the permission and resources to travel to Jerusalem and rebuild the city walls. Despite dangerous opposition from outsiders, the walls go up, and Jerusalem is saved—Or is it? Ezra and Nehemiah gather the returning exiles for a multi-day public reading of the Law, which results in people confessing their sins, worshipping God, and joyfully feasting. All seems well in the land. The LORD has worshippers in His Temple and a people vow to keep His Law. Oddly, however, the book of Nehemiah ends with Nehemiah’s sad realization that the Jewish people’s zeal for the Law is immediately lost, as people mix company with foreigners, neglect Temple sacrifices, and do not provide proper tithes. The reconstruction of hearts toward God is still necessary.

Ultimately, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe (not prescribe) how the remnant sought to practice faithful spirituality while navigating the political structures of their world. The exiles are not simply attempting to get home, but reclaiming their spiritual heritage through worship. And yet, following a spiritual path necessitates traveling a political path as well. The two are linked, because devotion to God is holistic—involving every dimension of one’s life from spirituality to physicality, private life to politics.

8. 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. Imagine yourself post-exile in Jerusalem as you attempt the grueling physical labor of rebuilding the Temple or the walls of Jerusalem, all while regularly

facing opposition from outside political forces. How clear does the purpose of your efforts feel? What is the purpose?

2. Now imagine the rebuilding complete—the ecstasy of being free to worship according to the Law—and yet over time, you see the zeal of others and yourself fading. What motivates you and others to remain faithful to the Law?

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. After the arduous task of rebuilding, a multi-day, communal meditation on the Law, and times of feasting, lament, and confession, the Levites lead a prayer in Nehemiah 9:5-38. This is a prayer of corporate identity in which the people recount their history. Please stand as a group and read this prayer together. After, consider the following questions:
2. *In this prayer, politics (the naming of rival nations/ideologies), history, confession, and vows all come together with remarkable specificity. Why is it important for the remnant to pray this prayer?*
3. *How could you identify with this prayer?*
4. *If we as a modern American church were to say a prayer like this, what would be important for us to include?*
5. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah underscore the political dynamics at play in following YHWH in the world. Currently, as we are near the height of a presidential election cycle and aware of numerous news items from racial injustice to terrorism to poverty to violence against police, in what ways must God have Lordship over our political convictions? To what degree are we tempted to over- or under-spiritualize our political engagement?
6. In light of your whole discussion, have a candid conversation about our Christian call in engaging American politics. With a posture of compassion, offer your convictions even if they are in disagreement with one another. Identify places of unity and honor places of disagreement. (Possible topics might include racial injustice, the presidential race, economic disparity, the role of law enforcement, and military operations.)

9. SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

There will be no small group discussion tonight.

10. CLOSING

Have a full-group open time of prayer, asking the Spirit for help in discerning the way to engage politics as Christians. Pray for obedient, wise, and united hearts.

**The Remnant of God in the World: Daniel
Week 31 (7/30-8/5) - Psalms 56-62, Daniel 7**

2. RECAP & PREPARING FOR CG

Daily Reading for Week

- Esther 6-10, Psalm 54
- Daniel 1-3, Psalm 55
- Daniel 4-6, Psalm 56
- Daniel 7-9, Psalm 57
- Daniel 10-12, Psalm 58
- Haggai 1-2, Psalm 59
- Zechariah 1-4, Psalm 60

Resources for Week

- Read Scripture Video: Daniel
- Read: Daniel 7

3. FOCUS OF TIME TOGETHER

To participate in an intense study on how to begin reading Jewish apocalyptic literature and to practice these hermeneutic skills together by taking a careful look at Daniel 7.

4. GROUND RULE / GOAL / VALUE FOR THE WEEK

Goal: Our goal this week is to practice intellectual humility by laying our ideas and presuppositions aside for a bit in order to explore truth in interdependent community. Participate in discussion with an intent to assist in the group's shared exploration rather than either refusing to participate or trying to coerce the group to see things your way.

5. CONNECTION AND UNITY EXERCISE (MUTUAL INVITATION)

Share your highs and lows from the week.

6. OPENING PRAYER

Sit silently for three minutes. As you do, listen for any thoughts or pictures or ideas that go through your mind that may be inspired by the Holy Spirit. After this silent prayer, take a couple minutes to invite one another to share anything they may have heard.

Then read this prayer aloud:

Lord, grant us pure hearts and clear minds;
Direct us in discerning what is good and true and beautiful;
Guide us along the path of wisdom and lead us in the way of humility;
We are frail and fallible creatures;
Be near to us, Lord;
Amen.

