

A person wearing a dark t-shirt and light-colored pants is walking away from the camera through a vast field of golden wheat. Their arms are outstretched to the sides. The sky is a clear, bright blue. The overall mood is peaceful and expansive.

**BOOK 13**

**the  
Path  
of  
Truth**

**Bible Lessons for Youth and Adults**

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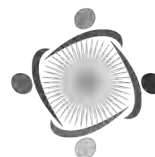
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# Presentation

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We're ready for a new year of Bible study, a year with many challenges that will make it necessary to grow in the knowledge of the Word and our approach to our God.

In the first quarter of this year, we'll see the theme "God's process with his people" in light of the prophet Isaiah. Then, we'll study current issues under the title "Faith and contemporary life." There we'll address issues such as human trafficking, social networks, pornography, etc. We'll continue with a quarter of "Relevant Messages for the Church" in light of the letters of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians. In the last quarter, we'll reflect on "Punishment and reward" in light of the book of the prophet Ezekiel, seeing how what was announced by this prophet is valid today.

We have a great challenge ahead!

The work that you'll carry out as a teacher, without a doubt, will be a blessing for those who participate. Don't neglect your spiritual life: read the Bible; Pray for yourself, for the ministry God has given you, and for the lives He's entrusted to you. Don't neglect your preparation; start early enough to read the lesson, learn about the topic, as well as find and organize all the materials you'll need on the day you teach your lesson.

Don't stop, don't be discouraged. Being a teacher allows you to be part of a ministry that helps transform lives. Each day as you teach, think about how God can use you in teaching the lesson. Let God speak first to your life, and in this way, you'll be ready to share with your students what the Lord has for their lives.

The ministry that God has given you must cultivate you and make you better every day so that the Lord can say: "...Well done, good and faithful servant!..." (Matthew 25:23a NIV).

**Patricia Picavea**

Editor - Ministries Publications

# Recommendations

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God is always calling us to form people and make disciples. This is a great responsibility, but it's also a great privilege because we can share what we've received by helping others to be disciples of Jesus.

Whenever we share biblical teachings with others that bring them closer to God and guide them in their Christian life, we're making disciples (2 Timothy 2:2).

We want to make your job easier; now it's in your hands. Take full advantage of this resource and be part of those who live the Great Commission by teaching what the Lord commanded.

## **Lesson preparation and presentation:**

1. Begin by praying that the Lord will help you to prepare well and give you wisdom and grace to get the message for your own life first.
2. Read the lesson several times during the week to deepen your understanding of it.
3. Gather your work materials: a dictionary, a Bible dictionary and to the extent possible, apart from your Bible, versions of Bibles other than the NIV that we use in this book. Also have pencils, erasers, and paper.
4. To begin preparing the lesson, read the Purpose of the lesson and keep it in mind as you prepare the lesson.
5. Be sure to find and read all the Bible passages in the lesson.
6. Take a sheet of paper and copy the outline of the lesson. Write at each point a guide to help you when teaching the class.
7. Follow each point as indicated in the book, ask the class questions and make the lesson as participatory as possible. The participation of the class members is of great help in the learning process.
8. Each lesson has a Memory Verse. Have it memorized yourself before coming to class, and take time during the class for people to memorize it.
9. End the lesson with prayer, being on the lookout for a student's need that arose from the lesson and pray for him or her.
10. Maintain contact with everyone in your class or study group. Use all available means, and make them feel that they are important to you and God and that you are praying for them.

## **Some suggestions:**

1. To teach the Memory Verse, you can have them repeat it together several times, or you can write it on the board and erase words as they say it.
2. Reward faithful attendees.
3. When a quarter ends, you can teach a class in a different way, and have a time with coffee or soda and some cookies.
4. Take time in the service (or ask the pastor to do so) to hype the start of the new quarter with the theme to be covered. You can mention the titles of the lessons, or explain a bit about the general topic.
5. Start on time so you don't run out of time at the end, and you can get the most out of your class.
6. If someone tells you about a situation before starting, or at the end of the class, don't forget to pray for the person during the week, and ask them during the week or the next class about their situation.

# God's Process with His People

## FIRST QUARTER

Complaint, Judgment and Promise

Here I am, Send Me

Warrior Kings and the Prince of Peace

Our God is a Righteous God

A Relationship of Privileges and Duties

Praise, Trust and Hope in God

God's Justice to the Nations

Trust in God not People

The Power of Prayer

God's Majesty, Grace and Sovereignty

The Human Heart is an Idol Factory

Zion's Redemption and Restoration

The Dynamics of the Alliance between God and His People



# Complaint, Judgment and Promise

Marco Rocha (Argentina)

**Study passages:** Isaiah chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

**Memory Verse:** “‘Come now, let us settle the matter,’ says the Lord. “‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool” Isaiah 1:18.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the scope of sin, its consequences, and God’s redemptive work.

## Introduction

In chapters 1 through 5 of the book of Isaiah, the Scriptures reveal God’s process with His people. The consequences of sin are described in detail. God appeals to them to repent, and offers promises of judgment, redemption and glory. In these chapters, we observe how the prophet Isaiah writes with depth, excellence, wisdom and the ability to introduce the central message of his prophetic ministry: salvation by faith.

Isaiah fulfilled his ministry in a Jerusalem shaken by the social and political changes of the time, and profoundly affected by the advance of Baalism, of the disgusting cult of Moloch, and of immorality, which had led the people to live out their religious lives only in the formality of the temple rituals, without a real understanding of the holiness of God and His claims. In Isaiah’s time, God’s chosen people worshipped superficially, contaminated by the cult of pagan gods and characterized by moral decadence, including listening to large numbers of doomsayers, fortune tellers, and idolatry. This was true for both the poor sectors as well as the wealthy. The prevailing attitudes among God’s people were pride and self-sufficiency.

Introduce the problem presented by the prophet Isaiah in these chapters by asking your students to get into groups and make a list of ways in which Christians today can also fall into a meaningless ritualism. Then conclude the activity by writing the conclusions of each group on the board, reflecting on the importance and relevance of the message of the prophet Isaiah for our days.

## I. God Denounces Sin and its Consequences (Isaiah 1:1-9, 22-23, 5:1-7)

From the start, it’s clear that Isaiah’s vision was a

revelation from God about future events concerning Judah, the southern kingdom, and its capital Jerusalem (1:1). Before the entire universe, God exposed the sin of the people, denouncing their rebellion and lack of discernment (1:2). Those who had been chosen to be a holy people had become rebellious sons and daughters whose load of wickedness and depravity had corrupted them until they had become apostate. The corresponding punishment, according to the Mosaic law, would be lashes; but this passage describes someone who has no place on his body for a whip due to the large number of sins committed. However, this sad reality didn’t stop them from sinning against God (1:5).

Faced with this widespread evil, the prophet Isaiah saw that punishment would come upon Judah as a consequence of their sin. Foreigners would invade, destroying cities and devastating the fields, and only a remnant would escape annihilation (1:9). The chosen people’s depravity was especially evident in the lack of social justice on the part of their leaders to the most disadvantaged sectors of society (1:16-17). Isaiah 1:22-23 says, “Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels, partners with thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They don’t defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow’s case doesn’t come before them.” The city that was once a symbol of justice and equity now had become the home of rulers who were shamelessly corrupt and showed contempt to others.

When the people and their rulers decided to forget God and despise His commandments, they entered on a path of sin that completely changed their way of life. An important part of this new sinful lifestyle was



seen in how they practiced their religion, without giving their hearts to God. Because of this hypocrisy, they reached a state of ignorance of the will of God for their lives, complying with superficial religion in which they participated, blinded by sin. With respect to this sad reality, Purkiser affirms the following: "The prosperity and apparent success of Uzziah's reign was injected again and again with internal corruption and worldliness of heart Formalism and legalism had undermined the strength of the religion of the Jews" (Purkiser, W. T. Knowing the Old Testament. USA: CNP, 1950, p.169). It's in response to this reality that the voice of God, through the prophet Isaiah, bursts forth with power to denounce the sin of the people and announce the consequences: What would this way of life bring them?

### Questions:

- Is what the prophet denounced relevant for our times?
- What are the sins that distance us today from God as a society?

## II. God Calls for Repentance (Isaiah 1:10-20)

The sacrifices of the people of Jerusalem and their leaders was full of formality, but lacking in obedience, and they disgusted God. The same thing happened with their solemn feast days, which were incompatible because of the iniquity of the false worshipers whose hands, instead of appearing holy, were stained by the blood of the victims of their sins (vv.10-15).

But God's accusation towards His people was tinged with grace and mercy, calling them to repentance and promising that even though their sins had created deep stains, his grace would restore their lost moral character (vv.16-18). In this prophetic vision, we too can know the scope of sin and the need of genuine repentance to be free from its effects. Romans 6:23 states, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Therefore, today, anyone who genuinely repents of their sins can receive Christ as their Savior and Lord, live in holiness, and enjoy eternal life.

Sin and its consequences are the manifestation of corruption that begins in the heart and reproduces itself in actions which, although they may appear to be pious, deny God's holiness and His demands. Also, only the Lord can fully restore the fallen and return

purity to the lost who repent and turn to Him with all their hearts. Regarding this, we can say that "Christ came to save us from acts of sin and to destroy our sinful disposition (Mt. 1:21; Rom. 6:6; 12:1-2). He died so that His people might be sanctified (Eph. 5:25-27; Heb.13:12). Holiness is necessary if a person wants to see the Lord (Heb. 12:14)" (Taylor, Richard. Beacon Dictionary Theological. USA: CNP, 1984, p.504).

God's call to repentance demanded that His people change completely, transforming their lives. He wanted the people and their rulers to return to Him wholeheartedly, admitting their guilt, and voluntarily separating themselves from their sins. Only in this way could they experience divine forgiveness and restoration (v.19).

### Questions:

- What is genuine repentance?
- Name some evidences of genuine repentance today.

## III. God Promises Judgment and Redemption (Isaiah 1:24-3:26, 5:8-30)

Restoration to the holiness promised by God includes a purification process that has a redemptive purpose and culminates in righteousness. The proud and all those who aren't willing to enter this divine process will end up consumed and ashamed (1:24-31). In 5:8-30, the prophet Isaiah detailed the sins, with which Judah provoked God, in a series of divine judgments in the form of "woes."

The first "woe!" (vv.8-10) is about those who hoard land, stealing from small landowners, in a form of accumulation that Jewish law prohibited. Verse 9 tells us of their fate: "Surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupants." The second "woe!" (vv.11-17) is for those who spend their nights with music "inflamed by wine," "but they have no regard for the deeds of the Lord, no respect for the work of his hands" (v.17). The result will be that they'll be humiliated and exiled because they didn't understand.

The third "woe!" (vv.18-19) is for the presumptuous, who full of vanity, dare to defy God. The fourth "woe!" (v.20) is for those who pervert moral values, seeking to clothe sin with an appearance of godliness, trying to hide its evil nature. The fifth "woe!" (v.21) is for those who smugly feel self-sufficient, avoid seeking advice, and create their own laws.

The sixth “woe!” (v.22-23) is for those who boast of the amount of alcohol they can drink and are unjust, acquitting “the guilty for a bribe” but denying “justice to the innocent” (v.23).

With regard to sin and its consequences, Richard Taylor states: “Sin spreads its deadly poison as a contagion, challenging the sovereignty of God and threatening the integrity of His kingdom, trying to control the future and eternity itself, helping and protecting the kingdom of Satan, the archenemy of God and the harmonious universe. It would be a huge impiety that God treat sin lightly, as if it were a passing sin” (Taylor, Richard. Exploring Christian Holiness, volume 3. USA: CNP, 1999, p.24).

For Isaiah, the origin of decadence and corruption in which the people of Israel and their rulers had fallen, was that they had rejected God’s written holy law, which represented His voice. The result of this decision was to bring upon themselves the wrath of God, and calamity and destruction. As prophesied by Isaiah, God’s judgment came to Judah as a devouring fire; the earth was devastated by calamities and foreign invasions (5:24-30). About this purifying process, Purkiser explains: “In the Old Testament, holiness is intimately associated with cleanliness and is considered incompatible with filth. In fact, it often seems that holiness is just that: cleanliness (Lev. 10:10; Gen. 8:20)” (Purkiser, W. T. Exploring Christian Holiness, volume I. USA: CNP, 1988, p.24).

#### **Questions:**

- How can we help deliver people from God’s judgment?
- Explain what redemption is in your own words.

#### **IV. God Promises His Protection and Glory (Isaiah 4:1-6)**

In a land ravaged by war, and faced with the scarcity of men, the prophet Isaiah declared that seven women would go after the same husband (4:1), breaking with customs, in order to avoid the disgrace of remaining single and leaving no offspring. The reality of a Jerusalem full of sin gives rise to the vision of a new Jerusalem where its inhabitants will live in holiness. They’ll be purified both on the outside as well as inside, through the presence of God. In Isaiah’s vision, the Shekinah appears, the presence of God as a pillar of cloud by day, and as a radiant light at night, that protects His people and reaches them with His grace (4:2-6). Holiness is an essential part of God’s love. Purkiser affirms the following: “Divine holiness is

His deep concern for what is fair. His love is his deep concern for the good of man. God cannot tolerate sin, not only because He is holy, but also because his nature is love. He wants and seeks our highest good and our superior happiness through righteousness” (Purkiser, W. T. Exploring our Christian Faith. USA: CNP, 1994, p.149).

After sin, in which the people and their rulers had fallen, and the suffering of the destruction experienced as a consequence of this, a faithful remnant would be blessed to experience the hope of the promised Messiah and the restoration of the Kingdom. This hope would be the impulse that would lead them to consecrate themselves, and change the hypocritical ritualism for true worship stemming from pure hearts and the raising of holy hands.

On the path of holiness, God’s people can feel safe, protected and cared for, recognizing that self-sufficiency leads to error, but dependence on God is life and peace. The temptation to live out a superficial religiosity will lead to perdition. The path of holiness invites us to experience a victorious, whole and full life, where pure hearts are evidenced in intentions and thoughts following the mind of Christ, and holy hands are raised both to worship God and to serve others, especially those who suffer. This holy way isn’t free from difficulties, but we’ll travel under the Lord’s guidance and protection. He calls us to a pilgrimage in this world, listening to His call and putting our hopeful gaze only on Him. To stray from this way is to give way to sin, even if we continue with rituals of a pious appearance. Walking firmly in God’s way will revitalizes us at every step, allowing us to overcome even the most challenging obstacles.

#### **Questions:**

- What is God’s promise to those who turn to Him wholeheartedly and remain faithful?
- Name some benefits of walking in holiness today in your life.

#### **Conclusion**

The first five chapters of Isaiah teach that God doesn’t tolerate sin in His people, especially when they live a superficial religion without giving Him their heart. This sin is publicly exposed with a strong call to repentance. Those who are willing to turn to God wholeheartedly and become followers of Christ will be redeemed and experience the Lord’s blessing of restoration, protection and care. But those who stand firm in their rebellion will be judged because they have rejected Him.



# Here am I, send me

Richard Faúndez (Chile)

**Study passages:** Isaiah 6:1-13

**Memory Verse:** “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I, send me!” Isaiah 6:8.

**Lesson Purpose:** To discover that Christian ministry and service are the result of a deep and real personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

## Introduction

Isaiah is considered to be one of the great and important prophets in the Old Testament. He is known as “... ‘the evangelical prophet’ because of how much he says about the redeeming work of the Messiah” (Ryrie, Charles C. Ryrie Study Bible. USA: Editorial Portavoz, 1996, p.965). The main doctrine that characterizes the book of Isaiah is “salvation by faith” (Price, Ross E. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume IV. USA: CNP, 1966, p.23). God’s call to the life of holiness is grounded in social justice and the need for moral righteousness of the entire nation (Isaiah 9:6-7, 10:1, 25, 26:7, 35).

After these introductory notes, chapter six is one of the important passages of Isaiah. The experience of the prophet described in these verses is really impressive. All the holiness and majesty of God are revealed to Isaiah in a moment in which the prophet was experiencing a deep uncertainty about his future and that of his nation.

Some background facts that explain this statement about the prophet are as follows: King Uzziah had died, leaving a vacuum of political leadership in a difficult time for Judah. The king’s death was imminent and predictable; not only because of his age which was close to seventy (2 Chronicles 26:3), but also because he was sick with leprosy (2 Chronicles 26:16-21). King Uzziah assumed his mandate as “co-regent in the kingdom of his father in the year 791 BC and reigned a total of 52 years,” leaving a legacy of peace, prosperity and socially accepted religious life (2 Chronicles 26:4-8) (Purkiser, W. T. Editor. Exploring the Old Testament. USA: CNP, 3rd edition, 1994,

p.289). At the moment of the death of King Uzziah, warlike confrontation with neighboring nations was imminent. Assyria, Syria, Egypt, and the northern kingdom of Israel stood as the great enemies of Judah. Later, it would be Babylon. Economic progress was evident throughout the kingdom, but it was coupled with serious problems of injustice, social abuse and corruption that both Isaiah and other prophets had begun to denounce. Above all, there was the absence of true faith, a lack of a spiritual experience that was alienating the entire Jewish society from the true God. The prophets considered this apostasy as the primary cause of all of Judah’s ills (Isaiah 2:8, 5:20, 57:3-21; Jeremiah 3:1-3; Ezekiel 8, 16; Amos 5:26).

With desperation and vehemence, the prophets called the people to repentance and reunion with their God. They advocated social justice and devotion to the whole nation as parts of the same coin (cf. Amos, Hosea, and Micah). With this bleak panorama, Isaiah entered the temple, and God revealed himself to him. The answer he received was the following: The Lord of Israel is King; He will protect His people from their enemies, and finally, God will bring judgment to Judah for their sins (Isaiah 6:10-13; cf. Jeremiah 24:8-10; Micah 7:4).

Isaiah discovered that His God was superior to all circumstances, crises and problems that his people could face. He saw that the God of Israel is the Lord. This encounter gave him a new impetus for his work as a prophet. His service to God was sealed with his sanctification and with his response: “Here am I, send me” (6:8b).

## **I. The Glory and Majesty of the King (Isaiah 6:1-4)**

The sadness and lack of hope that at some point can seize the heart and life of a person, for whatever reason, produce a feeling of fear and helplessness that makes the future look dark. The reference to the death of King Uzziah (v.1) isn't casual.

Although this king was old and ill, his death had a negative impact on the vision of the future that Isaiah had regarding himself and that of his nation. It's natural to feel like this when a sovereign dies. The people were grieving; it was of particular social and personal importance in everyday life of the people in the towns and villages. The prophet Isaiah felt it deeply since he had been very close to the king.

Uzziah had ruled for over 50 years. His government style, his achievements, and the positive progress of Judah's economy which had produced great prosperity and peace regarding conflicts with other nations, were highly valued. With the death of Uzziah, this social project also died. The people felt anxious and there was social uncertainty regarding the continuity of the nation. This uncertainty was strongly contrasted with this revelation of God himself that the prophet experienced.

Isaiah said: "I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne and the train of his robe filled the temple" (v.1). Concerns, fears, uncertainties and doubts disappeared. Although a prince of Judah had died, the King was still sitting on His throne, directing history and ruling with justice, might and holiness, majestic and glorious, worthy of all praise.

The vision of the greatness of the Lord was enhanced by the presence of the seraphim (vv.2-3). These are described as having three pairs of wings with which they covered their faces and feet, and they were flying, testifying to the majesty of God, declaring the perfection of His holiness expressed in the triple repetition of the qualifier "holy," and declaring that all the earth is filled with His glorious presence.

Then, two signs are described that amplify God's transcendence and power (v.4): A tremor shook the temple and smoke filled everything in the inner space of the holy place. We also find these signs in other biblical episodes, such as the delivery of the law at Sinai (Exodus 19, 20), the dedication of the temple

in Solomon's time (2 Chronicles 7:1-2), and in the account of the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

These were unmistakable signs for Isaiah. God is the Lord and King of Judah. Even when the circumstances change, and everything is transformed by the sin of the people, God was still on His throne. The future of Judah didn't depend on achievements, or the ability of human beings. His own future and that of Judah depended only on their true King, the God of Israel.

### **Questions:**

- What meaning would you give to the symbols described in the passage from Isaiah 6:1-4?
- Is it typical of Christians to be interested and concerned about the socio-cultural and political situation of their own country? Comment.

## **II. Confession of Sin before the King (Isaiah 6:5)**

The key to this chapter is in verse 5. Before the majesty, glory and power of God, human beings can only prostrate themselves before Him, discovering and confessing their own sinful condition. In Philippians 2:9-11, we see a similar statement. The apostle Paul stated that in the last times, everybody will have to bow their knees and glorify Jesus' holy Name. Who can stand before God? The psalmist strongly stated that only those who are holy and do His will can be in God's presence (cf. Psalms 15, 24 and others). God's holiness reveals our sin. Isaiah was no exception. He confessed his own condition first, without blaming the people or God himself, an attitude common in many men and women, allowing them to excuse themselves without facing their own faults. Isaiah saw himself as a sinner, unworthy to be in God's presence, and then he considered the condition of his countrymen.

Isaiah 6:5 shows the proper order of justification: Acknowledgment of personal sin, confession and regret - the necessary steps of a faith that redeems. But in addition, the prophet acted vicariously, identifying with the rest of the people. The dramas of society, such as injustice, corruption, idolatry and immorality, are summed up in the expression: "a people of unclean lips." Isaiah didn't consider himself better than the rest. He identified himself as one with them, and his confession included them.

This speaks to the fact that Isaiah's love of God and for king Uzziah was also love for all the people of Judah. We read in the Beacon Bible Commentary that "a vision of God always engenders a sense of one's own unworthiness, and the first impulse of the purified heart is try to lead others to God" (Harper et al., Eds., volume 4. USA: CNP, 1966, p.30).

The recognition of personal condition, confession and repentance are the necessary steps if we want to be accepted by God. This impels the believer to identify with other sinners and seek the necessary action to testify about the grace of forgiveness, which today we include in our ministries of evangelism, discipleship, and missions.

### **Questions:**

- What are the contents of the experience of justification by faith.
- Do you believe that in Isaiah 6 we can with certainty affirm the doctrine of entire sanctification? Why?

### **III. The King's Forgiveness (Isaiah 6:6-7)**

In the previous point, we pointed out the strength and importance of Isaiah's confession. But this act alone doesn't bring forgiveness or purify our sinful human condition. God is the only one who can forgive sins (Mark 2:7b; 1 John 1:9), transforming the nature of a sinful person (2 Cor. 5:17). In the Moody Bible Commentary, we read: "How could the prophet with impure lips repeat the angelic song? His consciousness was overwhelmed by a sense of weakness and personal failure" (Pfeiffer, Charles F., editor. Moody Bible Commentary. Old Testament. USA: Editorial Portavoz, 5th edition, 1997, p.609). Paraphrasing the apostle Peter, one could say to Isaiah: "To whom will you go?" God is the solution for this deep sense of sin.

We mentioned before that the book of Isaiah is a book that, among other topics, deepens our concept of salvation by Faith. The prophet had the experience of receiving purification of his lips and his heart through faith. The means that God used was the participation of one of the seraphim present in the vision, who bearing a burning coal taken from the altar of the temple, flew towards Isaiah, touching his lips and fully declaring him holy.

Only God can forgive. It doesn't come through personal merit. The prophet wasn't forgiven because he sinned less than the rest. God gives His grace in response to anyone who seeks to serve the Lord and feels incapacitated by their sin and guilt. The seraphim declared that God had done His work in the prophet's heart: "your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for" (Isaiah 6:7b).

The dimensions and scope of redemption are clearly seen here, expressed in the works of grace, justification and entire sanctification, forgiveness and purity. Now the prophet was delivered from his burden and from his unworthiness. He could already relate to God and not die. Now, he was ready to listen to the voice of God, understand it, and fully accept it. His own future and that of his nation were in the hands of the mighty, forgiving God who guides the history of His people above and beyond kings or circumstances. The prophet was ready to give his life in service to God.

### **Questions:**

- According to Isaiah 6-7, what value do you place on confession?
- Do you consider Isaiah's attitude of identifying with his people valid today?

### **IV. The King's Commission (Isaiah 6:8-13)**

In the final part of this passage, we find a rhetorical question that comes from God. This question reveals the restlessness that God manifests for the transmission of His Word and message to His people and to the world. This question wasn't directed at anyone in particular, and as such, it continues to be relevant today. God is calling us to cooperate with Him. "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (v.8a) is the question that reverberated in the temple, and still resonates now. God is looking for people who know they have been forgiven from their sins and are sanctified wholly, ready to give their lives in obedience to God and serve Him with all their might, renouncing their own life, projects and privileges.

Isaiah, with courageous determination, responded with speed: "Here I am, send me" (v.8b). This was the only viable answer for a person like the prophet. His love for God and for his people made him understand that there was only one valid answer that God expected.

It's true that he could have left the temple and gone home, and not have accepted the commission that God had given him. This is a choice that many people would have chosen, but the prophet wanted a close relationship with God. Now his life and ministry had much deeper meaning that went beyond the ritualism of his religion and of his office as a preacher. The call was personal, met expectations, healed emotions, and gave him hope for his own future and that of his nation.

The work of God changed the parameters of the prophet Isaiah's life in an instant. Given this extraordinary experience, he could only give one answer: "Here I am, send me" (v.8).

This is the answer that God seeks in the midst of His people yesterday and today. Only when we correctly understand the redemptive work that Jesus does in our lives will we love God above all things, including other people and our personal choices, and answer like Isaiah with determination and courage.