7. INTRO TO DISCUSSION

This week's material is an intense study on the hermeneutics of apocalyptic literature using Daniel 7 as our focus. It is perhaps the most rigorous study of the year. We chose to structure the material this way because we didn't feel it would be faithful to the goal of YOBL or the book of Daniel to skip the hermeneutic work necessary to grow in our

Bible-reading skills. Accordingly, there will be more content to digest than usual. Because of this, we've changed the normal structure to make the content more digestible. There will also be no structured small group time. Focus your energy on reading and understanding the ideas presented. Then, honestly process your emotional responses to your past and current interactions with apocalyptic literature and the variety of interpretations in the church.

8. 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.

Read:

The Book of Daniel in Context

Last week, we began our final series on Old Testament books called “The Remnant of God in the World,” chronicling the final chapters in the Old Testament story about God’s plan to heal the world through His people Israel. In Ezra and Nehemiah, we read historical sketches of the first Jewish exiles who returned to Jerusalem to start over again by rebuilding the Temple, relearning the Torah, and reconstructing the city walls.

We saw this exciting moment of liberation turn anticlimactic as division and turmoil broke out among those trying to be God’s renewed people in Jerusalem. Before long, the same evil and idolatry that led to the punishment of exile in the first place resurfaced, begging the questions: Is exile really over? Has this surviving remnant of the people of God truly been purged and purified of anything? Where do we go from here?

Interestingly, the book of Daniel serves as dual bookends to Ezra and Nehemiah, acting as both preface and conclusion to the return-to-Jerusalem story. In Daniel 5 and 6, we read how Daniel’s skilled and faithful work as a government official combined with his great spiritual wisdom and divine connection to the Jewish God earned him honor with the Babylonian rulers Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar as well as the other kings who eventually overthrew Babylon. Following the “writing on the wall” events of chapter 5, the Babylonian empire was conquered by what is called the Median-Persian Empire.

King Darius the Mede, now ruling over the land, was so moved by Daniel’s divine vindication and protection in the lion’s den that he actually endorsed Judaism throughout the empire. Chapter 6 concludes with: “So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.” When Ezra 1:1 says that “The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm [releasing Jews to go home and build the Temple],” it is fair to say that Daniel was the primary vessel God used to do so. In other words, Daniel’s faithful witness within the Babylonian government was one of the central causes for the release of the Jews from exile. The great restart recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah was only possible because of him.

But also, the book of Daniel serves as a concluding synopsis to Ezra-Nehemiah that at least partially answers the questions raised about whether the exile was truly over and

how then God's people would live. Remember that in Jeremiah 29:10, Jeremiah recorded a promise from God to release Israel from exile after seventy years. The return to rebuild the Temple seemed to mark the end of this punishment and the beginning of the promised liberation. Daniel was hopeful for this too: "In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom — in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years" (Dan 9:1-2). Therefore, Daniel becomes hopeful that he may indeed live to see the end of exile and goes to bring about God's promised action by confessing on behalf of Israel. This leads to a shocking and disheartening word from God: "While I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me... He instructed me and said to me, 'Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. As soon as you began to pray, a word went out, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the word and understand the vision:

"Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to restrain transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place." (Daniel 9:21-24, abbreviated)

In other words, what Ezra-Nehemiah chronicled in story form, Daniel documents in a divine vision-message: The seventy years of exile haven't accomplished their purpose — Israel hasn't been purified of its sinful nature and is not yet ready to be the holy people of God who bring "everlasting righteousness" to the world. The seventy years of exile didn't accomplish all that needs to be accomplished, and therefore exile will continue.

Rather than just 70 years, Israel will experience various forms of oppression and persecution for seven times that, or roughly 490 years. This heartbreaking notion proves true over the next several hundred years of Israel's history leading to Christ: First, as we saw, the Median-Persian Empire takes over, then Alexander the Great and the Greeks, then the Syrian/Seleucid Empire, and finally Rome. For five centuries following the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, life for the Old Testament people of God is a form of continued political punishment. Exile repeats itself over and over. This historical reality is, not coincidentally, both why Daniel was written and also why it was written the way that it was.

Note that the overall book was written about Daniel, but not by Daniel. Though it contains his writings, the writings are pieced together and narrated by someone who refers to Daniel in the third person. Many scholars think that the book was either written or newly annotated around 160 BC, several generations after the first remnant returned to Israel. During this time, the Jews suffered yet another horrendous persecution, this time under Antiochus and the Syrian (or Seleucid) Empire. It is likely that these circumstances of exile, similar to Daniel's in Babylon, were the motivation for converting the old oral testimony of Daniel's faithful obedience into the more artistic and formalized literary book we have today. This book, with its hopeful (though cryptic)

visions of God's eventual victory over the violent beasts of world empires and the heroic example of Daniel's faithfulness, would have been a tremendously valuable resource for another generation of oppressed Jews. In this sense, the historical testimony of Daniel's life and visions which occurred around 580-520 BC were able to speak powerfully to God's people in later eras of violent oppression, both in the 2nd century BC under the Syrian Empire as well as in Jesus' day under the brutal Roman regime. This is, in large part, what made the Book of Daniel one of the most popular literary texts in Jesus' own day as well as one of the texts most widely referenced in the New Testament.