However, the work of the prophet Isaiah would be hard, full of obstacles, misunderstandings, difficulties and persecutions. The people would harden their hearts, cover their eyes, and close their ears to the voice of the prophet who was relaying God's message to them. In the last verses, a final point is anticipated: "...Then I said, 'For how long, Lord?' And he answered: 'Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken...'" (v.11-12).

Here we get a glimpse of people who are hard, who don't want to repent. They probably think that it won't happen to them. The inhabitants of Judah were complacent and indifferent to the voice of God. But nevertheless, God gave Isaiah a guarantee: a small group of Judah would keep their faith in the Lord alive. They would obey and seek to serve Him faithfully in holiness in the midst of situations which would be more difficult and complex.

Verse 13 says: "But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land." The implied promise is Jesus. Of this remnant, the holy seed would be the Savior of Judah, Israel and the world whole. With

that promise, the prophet Isaiah gave himself fully to his work of preaching until, according to tradition, death reached him through martyrdom.

### **Questions:**

- What would be the (current) reasons for accepting God's call?
- How do you evaluate the response that today's society gives to the message of the gospel?

### **Conclusion**

Surrendering to Christ is a calculated risk. The promise of the presence of God, of His permanent work in the heart of every believer, must be balanced against the worries typical of these times. Answering the call as Isaiah did implies that we can participate in the greatest privilege that exists, that of taking part in God's mission of evangelizing the entire world.



# Warrior Kings and the Prince of Peace

Dorothy Bullón (Costa Rica)

**Study passages:** Isaiah 7, 8, 9:1-7

**Memory Verse:** “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” Isaiah 9:6.

**Lesson Purpose:** To discover how God works in the historical context of a rebellious king, and how He gives future hope in the coming of the Messiah.

## Introduction

Let's place ourselves in the eighth century before Christ. In the passages for today's study, we observe four kings: Ahaz - king of Judah, Rezin - king of Syria, Pekah - king of Israel, and Tiglathpileser III - king of Assyria, to the North. We also have three children with significant names: Shear-Jashub, Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, and Immanuel. The prophet Isaiah shared God's message about all these characters.

Ahaz was in a panic because the kings of Syria and Israel were attacking Judah. However, the real enemy was Assyria, the country to the north of Mesopotamia (now Iraq), which was the empire that cruelly attacked and conquered other peoples in the 8th century BC.

After this prophecy, during the reign of Ahaz in 721 BC, the Assyrian army captured the Israelite capital, Samaria, and took captive the citizens of the northern kingdom of Israel, from where many never returned. In 701 BC, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, attacked the fortified cities of the kingdom of Judah in a campaign of subjugation (in the reign of Ahaz's son Hezekiah). God took care of them, and Jerusalem didn't fall to the Assyrians.

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## I. God doesn't permit machiavellian plans but urges faith in Himself (Isaiah 7:1-9)

Ahaz reigned between 732 and 715 BC. He was an evil king of Judah who worshiped other gods and even sacrificed his son as a living sacrifice to Moloch (2 Kings 16:1-4).

Ahaz was a cowardly, superstitious, hypocritical ruler. In fact, he was one of the worst kings of Judah. He discovered that King Rezin of Syria, and Pekah, king of Israel, were going to attack Judah, and that they had plans to conquer Jerusalem and put another king on the throne of Judah. In 2 Chronicles 28:5-15 and 2 Kings 16:5-9, we read of the damage they were causing in Judah.

Acting against the advice of the prophet Isaiah, Ahaz asked Tiglath-pileser III, king of Assyria, for help to repel the invaders. Assyria defeated Syria and Israel, and Ahaz became a vassal of the Assyrian king. Although the political situation in Judah had improved, Assyria demanded heavy tribute, and the Assyrian gods were introduced into the Temple of Jerusalem.

When Ahaz went to meet Tiglath-pileser, his new chief, in Damascus, he saw the pagan altars and the places of sacrifice. He copied these designs and remodeled the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem following the pattern of the pagan temple and altars in Damascus. Ahaz is a powerful and extreme example of someone going into an unholy alliance for “good” reasons, and he was completely corrupted by it (2 Kings 16:10-18).

Before King Ahaz went to the Assyrians, the Lord sent Isaiah to speak to him to warn him not to get into these political associations. Isaiah looked for him and took his son Shear-jashub, whose name means “a remnant will return,” with him (Isaiah 7:3). Isaiah greeted him with a tremendous promise: “Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah” (v.4). The prophet assured Ahaz that, although these two neighboring kings were plotting against him and attacking Judah, in God’s eyes, they were nothing more than two smoldering coal butts.

Ahaz feared that the kings of the north were going to drive him out of his throne, but God told him through his prophet the following: “It won’t take place, it won’t happen” (v.7b). These kings that were plotting against him weren’t going to be successful because they were nations led by wicked men (Rezin and the son of Remaliah), and not by the Lord. This was God’s promise; Isaiah urged Ahaz to trust in the Lord and in His promise.

Ultimately, Ahaz didn’t trust the Lord, but put his confidence in worldly methods and in the king of Assyria. Jerusalem was saved, and Ahaz no doubt believed that his plan had worked. But if Ahaz had trusted in the Lord, Jerusalem would have been really saved, and they would have been blessed.

*Ask: Why did Isaiah take his son Shear-jashub? God wanted Ahaz to know that because of the type of ungodly trust that he had placed in the king of Assyria, Judah would eventually be taken into captivity in Babylon, from where only a remnant would return. Ask: Do we make the same mistake today of trusting people rather than God? Get them to share some examples.*

### **Questions:**

- Do you know of anyone who entered into an alliance with people with different principles for “good” reasons, and ended up corrupted by it?
- What can help us to trust in the Lord in times of trial?

## **II. God Encourages Discipline and Urges Patience (Isaiah 7:17-8:22)**

Isaiah brought terrible news to Ahaz (Isaiah 7:17). The Assyrians were well known for their sheer cruelty, especially with the nations they conquered. They reveled in torturing and humiliating their victims. Judah wasn’t only attacked by the Assyrians, but was also invaded by the Egyptians (v.18). These invasions reduced Judah to the point that they could only keep a few animals: “In that day, a person will keep alive a young cow and two goats. And because of the abundance of the milk they give, there will be curds to eat. All who remain in the land will eat curds and honey” (vv.21-22). Normal agriculture would be devastated (vv.23-24). The old farms became waste fields trodden by oxen, where sheep wandered at will (v.25).

Chapter eight begins with an interesting symbolic act: “The Lord said to me, ‘Take a large scroll and write on it with an ordinary pen: Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz’” (v.1). There were witnesses to this pronouncement (v.2). Then Isaiah’s wife conceived a child whom they named Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, which means “quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil” (Braun, J. A. Isaiah. The Bible Popular. USA: Northwestern Publishing, 2003, p.106

In a sense, Isaiah’s wife, the prophetess, brought about that prophecy. In verse four, Isaiah pronounced: “For before the boy knows how to say ‘My father’ or ‘My mother,’ the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the king of Assyria.”



With this prophecy, God was telling Ahaz when the prophecy about the fall of Syria and the Jewish people of the north, Israel, into Assyrian hands would be fulfilled.

Verses 5-10 declare that Judah wasn't going to escape. Assyria would come like a flood of many waters into Syria and Israel, and would come to Judah: "It will overflow all its channels, run over all its banks and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it, passing through it" (vv. 7b-8)

Judah, however, didn't drown; the water reached up to the neck, but they survived. However, they had to pay large sums of tribute to the Assyrians. Centuries later, Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah and led the captive people to Babylon.

Even if the victims of Assyrian domination (Syria, Israel and Judah) would have prepared for the invasion, they wouldn't have escaped. All their plans, words and ideas wouldn't help them because it was the will of God to use the Assyrians to punish them (vv. 9-10).

Ask: *How could Judah have prepared for this invasion?* Their ruler would have had to love and trust in God and not in the Assyrians (v. 11-15). Verse 13 says, "The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread." Judah shouldn't have participated in conspiracies (v. 12). God wanted them to call, trust and wait upon Him (v. 17). Isaiah said that he and his two children were signs that God was going to fulfill His Word (v. 18). Instead of consulting mediums and spiritists, the inhabitants of Judah should return to "the law and the testimony" (v. 20). Their paths were full of darkness because they abandoned the Word of God and trusted mediums, courting darkness, not light.

### Questions:

- Instead of putting his trust in the Lord, where did Ahaz go for support, and what was the result of that action?
- Where can we find the best advice for our lives today?

### III. God Promises the Messiah (Isaiah 7:10-16, 9:1-7)

These texts about the Messiah are found in two moments of Isaiah's discourse with Ahaz.

#### A. Immanuel (Isaiah 7:10-16)

Isaiah invited the king to ask for a sign from God to confirm the prophecy. But the king answered in a tone of hypocrisy: "I won't ask; I won't put the Lord to the test" (v. 12). The sign that God insisted on giving him was the following: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel... for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste" (vv. 14-16). This prophecy was centered around Ahaz, Jerusalem and the feared attack by Israel and Syria.

This is one of the most famous prophecies about the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, in the Bible (Matthew 1:23). It also illustrates a principle of prophecy: that prophecy can have both close compliance and distant fulfillment. Rodrigo de Sousa explains: "The Christian rereading of this text is a case of a double fulfillment of a prophecy, in which a symbolic sign given at the time of the prophet serves as an announcement of a superior reality, in this case, the birth of the Savior..." (De Sousa, Rodrigo. *Contemporary Biblical Commentary*. Argentina: Editorial Kairos, 2019, p. 857).

Who could Immanuel be in the context of the 8th century before Christ? Many commentators think that this was fulfilled immediately when a young lady of the royal house married early, conceived a son and unknowingly named him Immanuel, "God with us". We don't know the details; but that it was a message in the first place for Ahaz is obvious. He would understand it when it occurred. The name "God with us" was a message to the king to not put his trust in alliances with foreign kings, such as Egypt and Assyria.

With God by his side, things would work out. With him there would be no place to fear his enemies. The Lord was pointing out King Ahaz's lack of faith.

#### B. Birth and reign of the Messiah (Isaiah 9:1-7)

It's in chapter nine that we see very clearly the far-reaching prophecy: The birth of Jesus. Seven centuries later, a baby was born who would change the world. The invasion of the Assyrians was terrible for the northern regions of the promised land, the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali.

But with the arrival of the Messiah, things would change for them: "In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future, he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan" (v.1b). The prophecy announced a great light, happiness and joy (vv.2-3).

The northern tribes were the first to suffer the Assyrian invasions, but in the mercy of God, they were the first to see the light of the Messiah. The Messiah would bring a great victory. The reference to the great joy, the breaking of the yoke of his burden and of his oppressor's rod, and complete victory from all enemies has a spiritual application to the work of Jesus in our lives. These things are ours in Him!

Isaiah introduces us to his third child: Immanuel. This glorious prophecy of the birth of the Messiah reminded Israel that the person who would bring victory would be a man, born like any child. Indeed, the Messiah was born as a baby, that is, in human form, but he is part of the Trinity, and decided to come as a servant (Philippians 2:5). The second person of the Holy Trinity became man. This baby was born to be king, but as Jesus explained to Pilate, His Kingdom wasn't of this world (John 18:36). In fact, we can see that he will govern in wonderful ways. Every time someone miraculously quits a life of drugs or alcohol or the life of sin and is restored, we see the great rule God. His Kingdom is already with us, and one day it will be consummated (Revelation 20:4-6).

This child has several characteristics: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). The Messiah is wonderful, he is our Counselor; he is God of all creation and glory. When Isaiah called Him "Everlasting Father", it doesn't mean that Jesus is the Person of the Father in the Trinity, but rather that he represents the essential unity of the Trinity. Jesus himself explained saying: "...I am in the Father, and the Father in me..." (John 14:11). Jesus is the Prince of Peace; He reconciles us with God (Romans 5:1; Ephesians 2:14-19; Colossians 1:20).

The last verse of our study cries out: "Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this"

(Isaiah 9:7). All of this may seem too good to be true; but it will come to pass. God, the Lord of all heavenly armies, has promised to fulfill this word. Part of it has already been fulfilled. Jesus can be "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" to all now. One day, everyone will see and understand. For now, they are real for those who receive Jesus and submit to Him.

### **Questions:**

- What does "Immanuel" mean? What does this imply for our lives, families, churches and communities today?
- Compose a prayer to Jesus, thanking him for all the wonderful characteristics that He has.

### **Conclusion**

Rodrigo de Sousa challenges us: "The Lord Jesus Christ is God with us, revealing both His judgment and His Salvation for the world and humanity. Up to what point do you believe that God's judgment and salvation are experienced in the life of our societies and churches?" (De Sousa, Rodrigo. *Biblical Commentary Contemporary*. Argentina: Editorial Kairos, 2019, p.861). Each church has the task to share and live Emanuel's message in the neighborhood where it is.



# Our God is a Righteous God

Mirelys Correoso (Cuba)

**Study passages:** Isaiah 9:8-21, 10, 11, 12

**Memory Verse:** "...I will praise you, Lord. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me" Isaiah 12:1.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand how God reacts to sin, how much He loves the sinner and that His children should constantly worship Him.

## Introduction

Human character habitually reacts to a given situation under certain circumstances. According to Taylor, "From a theological meaning, character indicates the personal moral quality" (Taylor, Richard. Dictionary Theological Beacon. USA: CNP, 1983, p.115). Although psychology has defined that there are different characters that generate certain types of behaviors, sadly it's usual today to see people from diverse countries, regions, family backgrounds, intellects, ages and temperaments, acting alike; that is, with the same characteristics that were described in 2 Timothy 3:1-5 by the apostle Paul, where he defined what people would be like in the last days. It seems that there's no real delimitation of behaviors, and for the most part we can see that humanity was "cut from the same cloth."

So, it's also common to find in these times people characterized by fickle character who change their minds and act suddenly without taking a stable position on a topic or issue. What can we say about the anger and irritability, leading people to dehumanized actions of violence that are often applauded by many of the mass media, especially on social networks!

In the midst of this unfortunate scenario, the people of God have an excellent foolproof model, who, as the apostle James said, "...does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17b). The character of God is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is and will be for all time: "Holy, Holy, Holy" (Isaiah 6:3), because that is His nature and essence and "...he cannot disown himself" (2 Timothy 2:13b).

## I. The Wrath or Anger of God (Isaiah 9:8-10:34)

If we position ourselves as moderators of a panel of a group of consecrated Christians, and we ask them to mention God's attributes, qualities and actions, we'll hear them repeat in a euphoric tone that God is: "loving, almighty, omnipotent, omnipresent, merciful, just, faithful!" These qualities comfort us just listening to them. But what mostly won't be mentioned is that there are circumstances when God is wrathful. I've done this dynamic in different contexts, and in repeated occasions, I've had to mention God's wrath. Then the faces don't look so animated.

Although the Bible presents various passages which show that our God is slow to anger and full of mercy (Numbers 14:18; Ps. 86:15), it's a fact that the Lord does show wrath in His dealings with humanity, and we, as His sons and daughters, aren't exempt.

Few men in love or loving fathers have evoked phrases as beautiful and passionate as those God has spoken about His people, Israel. His love for them is unconditional and genuine. He calls Israel His "treasured possession" (Exodus 19:5), the center of His "everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3), "the apple of his eye" (Zechariah 2:8). For His chosen people, the Lord has performed countless feats. He shocked the world with wonders and signs that are still talked about in history. Thus, for spiritual Israel, those of us who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus, He prepared the most dazzling proof of love that the world has known and will ever know, the sacrifice of Jesus (John 3:16), and He continues to reveal himself with glory and power.

In the passages that concern us today (Isaiah 9:8-10:34), we see the Lord projecting himself in anger before Israel. No, we aren't in the presence of a capricious and unfounded feeling, but of God's response to the sin of His people. The sins of the people of Israel can also be found in today's world and even in our congregations. God hates sin.

This passage talks about pride (9:9-10), haughtiness (9:9-10), malignancy (9:17-18), lack of piety (9:19), lack of purpose (9:17), of deceitful rulers and leaders (9:16), who pass unjust laws that marginalize the poor and helpless (10:1-2). Isaiah 9:13, summarizes what we discussed before.

The chosen people didn't seek the Lord of hosts. God won't compromise with those who persist in sinning, but His answer will be according to His justice and righteousness. Many who don't believe in God, and even believers, devoid of biblical knowledge, see the wrath of God as alien to God's nature. They cannot understand that a God of love would be angry (1 John 4:8). They don't know which of His attributes justify His wrath and the corresponding punishment. "God is Holy (hagios) (Lk 1:49; Jn. 17:11), a Greek word that means among other things: Clean and pure of pollution" (Vine, Edwy William. *Comprehensive Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Costa Rica: Editorial Caribe, 1999, p.1502).

Ask your students: *Because He is holy, how could the Lord remain indifferent to what is dirty and obstructs the intimate relationship He wants to have with us?* God hates sin because it's the barrier that prevents us from living in His most beloved creation and sharing His holiness, experiencing entire sanctification. Precisely because of His sense of justice, and because of the magnitude of the love that God professes towards people, is the reason why He cannot benevolently consent to acts of disobedience (Ephesians 5:6). The Lord's heart is hurt when He sees many human beings being lost, serving Satan. When we're aware that He's angry with us, it's an opportunity to come into His majestic presence and take part in His redemptive plan.

### Questions:

- What human behaviors make God wrathful or angry?
- Name some biblical examples where we see God get angry.

## II. The Reign of God (Isaiah 11:1-16)

How wonderful it is to know that God's plan for humanity is redemption and not wrath! God doesn't want to be angry, but His very nature calls for wrath when we reject and resist Him, persisting in sin without repenting.

The God who made Israel walk on dry ground through the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21-22), accompanied them in the desert, day and night, guiding them with pillars of cloud and fire (Exodus 13:21-22), made them invincible in battles with giants (2 Samuel 21:20-22), even when He was still aware of the magnitude of their wickedness, wouldn't leave them without an alternative. He provided a superior miracle: the death of His beloved Son so that we might have life and life to the full (John 10:10).

Isaiah was announcing the most beautiful and touching love story that would ever be heard. Israel would be at the epicenter of the redemption of the world. The prophet said, "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord" (Isaiah 11:2). These are the credentials of the King of kings prophesied by Isaiah over 2,000 years ago.

All of us, God's sons and daughters, are part of the fulfillment of this prophecy. Christ reigns, and there's a people of diverse races, cultures and latitudes that worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:23), who are waiting for His coming, not statically, but by fulfilling His purpose on earth, that of expanding the precious seed: The Word of God (Luke 8:11). Christ reigns in every church that perseveres in sound doctrine, in that anonymous minister who is ready to serve quietly and faithfully, where only God sees what he's doing; in the sweet smile of a child who treasures his Bible as his most precious treasure; in fact, in all of us.

We are in the end times, and we see the world groaning in labor pains (Romans 8:22). What do humans do to solve the problems? More and more, they're only palliative solutions. This world needs the imminent coming of Christ and His glorious, eternal, just and inclusive reign. We can count on the Holy Spirit strengthening and comforting us, the Bible will continue to guide and sustain us. We must maintain an intimate relationship with the Lord, longing for the day when He comes for His church. We aren't of this world; our citizenship is in Heaven (Philippians 3:20).

Not only did Isaiah prophesy about the kingdom of God, many other prophets did too, including the apostle John, who in the book of Revelation, let us see that that reign would exceed all human expectations (Revelation 21:1-3). At last, those redeemed by the blood of the Lamb will be free from pain and death (Revelation 21:4). We'll be satisfied by the giver of the water of life (Revelation 21:6). We'll dwell in the heavenly dwellings, being partakers of the glory of God (Revelation 21:22-25). We'll serve, praise and worship the Lord (Revelation 19:1-18, 22:3). We'll see his face (Revelation 22:4), and we'll reign with Him (Revelation 22:5).

Ask your students: *Are we perpetually looking for the reign of Christ, or for fleeting happiness in this land? (Matthew 6:33).* May the cares of this world not make us lose our redemption and the priceless worth of the crown of life (Revelation 2:10b).

### Questions:

- What does God's reign mean for the church?
- How does the prophet John describe the kingdom of God, in the book of Revelation 19:1-18, 21:4,6,22-25; 22:3-5?

### III. Thanksgiving (Isaiah 12:1-6)

In the Bible, we can see many psalms of thanksgiving for different reasons, for military victories (Psalm 18), for having been delivered from danger or death (Psalm 30), for the favor of Jehovah (Psalm 138), as well as songs of gratitude, fruit of great feats and signs of God to His people. An example of this is in Exodus 15:2, when the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea and sang the Canticle of Moses and Mary, which not by chance is the same as Isaiah 12:2: "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation."

Because of the distance in time between Moses and Isaiah, we can say that this song was passed down from generation to generation. The center and the essence of the psalm is that of the Kingdom of God and His salvation.

Personally, when I'm depressed, I do an exercise that helps me get out of it. I make a list of all the blessings the Lord has bestowed on me. To my surprise, the list is getting longer and longer; this technique works for me like a drug. I quickly feel very blessed. But among all the phrases that I write, there's one that is repeated in all my lists, and stands out for its preponderance: I'm saved!

Having been freed from the stigma of sin, the extraordinary way how we've been justified, regenerated and adopted as children of God, the promise of eternal life and participation in the kingdom of Heaven, are sufficient reasons to be eternal worshippers. Nothing or no one can take away these spiritual conquests if we persevere in faith.

Living a life grateful to God isn't optional for us Christians; it's a command (Ephesians 5:20). It's a spiritual discipline, which in turn becomes a real challenge for our faith. I've met many worship ministers with "very beautiful loud voices" that move an entire congregation with their music, but their lives show that they aren't walking close to God. Thanksgiving is much more than singing and reading inspiring psalms. I'm not belittling the genuine praise that comes from the heart of a true follower of the Lord. In Revelation 19, we can almost visualize that glorious scene in which the voice of a great multitude praises and worships the Lord at the so-called Marriage of the Lamb. This lavish praise can only be the fruit of multitudes of grateful souls who, from their time on earth, had already professed sacrifices of praise (Hebrews 13:15); and that finally, they have consummated in heaven their longing to be eternally before the presence of the Lord to worship Him.

Thanksgiving is living through all our everyday chores on earth with an intrinsic joy in our souls in the midst of all circumstances. It's learning to see every situation, no matter how adverse it may seem, as a divine purpose that will work for good (Rom. 8:28). It's seeing God as the reason for our successes. Only after experiencing these experiences can our lips express authentic gratitude to God. But the greatest consummation of thanksgiving is to have sanctified lives that exude a pleasant odor, pleasing to the Lord, becoming offerings of thankfulness for Him (Rom. 12:1).

### Questions:

- What does thanksgiving mean for you?
- How can we lead a life of thanksgiving to God?

### Conclusion

God, unlike us humans, is always the same. His attributes are eternal. Because He's holy, he'll express wrath for sin. But he's always loving, just and merciful to the sinner. He's promised an everlasting kingdom for those who seek Him from their heart. Because of this, we're called to offer Him thanksgiving, which includes what we say and also living our lives in holiness.



# A Relationship of Privileges and Duties

Walter R. Rodríguez (Uruguay)

**Study passages:** Isaiah 13, 14:6-23, 22, 23, 24, 34

**Memory Verse:** “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” Hosea 6:6.

**Lesson Purpose:** To recognize that since the beginning of human history, the relationship with God is a covenant one, which includes duties, blessings, ethical conduct and benefits.

## Introduction

The prophecies selected for this lesson can leave us sad and perplexed as to the future. However, there are notes of restoration and hope if God's people take advantage of the opportunities that God Himself presents. In all the prophecies that we'll look at, there are very relevant lessons that are worth mediating on. Make no mistake, the warnings of these prophecies are real.

Isaiah lived and prophesied in a time of great political instability, a lot of military activity, wars where different empires and nations invaded other lands, which affected the lives of the inhabitants in that region of the world. Those were hard times for God's people, who had abandoned their relationship with God. On the other hand, those people who had attacked the Hebrew people had to suffer the consequences of their actions. Let's see how this worked out in detail.

### I. The Destruction of Nations (Isaiah 13:1-22, 14:6-23, 23:1-18, 34:1-17)

#### A. God's dealings with Babylon

The prophecy against Babylon, found in chapters 13 and 14, has already been fulfilled. The city of Babylon was conquered, destroyed, rebuilt and destroyed again. Only ruins remain at the present time. Under Nebuchadnezzar, this city influenced the world of those times. In its moment of great splendor and fame, it was known for having one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: The Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible says: “Like every great city,

Babylon was distinguished...for its prosperity... also for its pomp and laxity of their customs. Its idolatry was repugnant to biblical writers...It was the capital of the great empire which... rivaled Egypt for supremacy over Palestine and surrounding regions” (Nelson, Wilton M., edit. Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible. USA: Editorial Caribe, 1982, p.67).

The language and emotions of this prophecy carry words of encouragement for the people who had suffered invasions and submissions. There was real hope that God was going to do justice: “the Lord is near” (13:6); “The day of the Lord is coming” (v.9). The penalty suffered by those who so harshly oppressed the chosen people was terrible. The text says: “The Lord has broken the rod of the wicked” (14:5). The hard ruler of that nation was to be defeated: “Is this the man who shook the earth and made kingdoms tremble, the man who made the world a wilderness, who overthrew its cities and wouldn't let his captives go home?” (14:16-17); “How the oppressor has come to an end! How his fury has ended!” (14:4). This section, full of divine justice, must have sounded comforting to the ears of the people of Israel.