Ask:

How does hearing the context for Daniel help in your understanding of Ezra and Nehemiah?

Read:

The Book of Daniel as Apocalyptic Literature

The literary context that inspired the book of Daniel was the social/political landscape of God's people centuries after Daniel's life in Babylon. The landscape of persecution under brutal Syrian rule was eerily similar to the earlier torment of Babylonian oppression. It is this similarity of situations, not the exact details of each historical period, that inspired the form and content of Daniel, especially the seemingly strange visions in chapters 7-12. This differentiation will be crucial as we dive into exploring these texts.

Before we do, however, we must introduce a term: Apocalyptic. We use the term apocalyptic to mean pertaining to the end of the world — an apocalypse (typically where everything somehow explodes). But apocalyptic, or apocalypticism, is also a noun labeling a literary genre that became quite common in the ancient and Biblical world. Examples of Biblical apocalyptic include Daniel 7-12, Revelation, parts of Isaiah, and Ezekiel's visions of the flying, flaming chariot made of heavenly creatures depicting God's glory.

These texts strike us as absurd, nonsensical, and even scary. However, the ancient readers to whom these words were written would have felt no such discomfort. They would have been familiar with the symbolism and imagery in a way that would be hard for us to believe. It's worth it, therefore, to state a truism: We are utterly illiterate at reading apocalyptic literature and stand before these texts at a tremendous disadvantage. They require more homework and hermeneutic effort than perhaps any other books of the Bible. In terms of reading through the Bible in order to become more Biblically literate, the apocalyptic texts are like the big bad bosses at the end of a video game. Indeed, scholar Aaron Chalmers dubs apocalyptic "prophecy on steroids." It is perhaps apt then that they are mostly found toward the end of the Old and New Testaments. In fact, throughout history, more corrosive ideas and evil actions have stemmed from misreadings of apocalyptic literature than from probably any other.

The term apocalyptic comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis* which means to reveal or unveil knowledge that was previously hidden. Apocalyptic is symbolic picture-language, almost like political cartoons, that serve to speak both to current realities and to

universal types. Specifically, such language was often used to speak simultaneously to various details of real-life present circumstances as well as to elevate the meaning of such things above those particular details to illustrate what is typological or paradigmatic. In other words, apocalyptic isn't mostly concerned with symbolically predicting specific future events but with illustrating paradigms that tend to repeat themselves throughout history. Typically written in the context of crisis, Biblical apocalyptic aims to encourage hope in its hearers by lifting their countenance above the daunting realities of their current struggle and to illustrate the ways in which God is sovereign and powerful over even the worst the world has to offer. Apocalyptic aims to visually depict to oppressed people the truth that even the worst oppression is not the end of the story.

Consider the following snippets from Aaron Chalmers' *Interpreting the Prophets* to help orient us toward this unfamiliar genre:

“Whereas the prophets usually envisage God acting in salvation or judgment within history, these passages seem to anticipate a climactic and decisive intervention of God that brings history (at least as we know it) to a definitive culminating point...

Apocalyptic entails the revelatory communication of heavenly secrets by an other-worldly being to a seer who presents the visions in a narrative framework; the visions guide readers into a transcendent reality that takes precedence over the current situation and encourages readers to persevere in the midst of their trials. The visions reverse normal experience by making the heavenly mysteries the real world and depicting the present crisis as a temporary, illusory situation. This is achieved via God's transforming the world for the faithful...

In apocalyptic, God reveals his previously hidden future plans usually through dreams or visions. Unlike the visions we find in the prophets, however, these are full of elaborate and, at times, strange and mysterious symbolism and/or numbers. Many of the dominant images of apocalyptic belong to the realm of fantasy or myth, or we encounter surreal, unnatural combinations. For example, Daniel 7 contains a vision of four great beasts, including a bear with tusks in its mouth and a lion with eagle's wings, coming out of the sea, while Daniel 8 describes a goat with a horn that grows as high as the host of heaven. The meaning and significance of these dreams and visions is thus often obscure; serious interpretive work is required...