It's clear here that the evil that the powerful nations did to Israel (the Lord's people) didn't pass unnoticed by God; neither the abuse of authority or any other activity. Just as Babylon enjoyed and took advantage of their situation by abusing those that they had conquered, today too people are guilty of the same sin, whether it's an authority or an individual, taking advantage of the situation for their own benefit, instead of fully complying with what God has granted them.

Sins, whether of action or omission (“If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and does not do it, it is sin for them.” James 4:17), end up leading people and organizations on the wrong path, which in turn leads to negative consequences. Remember that Christians are representatives of the gospel wherever we live and in whatever we do, support and/or reject, whatever we promote, as well as what we allow within our authority and responsibility.

## **B. God’s dealings with Tyre**

Tyre, a Phoenician port that served Sidon, a bigger city a few miles away, grew rapidly, and prospered with maritime trade: “Tyre, was famous for its navigators. Their trade linked the East with the west... It was a great commercial and maritime center throughout most of history... Isaiah calls it “emporium of the nations” (v. 23:3), and Ezekiel... “she who traffics with the peoples of many coastlands” (v. 27:3)” (Nelson, Wilton M., edit. *Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible*. USA: Editorial Caribe, 1982, p.664). Because of its commercial success and its economic prosperity, it had become proud and arrogant. Tyre wronged Israel when it sold Israelites as slaves to Edom (Amos 1:9-10). With pride they despised others, just like Babylon. Isaiah 23:8-9 says: “Who planned this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose merchants are princes, whose traders are renowned in the earth? The Lord Almighty planned it, to bring down her pride in all her splendor and to humble all who are renowned on the earth.” Yes, Tyre was to be punished for a period of seventy years (Isaiah 23:15).

God had blessed Tyre with success and wealth, but it had been used for the accumulation, luxury, prestige and the power of a few. But verse 18 says: “Yet her profit and her earnings will be set apart for the Lord; they will not be stored up or hoarded. Her profits will go to those who live before the Lord, for abundant food and fine clothes.” Now, it was to go to those who put God at the center of their lives.

Tyre was conquered and restored several times. Every time they prospered because of the quality of their merchants and the capacity of their fleet. Sadly, Lebanon today is in a state of permanent conflict and great social distress..

## **C. God’s punishment on Edom**

Isaiah chapter 34 is a prophecy against Edom. The

central topic is expressed in verse 8: “For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution, to uphold Zion’s cause.” Zion’s cause refers to the historical enmity among the descendants of Esau and the descendants of Jacob, the Israelites. When the Jewish people were on their way to the promised land, the Edomites didn’t allowed them to pass through their lands (Numbers 20:14-21). Added to this, in the occasion of the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, the Edomites collaborated with the invader (Psalm 137:7).

The prophet Obadiah summarized Edom’s attitude toward the Israelites: “The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights, you who say to yourself, ‘Who can bring me down to the ground?’” (Obadiah 1:3). The prophet goes on to describe briefly some of the Edomite actions against the Israelite people (Obadiah 1:11-14). Many years had gone by but the Edomites showed no regret; on the contrary, they persevered in their sin. Hatred and arrogance motivated their rebellious attitude toward God and His people.

It’s easy to feel that these historical and remote events have nothing to do with what happens to us today. However, the lesson we can learn is that arrogance, pride and contempt for the teachings of the Word have their consequences for sinners and for their entire area of influence. Ignoring God and/or relegating His teachings to a secondary role and doubting its veracity is a mistake. Behaviors that arise from ignoring God and disregarding the ethics that He teaches will bring negative results in whatever is done. We need to be humble, wise and obedient.

## **Questions:**

- Do you believe that when people ignore God and disregarding the ethics that He teaches, there will be negative results? Why or why not?
- How does this affect our world today?

## II. The Destruction of Jerusalem (Isaiah 22:1-25)

### A. The city of Jerusalem

In chapter 22, Isaiah prophesied about Jerusalem. He called it “a town so full of commotion...city of tumult and revelry” (v.2); and he added that their rulers and their army had failed: “All your leaders have fled together; they have been captured without using the bow” (v.3). These verses give us the idea of a superficial existence, rulers without compromise, and the bravest soldiers were cowards.

The inhabitants of Jerusalem and their rulers ignored God's call to repentance (v.12), and instead had noisy parties, “But see, there is joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine!” (v.13). Faced with imminent danger, they opted for escaping in hedonistic activities, irresponsibly leaving the future for others to deal with the crisis. They put aside the almighty God and saw religion as merely carrying out ceremonial duties.

### B. Judah's government

In the prophecy, a public servant is referred to: Shebna the palace administrator (v.15), who, in the midst of the situation they were living in, became more concerned with his ego and personal interests than in fulfilling his duty. Because of this attitude, he lost his job and everything for which he was had worked for: “I will depose you from your office, and you will be ousted from your position” (v.19). A new administrator was appointed to take his place: Eliakim, who did his work well, God blessed him and encouraged him “I will drive him like a peg into a firm place...” (v.23). But Eliakim wanted to find his relatives and ensure their future giving them many benefits: “All the glory of his family will hang on him: its offspring and offshoots—all its lesser vessels, from the bowls to all the jars...” (v.24). This was a typical case of nepotism that ended up ruining him and his family: “...the peg driven into the firm place will give way; it will be sheared off and will fall, and the load hanging on it will be cut down...” (v.25).

The prophet Isaiah was committed to carrying out his call, and this meant speaking out against the wrongs of his society. Instead of just going along with the king, he was faithful to his calling and did what

God had entrusted to him. But the people chose to ignore both the messenger and the message. Each was focused on themselves.

Individualism is also very typical in our societies, and it contrasts with what the Bible teaches us: “... you shall love your neighbor as yourself...” (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 5:43). When the time came to unite against the common enemy, they weren't prepared to face the adversity. Their superficial religiosity wasn't enough; they needed a more solid and educated faith in the teachings of the Lord, which they didn't have.

### Questions:

- Do you think that, just as in Isaiah's time, people today ignore the call to repentance? (Isaiah 22:1-14). Why?
- Just like Shebna today, are there leaders who think too much of themselves? (Isaiah 22:15-25) Comment.
- If we're responding like the people in Isaiah's time: what should be our attitude today?

## III. Judgment on the Earth (Isaiah 24:1-23)

### A. The planet

In this third prophecy, Isaiah used apocalyptic figurative language to describe events that will cover the entire planet. Surely those people listening to Isaiah proclaim his prophecy hardly had any concept of what the planet was like. They understood the prophet to be referring to what they knew. However, we can see that since that, there's a real possibility that this prophecy may have a planetary reach.

Today, humanity possesses the means to self-destruct and depopulate the earth, whether by nuclear war, atomic accidents, chemical warfare, viral pandemics or by technological resources. Every resource in hands of sinful people, in moral decadence and negative ethics, can be used to end human life on Earth.

No one escapes the price of sin. Isaiah 24:2 says clearly that everyone from all kinds of walks of life will be affected. The prophet lists a number of employment and business relationships. The consequences of ignoring God, or deliberately sinning against Him, affects the whole world.



Ecological imbalances result from the abuse of the environment, and this will affect everyone, both the abusers and those who care about taking care of nature. In the same way that sin has personal consequences, it also brings in its wake, social consequences.

### **B. The inhabitants**

Isaiah 24:5 says, "The earth is defiled by its people..." Humanity will be guilty of such a tragedy. We have violated specific commands of God, such as the law and the covenant that He established with the people, and ignored the so-called "ecological mandate" of Genesis 1:28. The Beacon Commentary notes: "Subdue her and rule over her...It's about a delegated authority... by which man is responsible to his Creator... This didn't grant him the privilege of exploiting nature, leaving behind the ruin and desolation" (Livingston, George Herbert et al. Beacon Biblical Commentary, volume I. USA: CNP, 1969, p.19).

Those who are saved from the events mentioned in the prophecy are those who will sing praises to God: "They raise their voices, they shout for joy; from the west they acclaim the Lord's majesty" (Isaiah 24:14). However, the prophet said: "... I waste away, I waste away!

Woe to me! The treacherous betray! With treachery the treacherous betray!" (v.16). Even those who had suffered because of their sins and had survived didn't repent, but resorted to praise, trying to appease the wrath of God, matters that the prophet lamented with deep sadness. The Prophet Hosea expressed something similar saying: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings" Hosea 6:6.

Songs have their place, but they must be accompanied by lives that please God. Today we must be faithful to this ecological mandate out of love and obedience to God. He is the one who has provided the resources and He has commissioned us to take care of them and manage them, knowing that neglectful abuse and exploitation by greed is a sin and its consequences affect everyone and the world.

### **Questions:**

- Are we fulfilling the mandate of Genesis 1:28 well for our home and neighborhood? Why not?
- What can we do as a church today to take care of the community where we live?

### **Conclusion**

Continually, in these passages, the prophet Isaiah warned of the consequences of sin, both personal as well as social sins. He condemned pride, arrogance and greed, and he associated them with the abuse of the environment. He remembers that God has called us to repent, and he has been willing to forgive and restore, but the decision remains with us as individuals and as part of society. Let's live attentive to the will of God as we find it clearly expressed in the Bible, trusting in Him, and obeying what we know He wants us to do.



# Praise, Trust and Hope in God

Zeida Lynch (U.S.A.)

**Study passages:** Isaiah 25, 26, 27

**Memory Verse:** “You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you” Isaiah 26:3.

**Lesson Purpose:** To recognize the blessings of the Lord in our lives and in the life to come; and renew our commitment of fidelity and gratitude towards God.

## Introduction

Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, years before the exile (Isaiah 1:1). God's chosen people weren't living according to God's teachings. On the contrary, they were idolaters and disobedient to God's laws. Although some kings sought Him, others strongly rejected Him. This had led the people to move further and further away from God and live in idolatry, in complete and willful disobedience. Isaiah's mission was to warn the leaders of Judah about the judgment that would come upon them and upon the Jewish people. God was patient, but Judah's disobedience would be punished in the same way that the northern kingdom, Israel, had been punished.

However, Isaiah also shared the hope that God would fulfill the promise given to David, that the kingdom would always belong to David's offspring (2 Samuel 7:1-29). That promise would be fulfilled with the arrival of the Messiah in the very distant future. In the book of Isaiah, we find many prophecies about the Messiah. That hope would encourage the chosen people during the time of punishment and exile.

The other part of Isaiah's message was that there would be judgment against the nations that God used to punish His chosen people. These nations would be very hard on the people of Judah, and because they would magnify themselves and not recognize God in the midst of their feats, they would be completely destroyed. From chapter 13 to chapter 24, Isaiah mentioned God's punishment of the nations of Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, northern Israel, Ethiopia, Egypt, Duma, Arabia, Tyre, among others who would suffer for having mistreated His chosen people. Isaiah chapters 25 to 27 are expressions of praise to God for what He did, does, and will do for the redemption of His people. It's a call

to trust in the Lord during the time of captivity, and keep hope alive that this redemption will take place with the return to their land after exile.

## I. The People of God Praise and Thank Him for His Deeds (Isaiah 25: 1-12)

In Isaiah 25:1-12, the prophet invited Judah to praise God. Isaiah led the people to recognize that because of the kind hand of the Lord, they would see the fall of their enemies. Strong nations like Assyria, and later Babylon, would be destroyed forever (v.2). These actions would have repercussions, not only for God's people, but also in the neighboring nations when all sought the compassion of the Lord with His people in affliction and humiliation (v.4). Isaiah also pointed out that there would be blessing for all nations, inviting them to go to Jerusalem to the holy mountain of God (v.6-7). There is a promise of eternity in this chapter: God will destroy death and end suffering (v.8). That promise will also be fulfilled in the New Heaven and New Earth (Revelation 21:4).

How can we apply this passage to our lifetime? Isaiah 25:1-12 is a passage of hope, calling us to be thankful to God. Even during difficult times, His holy presence won't leave us. In some moments in the Christian life, we'll have to go through difficult times, trials, and anguish or uncertainty due to personal, family or social circumstances. The above passage gives us two reasons why we can continue praising the name of God, even during difficulties.

The first reason: God has done wonders in our lives. We all have personally experienced God's love, faithfulness, provisions and blessings. However, sometimes we forget them, or what is worse, we don't recognize that they come from Him. It's true that we can never finish counting all His blessings. As Psalm 40:5 puts it: “Many, Lord my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. None can compare with

you; Were I to speak and tell of your deeds, they would be too many to declare.” But we must learn to develop a spirit of gratitude for the gifts we perceive. We must also learn to recognize that God is acting on our behalf. Sometimes, we believe that they are fortuitous situations and not God’s intentional blessings for us.

The second reason He gives us is that he has “...done wonderful things, things planned long ago” (Isaiah 25:1). The promises of God are true. Just as he announced that He would punish His people, He also announced their freedom and the punishment of those had who abused His people. He kept His word as we can see in various prophetic books.

In the same way, we must consider the Word of God to help us grow in faith. The promises of God also demand a commitment on our part, a habit to change, a decision to make, a change of thought or attitude. God doesn’t condition His promises, but He wants us to grow and allow ourselves be shaped by Him. But also, in Isaiah 25:8-9, we find another reason to praise him: the promise that He will come one day when there will be neither death nor tears. Jesus promised His disciples that He would go to prepare a place for us (John 14:1-2), and Paul told us in 1 Corinthians 15:54 that death will be defeated.

Hope in the Second Coming of Christ, as well as the promise of Heaven for everyone who believes in Him, is another powerful reason for us to praise him. Revelation 7:17, 21:4 affirm that the Lord will wipe away all tears and that there will be no death or pain. When we face uncertainty, we can be sure that what we live will be like a moment compared with the eternity that awaits us, an eternity without pain, death or separation. This hope is another reason why we can praise God. Praising Him must be a way of life for every Christian. It must be the result of heart felt conviction that recognizes God’s faithfulness during our lives, the surety of fulfilled promises based on the hope for eternity we have in Him.

### **Questions:**

- Give three reasons Isaiah gives for us to exalt and praise God (vv.1,8).
- What are some of your personal reasons for praising and exalting God (v.8)?

## **II. God’s People Trust and Obey Him (Isaiah 26:1-21)**

Isaiah chapter 26 is an expression of confidence in God. It’s a song that would be sung when the Jews would return to their city after the exile. They would finally acknowledge that it was God who had allowed them to return and who

had defeated their enemies (vv.5-6). At the same time, it came from the people’s sincere repentance and their recognition that God had answered their desperate cry for divine justice (vv.8-9). Judah had strayed away from God because they continued to practice idolatry, in spite of all the prophet’s messages. During the exile, God continued to send prophets to guide them to repent and trust that He would forgive them.

It’s nice to experience the blessing of having overcome a test or a difficult moment. When we stop for a moment, in hindsight we see that God has been faithful during this time and has given us the victory. This helps us to reaffirm our trust in Him. Isaiah 26:3 tells us that God will look after us when we learn to persevere in Him because we trust in who He is. The peace that God offers is the same that Jesus spoke of in John 14:27 and the one that Paul mentions in Philippians 4:7. This peace doesn’t mean that we won’t have problems, but rather, it’s peace in the middle of the storm. This peace comes when we trust the Lord; when we continue to trust in who is God in spite of any situations we may have to go through, we can enjoy peace.

This isn’t a triumphalist confidence that believes that everything will be fine, or that nothing bad will happen to Christians. It’s a trust that’s based on the knowledge of who God is, that He keeps His promises, that His mercy it’s inexhaustible, and that He has promised to be with us forever (Matthew 28:20).

Isaiah 26:5-9 encourages the people to continue to trust in God and hope in Him because He has humbled the mighty (vv.5-6). God would defeat every nation who oppressed Judah. God is just. He evaluates our actions, and knows the intention of our heart (v.7-8). Through challenging situations, God is teaching us His righteousness (v.9). Difficulties are a means through which we can get to know Him in a new and fresh way, when His attributes and goodness become more visible in our life.

It’s when we recognize who God is that will help us to sincere repentance. From verse 16 to 18, we find out what was the chosen people’s reaction. Isaiah mentioned in verse 16 that the people sought God in prayer. In the middle of punishment, they recognized that they had disobeyed and sought God for forgiveness, restoration and restitution. In the following verses, we discover that they recognized that all their efforts for freeing themselves from the consequences of their disobedience was in vain. The prophet compares their pains to the effort of a woman during childbirth (vv.17-18). However, despite all their efforts, they didn’t obtain deliverance from their enemies. How important it is to recognize that only God can give us victory!

This lack of repentance is a symptom of pride. Many times, we want to “fix” our lives, and then draw closer to God. But the reality is that He will accept us as we are and fills us with the Holy Spirit who will help us make the necessary changes to transform our lives.

Isaiah 26:20-21 refers to time after the exile. It's an invitation to hope, to trust, to persevere in trusting God (v.3). These words should encourage us when we pass through difficult times and it seems that God doesn't answer us: “Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until his wrath has passed by” (v.20). Keep trusting, keep persevering, God has not changed, He will fulfill what He has promised.

### **Questions:**

- From Isaiah 26:5-9, give three reasons why the chosen people should trust God.
- What were the steps of Israel's repentance (vv. 16-18)?

### **III. God's People Experience Restoration (Isaiah 27:1-13)**

In Isaiah 27, the prophet invited the chosen people to keep hoping that God would restore them. In the first part of this chapter, Isaiah began by announcing the punishment and destruction of Judah's enemies. The example he used was leviathan, a marine reptile (v.1). This animal is used in some passages in the Bible to represent God's enemies. In Job 41, it's described as an animal of great strength. Its destruction by God is mentioned in Isaiah 27, referring to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who would conquer Judah and take her captive into exile (2 Chronicles 36:17-21).

The hope that Isaiah gave the chosen people was that the destruction of that enemy would be total. The following verses (Isaiah 27:2-13) affirm God's care for His people, in spite of the fact that they were going into exile. God would take care of them like a special vineyard (v.3). Those who have experience with gardening know that it's not enough just to plant seeds because the plants need constant care. In addition to watering, you have to prune, remove weeds that might be growing nearby, etc. In the USA State, where I live with my family, we have to keep our eye on the weather because we can have hail or snow even during the summer. When that happens, we have to cover the plants with materials that can protect them from the cold.

Isaiah emphasized that the Lord himself would care for His people so no harm could come to them. God didn't

take the punishment away, but even during the exile, God would continue taking care of them and keeping a remnant. Isaiah also expresses God's invitation to His people to be at peace with Him. Divine discipline isn't to destroy whom the Lord loves but to restore them (Heb. 12:5-8).

Judah's punishment was due to their idolatry and constant disobedience to God. Isaiah 27:9 tells us that God will spare the Israelites if they destroyed the altars where they worship other gods. The future for the remnant of Israel was one of victory. They would return to their land from every place where they had been exiled to and they would return renewed with the desire to please God and worship Him (vv. 12-13).

How can we apply this passage to our lives and the church? These verses should give much hope for the church today. First, that the common enemy we have is Satan, who will be completely destroyed (Revelation 20:10). When we see all the pain sin causes and its consequences in humanity, we can renew our confidence that Christ has overcome the enemy; he will be completely annihilated one day.

Second, God promises to care for us and protect us. Just as a gardener tends his garden, God will do what is necessary so that His church remains. In John 15, Jesus also takes the example of a vine, and invites us to remain in Him, to receive from Him the nutrients necessary for our life. However, the Isaiah 27 passage also shows us that there's a restitution process to guide us to true repentance and change of conduct.

This restitution process, which is different for each believer, has the objective of showing us what it is that is taking the first place in our lives, what is replacing God in us, and helping us to renew a commitment to be faithful to God. In the midst of the situations that God uses to polish and mold our lives, His love remains the same, He continues to take care of us. His intention is to make us more like Christ.

### **Questions:**

- What is your reaction to the injustices that occur in work or business environments?

### **Conclusion**

In Isaiah 25 to 27, we find a call to praise, confidence and hope in the presence of God in our life. Praise in the midst of difficulties, trust by recognizing who God is, and hope in His restitution. We must develop these attitudes in order to have a victorious life in Christ and testify with our lives to those around us.



# God's Justice to the Nations

Joel Castro (Spain)

**Study passages:** Isaiah 28:1-15, 18-29, 29, 33:1

**Memory Verse:** "The ruthless will vanish, the mockers will disappear, and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down..." Isaiah 29:20.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that if we don't sincerely seek God's presence, God will judge us as He did with Judah, Israel and Assyria.

## Introduction

The book of the prophet Isaiah is longer than any other prophetic book. The content of the 66 chapters of this book has earned the title of being the "miniature Bible." And just as the Bible touches on generic themes such as sin, the Messiah, salvation, judgment, etc., so does the prophet in this book. Referring to divine justice, Isaiah preached and witnessed the judgment that Israel had to suffer.

The prophet Isaiah rebuked the nations, calling them to consider the impending divine judgments if they didn't repent of their wickedness. There are two sections where the writer expresses laments in the form of divine judgements on different recipients. The first is addressed to the house of Israel, whom he denounces for their wickedness (5:8-22); and the second section is addressed to the nations closest to the prophet (28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33). "The first is contained in one chapter; and the second is found in a section of 6 chapters, also known as "the book of the woes" (Youngblood, Ronald. Theme of Isaiah. USA: Editorial Miami Life, 1987, p.65).

In our study today, we'll look at some of this second section following the title of the lesson, "God's justice to the nations." Let's examine what caused the nations of Israel, Judah and Assyria to be put on trial.

### I. Judgment for the House of Ephraim (Isaiah 28:1-13)

After King Solomon's death, Israel was divided into two kingdoms. The southern kingdom was made up of just two tribes, while the northern kingdom was composed of ten tribes, of which the tribe of Ephraim was the most dominant. Previously, Isaiah had called Samaria "the head of Ephraim" referring to this city as the capital of the northern kingdom (7:9). Ephraim was judged for their addiction to alcohol: "Woe to that wreath, the pride of

Ephraim's drunkards, to the fading flower, his glorious beauty, set on the head of a fertile valley—to that city, the pride of those laid low by wine!" (28:1).

The consequences of alcohol have never been good. It's brought innumerable suffering and pain to society, both on a personal and family level, in the work place and above all, as a spiritual problem. Abuse of alcohol causes riots, debauchery and people do ridiculous things. So what could be expected from those who ruled the northern kingdom? Alcohol gives false authority to those who rule because they do it with haughtiness and despotism. For this, God would raise a nation that would trample "the wreath, the pride of Ephraim's drunkards" (v.3). God was going to bring a nation against them who was powerful and strong. "Like a hailstorm and a destructive wind, like a driving rain and a flooding downpour" (v.2). Assyria was coming to humble Israel and besiege the capital city Samaria, which fell in 721 B.C.

The alcohol problem had become so pervasive that not only civil rulers had fallen into this vice but also the priests and prophets who: "stagger from beer and are befuddled with wine" (28:7). Unfortunately, they had lost all spiritual sensibility, were stupefied, deranged and stunned. There was no spiritual vision and they didn't make good decisions (v.7). It was such a gross situation that there was only vomit and dirt on their work tables (v.8).

In Leviticus 10:8-11, God had commanded Aaron and all the Levites to keep away from the consumption of alcohol so that they could discern between good and bad. Things got really bad in Israel, not only were the leaders drunken, but the people too. If they didn't change their ways, they would be destroyed by the Assyrians. Even though they refused to learn their lessons like naughty children, they would have to learn their lessons through strangers from a foreign land. This is what happened when the Assyrians conquered them and took them as captives to a strange land (v.9-13).

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul, in his pastoral instructions, told Titus and Timothy that pastors and spiritual leaders shouldn't be wine drinkers (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7). But this exhortation is valid also for every disciple of Christ since alcohol can distort reality and dominates us, preventing us from being guided by the Holy Spirit.

Returning to the passage from Isaiah, in the middle of the exhortation to the civil and religious leaders who were being destroyed by alcohol, God talks of himself as a wreath: "In that day the Lord Almighty will be a glorious crown, a beautiful wreath for the remnant of his people" (Isaiah 28:5-6). We need to follow Paul's advice to the Ephesians, to be filled with the Holy Spirit instead of getting drunk with wine which leads to dissolution and death (Ephesians 5:18).

### Questions:

- What was and still is the vice that breaks many lives and many families?
- What are the consequences when religious leaders fall into the consumption of alcoholic beverages (v.7)?

## II. Judgment for the House of Jerusalem (Isaiah 28:14-15, 18-29, 29:1-24)

Isaiah lived in Jerusalem, so he knew his countrymen very well and he also denounced the southern kingdom for their wickedness.

### A. Judgment for their falsehood (28:14-15, 18-29)

The Jewish nation was aware of the military crisis that was taking place in the region, but instead of seeking God's help, they took refuge in a religion of lies and falsehood (v.15). Isaiah denounced this fact as mockery to God (v.14,22). The religious and civil leaders, knowing from whom true salvation would come, preferred to make alliances with Egypt. Isaiah called this pact with Egypt a "covenant with death" because instead of life, it would lead to their demise (v.18).

Today, people prefer to hear from the false preachers who speak to them of peace, prosperity, and security, not putting the attention on how we can please God. This sort of false message gives the devil advantages since it's a lie dressed up as a blessing

### B. Judgment for their spiritual hypocrisy (29:1-14)

The prophet Isaiah began chapter 29 by launching a sorrowful lament for the judgment that would come to Jerusalem. This "woe" was due to the lack of sincerity in their worship of God. In verse 2, there's a play on words with the term "Ariel". Clarke states: "The first Ariel here

appears to refer to Jerusalem, which would be put in a tight spot by the Assyrians; the second Ariel seems to refer to the burnt offerings on the altar" (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible, volume II. USA: CNP, 1974, p.192). God declared that the sacrifices offered in Jerusalem were in vain. The divine admonition was as follows: "The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats..." (1:11). God was tired of their mere religiosity; therefore, in 29:13 he warned them: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught." They burnt their sacrifices insincerely, but the time would come when they would be burned by divine punishment.