It primarily served to encourage its readers in the midst of their trials. Apocalyptic literature, like prophecy, is highly situational — it was written in order to address and respond to a specific problem in the life of the community of faith. This situation was usually one of crisis, such as rapid, destabilizing change, a severe drought or plague, or persecution.

For example, critical scholars often associate the book of Daniel (or at least chapters 7-12) with the crisis precipitated by the persecution of the Jews undertaken by Antiochus IV Epiphanes during the early second century BC. The book can be read as a commentary on the dramatic and distressing events that occurred in Israel and the

broader world during his reign, which included the desecration of the Jerusalem Temple, the outlawing of distinctive Jewish rites, and the execution of those who opposed him. Daniel 7:25 appears to allude to Antiochus with its reference to the little horn ‘speaking words against the Most High, wearing out the holy ones of the Most High, attempting to change the sacred seasons and the law.’

Apocalyptic seeks to encourage, comfort, and exhort the community to continued faithfulness, in spite of whatever opposition or problems its members may be facing. It affirms that such crises are only temporary — God remains in control and he will soon act to judge the wicked and vindicate the righteous.”

Ask:

1. How would you describe the way you were previously taught to think about apocalyptic literature? How does the idea that apocalyptic literature is not primarily concerned with end times prophecies but symbolism regarding contemporaneous political events alter this viewpoint?
2. Have you ever felt embarrassed or uncomfortable about Biblical texts like Daniel or Revelation or Christian ideologies concerning the “rapture” or “antichrist”? Share any stories or reflections.

Read:

Beginning to Interpret Apocalyptic Literature

More from Chalmers:

“Apocalyptic texts present unique challenges to the modern interpreter. ‘No other genre of the Bible has been so fervently read with such depressing results.’ Our problems are largely a result of the fact that the apocalyptic genre has no real modern equivalent... Impressionistic art can serve as a helpful analogy for orienting our reading of apocalyptic texts. An impressionistic painting is best appreciated from a distance. These works are composed of fine lines, dabs of paint and brush strokes that ‘combine to depict scenes of unusual vividness and emotion’. If we stand too close, however, if we concentrate simply on the lines and dabs themselves, we are unlikely to grasp what the artist intended to convey - all we will end up seeing are lines, dabs, and strokes which look rather peculiar and random in their placement. Instead, we need to take a step back and consider the work in its entirety. When we do this, we are able to appreciate how those apparently random and disjointed paint strokes, dabs and lines in fact end up working together to produce a coherent and striking whole.

Likewise, apocalyptic texts needs to be appreciated from a distance. When reading apocalyptic texts, it is worth stepping back and trying to grasp the point of the vision as a whole. What is the overall effect? What is the big picture? What is the overarching sweep of the vision or narrative? Ultimately, we need to move beyond the details to determine the primary message(s) of the entire vision. The ever-present risk is that modern readers will get so bogged down in the details of the visions that they fail to grasp the bigger picture. Or, to draw another analogy, they will see the trees but miss the forest. Individual details may be important (after all, the only reason we have a bigger picture is because it is made up of smaller details), or they may not. What is always important, however, is the significance of the vision as a whole. And, of course, it is

often when we have grasped the big picture that the details within this make more sense.

Once we have grasped the big picture of the vision, it is time to focus on the details. The further we move from the general (the 'big picture') to the specific ('details'), the less certain our interpretations may become. In other words, while we may be confident that we have grasped the meaning of the vision as a whole, the significance of certain specific elements within this may elude us. 'This is not unexpected, given the allusive nature of apocalyptic visions. For much of the vision is an earthly way to think about a heavenly reality, or a present way to think about a future reality. So given our earthly and present limitations, we cannot expect to understand the meaning of each detail.'

Ask:

Describe a moment when you've experienced something like impressionistic art where choosing not to focus too much on specific details helped you to better see and appreciate the overall picture.

Read: Daniel 7. As you do, keep in mind the analogy of impressionist art and focus on the big picture being painted with these images and symbols.

Ask:

1. What big-picture impression stood out in your mind as you read Daniel 7? In other words, what point is it trying to make?
2. In your mind, how important is a text like Daniel 7 to your life as a Christ-follower?
3. How does it make you feel to meditate on the fact that our entire faith tradition is so heavily dependent on a book, and specifically an old book that most Christians and perhaps we ourselves struggle (and often fail) to read correctly?

9. SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

There will be no small group discussion tonight.

10. CLOSING

Spend a minute in silence, discerning any invitations the Holy Spirit may have for you — whether to dive deeper into the study of Daniel and apocalyptic on your own, to take a break from YOBL, or to make some commitment based on what you heard in the text. Make any commitments to God in prayer before one another.

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.