We cannot cheat or blackmail God with our ritualistic worship. God wants worshipers "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). Spiritual hypocrisy darkens and clouds our vision and Christian growth. The mouth must confess what the heart believes. But if our heart isn't close to our Creator, our mouths will be manipulated by a simple religiosity lacking sincerity. Spiritual hypocrisy is, according to Beacon, "spiritual illiteracy" (Price, R. E. Beacon Bible Commentary USA: CNP, 1991, p.128). Ask: *What can be expected from a Christian leader whose heart isn't being governed by God and his Word?* Isaiah 29:10 says: "The Lord has brought over you a deep sleep: He has sealed your eyes (the prophets); he has covered your heads (the seers)."

### C. Judgment for disguising their sin (Isaiah 29:15-24)

Evil attracts evil, falsehood and hypocrisy guided Jerusalem falsely to believe that they could hide from God. So it was with our first parents who wanted to hide under the trees as if nothing had happened. Isaiah spoke to his contemporaries, trying to get them to understand that no one can hide their sins because God as a potter knows the clay well (29:16).

Our Lord Jesus ruled out all cover-ups when he said: "For there is nothing hidden that won't be disclosed, and nothing concealed that won't be known or brought out into the open" (Luke 8:17). Before God, everything is discovered. The psalmist said: "You know when I sit and when I rise... you perceive my thoughts from afar; Where can I go from your Spirit?" (Psalm 139:2 y 7). If there isn't a real repentance; "The ruthless will vanish, the mockers will disappear, and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down" (Isaiah 29:20). Only the humble shall increase in gladness and have everlasting joy (Isaiah 29:19).

## Questions:

- For what reasons was Judah to be condemned? See 28:14-15, 18-29 and 29:1-14
- What do you understand when you read Isaiah 29:13? How can you apply it to your life?

## III. Judgment for Assyria (Isaiah 33:1)

Assyria was a nation closely linked to the biblical history of the Old Testament. It was one of the first three nations mentioned in the Bible (Genesis 2:14). Assyria is described by the great historians as the first large-scale world power. The Assyrians came to be the promoters of imperialism, especially in the 8th and 7th centuries BC. Assyria is also recognized as one of the initiators of the well-known system of globalization since under their empire, which encompassed a large part of what is now called the Middle East, there was a lot of trade and transportation of people, although the latter were transported as slaves. The Assyrians were famously very bloodthirsty: "they not only devastated the cities they conquered... but many times they mercilessly deformed them by amputating their ears, the nose or the lips" (Rojas, J. New Popular Dictionary of the Bible. USA: Editorial Unilit, 2013, p.38).

The nations that fell under the Assyrian yoke had to pay high amounts in taxes. Not even this escaped the people of God when they rebelled and fell under threat of the Assyrians, which made them pay large sums in taxes. Another of the atrocities committed by the Assyrians with those they had subjugated was that once a city had been conquered, they exchanged the population from one part of the empire to another in order to control their rebellion. This is what they did with Samaria after they had submitted (2 Kings 17:24-41). This fueled enmity with the inhabitants of Judah for centuries.

Isaiah denounced Assyria, revealing her sins of violence and disloyalty (33:1). In the face of this brazen violence, God said to them: "Woe to you, destroyer." When the Assyrians conquered other nations, they kept as much as they could for themselves. This reveals the selfish and cruel heart of this nation that took advantage of their strength to undermine the defenseless.

The same can happen with some people today who seek their own interest and benefit without paying attention to the needs of the rest. We can see an example of this in 2020 at the beginning of the confinement due to the pandemic when many people went to the supermarket and dismantled everything, buying compulsively in large quantities, thinking more about providing for themselves without leaving anything for the rest. This is looting regardless of others.

Christians cannot be selfish and at the same time live for God. The selfish person always wants more: more money, more beauty, or he seeks to be more than others without caring if he hurts his neighbor in order to achieve his aspirations. For sure, all the selfish will also be damned on that great day when God tells them that he doesn't know them (Matthew 7:23). He said of Assyria: "...The oppressor will come to an end, and destruction will cease; the aggressor will vanish from the land" (Isaiah 16:4).

Assyria was also denounced for its disloyalty or betrayal (33:1b). By the time the northern kingdom was subdued by the Assyrians, Hezekiah ruled in the south. He made a deal with Sennacherib, king of Assyria, to pay him a tribute and try to avert war (2 Kings 18:13-14). However, once that tribute was paid, the Assyrian king disregarded his promise and sent his troops to Jerusalem to terrify her and take the city (2 Kings 18:16-17). This was a betrayal of all rules; "Because he didn't respect the conditions of peace that he himself had fixed" (Price, R.E. Beacon Commentary. USA: CNP, 1991, p.138). Someone said that traitors choose the time and place carefully. This is a fact, the more loyalty they expect, the more treacherous they become.

Betrayal manifests itself when we let down our friends who honor and trust us. The psalmist said: "If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it" (Psalm 55:12). But he feels pain when a friend betrays him (v.14). Treachery goes hand in hand with hypocrisy. The church today must be careful with its testimony. After having committed to remain faithful to God, the church may begin to love the world more, or simply may fail to fulfill its mission. The Bible is full of examples of those who are loyal as well as others who are traitors. Betrayal is a sin, and it's sanctioned. Ask: *How can we let God down?*

Assyria was destructive and disloyal. Its total destruction began in 612 BC. The Assyrian empire disappeared forever.

## Questions:

- What were the two sins of Assyria for which her punishment was everlasting?
- What was Assyria's disloyalty?
- As Christians, what are our commitments?
- How do we as Christians keep our promises or commitments no matter how small?

## Conclusion

Sin won't go unpunished, for soon, God will manifest His justice, Jesus Christ, to save us. But if we turn our backs on Him, one day not too far away, we'll experience God's justice, for our "God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29).



# Trust in God, not people

Eudo Prado (Peru)

**Study passages:** Isaiah 30:1-26, 31, 32, 33:17-24, 35

**Memory Verse:** "For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; it is He who will save us" Isaiah 33:22.

**Lesson Purpose:** To recognize the blessing of putting our trust in God and not in other people.

## Introduction

In our study this quarter on the book of the prophet Isaiah, we come to a very important topic: it's better to trust God than rely on other people. This series of chapters that we'll study next tells us about a crucial time in the history of God's people because the Assyrians were attacking the middle eastern countries at that time. Isaiah played an essential prophetic role proclaiming the divine message to a people who had deep spiritual blindness. Isaiah was able to influence King Hezekiah, a righteous ruler of the kingdom of Judah, whose story is told in 2 Kings 18-20.

### I. God punishes those who turn aside and trust in man (Isaiah 30:1-17, 31:1-3)

Faced with the constant threats on their lives, the children of God had to learn to trust Him above everything. The Bible teaches us that our ultimate safety lies only in God. However, many times, we discard divine protection and put our trust in other people. The passages from Isaiah which supports the first part of this lesson teaches us the terrible evil of not listening to God and trusting in others.

#### A. When hope is placed in people

Israel made a pact with Egypt, seeking protection against the threat of the Assyrian Empire, but in doing this, they were rebelling against God. In chapter 30, the prophet Isaiah protested against such alliances, considering them vain and useless (v.7). Why didn't God approve of this alliance? "Wars in the ancient world were - and are today too- linked to pacts and alliances... religiously, alliances lead to infidelity because they meant entering into a cultural and religious relationship with peoples of a different faith who, because they are stronger, will end up imposing their own way of life" (Simian, Horacio. Commentary on the Old Testament -II- Isaiah. Spain: The House of the Bible, 1997, pp.26-27).

For this and many other reasons, God warned Israel that it wasn't good to seek the help of Egypt or any other nation. As God's children, we have to select well our relationships too because they can intervene significantly in our spiritual life. Paul expressed this in 2 Cor. 6:14.

However, life is made of decisions. Every day we have to decide about one thing or another, and in certain cases, we struggle with the deep anxiety of not knowing what to do. Actually, when we have the Word of God, we know which should be the right decision. It's mainly a lack of faith in God that causes us to make decisions which are inconsistent with His will. We process in our mind over and over what should happen, looking at the alternatives before us, but finally, on some occasions, we disregard the divine advice.

#### B. Divine just punishment

As in the case of Israel, many of the predicaments in which we Christians find ourselves are the consequence of our own disobedient actions. The book of Isaiah describes the people of God at that time as a sinful nation. All kinds of evils were present in the midst of that society (Isaiah 1). Therefore, in that deplorable moral state, the nation was clearly deserving of divine judgment. However, everyone in our natural state of sin are guilty before God and deserve His just punishment (Romans 3:9-20), but God, who is great in mercy, forgives those who repent (Numbers 14:18). Christians can fall into terrible mistakes when we disregard the counsel of God.

#### C. Repentance is the only way out

However, although Israel was a guilty nation, God always loved His people deeply, providing His advice and promises through the prophets. The promise we find in Isaiah is significant (30:15). Israel's only hope against the impending punishment was to appropriate the grace of God through repentance and faith.



This is a precious promise for us today. We must stop struggling in our own strength to find our security, and put our trust completely in God (Proverbs 3:5-6). Israel rejected the counsel of God sent through the prophets, and that was one of the main causes of her failure. This is why the Bible invites us to search for advice in its pages, as well as from pious and wise people who love the Lord. God has also placed in each of us the ability to discern His will when we're in constant communion with Him. The Holy Spirit will give us the necessary understanding to make good decisions through the Word. Jesus promised it in John 14:26.

### Questions:

- What could lead us to make decisions that are against the will of God?
- What does it mean to "trust in people"? Explain.

## II. God Blesses those who Persevere and Trust in Him (Isaiah 30:18-26, 31:4-9)

Facing the prospect of the imminent Assyrian invasion, the people were naturally very afraid. However, the solution wasn't to disobey the Word of God and establish human alliances, but rather, the blessing would come in trusting in God and waiting for His salvation.

### A. The beatitude of faith

When we find ourselves terrified, not knowing what to do or what to expect, let's remember that faith in God brings a great blessing: the certainty of His presence (Deuteronomy 31:8). Isaiah 30:18-26 shows us how faith makes a difference in the life of the believer when we pass through adversity and suffering.

When fear takes hold of a person, it can paralyze them, stopping them from moving on. The sense of fear increases when we're alone and helpless. This is what happens to us when we don't put our trust in God; we're left helpless and at the mercy of circumstances. But although we aren't deserving of divine favor, just as Israel wasn't, if we believe by faith, we'll get the help we need from God.

Israel had accumulated sin after sin, disobedience after disobedience, until reaching the point of imminent divine punishment mentioned here. However, the opening verse of this passage is very significant. Faith is the prerequisite of blessing. Isaiah 30:18 says: "Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore, he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!" This text reveals God's forgiving character and His place in the midst of the afflictions of those who trust in Him.

How wonderful it is to enjoy the blessings of God's favor! Let's also remember that the Lord is always with us. Many times, we have to pass through difficult circumstances due to our infidelity towards God. As in the case of Israel, we may go through difficult times where God, because of His justice, gives us "the bread of adversity and the water of affliction" (v.20). But in those times, He is waiting to hear our cry for help: "How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you" (v.19).

A sincere return to God in repentance and full trust in Him is what will make the difference. God doesn't fail His children, neither does He leave them alone. The fidelity of His promises sustains us in the midst of adverse times. We can be sure that He is present and ready to help us.

### B. The blessing of complete salvation

Next, in 31:4-9, the prophet announced through beautiful literary figures the greatness of the salvation promised to Israel. Despite the terrible fame of the Assyrian kingdom, Israel could expect a great deliverance from God, indeed, that was what happened (2 Kings 19). The first figure he uses comes from wild nature: "...As a lion growls, a great lion over its prey... so the Lord Almighty will come down to do battle on Mount Zion and on its heights" (Isaiah 31:4). This verse describes God's jealousy for His people. The second picture: "Like birds hovering overhead, the Lord Almighty will shield Jerusalem; he will shield it and deliver it, he will 'pass over' it and will rescue it," (v.5), clearly indicates His providential care.

So, we must expect God's complete salvation. His work in our life leaves nothing out.

There's also nothing that can prevent His purpose from being worked out in us. With all confidence, we can express with Paul: "What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

### Questions:

- What does the beatitude of faith refer to?
- How is the work of salvation in the people of Israel and the church similar?

## III. God Promises Good things for His People (Isaiah 32:1-20, 33:17-24, 35:1-10)

To consider the last part of this lesson, we'll study three passages: Isaiah 32:1-20, 33:17-24 and 35:1-10. In these texts, there's a common denominator: God's great promises for His people.

## A. The messianic promise

The book of Isaiah has been called by some commentators as “The Gospel of the Old Testament.” Many quotes from this book appear in the gospels and other New Testament books. In the first passage, He is announced as the “just King.” Historically, commentators have debated between the idea that this is a reference to the reign of Hezekiah, or as a direct allusion to the messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ. “However, it’s likely that the prophecy of Isaiah 32-33 was given before the time of the prophecy of Isaiah 30-31. Both look to the time of Assyria’s invasion of Judah, but Isaiah 30-31 are placed in the time of Hezekiah as the invasion neared Jerusalem. The majority of the commentators believe that the king who would reign righteously was Hezekiah, and since he says he will reign, this prophecy may have been given early in the Isaiah’s prophetic ministry, during the reign of King Ahaz, the predecessor of King Hezekiah” (Isaiah 32-The Reign of Righteousness King. Retrieved from: <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/isaias-32/>, on March 9, 2021).

However, the view that the allusion to the “just King” found in this chapter is a messianic prophecy accords completely with the gospel character of the book of Isaiah.

## B. The promise of the Spirit

The warning to the women of Jerusalem that appears from 32:9 is of great importance in the context of the passage. These indolent and trusting women faithfully represented the spirit of self-sufficiency and spiritual blindness of the nation; they didn’t want to recognize their wretched condition and the proximity of the divine punishment. But Isaiah’s proclamation included the promise of a hopeful future characterized by the outpouring of the Spirit of God on his people: “Till the Spirit is poured on us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest” (v.15). With the outpouring of the Spirit, a full transformation of the ethical condition of the people that would result in relationships of “The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever” justice, (v.17).

The eschatological fulfillment of this precious promise, undoubtedly refers to the pouring out of the Sanctifying Spirit on the church at Pentecost. It’s through the fullness of the Holy Spirit that God’s purpose of holiness is achieved for His people (Ephesians 3:14-19).

## C. The promise of justice

In the second passage, Isaiah 33:17-24, we find the promise of God’s justice for His people. Here is where our

memory verse is found. It includes many prophecies about Christ: “For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; it’s he who will save us” (Isaiah 33:22). This beautiful statement includes everything that God is on our behalf. It’s interesting that all the statements of this verse refer to God as the administrator of Justice. They probably refer to all levels of government; that is, what today we call the powers of the state.

One of the names of God in the Old Testament was “Jehovah Tsidkenu” (Jehovah, our righteousness; Jeremiah 23:6). “In this symbolic name are summed up all the good things promised for the messianic times. The Hebrew word translated righteousness includes the ideas of righteousness and justice, salvation and liberation. Cf Isa 9:7; My Q. 5:4.17” (Holy Bible Reina Valera 1995, Edition of Study. United Bible Societies, 1995, p.960).

In the present times, when human government corruption has us completely disappointed, it’s wonderful to know that the children of God belong to a kingdom of eternal justice; Jesus Christ is our King.

## D. The promise of redemption

The last study passage for this middle section of the book of Isaiah is chapter 35. This chapter is a beautiful poem containing a series of promises related to salvation. There is a remarkable contrast between this chapter and the previous one that spoke of God’s wrath. Here, the emphasis is on the future fulfillment of God’s goodness towards His people. “Isaiah used his high poetic talent to give us an idea of the glory and happiness that characterize a rescued people that returns to the city of their God” (Price, Ross F.; Gray, C. Paul; Grider, J. Kenneth, & Swimm, Roy E. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume 4. USA: CNP, s.a., p. 146).

One day all these wonderful promises we find in the Word will have their final fulfillment. The church will be gathered together to celebrate eternal salvation and God’s greatness as described by John in Revelation 19:1.

### Questions:

- What does the outpouring of the Spirit of God do to His people?
- How do the promises of Isaiah 35 apply to us today?

### Conclusion

The people of Israel experienced, through suffering, the mistake of abandoning God; but also, the greatness of salvation when they put their trust in Him. There’s a great hope of salvation for all who trust God. He has promised good things for His people. His promises never disappoint, and He will fulfill His purpose for all who love him.



# The Power of Prayer

Efraín Muñoz (U.S.A.)

**Study passages:** Isaiah 36, 37, 38

**Memory Verse:** “Now, Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, Lord, are the only God” Isaiah 37:20.

**Lesson Purpose:** To learn from Hezekiah’s experience of the power of prayer in the midst of dire difficulties.

## Introduction

God is attentive to the prayers of His people, even in the midst of the most terrible trials and diseases. God listened to Hezekiah’s prayer of faith and gave him victory over his enemies (37:36) and extended his life in the midst of agony (38:5).

It was the fourteenth year of the reign of Hezekiah (701 BC) when the Assyrian king Sennacherib came against Judah with the intention of bringing Judah under his control. Only the cities of Lachish and Jerusalem had not been defeated. So, Sennacherib sent his Field Commander, with blasphemous questions to intimidate the king of Jerusalem: “The field commander said to them, “Tell Hezekiah: ‘This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours?’” (36:4). This question had the purpose of undermining any confidence that the people of Jerusalem had regarding: i) Confidence in Egypt (36:6); ii) Trust in Jehovah (36:7); and iii) Trust in King Hezekiah (36:14). To tell the truth, Judah couldn’t trust the Egyptian pharaoh as he was a person who betrayed his allies.

Judah, then, wasn’t to rely on foreign military powers. The Assyrians told them that they couldn’t trust King Hezekiah himself since he only represented a civil government. But where Sennacherib was wrong was in his analysis of God. They didn’t know who He really was, or of God’s power to defeat His people’s enemies.

*Invite your students to share experiences from their lives about how they have seen God at work in their lives, answering their prayers, and helping them in times of difficulty. Our God is an almighty God who can change our life circumstances.*

## I. Hezekiah is Threatened by Sennacherib, King of Assyria (Isaiah 36)

In times of King Hezekiah, Judah, known as the southern kingdom, had been enjoying relative calm (v.1). At least they didn’t have any major issues to contend with until the fourteenth year of his reign, when the Assyrian emperor, Sennacherib, led a full successful military campaign against Israel, and now the Assyrians were starting to attack Judah.

Sennacherib sent one of his captains (v.2) with a large army to threaten King Hezekiah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The message that Sennacherib sent to Hezekiah was clear and forceful. He was told to surrender and not try to resist the invasion. He declared that Jerusalem had no military forces, and pharaoh, the king of Egypt, was a treacherous man that couldn’t be trusted (v.6). The Assyrian king said it was useless for them to put their trust in God because there was zero evidence that God had saved Israel, the Northern kingdom, from the clutch of the Assyrians. But Sennacherib didn’t know who God is.

The Field Commander said: . . . “You are depending on the Lord your God”—isn’t he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, “You must worship before this altar?” (v.7b). In this verse, it’s clear that Judah’s enemy had no idea who the Lord really was: “Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim” who is “God over all the kingdoms of the earth” and Creator of heaven and earth (Isaiah 37:16)

The Assyrian Field Commander used two strategies in order to get Hezekiah to surrender: i) Confusion: He said: “I’ve I come to attack and destroy this land without the Lord? The Lord himself told me to march against this country and destroy it” (v.10).

ii) Terror: He sowed an image of calamity in the minds of the people, saying that God's people would eat their own dung and drink his own urine (v.12b). The Field Commander continued to frighten the people by shouting out facts that were verifiable: "Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? Who of all the gods of these countries have been able to save their lands from me? How then can the Lord deliver Jerusalem from my hand?" (vv.19-20).

Before Sennacherib's threat, Jerusalem lived in relative peace. They didn't feel the need to pray with the conviction that the Lord would be the only answer to their prayers (v.1). A powerful prayer many times comes from a sorrowful heart, which is confused and afraid of tragedy. Chapter 36 is of utmost importance because it helps us understand that we often pray powerful prayers when we're between a rock and a hard place. In other words, the threats against Jerusalem far exceeded Judah's ability to respond, even with foreign help. Hezekiah understood that they weren't going to win with the army, or the use of force, but only with God's Spirit (Zechariah 4:6b).

### Questions:

- How would you react to circumstances that threaten your life or safety?
- What things give you some security in this life?

## II. Hezekiah Prayed, and God gave Him the Victory over Assyria (Isaiah 37)

Hearing the blasphemies that the Field Commander had shouted against the Lord and against Jerusalem, Hezekiah and his servants and the priests tore their garments and put on sackcloth as a sign of deep sorrow and repentance (vv.1-2). Genuine individual and corporate repentance is the first step if we want our prayers to be answered. Hezekiah started a prayer movement. He didn't isolate himself but sought out the nation's spiritual authorities to find the prophet Isaiah in order to pray for Jerusalem (v.2).

There was no point in seeking help from the king of Egypt. Hezekiah dismissed that possibility and immediately set in motion a strategy to seek God in prayer, with his cabinet of government and spiritual authorities. This was a wise decision and was the beginning of victory.

Hezekiah wanted Isaiah to listen to the arrogance of the Assyrian commander against God, and to pray for the people who felt as defenseless as a newborn baby (v.3). When the entourage reached Isaiah, God had already begun to trigger a plan in favor of His people (v.6). The first message was: "Fear not." The second part of the message was what God was already doing against the Assyrians (v.7). Yes, Sennacherib had used the strategy of sowing confusion in the minds of the inhabitants of Jerusalem; now God would indeed confuse the Assyrian king (v.7). This confusion in Sennacherib's spirit would produce his flight from the Israelite territory, and would lead to his own death at the hands of two of his sons (vv.37-38).

As soon as Isaiah proclaimed God's promise in favor of Jerusalem (vv.6-7), the Assyrian king was confused (vv.8-13). On this occasion, he sent some ambassadors to Hezekiah to threaten him again, but this time he did it through a letter, with the purpose of producing hysteria to make them surrender instantly and completely. God was moving His hand, using other nations to save the people of Jerusalem, and in fact all Judah. Hezekiah took this letter and, after reading it, he went to the temple; he opened the letter in the presence of God and prayed (vv.14-20). By doing this, Hezekiah recognized:

- i) Who the Lord was (v.16);
- ii) He asked God to hear and heed his prayer (v.17);
- iii) He didn't deny reality, by acknowledging that Assyria had destroyed the surrounding lands (v.18);
- iv) He mentioned why those nations were destroyed (v.19); and
- v) Finally, he asked for release from the hand of the enemy (v.20).

The prophet Isaiah sent a message to Hezekiah, which was God's answer to their prayers (vv.21-35). In all these verses, God showed His will in favor of the remnant that had not surrendered to their enemies. Jerusalem, who had resisted until the end and had shown faith in the midst of threats, had relied on prayer as a means of salvation.

God promised that the Assyrian king wouldn't enter Jerusalem and wouldn't even shoot a single arrow against God's people (vv.33-34). The reason was that God himself would take care of the city for the love of His name and for the love of David His servant (v.35).

The answer to Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem's prayers materialized when God sent His angel to kill the one hundred eighty-five thousand Assyrian soldiers who were besieging Jerusalem. Sennacherib fled to Nineveh and was murdered by two of his sons in front of his own god Nisrok (vv.37-38).

### Questions:

- Hezekiah turned to prayer as a means of salvation. Do you remember any similar experience in your life? Share.
- How did God answer your prayers?

### III. Hezekiah Prayed, and God Healed Him (Isaiah 38)

Apparently, before Sennacherib's threats, or during those difficult times, King Hezekiah had become seriously ill (vv.5-6). "In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amos went to him and said, "This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you won't recover" (v.1)

How did Hezekiah react to the news? Once again, he took refuge in prayer, a heartfelt desperate sort of prayer: "Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, 'Remember, Lord, how I've walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly" (vv.2-3). He knew that the message was real. Turning his face to the wall was a sign of understanding that the news was true. It was a powerful prayer, he was humble. The king begged for his life, asking God for mercy and to consider his integrity.

Another very important element in Hezekiah's prayer was the way he cried to the Lord. A powerful prayer is one where we pour our hearts out before the Lord. This was a prayer that reached the very heart of God, and God was moved. What was it that moved God's heart? When Jesus saw the blind and sick, he was moved by compassion (Matthew 20:34).

In verses 4-6, God sent Isaiah to answer Hezekiah's prayer. There were three things that God wanted Hezekiah to know:

i) His prayer had been heard, God had seen his tears, so God would give him fifteen more years of life;

ii) God would also deliver the king and Jerusalem from the hand of the king of Assyria; and

iii) as if this weren't enough, after the liberation of the city, God promised to protect Jerusalem and its inhabitants.

God gave Hezekiah an unusual sign. Isaiah told him: "This is the Lord's sign to you that the Lord will do what he has promised: I will make the shadow cast by the sun go back the ten steps it has gone down on the stairway of Ahaz." So, the sunlight went back the ten steps it had gone down" (vv.7-8). Isaiah ordered that a poultice of figs be applied to the boil, and the king recovered (v.21).

In verses 9-20, Hezekiah expresses his prayer in poetic form, sharing his feelings about life. He lets us see the deepest parts of his heart. It's worth reading and reflecting about this Psalm that Hezekiah composed when he was healed of his sickness (Psalm 38:9).

### Questions:

- Explain in your own words how Hezekiah prayed before his imminent death.
- How often do we see God answer our prayers? What do you think should be the true attitude of the church with regard to prayer?

### Conclusion

We all want our prayers to be answered, especially when we face large-scale adverse events. God answers them according to His will. We don't know what to ask God for in prayer, but His Holy Spirit will help us, and pray for us with groans that cannot be expressed in words.



# God’s Majesty, Grace and Sovereignty

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (Cuba)

**Study passages:** Isaiah 40, 41, 42:1-9,14-25, 43, 44:1-8,21-28, 45

**Memory Verse:** “I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me...” Isaiah 45:5.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the revelation of God’s majesty, greatness, grace and sovereignty in these passages of Isaiah.

## Introduction

The prophetic books, including Isaiah, contain oracles or “oral proclamations on the names of God that generally describe the condition of the nation of Israel and God’s treatment of them” (Julca, Jorge L. TA Module II. Guatemala: Ed, CN-MAC, Church of the Nazarene, 2003, p.216). In the chapters that concerns us, Isaiah spoke to the exiles in Babylon. The prophet emphasized the very essence of the character of God as a guarantee that He would keep His promises regarding the redemption of His people. Chapters 40 to 48 contain the promise of a new liberation of the people of Israel led by God himself.

Let’s observe how these passages reveal the Lord’s character, His very nature as seen through His actions in this period of Israel’s history, allowing us to get to know Him better.

### I. God’s Greatness and Majesty (Isaiah 40, 41, 42:1-9,14-25)

The prophet Isaiah categorically described God’s majesty in these passages, as seen in the people’s history. This term the “majesty of God” communicates to us His absolute greatness and limitlessness. Isaiah prophetically transports us to the time of exile in Babylon towards the transition towards Persian rule, two of the largest empires in history. In the middle of this situation, the prophet described God’s dealings with His people and revealed His character.

#### A. Description God’s greatness and majesty

This description which affirms God’s greatness and majesty in the midst of a generation that attributed it to kings, empires and gods, was extraordinary on the part of the prophet. Isaiah affirmed that God:

- Decides what will happen to His creation (40:4-5).

- Although there’s death in nature’s cycles, His Word is eternal (40:8).
- All creation obeys him (40:12-16, 22).
- He is bigger than any human empire (40:17).
- He rules over human rulers, and the nations have to obey him (40:23-24, 41:1-5).
- Nothing compares to Him (40:25-26).
- He is the eternal God and Creator (40:28).
- He gives strength to the weary (40:29-31).

To Israel, these descriptions were more than a spoken or written word. They experienced them, they saw God in action, they understood who God is, from their very life experiences. They had to learn many lessons, just as today, those of us who serve in the Church discover that we can have a personal relationship with our great and majestic God. The Church is called to exalt God with our lips and through our deeds in the midst of this generation. He continues to reign as King.

#### B. He is our king

##### I. He chose His people, they are His Servants (41:8-9, 42:1-9)

God’s choice of Israel as His people was often affirmed by the biblical writers. God has always chosen a people for himself to reveal His love and purpose: Israel in the Old Covenant, and the Church in the New Covenant. Bible scholars offer two interpretations as to who is the Lord’s servant in Isaiah 42:1-9.

The first interpretation refers to Israel as the servant that has been given a mission by God, towards the rest of mankind (Isaiah 42:6).

The second interpretation stems from a later hermeneutics, and states that Jesus is the servant prophesied by Isaiah. Both interpretations have in common the purpose of fulfilling God's mission, which is the Church's calling too.

### **2. He promised to protect them (41:10-12)**

It was essential for Israel to know that God was protecting them. They had experienced this on many different occasions. The prophet announced the following message from God:

- They didn't have to be afraid (41:10).
- God promised to strengthen, help, and save them (41:10).
- He would make their enemies fall (41:11-12).

There are countless testimonies of God's protection that the church can quote, while on other occasions, we aren't even aware of what is happening because there are many things that God has delivered us from without making them known.

### **3. He would make them victorious over everything (41:15-16)**

This passage illustrates how God gave them the tools to win. With Him, His people are victorious, and nothing that can happen against Him which cannot be surmounted.

### **4. He would help them by meeting their needs (41:17-18)**

These verses describe Israel's future departure from Babylon and the journey back to Palestine. This was going to be difficult, but God promised to help. God's greatness is so immense that He makes springs and rivers flow in the dry deserts (v.18).

This describes how God wants to help us in the midst of all adversity. He doesn't leave us alone, but provides what we need. We have all been able to see God's greatness in the midst of many spiritual deserts that we have traversed, and how out of nothing, out of impossibility, He has done great things for us.

### **5. He was greater than their enemies because He knew their future (41:21-29)**

The Lord summoned the nations to present their arguments, inviting their gods to speak. This rhetoric affirms His majesty before any mighty nation and gods they worship. He made them look ridiculous as none of these gods could answer anything when faced with His greatness (vv.22-24).

This shows once more than God is above all gods; and His greatness is such that He even knows and can announce with certainty what is about to happen (vv.25-26). He can talk of the good that will come for His people (v.27).

### **6. God, our king, also disciplines and punishes sin (42:14-25)**

Few of us like this, but it's also part of the essence of our King. He executes discipline and punishment with complete justice.

#### **Questions:**

- How is the majesty of God defined?
- Name some events in the life of God's people that illustrate His majesty.

## **II. God's Redeeming Grace (Isaiah 43, 44:1-8,21-28)**

How beautiful it is to know that the same God who punishes has grace which never ceases! No matter how much His people don't deserve it, His grace continues to act on our behalf.

### **A. Redeeming love**

God is so good that, although Israel sinned on countless occasions, what He always showed them was grace. It's not hard to see God's grace throughout the Old Testament. He punished them in different ways for their sins, but he always loved them. Let's see some examples of his grace:

- 1. He promised them a safe return.** It was vital for the nation to return, but they were afraid. God promised them that they would return and that He would protect them (Isaiah 43:1-3:5-8, 44:1-2). Maybe the human reaction for all their sins would have been to leave them in Babylon, but God chose to be gracious to them.
- 2. He showed them His courage and love.** God revealed to His people how much He loved them and the high purpose He had for them. That is what His grace is about: valuing and loving us, even when we didn't deserve it. Let's compare for a moment, our life in relation to our fidelity to God, with the weight of His love towards us, and we'll see His grace. The Beacon Theological Dictionary put it this way: "The essence of the doctrine of grace is that, although man deserves that God be against him, He is for us. In a very specific and concrete way, God acts in our favor."

(Taylor, R. S., Grider, J. K., and Taylor, WH. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1995, p.314).

**3. He's our Savior.** In this love relationship, no one else can do anything for us. There's only one God, who is our savior, and those that have witnessed God's love understand this (43:10-13). God promised them deliverance, and He reminded them about the wonderful ways He had rescued them in the past (43:14-18). The continuity of this concept of "God the Savior" finds its maximum splendor in the New Testament in the person of Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice for humanity. In this New Covenant, the term "savior" is broader because it not only talks about a temporary release from problems, but an eternal deliverance from sin.

#### **B. God acts without anything to condition Him**

God promised His people to do new things, make ways in the desert, provide protection from animals, give them a supply of water (43:19-21). But Israel had not honored God through their sacrifices and offerings. On the contrary, God was overwhelmed by their sins (43:22-24). Verse 25 declares a glorious flash of His grace: "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more" (43:25).

God continues to act in the same way with His Church, even when on many occasions the Church has behaved the same or worse than Israel. Are we're honoring the Lord as He deserves, with all our hearts, without pettiness? Everything we have belongs to Him, so let's always give gratefully.

Next, let's observe some actions God took with His people that reflect His grace:

- He poured out His Spirit and His blessings on the people (44:3-5).
- He dispelled their wickedness and sins (44:22).
- He showed His glory (44:23).
- He fulfilled His plan to restore and rebuild Israel (44:26-28).

God's grace was such that He forgave His people, He promised that they could return, and they did. They saw His glory manifested. They could see how God prophesied that Cyrus would do His will (44:28). The Persian emperor Cyrus collaborated so that the people could rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Did they deserve something like this? Humanly no, but His

grace and love is inexplicable. God continues rebuilding and restoring every believer. God's grace isn't just a doctrine or a concept ... it's the way he deals with us.

#### **Questions:**

- Name some ways God showed his grace to Israel.
- How would you describe the grace of God in your life?

### **III. The Sovereignty of God (Isaiah 45)**

Although some say that this portion of the book was written prior to the capture of Babylon by the Persians, due to the clarity of the message and the accuracy of the name of King Cyrus, others "affirm that Isaiah as a prophet predicted the rise of this king 150 years earlier." (Carro, Daniel; Poe Tomás, José; Zorzoli; Rubén, O. Biblical Hispanic World Commentary, volume 10. USA: World Hispanic, 1993, p.148). Both interpretations give us largely the profound revelation of the prophet and the truthfulness of his oracles. It's a passage that points categorically to a sovereign God and we can understand this characteristic from the perspective of the prophet.

There are two concepts of divine sovereignty that stand out in this chapter:

#### **A. The Lord is the only God**

Repeatedly, God is recognized as the single deity. This is a clear example of Jewish monotheism in comparison to the polytheism of all the nations around. It's clearly stated that He is Lord, the only God that exists (45:5-6, 18c, 21-22). Beacon Theological Dictionary, referring to this conceptualization, tells us: "The general concept of divine sovereignty is basic to all true biblical theism (Ps. 115:3). First it's essential to monotheism. God isn't only divine He is the only deity" (Taylor, R. S., Grider, Jk, and Taylor, WH. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1995, p.656).

This was a clear message for the Hebrew people who were constantly bombarded by the worship of foreign gods, and into which paganism they fell many times.

It's still a clear message for the church today that also lives in a world full of the worship of false gods. To understand the sovereignty of God, we need to start from this premise: He is the only God that exists.



## **B. God acts according to His will; and He's always right in what He does**

We need to understand that God as the creator of the universe directs and controls. His sovereignty is unquestionable. Isaiah said it this way: "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things" (Isaiah 45:7).

Questioning why God does or doesn't do things just reflects the immature character of the believer. We must assume His will, whatever it may be, is right. There are believers who live questioning things that happened to them in their life, and some even blame God. This shows that they haven't understood the concept of a sovereign God. We cannot argue with God.

In verse 9, Isaiah declares: "Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, those who are nothing but potsherds among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'The potter has no hands'?"

We need to understand that there are things that God establishes, that happen in our lives, and we cannot change them. He allowed them and so we just have to accept them. This is what it means to understand that the sovereign God is leading us. It's possible that on many occasions we won't understand what He's doing, but it's unquestionable that everything works for good. God knows what he's doing.

It was difficult for the Israelites to understand that God chose nations more sinful than themselves to punish them. They had suffered in exile, and God was now moving a pagan king named Cyrus to rebuild the city and free the exiles. Isaiah describes it like this: "I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness. I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the Lord Almighty" (v.13). This must be a common phrase on the lips of believers: "It's what my God has decided"; and always what He decides is for the good of His children. We need to trust Him.

Some of God's decisions:

- To give them the riches of Egypt so that His name may be exalted (45:14-15).
- To shame those who make images (45:16).
- To save Israel (45:17).
- For all to obey him (45:23).

- Allow those who are angry with Him to be ashamed (45:24).
- So that all descendants of Israel should praise him (45:25).

Let's be grateful about what the sovereign God decides.

### **Questions:**

- Name the two concepts of sovereignty discussed in Isaiah.
- How is divine sovereignty manifested in your personal relationship with God?

### **Conclusion**

Having analyzed these passages, we can affirm that the Word of God reveals that God is a great and majestic God who permanently showers His grace on His people and to all humanity. At the same time, He is sovereign God.



# The Human Heart is an Idol Factory

Josué Villatoro (Mexico)

**Study passages:** Isaiah 44:9-20, 46, 47, 48:12-16, 57:3-13, 65:1-12

**Memory Verse:** “When you cry out for help, let your collection of idols save you! The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away. But whoever takes refuge in me will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain” Isaiah 57:13.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the seriousness of the practice of idolatry among the people of Israel in the Old Testament, and in our contemporary situation today.

## Introduction

Idolatry is a theme that is always present in biblical teaching. Beginning with the first legal code, the Ten Commandments, God has been very clear about how vital it is to recognize Him alone as the only God. The first two commandments are a clear warning about the need to acknowledge the Lord as the one true God. Emphatically, God ordered: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). The second Commandment states clearly: “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below” (Exodus 20:4). What’s more, God made clear what the consequence of obeying or disobeying this command would be: “You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:5-6).

God wanted to be very clear and incisive with this command because he knew that throughout history, His people you would face situations that would invite them to worship other gods and venerate people or things that weren’t and never will be the true and living God. During the centuries of slavery in Egypt, for example, they saw an infinity of deities, some in the shape of animals, others in human form, and even, they might have been tempted to worship the Pharaoh himself. The same would happen in Persia, in Assyria, and in every place to which the people of God went by their free will or by force.

The prophet Isaiah gave one of the clearest messages about this issue of idolatry. Let’s take a closer look at what the Lord, through the longest book of the Old Testament prophets, said to His people.

## I. This Doesn’t Make Sense! (Isaiah 44:9-20, 57:3-13)

In Isaiah 44:9-20, God talks about how ridiculous it is to worship an idol. In verses 13-17, he gives the example of a wooden idol. He explains the whole process: the woodcutter cuts down the tree; with part of the wood he lights a fire to keep warm, with another bit he cooks, and with yet another piece of wood, he makes a god, then prostrates before it, worships it, and prays: “... Save me, for you are my god” (v.17b). Think about it: the same wood that was used to burn, or cook, or any another activity was used to make an idol to which someone prays. God says of these idol worshipers: “They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand” (v.18).

*Ask: How is someone going to pray, trust and worship an idol, that he himself has created out of nothing? What power does an inanimate being have that wasn’t there until a few hours ago, and now it’s designed and shaped by the same people who pray to it? What strength does an image have that can be broken, damaged, scratched, rot or get lost at any time?*

But idolatry not only implies the meaningless fact of worshipping a created being, but also the actions that make us lose the dignity that God has given us. In Isaiah 57, God condemns His people’s idolatry, declaring it to be shameful. He reminded them: “You burn with lust among the oaks and under every spreading tree; you sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags” (v.5). That is, the people had forgotten the indications given by the Lord; they had surrendered publicly to sexual immorality before an idol.

In addition, they carried out human sacrifices, killing little children in worship to a false god. All this leads us to think that idolatry is a practice carried out by people lacking in understanding, without the ability to discern between good and bad. They haven't been enlightened by the wisdom of God, unable to understand that idolatry is a foolish, senseless and dumb practice.

Today, we can see many examples that make us think the same: in particular the case of Mexico, with about 60% of the population professing Roman Catholicism. December 12 is a national holiday in favor of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Many people go on a pilgrimage from their places of origin to Mexico City, walking more than a thousand kilometers, sleeping in the open air for two or even three weeks, eating poorly, piggybacking little children, and exposing their life to accidents and other tragic consequences, and all of this just to worship an idol. We continue to underline the truth and wisdom of God's word that everybody who worships an idol is like a person who "feeds on ashes; a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?" (44:20).

### Questions:

- Could you give a current case of the process shown in Isaiah 44:13-17? How could that be exemplified today?
- Do you consider that there are people today who by worshiping an idol, lose human dignity, as exposed in Isaiah 57:5? Comment.

## II. Yes, There is a Living God! (Isaiah 46)

The main reason idolatry is a stupid practice is because there's no need to invent a false god, or pray to an invented deity, or worship an inert statue. There is already an almighty God; He is the only one with enough attributes to be God. He says to His people: "With whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?" (v.5).

The Bible presents us with many stories in which the superiority of the Lord is shown over the idols of the various nations that were enemies of God's people. One of the best-known ones is when Moses and Aaron presented themselves before Pharaoh to request that the people of the Israel be freed from Egyptian oppression. On that occasion, Aaron's rod turned into a serpent to show God's power, and although the Egyptian sorcerers did the same, Aaron's rod, in its serpent form, ate the sorcerer's wands, demonstrating that the Lord God of Israel was greater than the Egyptian gods (Exodus 7:8-13).

When Elijah challenged the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel, the pagan priests prayed for hours but nothing happened, but when the prophet prayed God sent fire to consume a sacrifice that had been splashed with water (1 Kings 18:23-39).

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, were thrown into the fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar for not bowing down and worshiping the image of the king because the people believed he was a god. But God delivered them from it, preserving their lives, and this sign was so great that the whole kingdom had to recognize who was the real God (Daniel 3). And even with all this, the chosen people turned their back on the Lord, betraying him, looking for idols, and worshiping false gods.

Today, we could judge the Israelites, accusing them of being foolish idolaters. However, we have often read about these happenings, and while we don't have doubts about God's superiority before false gods and idols, it's likely that we 21st century Christians are just as idolatrous as the people of Israel who turned their backs on God again and again. Anything, whether it's a person or an object, that takes the place of God in our lives, has become an idol for us. So, if our money makes us feel secure, that can be an idol. If our material possessions give us peace of mind, that too can be an idol. Our work or good health can become idols if we depend on them to feel stable and confident. Any of these things aren't superior to God, for everything comes from Him (James 1:17). He gives us everything. As Job said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21).

And yet He remains sovereign, He is still God, He is above everything we have.

Worshiping idols is a serious matter. The Bible is full of warnings against idolatry, beginning in the Pentateuch (Exodus 23:13; Leviticus 19:4), going through the historical books (1 Samuel 15:23), wisdom literature (Psalms 16:4, 135:15, 115), the prophets (Jeremiah 11:12; Jonah 2:8; Micah 5:13; Habakuk 2:18), and even appearing in the epistolary texts of the New Testament (Romans 1:23; 1 Corinthians 6:9,10:19-22; Galatians 4:8; 1 John 5:21) and even in Revelations (9:20).

It's no coincidence that the topic of idolatry appears so many times throughout the entire biblical text. Idolatry is a very delicate subject, and one that God wants to make very clear to us, His children. He won't share with something else or someone else, the place that only belongs to Him.

No one else should have first place in our hearts, God is the only being worthy of our worship because He is the one true and living God.

### Questions:

- In this part of the lesson, three biblical narratives were mentioned in which it was evident that the Lord was superior to the gods from other nations. Do you know of any similar story or experience close to you like these? Share it with the group.

### III. The Consequences of Idolatry (Isaiah 47, 48:12-16, 65:1-12)

Idolatry is a harmful sin that offends the Lord and cannot be ignored. God speaks about how His people turned their backs on him: "All day long I've held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations (65:2). God shared His feelings about their idolatrous practices: "Such people are smoke in my nostrils, a fire that keeps burning all day" (65:5b).

In Isaiah 65:11-12, we find the retribution of those actions: "But as for you who forsake the Lord and forget my holy mountain, who spread a table for Fortune and fill bowls of mixed wine for Destiny, I will destine you for the sword, and all of you will fall in the slaughter; for I called but you didn't answer, I spoke but you didn't listen. You did evil in my sight and chose what displeases me." These are very harsh statements from a God who is angry with His people, who is upset because His children had turned their backs on him. Read the statement several times. None of us would want to hear those words from God. The message is clear: idolatry brings death, separation, causes sadness and anger in God's heart. He constantly seeks us, but often finds only rejection and mockery.

We should live in such a way that we aren't afraid of the consequence. How should we live if we want to receive kindness from a God? But if we don't listen to His word? How can we find mercy from God if we betray Him all the time? How can we ask favor of God who we always put aside and forget? In 2 Chronicles 36:15-21, we can find the consequence of disobedience and of not listening to the voice of God by turning our backs to God worshipping idols and false gods. We need to take note of the result of the people of Israel's constant idolatry.

Idolatry is a very specific topic for us today. For us in Latin American we have inherited the Roman Catholic traditions which were brought from Spain. We come from a family tradition of worship of images of saints,

martyrs, virgins, among others. There are religious festivities in their honor and even people pray to them to ask for their intercession for various issues and needs. Even those of us who have received Jesus as the only mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5) say that we don't worship images or have idols, but it's possible that idolatry is still within us, distracting us from honoring and worshipping the Lord as He wants. Let's remember that idolatry doesn't just mean bowing down to a graven images, but it also is implied giving our lives to things that distract us from God or take His place in our lives. "The God of Israel is creator of everything that exists and king supreme, while idols are gods only of some aspect or portion of reality" (Nelson, Wilton. Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible. Costa Rica: Editorial Caribbean, 1974, p.294).

### Questions:

- God's words in Isaiah 65:11-12 are very harsh. Do you consider that they are fair punishment for the people's actions? Explain.
- Read the passage from 2 Chronicles 36:15-21, and analyze the consequences that the people suffered for their disobedience. Do you know of anyone who has experienced something similar in their life as a result of not honoring God? Comment.

### Conclusion

Idolatry is as real today as it was yesterday, and is present in a portion of believers who attend church services. By asking some questions we can see how we stand in this matter: Who created me? Whom do I always trust? To whom do I look for supreme truth? To whom do I look for security and happiness? Who is in charge of my future? We must take care of our relationship with God day by day so that nothing or no one ever takes the place that only belongs to God. Let's say with the Psalmist: It's we who extol the Lord, both now and for evermore. Praise the Lord" (Psalm 115:18).



# Zion's Redemption and Restoration

Marcial Rubio (Peru)

**Study passages:** Isaiah 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54

**Memory Verse:** "Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones" Isaiah 49:13.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that we cannot live outside of God's laws without suffer consequences, and that no one is excluded from the scope God's plan of redemption and restoration.

## Introduction

The history of the people of God is marked by periods of bonanza and prosperity, as well as political, economic and social disaster, depending on the condition of their relationship with God. In this study, we'll see how God revealed how He was going to restore the people of Israel, giving them back their dignity as His chosen people.

### I. Promise of Restoration to His people (Isaiah 49, 50, 51, 52)

#### A. The announcement of a glorious future (49:1-7)

A group of Jews returned from exile to Jerusalem, thanks to a decree of King Cyrus of Persia, but they found the city devastated: it was a scene of destruction, full of rubble and abandonment. However, the most glorious and encouraging prophecies were given regarding the promising future of Jerusalem. In the midst of the chaos, pain and shame, God announced the scope of the world mission of the Servant of the Lord. Ask: "Who is the servant of Lord? The answer is in v.3: "You are my servant, O Israel; in you I will glory." It's the nation of Israel personified in the servant of the Lord" (Cavero, Daniel and others. World Hispanic Commentary, volume 10. USA: Editorial El Paso, 1982, p.156).

God's people are called to proclaim the prophetic message of God to the peoples of the world. Although this 'servant' seemed to be humiliated and defeated, the Lord planned that they should return, and the Persian king's decree was a part of God's plan (v.6). The chosen people were called to be "light to the nations..." (v.6). Because of their disobedience, they had become servants of tyrants, but God was directing historical events according to His plans that finally pointed to redemption in Christ, extending its reach to the ends of the earth (v.6).

#### B. Zion would be repopulated and clothed in glory (49:8-26)

In the midst of the feeling of abandonment in which the inhabitants of Jerusalem lived after they had returned from captivity, a prophecy was given highlighting the work of God in favor of the afflicted. However, a feeling of bitterness aggravated their anguish and despair. God, ratified His loving promise: "...I will never forget you" (v.15), and He announced the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the repopulation of the land. How could this be possible when a large part of the Jews continued living in exile? God told them that it would be like taking away the prisoner from the warrior, like snatching the loot from a tyrant. New immigration movements would come from Babylon, the city would be rebuilt, and the nations would recognize the excellence of the Lord's work on behalf of His people.

#### C. Exhortation to faithfulness to God (50:1-11)

The state of Jerusalem was chaotic: the city had been destroyed, the temple ruined, the streets were piled with rubble, and there was open contempt for the Word of God. After the painful time of the exile, the Lord sent them an encouraging message, but He only received a cold response from those who preferred to stay in Babylon, as well as those who had returned to Jerusalem, but had not turned their hearts to God. The Lord pronounced judgment against the inhabitants of Jerusalem, while the remnant of the faithful suffered injustices and oppressions, and spiritually His people were in ruins. The prophet announced God's promise of salvation and the coming of new times that would turn oppression into joy and songs of thanksgiving. The prophet prayed, asking God to bring back those who still remained in exile. This chapter is a call to the people to be faithful to God.

## D. The good news of salvation (52:1-12)

Using the simile of a woman, the prophet called Zion to shake off the dust, put on finery and power, and sit on the throne (v.1). He told Babylon to descend from its throne and sit in the dust (47:1, cf. v.2). The prophet counted the empires that had struck the people of God, causing His name to be blasphemed, and announced a triumphal march from Babylon to Jerusalem. The messengers would announce: "Your God reigns!" (v.7), the city guards would shout for joy, even the ruins were exhorted to sing praises. God was going to comfort His people and rescue Jerusalem.

In the new immigration from Babylon to Jerusalem, God would accompany His people, guiding them and protecting them along the way. Israel's triumph would astonish the nations.

### Questions:

- What was the social, political, economic, and spiritual condition of the people of Jerusalem?
- Is there any similarity with the reality of our country? Comment.

## II. Promise to Send the Servant Redeemer (Isaiah 53)

### A. The contempt for the Servant redeeming (vv.1-3)

Isaiah announced the unbelief of Israel: they saw the Messiah, they heard him, but they didn't trust Him. The main rejection went to the person of the redeeming Servant (v.2): "He wasn't born in a palace, he was born in a stable in Bethlehem and grew up among the despised people of Nazareth" (Warren, W. Wiersbe. Expository Outlines of the Bible, Volume II. USA: Publisher Caribbean, 2002, p.127).

He didn't come into the world as a great tree, but as a humble 'shoot' that would sprout from the trunk. Upon His arrival, He found the chosen nation of Israel with a very formalistic religiosity, but spiritually desolate and dead. And when He brought them abundant life, they rejected it. His physical appearance didn't meet the standards of leadership that the human eye aspired to see, and He was rejected. Today, the world doesn't want a Christ with personality and authority, but a 'Christ' who fits their demands.

### B. The work of the redeeming Servant (vv.4-6)

This part of the chapter shows "the Messiah...suffering [for the] purpose... [of] expiating the sins of the whole humanity, and end the need... to make sacrifices of animals in a constant and permanent way" (Cavero, Daniel. Hispanic World Commentary, volume 10. USA: Editorial El Paso, 1982, p.170). Why would a man as innocent as Jesus have to suffer such infamous contempt? He came to take the place of sinners bearing the guilt of humanity.

The price to pay was as follows: "(i) wounded, pierced with swords and nails (John 19:37; 1 Peter 2:24; 2 Cor. 5:21); (ii) bowed down and crushed by a burden, the weight of sin put on him; (iii) punished, as if he had broken the law, in this case with the wounds from the lashings he suffered" (Wiersbe, Warren W. Expository Outlines of the Bible, Old Testament, Volume II, Ezra-Malachi. USA: Editorial Caribe, 1995, p.128).

But all the physical suffering couldn't be compared to the spiritual suffering caused by the weight of our rebellions and our deliberate breaking of God's laws, our corrupt natures, and our hardships and afflictions. Isaiah 53:6 says: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray" (sinners by birth), "each of us has turned to our own way" (sinners by choice); "and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." The atonement made by Christ on the cross in His death has universal consequences, so we rejoice as beneficiaries of His salvific work.

### C. The Resignation of the Redeemer Servant (vv.7-9)

The Redeemer Servant was subjected to a legal process, full of injustice, oppression and brutal rigor. They mocked him, moved him from place to place, His disciples abandoned him, no one protested demanding justice, no one challenged the aberrant process, they took him out of the city and they hung him on a tree, while the criminal Barabbas was treated kindly. However, "not even to plead 'not guilty' did He open His mouth, He offered himself freely and voluntarily [...] with His wisdom He could have evaded the sentence, and with His power He could have resisted execution" (Matthew Henry Bible Commentary, Spain: Editorial Clie, 1999, p.794).

He gave up His rights in favor of all humanity, and "He was assigned a grave with the wicked" (v.9). Had it not been for Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, the body of Christ would have been buried in a "potter's field", or perhaps thrown into the mass grave (John 19:38-42). He came into the world and took on human nature, was born in a stable, lived in poor circumstances in Nazareth, never used His power for his own benefit, neither did He amass any fortune, He entered Jerusalem mounted on a borrowed donkey, He died naked on a cross, and He was buried in a borrowed tomb. What a contrast to the fortune of some "servants of Christ", today!

### D. The victory of the redeeming Servant (vv.10-12)

The amazing thing about the announcement was that the Servant of Lord would live again after death (vv.10b-11a), He would see offspring, He would live forever and it was God's will that whatever He does would prosper, and His righteousness would be satisfied (v.11). The prophet's speech ended on a note of victory (vv.11b-12).

The rest of chapter 53 refers to the national scope of the expiatory work of the redeeming Servant in favor of Israel, whereas verse 11b refers to the universal scope of His expiatory work. In reality, no one took His life. Jesus said: “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I’ve authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again...” (John 10:18); and then he would announce: “I am going, [...] to prepare a place for you [...] I will come again” (John 14:2-3). The redeeming Servant is the victorious Servant.

### Questions:

- What was the mission of the Servant?
- How was the Servant received by the recipient people (Israel)? How is he received today?

## III. The Glorious Future of God’s People (Isaiah 54)

### A. The Lord speaks to Israel as His bride (vv.1-3)

“The church of God under the Old Testament, confined within the narrow limits of the Jewish nation, and even smaller in terms of the very small number of true believers, and that sometimes seemed abandoned by God, her husband, the barren woman who didn’t give birth and was desolate” (Clarke, Adam. Comment of the Holy Bible, volume II. USA: CNP, 1967, p.312), The prophet starts by saying: “Rejoice, O barren...” (v.1). “The prophet was referring to a popular saying of those times: “more are the children of the forsaken one than those of the married one” (v.1), because she would soon be filled with children (inhabitants), the population of the city will be so numerous, that its habitable space will have to be widened considerably” (Clarke, Adam. Holy Bible Commentary, Vol. II. USA: CNP, 1967, p.796). So, they were going to have to expand their tents, preparing more space as well as their territorial area, because the citizens would reclaim their lands inhabited by foreigners, and they would retake possession of the ruined cities (vv.2-3).

### B. Israel would be restored as a widow delivered from helplessness (vv.4-6)

In Israel, married woman felt secure and fulfilled as long as their husband was alive and they had children, but the barren woman was stigmatized as useless. God announced good news for women who represented Israel’s shameful past under Egyptian, Assyria and Babylon rule, that the shameful past was over (v.4). The complex situation of Israel as a destitute widow would be resolved, demonstrating that God isn’t dead: “For your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth” (v.5). Multitudes of wounded women throughout history of humanity have been abandoned by their husbands, have found relief, peace and consolation

in this promise that God can fill the space of emptiness caused through the loss of their husband. Because He loves us, our God and Father supplies the deepest needs of our souls and gives us victory in the face of insult and pain of any abandonment. Only God can fulfill the needs of the human soul through His perfect love.

### C. God explains His restoration of Israel (vv.7-8)

God said to His people: “For a brief moment I abandoned you...” (v.7) referring symbolically to the exile in Babylon. Verse 8 reveals the depth of His love: “‘In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,’ says the Lord your Redeemer.” Even during the exile, He had been with them, and He had been guarding them on the return journey. The times of tribulation they had lived through didn’t mean that God had abandoned them; God was disciplining them for their disobedience. God’s laws are like the rails of the train: when we leave the ‘rails’ of the Word of God, we’ll inevitably suffer the consequences until God rescues us.

### D. The glorious state promised by God (vv.11-17)

The Lord came to His people to give them strength, security, calm and protection as they were prostrate in affliction, discouraged and without consolation, feeling that they had been abandoned by God. He announced that no weapon would prevail against His servants because He himself would protect them from derision, defamation and slander. This is the inheritance for the servants of the Lord. They had to remain calm under the protection of the Lord, knowing that He will treat them with justice.

After the time of the apparent helplessness represented through the Babylonian captivity, God would raise up His people, restoring and prospering His city, achieving the conquest of international prestige. Jerusalem would have a bright future before the nations. Every time a man, a family, a people or a nation turns to God, He not only forgives them, but restores and returns their dignity lost through their disobedience.

### Questions:

- In what did the glorious future of the people of Israel consist?
- Do you think there’s hope for our people? Comment.

### Conclusion

The results of obedience as well as disobedience are inexorable like the law of gravity, or of sowing and harvesting. God, in His love and mercy, always used means and circumstances to call His children to reflection and repentance. When they decide to return, He always receives, restores and ennoble them with fruitful lives and victorious testimonies before the world.



# The Dynamics of the Alliance between God and His People

Elvin Heredia (Puerto Rico)

**Study passages:** Isaiah 55, 56:1-8, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63:15-19, 64, 66:5-14

**Memory Verse:** “For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations” Isaiah 61:11.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that the covenant with God is true in love and justice; but that it has an order of processes that we must consider and contains some requirements on our part for its fulfillment.

## Introduction

Isaiah is believed to have exercised his prophetic ministry during some 60 years in the 8th century B.C., spanning the reigns of four kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (1:1). The events narrated in the book of Isaiah aren't chronological. They are separate visions in a non-specific order. In fact, Old Testament literary scholars identify at least three collaborators in the writing of this book: Isaiah, son of Amoz, who is credited with the first 39 chapters of the book; chapters 40 to 55 are attributed to an anonymous author during the time of exile in Babylon, identified as “Deutero-Isaiah”; and chapters 56 to 66 are attributed to other authors who formed an anthology or collection of related prophetic writings of God's covenant with His people.

This last part of the book of the prophet Isaiah basically contains a series of exhortations to the people of Israel, giving them directions about how to observe and keep the covenant with God. This general exhortation seems to outline an orderly structure of matters related to the covenant that the people had to consider.

These are also divine recommendations that we should equally observe in our covenant with God. Let's examine that “contractual definition” of the covenant of the Lord with His people that these chapters seem to suggest to us.

### I. Mercy for the Repentant Sinner (Isaiah 55, 56:1-8)

#### A. The free provision of grace (Isaiah 55)

First of all, we notice some dynamics that are always present in the covenant relationship between us and God. It's always God who takes the initiative and makes the first step. From this part of the book onward, Isaiah gives a

better answer to the question posed in Isaiah 53:1. God's grace is portrayed and the people are called to repent. The thirsty and the penniless are designated in the passage as those who were in urgent need of relief. God's covenant is presented to them as the golden opportunity to acquire reconciliation with the Father who provides.

In our times, there are many people too who are far away from God and are thirsty and poor. Jesus Christ, the one who could give us the water that would be an inexhaustible source “that springs up to life eternal” in us (John 4:14), made himself freely available on the cross. The announcement of God's mercy continues to be present and valid for all those people who repent of their evil ways.

This is for those who no longer want to spend their money “on what isn't bread”, nor do they want to continue working “for that which doesn't satisfy” (55:2). Sin has never benefited us. On the contrary, it has reduced us to suffer thirst and be poor beggars of divine grace. The good news is that grace is still at hand, in our reach through repentance.

#### B. Remaining in grace implies a cost (Isaiah 56:1-8)

From this passage, we begin to notice that God's blessings and provisions are included in the covenant He has made with us, but they imply permanence, obedience and fidelity on our part. Isaiah 56:1 defined those requirements as maintaining justice and doing what is right. Immediately in the next verse, there's a promise of blessing for those who obey, keeping the requirements of the covenant, and turning away from doing evil (v.2). So, the rewards promised in the covenant of grace, the provision and salvation, require compliance with God's statutes and orders.



God freely provides water, bread, wine and milk, but under God's covenant, we have to keep our part. Forgiveness and reconciliation with the Father are available, however, we have to turn our backs on sin: "Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon" (Isaiah 55:7).

### Questions:

- What does it mean for us to do what is right and stay within the covenant?
- How is God's covenant with his people still valid today?
- Staying in grace comes at a cost. Explain what that cost consists of for you

## II. God Requires Obedience (Isaiah 58)

### A. The fast that pleases God (vv.1-12)

Many explanations have been offered at a theological level about fasting in the experience of faith. My mother used to say that the time of fasting should be a separate time for meditation and deep spiritual reflection in our relationship with God, without any kind of distraction, even that of food. She also said that separating that special time reserved for something else was a spiritual exercise that made fasting more than a simple activity of going hungry. But what is this passage really talking about?

For those who hypocritically wanted to demonstrate a false religiosity, fasting became a reason for boasting, with which God wasn't pleased. In accordance with Isaiah 58:3, that boasting turned into pride and rebellion, wanting to claim that God, in a certain way, had broken His part of the covenant since He didn't seem to answer these religious expressions by sending the anticipated material blessings.

In response to this claim, God pointed out to them that the oppression they exercised towards other people didn't correspond to the good intentions implied in sincerely obeying the covenant. When we fast, we should never go around with long faces as a demonstration of false piety. That was precisely what Jesus said to the Pharisees (Matthew 6:16). Fasting isn't about showing how 'spiritual' one is by going without food. We shouldn't fast as an imposition but as a liberating practice. The components of fasting aren't only lack of food and water, but the total absence of oppression, impiety, injustice and mistreatment (Isaiah 58:6). The true fasting that God requires of us in His covenant has nothing to do with hunger or scarcity, but with giving bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and a home for the homeless and

supporting our families (v.7).

Setting aside time for the Lord is good, and God will bless us. Giving of what He has provided to our neighbor is even better. This is an important part of fasting that pleases God.

### B. The Sabbath (vv.13-14)

Once again, keeping the Sabbath day holy constituted a practical way of demonstrating the attitude of obedience that God expected of His people. God promised great blessings for those who observed and kept the Sabbath. If we want to see and experience God's blessings, we need to obey His covenant.

For us, obedience to the commandments of God will bring the same results. Isaiah 58:13-14 defines obedience to God as keeping our feet from doing something wrong before God, submitting our wills to God's will, delighting in following the commandments and precepts we find in Scripture, and recognizing in worship the greatness of the Lord over our desires and intentions.

Obeying God, as Paul later states, is to put to death the earthly in us (Colossians 3:5) It implies giving up our will and embracing God's will. Just as the people in the Old Covenant had to obey God, He asks us, too, to follow Him in obedience. Of course, the rewards for obedience to His covenant are to the same because "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

### Questions:

- What is the fast that pleases God?
- What is the practical implication of keeping the Sabbath day holy today?

## III. The Cycle of Iniquity and Confession (Isaiah 59, 63:15-19, 64)

### A. Repetitive iniquity (Isaiah 59)

As was their custom in their relationship with God, the people of Israel turned away again and again, disobeying the requirements of God's covenant. The effect of straying from covenant led to a division between God and the people. This meant that God hid his face from them. The divine provision promised in the alliance stopped. The people were contaminated with blood on their hands, with iniquity, impiety and injustice, as well as unfaithfulness to God through libations and sacrifices to false gods (Isaiah 59:7).

They spoke lies, they were unjust and vain, and their thoughts and actions were aimed at doing evil. The people always suffered from these evils, they always tripped up on the same stone.

We are often like the people of Israel. There have been many times that we have disobeyed God and broken His covenant. What's important, in any case, aren't the times that we've fallen, but the times we get up and try not to fall again. Our experience of Christian life may be plagued by trips and falls, products of our weaknesses and attacks from the enemy. In view of that reality, both yesterday and today, we need to return to the Lord.

#### **B. Confession, repentance and restoration (Isaiah 63:15-19)**

Despite their many setbacks, disobedience and iniquities, which led the people time and time again to break God's covenant, divine mercy was always there for those who repented of their sin and sought to restore their relationship with God. Coming back to what God had taught them in His covenant, there was a door that He always left open so the people could return to Him, but returning would always imply repentance, casting aside evil and obeying God's commandments. Isaiah 63:15-19 then became a prayer of repentance for the evils committed, and a plea asking God for mercy and help.

That same option remains open and available for every repentant sinner. The method has always been clearly arranged and stipulated by the Word of God. Once again, we find in Isaiah 55:7 the requirements to achieve forgiveness and restoration of God's covenant in all our lives: "Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon." The same provision is contemplated in the advice of the Apostle John in 1 John 2:1, when he said to us, "My dear children, I write this to you so that you won't sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One."

Sin shouldn't be our desire, but it's undesirably a latent possibility in our life experience. As long as we understand, acknowledge and sincerely confess our disobedience and our sin before God, we'll find in the Lord that loving Father, willing to forgive us and restore us.

Therefore, and as the letter to the Hebrews says: "Let's then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

#### **Questions:**

- How can we explain this cycle of iniquity and confession shown in Isaiah 59, 63:15-19 and 64?
- What must we do to receive forgiveness and restoration from God?

## **IV. Prosperity and Mission of the People (Isaiah 60, 61, 62, 66:5-14)**

### **A. Results of obedience and permanence in the covenant (Isaiah 60)**

God promised the people of Israel the restoration of His glory as a nation among nations. The material and spiritual blessings contained in the alliance would be faithfully given if the people remained faithful and steadfast in obedience to God. They longed for peace and the restoration of the glory of Israel among the peoples of the earth that would shine as everlasting light (v.20).

Such a guarantee is offered to us believers today. God will fulfill for us all the promises contained in His covenant, as long as we remain obedient and faithful to His commandments and ordinances, willingly and joyfully submitting to His will, turning away from sin and wickedness.

### **B. The people's mission (Isaiah 61)**

As part of that required obedience and fidelity to God's covenant, we too must be just, merciful and loving to God, sharing the message to our neighbors of repentance and restoration that is promised in God's covenant. Those who enjoy the blessings and beatitudes of the covenant must equally share those blessings and beatitudes with those who still remain alienated from God, living without His forgiveness and without having reconciled their lives to the Lord. Today, we who have been benefited from God's covenant must strive to remain within the stipulations of what God desires of us, being obedient and faithful to God's commandments and sharing with righteousness and mercy the grace we have received (Matthew 10:8).

#### **Questions:**

- How are obedience to the covenant and the mission of the church interrelated?
- What must we do so that God's promises are fulfilled in our lives?

#### **Conclusion**

All of God's promises powerfully support our faith and will lead us to eternally enjoy His peace. They are always the joy and strength in our earthly life as we fight the good fight, seeking God's light, trusting in him, and staying away from evil. Great and faithful are the Lord's promises!"

# Faith and Contemporary life

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Second Quarter

Social Networks

Human Trafficking

Pornography

Sexual abuse of children

Climate Change

Marriage and Family today

Gender Ideology

Emotions: God's special gift

Compulsive Gambling and Nomophobia

Managing Stress

Corruption

Defending life from conception

Jesus, our Prince of Peace



# Social Networks

Slater Joel Chavez (Argentina)

**Study passages:** Matthew 13:1-4

**Memory Verse:** "Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore" Matthew 13:2.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand what social networks are, their positive and negative aspects and how they may be a tool to share the message of salvation.

## Introduction

In the midst of the world we live in, it's good to discover tools that help us share the message of Jesus with those around us, as well those who live in a wider context. In this lesson, we'll learn about Internet Social Networks. Many inventions that we have created have benefited humanity, but many of these, if they're poorly managed, can become harmful. So, we'll look at social networks, seeing their positive and negative attributes. We'll also see that they can be a tool to share the message of salvation.

### I. Definition of Social Networks

We generate social networks all the time with people with whom we interrelate. We all have them since networks are forms of social interaction, defined as a dynamic exchange between people. Social networks have always existed, but today, they have become much broader thanks to information technologies employed in the Internet, where there's a strong correlation between these and social network users. "People have always been looking for ways to connect and network with each other. And in this age of digitization, people have found ways to be socially active on the internet, which is possible with the advent of the numerous social networking platforms and apps" (<https://makeawebsitehub.com/social-media-sites/>).

Techopedia defines them as: "A social networking site is an online platform that allows users to create a public profile and interact with other users. Social networking sites usually allow a new user to provide a list of people with whom they share a connection, and then allow the people on the list to confirm

or deny the connection. After connections are established, the new user can search the networks of connections to make more connections" (<https://www.techopedia.com/definition/4956/social-networking-site-sns>).

We could also define social networks as places on the Internet where people publish and share all kinds of information, personal and professional, with third parties, acquaintances and absolute unknowns (Celaya, J. *The Company on the WEB2.0*. Spain: Planet, 2008, p.21).

Although there are hundreds of social networks, some are more famous than others. We could group them as follows:

1. Social networks for professionals, through which people share with others who can give some professional service or share their experiences (LinkedIn, Sumry, Xing, etc.)
2. Social networks of generalities where people share advertising and all kinds of general or personal information (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, snapchat etc.)
3. Specialized social networks through which we can access more specialized information or of personal interest (YouTube, Wattpad, Flixster, etc.)

Each of these kinds of social networks is a tool where people can generate all kinds of connections.

### Questions:

- How would you define Social Networks on the Web?

- What are the differences between the Social Networks that have always existed and the Social Networks of the Internet?

## II. Advantages and Disadvantages of Social Networks

Social networks allow us to exchange our information with just a screen touch or click. Nevertheless, the use of these Social Networks can have negative aspects for our lives as well. Let's mention some positive and negative aspects of the use of these networks.

### A. Positive aspects:

1. *They can establish new relationships.*  
Before Social Networks, our relationships were established with people around us. Today with the help of social media, we can establish friendly relationships with people from other cities and countries. With these social networks, bonds of friendship are strengthened and maintained. We may also find that it's easier to make new connections. We don't have to be shy or embarrassed. It's far quicker and takes less effort to start a new social relationship. So, there's a sense in which it might be easier to find other like-minded people on social media. Some can make an excellent connection with another person, and maybe this virtual relationship might turn into a face-to-face one.
2. *The help us keep in touch with existing relationships.*  
Nowadays, thanks to social networks, we can be up to date about what friends, family and acquaintances are doing.
3. *We can rediscover friendships through search engines*  
Through Social Media, we can recover some old friendships that we've lost contact with. So, we can say that today, the tools of Social Networks have succeeded in fostering and consolidating people's interpersonal relationships, and even starting some new ones.
4. *We can access to all types of content through networks*  
Internet Social Networks can supply us with

content of all kinds of interest, such as tutorials (explanatory videos about some discipline). We discover videos about people with many talents, which can inspire us. Also, we can find Bible passages, sermons, devotionals, commentaries etc.

5. *We can use Social Networks to promote events.*  
They are great places to promote activities, whether it's an event, a special church meeting, and in other cases, promote a personal business. The more people that see the church event banner or poster, the more will participate in the event. In the same way, the more people who know about a personal business will increase the number of customers.
6. *Source of entertainment.*  
Years ago, television was 'the queen of entertainment,' however, with the future of the Internet and its possibilities for connection and exposure to many shows, dramas, discussions etc., of entertainment content, the use of Social Networks in the Web exceeds that of television.
7. *Possibilities for education.*  
Social networks expands the exchange of information, texts, videos, images, virtual transmissions, etc. These types of content open up a range of possibilities for educational training. Different institutions, private, public and ecclesiastical organizations, with the help of the different social networks, transmit their thoughts and ideologies through the different contents they publish.

### B. Negative aspects:

1. *Social Networks can isolate us.*  
When people use them excessively, they may lose contact with the people around them. This is perceived when we're sitting at the table to eat and often teens and young adults can't take their eyes off their cell phones. As the psychologist Miguel Ángel Rizaldos says: "It brings you closer to the one that is far away, and it takes you away from the one that is nearby" (Retrieved on May 30, 2021, from "The Good and Bad of Social Networks", by Rizaldos, M. Available at

<https://psicologiaymente.com/social/lobueno-and-bad-social-networks> ).

2. *They can fool us.*  
We can find false profiles that don't speak the truth. This is carried out by unscrupulous people who hide their identity in order to insult, criticize and humiliate. We can even find pedophiles. It should be noted that a large part of social networks aren't suitable for teenagers. So, we must be careful not to expose our children and teens to these possibilities.
3. *A deceptive self-esteem.*  
Often adolescents, young people, and even the not so young define their self-esteem from the followers, friends of Facebook or "likes" they receive.
4. *Fake news.*  
It's very common that people or organizations generate misinformation. Because of the opportunities that Social Networks have to spread all kinds of information quickly and massively, a lot of what is out there is 'fake news.' It's more than likely that you may have received a cell phone message about some apocalyptic news. Therefore, it's highly recommended to verify new information with reliable sources.
5. *Overexposure.*  
Sometimes, we don't take the necessary care about the content we share. This is more noticeable in adolescents and young people who, to gain acceptance or likes, upload content which they shouldn't. Too much personal information is often shared about where we live, which is dangerous. There may be false profiles that are using this information to take advantage of it.
6. *They can be addictive.*  
Due to their attractiveness and speed, Social Networks can lead to addiction. According to research published in 2015 by the National Library of Medicine from the US National Institutes of Health, people who spend two or more hours a day using Social Networks are more likely to have mental health

problems. Dr. Hugues Sampasa-Kanyinga, from the department of epidemiology of the Department of Public Health of Ottawa, Canada, author of the study, said that although the relationship between addiction to Social Networks and problems of mental health is still not entirely clear, daily use for at least two hours of social media is linked to psychological disorders (Retrieved from "2, 5 or 7 hours a day? How long is too much using social networks?", by BBC News World. Available in <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-44438861> ).

Looking at these aspects of Internet Social Networking, we can say that it all depends on what we do with it. We can't demonize Social Networks, because if they are well managed, they can be a tool for fostering healthy relationships, and even spreading the message of salvation.

#### **Questions:**

- How could you manage your social networks properly?
- How would you teach teenagers and young people about social networks?

### **III. Christians on Social Media**

Our primary goal as Christians is to worship God, live like Jesus and transmit His message to the world through our actions and words. So, let me paraphrase the following saying: "Tell me what's on your social networks; and I will tell you who you are."

Just as the passage in Luke 6:45 says: "... the mouth speaks what the heart is full of." So, from what is in our hearts, we'll communicate in our Social Networks. All the time, we're deciding to do something or nothing. If we decide not to share the message of salvation on our Social Networks, maybe we should ask ourselves why we haven't done so, since we must fulfill that Great Commission of Matthew 28. Maybe our answer would be that we're sharing the message of salvation with our immediate surroundings, and this is very good. But in principle, we must always look for different ways of proclaiming the message of salvation.

We're told that everything is always changing, and what doesn't change isn't alive. Social Networks are changing our way of relating, so, we must be willing to include and use one more way of transmitting the message of salvation, but of course, without altering the same essence and values that Jesus taught us more than two thousand years ago: "Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore" (Matthew 13:2, emphasis added). Jesus had a habit of changing platforms to bring His message to more people (Mark 3:9-10, 4:1; Luke 5:1-2). In Jesus' times, if one wanted to gain knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, they would have to go to the synagogue, the temple, or tag along with a teacher of the law.

Years ago, if a church wanted to do something evangelistic, we did an outdoor event and preached on the street corners. If we wanted to find people, we went to the streets. However today, people aren't only in the streets, but many are on Social Networks. Some of them will be walking around with their cell phones, on their Social Networks. This also happens if they're on public transport, going to work. Social Networks is a new mission field.

Just as Jesus not only taught in the synagogues, but also in a fisherman's boat, or on a mountain, we must enter the social networks. Because people aren't only on the "beaches" (streets), but also on Social Networks

Some Ideas for Sharing the Lord's Message:

- Share a verse that has impacted your life.
- Share a short summary of the sermon notes from last Sunday.
- Share your testimony.
- Promote a church event.
- Stream the meeting on church social media.
- Share a short video of a devotional.
- Share the devotional plan of the church.
- Ask if anyone has a prayer request.

As a final note, it's worth mentioning what was recreated in the biographical film "Social Network" by director David Fincher where he recreates the beginning of Facebook. In the film, young Mark Zuckerberg, after breaking up with his girlfriend

in university, couldn't find a place where he could ventilate his pain, and he decided to create a space to externalize it.

This is how Facebook was born, as a space to tell what he was thinking or feeling.

### **Questions:**

- Why would a social network be a good tool to share the message of salvation?
- What other ideas could you mention for sharing the message of salvation on social networks?

### **Conclusion**

We must see Social Networks as the 'boat' that God has placed in our hands. There are many people in Social Networks looking for a space where they can open their hearts. More than ever, we need to be in these Networks, and become those fishers of men and women for Jesus.

Lesson  
**15**

# Human trafficking

Trino Jara (Armenia)

**Study passages:** Genesis 37:26-28; 1 Kings 5:1-5

**Memory Verse:** “For we’re God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” Ephesians 2:10.

**Lesson Purpose:** To reflect on one of the most grotesque crimes that men, women and children suffer: human trafficking and understand that anyone can be a victim of it.

## Introduction

Let’s read the following fictional story: Nela is a teenager who grew up in a dysfunctional family, not knowing her father. Her mother was never able to go to school and spends most of her time working outside the home as a domestic servant. Nela’s mom comes home late at night to prepare something to eat for Nela and her four brothers and sisters, who by the way, were fathered by different men when their mother was a teenager.

This is the life of one of the many families living in marginal communities. One day, while walking in the street, Nela met Elena, a pretty young woman who befriended her. At first, Elena began to give her things and to take her places with her friends. Little by little, that relationship got stronger until one day, Elena offered her work in another city. It didn’t take much for Nela to convince her mom to let her go. So, this young teenager was taken to another city, far from her home, and there she was sold to the owners of a nightclub who forced her into prostitution. After a period of time, she was taken to another country where for several years she has been paying her owners the debt of the cost of her passport and air tickets. By the way, her passport was confiscated upon arrival at her new ‘business center’. Nela disappeared from her community, and no one knows anything about her. She is yet another victim of a criminal business that destroys lives of millions of people, which is known today as ‘human trafficking.’

In this lesson, we’ll address this topic. This fictional case isn’t an isolated story because unfortunately, there are many people like Nela who are robbed of their lives and freedom to be turned into mere merchandise that is commercialized and degraded in different markets, mostly controlled by international mafia networks.

Also, there are many ‘Elenas’ in our communities who’ve lost all decency and compassion. They have allowed themselves to be manipulated by greed and have fallen into Satan’s snares, deceiving and destroying the lives of many people and families.

## I. Description and explanation of human trafficking

The United Nations document on trafficking of people states that this is a crime under international law. Article 3(a) of the Prevention Protocol, Suppression and Punishment against Human Trafficking, especially of women and children, provides the only internationally accepted definition of human trafficking: “Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>).

According to information from the United Nations, each year more than 40 million people have been victims of trafficking, including women and children: “It’s estimated that at any given time in 2016, 40.3 million people have been subjected to modern slavery. This figure includes 24.9 million in forced labor and 15.4 million in forced marriage. This means that in the world there are 5.4 victims of modern slavery for every 1,000 people. 1 in 4 victims of modern slavery are children. Of the 24.9 million people trapped in forced labor, 16 million are exploited in the private sector, for example at domestic work, the construction industry or agriculture; 4.8 million people are victims of exploitation and forced sex; and 4 million people are in situations of forced labor. The forced labor disproportionately affects women and girls, who represent 99 per cent of the victims in the commercial sex industry and 58 percent in other sectors” (<https://www.ilo.org/>)



global/topics/forced-labour/lang--en/index.htm ).

Most people are trafficked and sold by international mafias that negotiate, sell and exploit them as merchandise. The largest operating networks and abuse are concentrated in prostitution, pornography and forced marriages. But there are also traffic networks of people specialized in exploiting people in the production chains in poor countries. For example, in some of the Asian countries and in Latin America, it's common to hear of large companies that manufacture clothes and shoes of famous brands exploiting women and children without pay or with minimum pay, and without any protection.

In Africa, the largest operating business is in the cocoa industry on the west coast, as well as in the gold and diamond mines. Many suffer in the so-called 'servitude for debts', where families have borrowed money from lenders, and when they can't pay, they give their children to be exploited, a very common practice in Africa.

When we talk about millions of women and children who are trafficked for purposes of sexual exploitation and pornography, most of them are deceived with false promises. While in the industry, most of the people are aware of their situation, but because of extreme poverty, there's no other option but to accept these working conditions. Of course, the vast majority of exploited children are victims of the inhumane system in which they live.

### **Questions:**

- Define in your own words human trafficking or modern slavery.
- Do you believe that this problem affects the community where you live? Explain.

## **II. Biblical view of Human Trafficking**

'Human trafficking,' or 'modern slavery' as it's commonly known, isn't something new in the history of humanity. The book of Genesis tells the story of Joseph, who was sold by his brothers to the Ishmaelites merchants, who in turn took him to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar, an official of the house of pharaoh (Genesis 37:26-28). The story of Joseph is like the stories of millions of men, women and children who are deceived and sold as slaves in the trafficking business of people. In the case of Joseph, it was his brothers who betrayed and sold him.

Another biblical passage, in 2 Kings 5:1-5, tells the story of a young Hebrew slave girl who was stolen from her home in Israel and trafficked to Syria, where she ended up in the house of a General of the Syrian army who was also a leper. This particular case represents another form used by the smugglers for their dirty business of human trafficking: the robbery of innocent people. It's very common to read in local newspapers of the disappearance of people, especially children, adolescents and women.

Both stories, that of Joseph and that of the young Hebrew slave, recount the tragedy that millions of people live whose lives and futures have been stolen because of the avarice and greed of unscrupulous men and women.

Paul, writing to the church at Ephesus, described the creative purpose that God had for us (Ephesians 2:10). We're God's creation. He made us with to be happy and have useful lives. Unfortunately, the devil has warped that divine purpose, making many slaves of greed and avarice, corrupting them to such an extent that they have dishonored God's creative purpose, by taking advantage of the innocence and extreme poverty of others human beings created in the image of God, making them mere items of merchandise, exposing them to extreme humiliation and slavery, just for the love of money.

God has created us in His image and likeness with dignity (Genesis 1:26-27) to be faithful stewards of His creation. Psalm 8:3-8 describes God's purpose in creating us. Human trafficking distorts this purpose because people that God has created to be free and live with respect and dignity in a world that He made are turned into mere merchandise, dehumanizing and destroying their dignity and future.

In Matthew 18:1-6, Jesus referred to the value that children and girls have for Him and for His Kingdom. In this passage, He describes the terrible consequences that will come to those who dare to hurt one of His little ones. Also, the apostle James denounced those who deceive, rob and exploit the poor; and how their cries come to the throne of God (James 5:4).

Based on the above, human trafficking isn't only a crime against humanity, but also an abomination to God's creative purpose.

### **Questions:**

- As you read the stories of Joseph (Genesis 37:26-28) and the Hebrew girl (2 Kings 5:1-5), what emotions do you feel in your mind and heart?
- Do you know someone who has been a victim of white slavery? What would you do if you met someone who has?
- How does God manifest His mercy towards men and women despite their sin (Psalm 115:16)?
- What other biblical passages can we use to help educate and prevent this crime from affecting our children and youth?

## **III. What can we do as church to combat Human Trafficking?**

The church can play a very important role in assuming responsibility to help prevent this crime against humanity in the community where it ministers.

The Church must be the prophetic voice in the community, speaking out against human trafficking, labelling it as a heinous crime against God and His creative purpose.

As Christians committed to justice and protection of the most vulnerable populations, we must be vigilant in identifying and reporting this type of activity in our communities.

#### **A. Inform:**

The church has the responsibility to inform and educate about this dirty business. In studies carried out by the United Nations, it was found that although this is a business that has developed international tentacles, it depends a lot on national networks of people who are dedicated to cheating and stealing people in local communities. This means that even here in your community where you're studying this lesson, there may be human trafficking networks that you're not aware of. It's important to underline that we too are in danger of falling victim to human trafficking! We need to share this dangerous modern slave trade with all its implications so that adults, youth and children don't fall into its snares. We all need to be careful and not to be fooled by them.

#### **B. Prevent:**

One of the most powerful fronts to stop the advancement of crime is the church. Most victims who fall into the trap of human trafficking are mostly children and young people who live in conditions of poverty, and in their effort to get ahead in life, they accept the offers that come from people who present them with 'good intentions', but that in the end, represent death traps. The church is called to guide, advise and empower the new generations to trust in the transforming power of God, and in His grace and sustenance. We believe that our God is the creator, and that in His love and compassion, He helps us get ahead without exposing our lives and falling victims of human trafficking.

#### **C. Protect:**

As a church, we're called to protect our children and youth against the snares of the devil and his poisonous chains. As the body of Christ, we must be responsible to help our children and young people develop strong spiritual foundations that help them develop a deep relationship with God. This will help them make wise decisions that will protect them from falling victim to human trafficking.

Over the years, it has been proven that a child or girl who has been part of the church family and has been instructed in the Word (Proverbs 22:6) is less likely to fall victim to human trafficking because their spiritual foundation are strong and they're covered by divine protection (Psalm 91) and the family of faith.

#### **D. Restore:**

Many victims of human trafficking manage to free themselves and return to their communities, and then after their tragedy comes the process of restoration. Many victims never recover from the trauma and tragedy they have gone through. The humiliation that many people suffer is indescribable. Unfortunately, people who've been trafficked are alone and they're often not understood, and many end plunged into alcohol, drugs and prostitution (this is because it's the only thing they know how to do). Many others just commit suicide. Their lives are like broken pots whose pieces are lying on the ground and are trampled by society. The church can play a compassionate role helping to 'pick up' of those pieces. They need to be reunited with their loved ones. The church must open her doors when they need help most. God's people can play a transforming role and help these people who've suffered as victims of human trafficking get back on their feet again.

I met Natacha in a Russian city. She was a 17-year-old teenager with no parents, living with her uncle. I met her at church where she was part of the worship team and youth group. During our visit, we celebrated her 18th birthday. When I look at the life of Natacha and her social status, I can only give thanks and praise God because, thanks to the church, she is protected in an environment where Christ reigns! Without Him, her life could have been destined to be another victim of drug trafficking persons, but thank God, the church has been her shield, offering her the way to get divine help. So, there are thousands of young women, men and children who are protected spiritually in the church.

Still, we're all vulnerable to falling victim to this crime. Therefore, we must take care of ourselves and help each other and be vigilant.

#### **Questions:**

- Make a short list of how your church can help prevent this crime.
- Are you aware of organizations in your community that are helping victims of human trafficking? If so, what are they doing? How do you think the church can get involved and help?

#### **Conclusion**

God has created us in His image and likeness. We're the crown of His creation. We weren't created to live in slavery, or to be exploited as mere merchandise. Think about it, today more than 40 million people, including women and children, live in slavery. As a church, we have a historic responsibility to denounce, inform, educate, prevent and protect vulnerable populations from this kind of abomination against God and His creation.

**Study passages:** Matthew 5:27-30

**Memory Verse:** “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” Matthew 5:28.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the big problem that pornography creates and discuss how to face it and achieve victory from the biblical point of view.

## Introduction

In today’s hypersexualized society, pornography is at the center. Without regulations, pornography grows at an exponential rate becoming massively accessed around the globe. Little by little, the consumer society in which we live has made the depersonalization of the human body so common that sex is just something to be used to obtain personal pleasure and then to discard. Media and advertising go hand in hand in making use of bodies as merchandise to increase earnings. For the sale of almost any product or service, women and men are exposed with very little clothing, in suggestive poses, with evident double intention. According to a Cornell University study, women with full breasts tend to earn more tips: a case of exacerbated consumerism, probably unconsciously on the part of the client, due to hyper-sexualization (<https://medium.com/@asexualidadmx/what%C3%A9-is-the-hypersexualization%C3%B3nb3230a03bbb>).

Perhaps the most dangerous part of pornography is how subtle it is, a silent evil that goes unnoticed, but which has great influence on the culture. Porn is becoming the sexual ‘educator’ of our time, which is serious because it shapes relationships between women and men, poses stereotypes and defines gender roles. Porn begins to look like something natural in everyday life, and many people downplay the moral damage it causes.

This evil isn’t new, however, but thanks to the Internet, today porn has become easily accessible, showing up for free, 24 hours a day, every day and in almost every corner of the planet. Never before has it been so easy to access as it is today. The people that use porn are getting younger and younger, even as young as 9 and 10 years old, which implies violent impacts and profound damages to the brains of our children and adolescents.

## I. Pornography

### A. Definition

Collins on-line dictionary offers the following definition: “Pornography refers to books, magazines, and films that are designed to cause sexual excitement by showing or describing sexual acts” ( <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/pornography>).

In fact, it’s quite difficult to fully define pornography, and there’s a lot of discussion about it. Anyway, we can understand pornography to be the use of stories, comics, animations, graphic and audiovisual images or reproductions of nudity and scenes of sexual content in order to provoke the sexual arousal of those who participate.

### B. A problem of great magnitude

Because the consumers remain anonymous, it’s very difficult to know the exact dimensions of porn today. This billion-dollar industry annually brings destruction, perversion and death to thousands of millions of people around the world. Although pornography has existed since the annals of humanity, it didn’t always have the global reach that it has in the present. A century ago, the person who wanted to consume pornography had to find out where to buy it, while today, it’s offered (in high resolution and even in virtual reality) for free, in the palm of a hand, since 80% of visits are made from smart phones (<https://www.pornhub.com/insights/tech-review>).

The Web is constantly growing, and porn sites are no exception. Currently, there are more than 1.5 billion websites. In 2019, a single site had 42 billion views (115 million visitors a day) with an average consumption per visitor of 10:13 minutes. And in the year 2020, it obtained 47,450 million views (130 million daily visits) (The Pornhub Technology Review. <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/tech-review> ). 12 new porn videos were uploaded to Internet per minute.

These examples of figures are sufficient to help us understand that we're facing a huge problem which is expanding and with catastrophic consequences. A problem that science is warning about, and which the church doesn't escape. In the study "The Phenomenon of Pornography", carried out by the Barna Group, 54% of Christian men and 15% of women admitted consuming pornography once a month; 39% felt comfortable with it, and 19% are working to leave it (<http://barna.org/research/porn-in-the-digital-age-new-research-reveals-10-trends/#.Vw5IFRMrLMU>).

The Argentine psychologist and expert in sexology, Laura Caldiz, says: "For 40 years I've been working in the area of sexuality, teaching related topics, but I've never really come across anything so worrying and so disturbing for the future of young people's physical, mental, emotional health...At this time, the dimension of this problem calls for it to be named a public health issue that deserves intervention, on the one hand, and prevention on the other" (Retrieved on June 15, 2021, from "The influence of porn on digital media", by Laura Caldiz. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcBqHIN\\_-lY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcBqHIN_-lY)).

### C. Porn is addictive

In a study by the Max Planck Institute in Berlin, they observed that consumers of pornography had less gray matter and recorded a reduction in their brain activity. These effects could include changes in neuronal plasticity by intense stimulation from the pleasure center (<https://www.neurologia.com/noticia/4710/estudian-the-relationship-between-pornography-consumption-and-connectivity-functional-brain>). This confirms the fact that addictions modify the brain in the frontal lobe where executive function is managed, impulses are controlled, and judgment and organization carried out ("Advice from a neuroscientist mother for your adolescent son", by Frances Jensen. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdL-ddX8Etk>).

When a person watches porn, their brain responds to the stimulus by downloading the neurotransmitter dopamine, which produces a feeling of well-being and pleasure. But when the level of dopamine slows down, the person goes in search of more stimuli to achieve the pleasurable sensation, and this leads to a circle of destruction. Like all addictions, pornography affects the consumer and their entire social circle of influence. The problem is that many people see this issue as personal entertainment and maintain that they're not doing harm to anyone. Another factor to consider is the "normalization" of pornography today.

### D. Porn creates an unreal world

Porn isn't real sex. It's just drama and fantasy prostitution. It takes love out of the relationship between a man and a woman, objectifying the body, depersonalizing and modifying the healthy view about sex. It creates unreal expectations about sex, selling a false image of what real pleasure and satisfaction are. Many psychologists, psychiatrists, sexologists, therapists and marriage counselors report having to help an increasing number of individuals and couples with such problems as sexual dysfunctions, loss of interest, dissatisfaction, discontentment with their own image or that of their spouse, among others. When treating the problem, pornography was or is present, creating in the mind of the consumer a world of fantasies that, consciously or unconsciously, leads to relationship breakdowns. This creation of unattainable expectations generates a huge sense of failure.

#### Questions:

- How would you define pornography?
- How big is the problem? What damage does it cause?

## II. What does the Bible say about pornography?

Although we don't find the exact word 'pornography' in the Bible, we do see that it's related to the Greek word *porneia* which is the basis of the word. *Porneia* is used 26 times in the New Testament with varied meanings, although it always refers to sexual impurities between people and with God. Remember that the context of the New Testament was inundated with pagan cults where cultic prostitution existed. Hence, in several of the passages, *porneia* means "idolatry".

In Matthew 5:32, 19:9 and John 8:41, it means 'sexual relations outside of marriage.' In Acts 15:20,29 and 21:25, it has a connotation of idolatry. In 1 Corinthians 5:2, 6:13,18, 7:2 and 2 Corinthians 12:21, *porneia* means 'immorality' (shamefulness)" (Balz, Horst and Schneider, Gerhard. *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. II., pp.1084-1090).

All the passages lead us to see the divine regulation: holiness in all areas of life (1 Thessalonians 4:3; 1 Peter 1:15). God claims for himself total worship, not just on Sundays with the congregation, but worship in everyday life. When this doesn't happen, He calls it idolatry (Ezekiel 23:49), fornication (Leviticus 20:5), and adultery (Jeremiah 5:7). These are strong words!

One of the passages that speaks most directly about the issue at hand is Matthew 5:27-30. Here Jesus was raising the standards with respect to what Jews considered adultery (v.28). Jesus spoke of how we use our eyes. Of course, He doesn't condemn that casual look, but that look that has bad intentions and leads to imaginations and impulses. Jesus here is pointing to something intimately related to pornography. There's a popular saying that says: "The problem isn't looking, but looking twice." Porn may have been initially viewed by chance, but the problem arises when we continue watching.

We have already seen how the human brain works with pornography, therefore, we think that we can watch without being caught. Men and women who suffered this evil assure themselves that it's okay because they have it under control. But pornography is sin for which we need to repent and seek forgiveness from God, together with a committed decision to drop it.

Next, in Matthew 5:29-30, Jesus calls His followers to radical purity of life, and this includes sexuality. To do this, He uses a very extreme example of hyperbole so that His listeners, then and now, understand the consequences of uncontrolled behavior. Now, he isn't asking us to mutilate the body. On the contrary, He's bringing our attention to what it really means to be free. Although this teaching also applies to women, Jesus was talking about how men look at members of the opposite sex (the word *yuvaika* which means "woman, wife, lady, owner, widow, girl") (Pabón, José M. and De Urbina, S. VOX Greek-Spanish Dictionary. p.124). He speaks to men because they're more visual, and many times, they allow themselves too much freedom in this regard. Jesus makes it clear to them that women must be respected, whatever their condition. A man may not look at a single girl lustfully. He doesn't have the right to look disrespectfully, lasciviously or lustfully at any woman, even if she is his wife.

In the relationships between men and women, whatever their condition, there must always be respect and mutual support as equals.

#### **Questions:**

- Do you think Jesus' recommendation in the study passage is exaggerated?
- How would you say it?

### **III. The church and the challenges facing the pornography**

Today, the church faces a great challenge with this issue of pornography, both in the community at large and within the congregation itself. There are stories of people, even holding positions of leadership in a congregation, that have been trapped by porn. There are many actions the church can take, but at least three are the most urgent.

First, we need train our members and families not just about pornography, but also sexuality from a biblical perspective, a theme absent in almost all congregations. What does the Bible say about sex? Can we live today a sexuality that honors God? What if I consume porn; is there salvation?

Second, we need to teach the church, and everyone in general. This can be done in many different instances; for example, from the pulpit, in Sunday school classes, small groups of men and women, in couple's ministries, as well as in teen and youth ministries. Outside the walls of the church, according to what is possible, the church can look for opportunities to teach about this topic in schools and colleges, clubs, through social networks and web pages, etc. Adequate information will provide a powerful tool to confront pornography and help children and young people develop healthy sexual attitudes.

Lastly, and most importantly, the church must provide a suitable environment, where those who are consuming pornography (new members or church people), can confess and receive all kinds of help to overcome this addiction. We shouldn't treat them with shame but accompany them in their recovery process with love and patience.

#### **Questions:**

- Do you know people who've been affected by pornography?
- What will you do from now on regarding this issue?

#### **Conclusion**

As we've seen, pornography is an evil that advances mercilessly. It attacks everyone equally, men and women, without distinction. What can we do? It's urgent that we start to understand the problem, teach biblical truths about sexuality, and offer restoration to those who suffer from it. We need to start now.



# Sexual abuse of children

Priscila Picavea (Argentina)

**Study passages:** Matthew 25:35-36

**Memory Verse:** “The King will reply, Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” Matthew 25:40.

**Lesson Purpose:** To learn about child sexual abuse, how frequently it occurs, and what we can do to prevent it and care for those involved.

## Introduction

Sexual abuse isn't a new issue or one reserved for only some countries. On the contrary, it happens all over the world since the beginning of time. The difference is that now we have more knowledge of the topic since there's more talk about the problem and how to prevent it. We now know that sexual abuse can generate trauma that can be reduced if dealt with in time.

Child sexual abuse is a problem that affects minors regardless of gender, social status or geographic location. No one is exempt from this problem and its consequences. It causes trauma that affects adolescents, young people and adults. We need to know how to detect it and treat these young people as soon as it's discovered.

### I. Let's talk about child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse refers to any sexual contact between a child (either a boy or a girl) and an adult, where the adult exercises power and authority over the minor, causing sexual pleasure for himself. This abuse can be accompanied by physical contact such as rape, penetration, touching, caressing, etc. Also, no physical contact may take place, such as asking a minor to dress or undress in front of the adult, or asking the minor to touch their own body, etc. It can occur within the family circle, among members of the extended family or trusted people, or outside the family with unknown people outside close family ties.

Most abuse cases are found within the family or with acquaintances. “In Argentina, according to data from the national government, 53% of child sexual abuse cases occur in the victim's home, 18% of cases occur in the aggressor's home and 10% of cases in the home of a family member, that is, 63% of cases occur in the family of the victim” (<http://xn--foroporlaniez-skb.org.ar/2020/07/frenemosel>).

“In a study with 48 parents of victimized children in Boston, they found that when the perpetrator was unknown, 73% made the corresponding complaint. On the other hand, when they were known, only 23% reported the abuse to the authorities and no complaints were registered when the person responsible for the abuse was a direct relative” (Irene Intebi. Sexual abuse in the best families, pp.42-43).

This shows that when it happens within the family nucleus, adults are more likely to do nothing about it out of fear of losing the family, household support, or other benefits. This warns us that when we receive a complaint from a minor who tells us that they were abused by someone in their family, it isn't helpful to try to deal with the family as a first resource because this might cause more trouble. Instead, counselors should talk to their superiors, or find out from the corresponding authorities of their city a way to make an anonymous report. It's better to begin to deal with these cases from a professional point of view.

Children generally don't lie about these topics, and it's important to act as soon as we receive this information. It's important to tell the child that has suffered abuse that it isn't his or her fault, that you will look for way to help them. Don't promise to keep it a secret, but on the contrary, you should look for professional help.

Child sexual abuse is the exploitation of a child for the sexual gratification of someone older than they are. When we refer to abuse, this can include exhibitionism, caresses, sexual contact and penetration, although it also refers to the use of minors to make pornographic materials for their commercialization.

The consequences of child sexual abuse can vary depending on the case, the environment where it happens, the frequency and the person who does it.

Many times, people think that because the child has only been groped, he won't have trauma, or it won't affect them in their development. But actually, this isn't true. They can be groped or penetrated, and may have subsequent trauma, or not. It all depends on the person and the circumstances mentioned above. The earlier the child verbalizes what happened, the less the trauma will be than if they keep it a secret.

For this reason, it's important to listen to them when they mention that something like this happened to them, which bothered them or scared them. By listening to them and acting in a protective way, we can help them not to have trauma in the future, and they can process it in a better way. But if we ignore them, joke about it, or we make them believe that they were misinterpreting what had occurred, they'll repress their feelings and very likely will suffer future traumas.

There are several factors that can promote sexual abuse in children. One is marital conflicts, where the minor doesn't feel protected by the family situation and may seek refuge in whoever offers it. Another cause is oversexualization, when children are exposed to sexual behaviors and conversations by adults which aren't correct for their age. People may talk openly about their sexuality in the presence of minors ... children who are sometimes left alone for a long time without supervision. These children may not receive proper signs of affection or security from their parents who leave them in the care of 'trusted' people, without supervising or asking what happens. And those people take advantage of the children's needs for love and affection.

Some false beliefs regarding how children are abused or their reactions to it can be seen in following: the belief that if it happened to someone close to us we would be aware of it; the belief that if the mother knew, she would denounce the abuse and defend the minor; the belief that this is a new incidence or that it hadn't happened before; the belief that if the abuse is repeated over time and doesn't mediate physical violence, it's because the minor wants it, seeks it or enjoys it; the belief that abuse isn't very common; the belief that children lie, confuse fantasy with reality, or are 'used' by their mothers to take revenge on the father or some other relative; the belief that it only occurs in families that are financially vulnerable; the belief that only girls are victims; the belief that because they're children, they'll forget what happened and as a result they won't be affected afterwards; and the belief that it's an internal family issue, and that we shouldn't get involved.

## Questions:

- Do you think we need to talk about this topic in the church? Comment.
- How aware were you of the topic, and what new aspect have you learned?

## II. The Bible speaks of prevention and intervention

In the Bible, we see that Jesus acted with mercy and healing in difficult circumstances, like the case of the resurrection of Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:41-56). When there was no longer any hope, Jesus stretched out His hand to the girl and restored her life and to her family. It's very nice to see Jesus' reaction to requesting that they give the girl something to eat.

When we talk about the subject of child abuse, we need to realize that children who are affected by sexual abuse need to be emotionally healed. They long to get rid of the heavy load they carry inside. The Bible teaches us that child abuse in any shape or form is wrong. Jesus commanded us: "Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:31). He also set the golden rule: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12). These commandments of God are in relation to all people, regardless of age, and so include children who must be cared for and treated with respect. Just like an adult, they're created in the image and likeness of our God (Genesis 1:26).

The Bible is clear about the need to respect sexuality between close relatives. We read in Leviticus: "No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the Lord" (Leviticus 18:6). The entire passages of Leviticus 18 and Deuteronomy 27:20-23 are very detailed about the subject of today's class. We must be very careful always to protect minors, who are very vulnerable.

Also, as Christians, we must help the children who suffer abuse and teach how to prevent it. The Bible tells us to meet the need of others: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matthew 25:35-36). So, we need to support those children who are suffering sexual abuse, and even better, let's work hard to prevent it from ever happening.

In Proverbs 24:11, the Word of God tells us: "Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter." Putting them in God's hands is very important, but it isn't the only thing we must do. As adults, we can ask God to use us to prevent or relieve children from any type of abuse they're suffering.

Isaiah 61:7-8 emphasizes that almighty God is a just Judge. Let's not try to take justice into our hands and wish evil to the aggressors. It's better to seek to give love, hope and renew those in need, and Christ will take care of judging wrongdoers. As Matthew 25:40 says: "...The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" So, when we discover that a child has been hurt through abuse, we need to take care of them and help them to recover, never ignore it as though it had never happened. Let's remember that whatever we do for them we're doing for God. We need to go out of our way to get informed and trained, always seeking the best for children. Prevention or early detection and treatment will make a difference to this child as they grow up into adulthood, free from the effects of what they might have undergone or suffered.

### Questions:

- Name another time Jesus exemplified caring for children.
- According to the Bible, how should we act when we learn of a minor who is in danger?

### III. What can we do as adults?

40% of sex offences are committed with minors, many of whom experience their first sexual assault before reaching 16 years of age. If these abusers don't receive treatment, they run the risk of repeating that behavior later. In a survey of young Christians, 3 out of every 10 young people said they had some negative sexual experience in childhood. The results obtained among Christians reflects the population at large. It's evident that there are many people who are dealing with the consequences of childhood abuse, and that to be a Christian doesn't immunize us against evil.

So, we must underscore the need for prevention. As adults, we must take care of the children around us, ensuring that they find a place to learn of God's love in the church, discovering that they're part of God's special creation. They must learn how to take care of their bodies, identifying their private parts and insuring that one looks at or touches them; and if an adult does these things to them, they need to have the courage to report it and find help.

We can teach how to deal with these issues in the different activities that we have with children. They need to say "NO" when something happens they don't like or makes them feel uncomfortable. They can leave the place where they feel danger and ask for help. We need to teach them that secrets aren't good when they make us feel uncomfortable.

Abuse can occur within the local churches where we need to look after the children with care. If possible, there should be two adults per classroom to take care of children and protect adults from bad misunderstandings or false accusations. It may not always be wise for married couples to teach the same class since they can support each other in case of abuse, leading to complications and misunderstanding, making getting to the truth more difficult. Small children need to be accompanied to the bathroom, and waited for outside, giving them their privacy.

If anyone suspects that a child is being abused, they need to approach the child and lovingly encourage them to talk about it. Children generally don't lie about the issue of abuse. Anyone who has been abused, or has abused children, can find hope and healing in Jesus Christ. Seeking help from a pastor, counselor, support group, or professional can be a good place to start recovery. It's recommended that the abuser receive help in another institution other than the place where the victim is, since this would cause problems in the recovery of both parties.

### Questions:

- How can you help prevent child sexual abuse of the minors around you?
- What would you do if a child tells you that he/she was abused?

### Conclusion

Isaiah 61:1-9 reminds us that Jesus came to save everyone, to heal all who come to Him and need his love, forgiveness and healing. God is the answer for humanity, and also for people affected by abuse. He's the best news we can give to the afflicted. He's the one who frees those who are in prison and darkness, who provides joy instead in mourning, a mantle of joy instead of an anguished spirit.

For a good document to help your church set some healthy guidelines to help prevent child sexual abuse within the church, download the **Protection Policy for Children, Youth, and People with Special Needs** here: <https://www.mesoamericaregion.org/en/package/child-protection-policy/>





# Climate Change

David McKeithen (Argentina)

**Study passages:** Ezekiel 36:35-36

**Memory Verse:** “Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the Lord have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it” Ezekiel 36:36.

**Lesson Purpose:** Examine current environmental issues and reflect on our role as Christians in the face of this crisis.

## Introduction

The planet, creation, what we call nature, is being whipped, and those responsible seem to have a free hand. Seen from any perspective, in raw data, the ecosystems of our planet are experiencing a historic level of destruction. Not that this is a new story, considering the levels of deforestation and desertification and extinction of species that has characterized various societies over time (e.g., from the development of agriculture, humanity has deforested, damaged or fragmented 80% of the forests that covered the planet), but it's still our story.

How has the relationship between humanity and the world changed? What's our current impact on the planet? How can we respond to the devastation that marks these times? In this lesson, we'll briefly review the global situation and examine the implications of the message of restoration, as well as consider what the church should do.

### I. Present state of creation

Each country has its own characteristics according to its social history, industries, policies and consumption practices. Therefore, each one must contextualize the problem according to their locality. However, the global pattern is evident and sustained. Humanity has destroyed 420 million hectares of forest since 1990. 85% of the wetlands present in the year 1700 no longer exist. The United Nations (UN) calculated in 2019 that at least one million species of animals and plants are at risk of extinction and could be lost in the coming decades (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-declineunprecedented-report/>). Since the 16th century, more than 680 species of vertebrates

have been driven to extinction (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/naturenature-decline-unprecedented-report/>). In a literal sense, our societies hold a pattern that destroys creation.

This problem extends beyond appreciation and care of the wonderful diversity that God provided as these practices already have consequences for support of humanity. If we consider the food situation, the truth is that the global dietary needs are increasingly fragile: among the 30,000 and 50,000 species of edible plants, only about 170 are commercialized at the moment; and we support 90% of the diet worldwide with only 15 species (<https://www.cbd.int/doc/press/2019/pr-2019-05-22-idb-en.pdf>). Due to the poor conservation and active marginalization of varieties internal to each species, in recent years we have lost thousands of varieties adapted to droughts, floods, or resistant to certain pests. Just take the example of the apple tree, which registered more than 7,000 varieties in the United States. In the XIX century, however, they estimate that they have lost 86% of these varieties (Fowler, C. and Pat Mooney. Food, Politics and the Loss of Genetic Diversity, 1991). Similar processes are happening with ancient varieties of potatoes, rice and various fruits that have sustained human populations along the course of history.

There has always been a remnant that raises their voice against this destruction, observe and record this loss, or work on its conservation and regeneration, but the forecasts remain devastating. Despite efforts to recycle, waste pollution from plastics has increased tenfold since 1980.

Due to industrial waste and fertilizers that end up in rivers and oceans, there are already more than 245,000 km<sup>2</sup> of “dead zones” in the ocean. Currently only 40% of the global population have access to safe and clean water (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-decline-unprecedentedreport/>).

The agency of scientists that updates and presents the data to the United Nations, the IPBES, reported in 2019 that governments weren't reaching the environmental projects goals proposed for 2020 (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-decline-unprecedented-report/>), and that such a breach would mean failure to meet global targets related to poverty, hunger, health, quality and access to drinking water, urban sustainability and the climate.

The non-consideration of the planet and the active destruction of its ecosystems will only intensify other social, economic and political problems. Today, between 100 to 300 million people are at increased risk of floods and hurricanes due to the destruction of coastal ecosystems. As a consequence of global heating, aggravated by the doubling of emissions of greenhouse gases since 1980, the intensification of droughts, floods and other climatic events will affect populations around the world. In 2017, they calculated that 60% of the 30 million displaced persons (forced migrants) was for reasons of natural disasters (<https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/%20grid2018/downloads/2018-GRID.pdf>).

This is dark data. Sitting in our houses in urban centers, it can even seem distant, surreal or of little consequence. But we're all involved in what sort of legacy we'll leave for the following generations.

### **Questions:**

- Contextualizing the global data mentioned, how is the society in which you live related to creation?
- Personally, what themes, ecosystems or species are you most interested in or concerned about in creation?

## **II. Desolation and restoration**

Genesis 1:28 says: “God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living

creature that moves on the ground.” Unfortunately, throughout history, various societies with some familiarity with the Bible have cited this verse as a manifesto to subdue and “civilize” nature. Being isolated from the essence and context of salvation history that permeates the Bible from beginning to end, this phrase has been and is used to justify the indiscriminate use and exploitation of the planet, positioning the human being at the apex of creation. However, frameworks of interpretation must be consistent with the central message of the Bible: God's love toward His creation and the gospel of salvation and restoration.

The history of sin that runs through the Bible evidences the damage it exerts on relationships: between people and their Creator, among people, and between people and the rest of creation. Genesis says that a river came out of Eden to water the trees that are pleasing to the eye and from which they could be eaten (Genesis 2:9-10). God then commissioned humans to cultivate and care for the garden (Genesis 2:15) and know and name each species (Genesis 2:19). However, sin would have negative consequences, both in the relationship with God and with the planet (Genesis 3:17-19), expressed by the expulsion from the garden (Genesis 3:23), and the introduction of animal death (Genesis 3:21).

In the mission entrusted to Noah (Genesis 6:17-22), we find one of the earliest examples of the salvation of mankind and the restoration of the relationship between people and animals. God restarted and covenanted with mankind (Genesis 9:12-13). He reiterated the human role and its link with creation, explaining to Noah his goal of keeping “their various kinds alive throughout the earth” (Genesis 7:3), with reference to each animal that he commanded to go up into the ark. When landing on firm land, God commanded that the animals of the ark be freed so that they may reproduce abundantly on earth (Genesis 8:17).

This motto of salvation and restoration would be repeated in the eschatological visions recorded in the prophetic books. In essence, prophetic language relates sin with the death and destruction of creation. And after the people have repented, there are promises of the presence of the Spirit and the restoration and renewal of creation (e.g., Isaiah 65-66; and Amos 9:11-15).

Throughout Isaiah, the rest of creation interacts with God. In Isaiah 44, the Lord asks the depths of the earth, the mountains, the forest, every tree, to shout for joy at the redemption of Israel (vv.22-23).

Continuing this parallel, in chapter 45, the clouds spill righteousness, and the earth bears fruit of salvation and springs justice. Alignment with God's justice affects the rest of creation, as can be seen in the vision of the reign of the Messiah expressed in Isaiah 11, where he affirms that "They'll neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (v.9). In Ezekiel 36, for example, after declaring that "they defiled" the land "by their conduct and their action" (v.17), God says to them: "Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, people of Israel!" (v.32), and then gave them "a new heart" and put "a new spirit" in them (v.26). This expresses abundant life after repentance, describing the restoration of the earth: "They will say, "This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited." Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the Lord have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it" (vv.35-36).

For first century societies recorded in the New Testament, the environment referred to in the Old Testament was already different. Lions were no longer prowling around as they did in the experience of shepherds and residents, as it was in David's time (1 Samuel 17:36-37), or earlier as observed by Samson (Judges 14:5-6).

By the time of the New Testament, lions must have been just a symbol, given the urban expansion and the reduction of this species in the area. The images Jesus used in various parables were agricultural because these regions had already been deforested, and depended on crops and domesticated animals. Even so, in the gospels, various references are made to environmental pressures such as intensified fishing of the Sea of Galilee (by the Roman Empire, from the port of Tiberias) which made fishing difficult for families like those of Peter and John.

Beyond these little facts parallel to biblical history, we rediscover the explicit continuity with the restorative vision of the prophets in the letter of Romans: "For the creation waits in eager expectation

for the children of God to be revealed ... We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:19-22).

The Bible isn't an environmentalist book, nor should we interpret it from the point of view of that contemporary paradigm. The scriptures have their own focus and message purpose. On the other hand, the Bible is always relevant for problems that each generation lives. In our times, given the magnitude of the destruction of creation by human beings, in addition to the immediate and long-term consequences leading to events that will take place in our communities, it's crucial to re-examine the staggering creativity and complexity of creation, the love of God towards all His creation, and the work of restoration of which we're invited to be a part.

### Questions:

- Considering the passages in Genesis [Eden (Genesis 1) and Noah (Genesis 6 to 9)], how should humanity interact with the rest of creation?
- What is the impact of sin on the rest of creation and what is the vision of restoration in response to this sin? (references: Genesis 6 to 9; Isaiah 11, 44, 61, 65, 66; Ezekiel 36).

### III. Let's do it

In the current context in which our planet exists, reflection on the role of the Christian in the face of the environmental crisis is much more than a mere administration of resources at our disposal. We must be reconciled with God and live out the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5 and 6). Reconciliation is part of the restoration work of the Lord that starts in our hearts, but as we saw in Ezekiel 36, our relationship with the rest of creation has been damaged by sin.

The planet is being destroyed at a catastrophic rate. As a result, our populations are and will be increasingly exposed to floods, scarcity of water, fires, and social and economic conflicts that will affect us. As a church, we have a responsibility to again take up the challenges given in Eden and to Noah after the flood to care for nature. We need to retake the challenge the prophets left us to restore nature.

We also have an opportunity to be light in this world, anticipating the disasters that can be seen in the coming years and providing answers that cushion some of these crises. With creativity, there are thousands of responses our churches and districts, in coordination with compassionate ministries or broader social projects, can make.

In the first place, it's essential to examine our daily impact on the environment and review our practice according to a life that values and preserves creation. Secondly, I'm convinced that the more we know of our surroundings and observe creation, the more we'll want to find solutions to bring care and restoration. The church must educate about the complexity and beauty of creation, and promote activities exploring and enjoying nature, which are key to restore the relationship between humans and the rest of creation. There are so many mysteries that we barely pay attention to, ranging from plant species, insects, birds and other animals that surround us, even rainfall records and the local watersheds that feed the local water sources.

Returning to the commission given to Noah, and the goal of conserving the various species of the earth, we can explore and educate about this diversity by visiting nature reserves or nearby national parks, starting nurseries for threatened local plants, recover the diversity of local or regional edible species that are in disuse, preserve the local wisdom and knowledge of these species, start or join community gardens, and research on the most relevant environmental problems in our local environment.

From the commitment to the integral life of our congregations and communities, we can prepare for the most likely disasters in our region and reduce the vulnerability of our communities (whether of floods, droughts, food shortages, etc.) informing people locally and working together with other local organizations.

### **Questions:**

- Examining your own context, what do you consider to be the biggest environmental problems in your area or locality, and what contributes to this?
- What role can the church have in the face of current environmental problems? What could you do locally? Share.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen, our sin forms part of the current historical destruction of creation and of our relationship with nature. We're called to reflect the love of God in the world. In the face of this titanic environmental problem, we have an opportunity to take care and treasure creation, love our neighbor, and announce and take part in God's restorative work in an ever bleaker world.



# Marriage and family today

Germán Picavea (Argentina)

**Study passages:** Genesis 1:26-31, 2:4-24

**Memory Verse:** “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” Romans 12:2.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that God’s plan for marriage and family remains the same as at the beginning despite the changes that marriage and family have and will continue to suffer throughout history.

## Introduction

The United Nations Human Rights Council, on July 1, 2016, approved the Resolution on the Protection of the Family, which reaffirms that the family is the “natural unit and fundamental nature of society” and recognizes its “key role” in social development. The resolution demands that “adequate protection and assistance” be provided, as well as “the natural environment for growth and well-being of all its members, and particularly the children” (<https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=es/A/HRC/RES/32/23>).

Marriage and the family have undergone changes in their organization and adaptation at each moment of history. In the last 100 years, marriage and the family have changed more drastically than in the previous 20 centuries. There are a myriad of social, economic and cultures that are the causes of these changes. So over time, the concepts of marriage and family have been changing enormously to the point that at present we cannot speak of a single model of marriage and family; it’s far more complex.

## I. Types of marriages and families today

We must clarify that some societies understand marriage to be the union of two people without children, or who have children (biological or adopted), as characteristics of the family. Some couples live together outside of marriage, modifying the known meaning of marriage as a requirement for living together. They may call each other ‘partners.’ For most women, this is a time of waiting for marriage, and for men, it’s simply a ‘rehearsal.’

Although many live like this all their lives as a couple, there are some who **Live Apart Together** (LAT) They share life under the criterion of fidelity, but each one retains their own space that can be independent or with their parents. They may share a weekend, vacations, some weekdays, etc. They don’t settle in the same house since they think that coexistence kills love.

**Couples and open marriage:** this type of relationship can be combined with the previous two. An open relationship is a common-law or legal marriage where both parties agree to give each other permission to have intimate relationships outside the couple or marriage, without regarding it as infidelity. The couple make the rules. Generally, it occurs in people who negatively react to closed and monogamous relationships in which sexual exclusivity is promised among its members.

**Dinks:** (Double Income No Kids) is a trend that started in Europe in the eighties and has become popular worldwide. These are people with a high level of income, mostly professionals between 25 and 40 years of age, living under the same roof, who decide not to have children, or can’t have children. In general, they are people whose goals have to do with dedication to their careers and desires to maintain their social status. Usually, they’re people who pursue a comfortable lifestyle in which they prioritize fun, hobbies, travel and personal tastes.

**Nuclear family:** This is the basic family unit that consists of a husband (father), wife (mother) and children, who can be biological or adopted, living under the same roof.

An **extended or consanguineous family** consists of a nuclear unit living in the same place that extends beyond two generations and is based on blood ties. For example, the family of third and fourth generations includes parents, their married children or singles, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

**Single-parent family:** They are formed by only one parent, usually the mother. This model can be due to adolescent or unwanted pregnancy with a single mother who may not know the father. Conversely, the lady could become a mother through artificial insemination, or being abandoned by her partner through divorce or widowhood. Sometimes, the father or mother is absent. It can become difficult for a single parent to manage the house and children, so they usually resort to getting help from relatives.

**Assembled family:** This is a couple in which one or both members have children from previous unions. This type of family can occur between widowed, divorced or single parents. Given the high and increasing rate of separations and divorces, this is a type of family which is on the increase. As for formality, some opt for coexistence as a test, then after time they'll affirm or reject the combination of families. In others, this coexistence is prolonged in time and there are those who also formalize their union legally and before God.

Among its characteristics we can highlight that in the blended family, generally, it's the adults who choose it, and the children must adapt to a new reality. New roles such as 'stepfather' and 'stepmother' come into play, but it may be difficult to define them well. Many times, in fact, dealing with ex-spouses about children from previous relationships can end up producing serious friction in the new couple. There's often a clash of family models, upbringings and values that aren't easy to reconcile. In assembled families, the number of members (nuclear and extended) often leads to conflict.

**Same-sex family:** Here there's a couple of the same sex who become parents of one or more children through adoption, womb rental (or

surrogate motherhood), or in the case of women, through artificial insemination.

**Transnational family:** These are families that live periodically or permanently separated in different countries, some in the country of origin and others in the destination culture, and this can even change with some regularity. This entails remote parenting. There are many transnational families today, and it's on the increase. They may suffer from changes in the ways of relating between their members due to the prolonged absence of one or more members. There needs to be an effort to maintain links between the members at key moments in life, not just financial support, and adaptation to new technologies (like Facebook Messenger video, Skype, WhatsApp video, etc.) that can help continue the family relationship and strengthen it.

**Co-parenting:** it's a new way of family relationships where there's no other reason beyond the genuine desire to have a child and raise it between two people. The reason for co-parenting isn't wanting to be a father or mother alone as a single parent but wanting to share parenthood without being sexually linked or in a cohabiting relationship. In this model, parenting is similar to that of separated or divorced parents. It occurs mostly in professional people whose lives have reached a stability and they think it's time to be parents. In the case of women, there's also the variable reproductive age to consider. The formation of a co-parental family begins with the choice of parents. Some cases are known in advance, while in other cases, guidelines for co-parenting are sought and agreed upon. Regarding conception, there are those (heterosexuals) who sexually unite solely for the purpose of conception, and there are those (heterosexuals and homosexuals) who achieve parenthood through sperm donation, maternity surrogacy, artificial insemination and adoption.

### **Questions:**

- How would you define marriage and family?
- How many forms of coexistence do you know around you?

## II. What is God's plan for the family according to the Bible?

In God's plan when He created everything, marriage and family were an important part. It wasn't an improvised act. From the beginning, God said: "Let's make mankind in our image, in our likeness..." (1:26); and in verse 27, he carried out the trinitarian decision to create human beings, male and female. The triune God planned it (v.26); and he did what he had planned (v.27). At that moment, human beings were born, male and female, to live together (2:24). God blessed them and he said to them: "Be fruitful and increase in number" (1:28-30). There, God established the first marriage with its two members. Among their many other responsibilities, God encouraged them to conceive and raise children so that they could continue the cycle, thus ensuring the continuation of humanity. At the end, God expressed for the first time that everything He created "was very good" (1:31). Therefore, we understand that marriage and the family have their origin in God. They belong to the creation order.

Let's look at Genesis 2:24 where God shared some principles with the first couple. He called them to come together, abandoning or detaching themselves from their nuclear family to form their own. This is a founding principle. We can say that marriage in God's plan begins by changing our priorities of attention and care. It's His way of protecting the new couple from outside influences, allowing them that intimacy necessary for the construction of the new unit. Marriage is a unity among equals (1:26-27), without hierarchies, no authorities... a unit that is strengthened by the contribution of each one through their gifts and abilities, capabilities and resources that they put at the service of the relationship (1:28).

Secondly, God commanded that they come together as spouses. The Hebrew word for "unite" means "to seize," "hold on to," "adhere to," and also "affection," "loyalty," and "devotion." It's no accident that all the meanings are based on physical proximity. God called the new marriage to total unity in all areas of life. Hence, Paul commanded spouses not to separate (1 Corinthians 7:5).

God established the principles of fidelity and permanence in the relationship. Both members are called to the commitment to remain united, attached, with total loyalty to each other. Later, we see God reaffirming this when the people lived outside of His plan (Malachi 2: 14-16). This is also underscored by Jesus in Matthew 19: 6. He concluded by saying: "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Jesus said: "the two shall become one flesh" (Matt. 19:5). Jesus used the future tense "shall become." This implies process. We don't start out on our marriage day as 'finished products.' Marriage, according to God's plan, is about two people (male and female) who leave their family of origin and commit themselves to each other for life, who work daily and intentionally in their relationship, building a unity as strong, solid and harmonic as "one flesh."

### Questions:

- What was God's original plan according to Genesis 1:26-31?
- How do we apply this biblical passage to our family?

## III. Church, Marriage, and Family Today

We all agree that the Word of God is our rule of faith and practice, but often very subtly in everyday life we let ourselves go and conform to the times in which we live. You've heard expressions like these: "This is how it's done now," "update yourself!" or "open your mind." As in the first century, the apostle Paul tells us not to conform to the present values we see around us in the world, but to let God's Word guide our lives (Romans 12:2).

The apostle lived in a time very different from ours, but very similar in terms of the social propositions of marriage and the family. It was a patriarchal system where the man held absolute power, dehumanizing women, removing them from the place that God gave them next to the man. God never changed that; only sin modified it (Genesis 3:16). It was a time where domestic violence was common; hence Paul in Ephesians 5:21-6:9 spoke for the "voiceless" (women, children and slaves) and gave them their rightful place.

In first century society, fidelity was required only for the woman, and permanence in the marriage wasn't considered important. They said that Greeks and Romans got married to get divorced, and they divorced to get married. The Jews temporized their law to achieve the same purpose (Matthew 19:3). "It's no exaggeration to say that the whole atmosphere of the ancient world breathed adultery...The marriage bond was in the process of disappearing" (Barclay, William. *The New Testament Annotated* by William Barclay, vol. 10, 1984, p.179).

Today, the situation isn't dissimilar from that of the first century. Domestic violence continues to increase. Every 10 minutes a woman dies in the world from this cause (<https://www.france24.com/en/20200303-womens-day-latin-american-femicides-violence-gender>). "Today, marriage seems a thing of the past. The number of divorces for every thousand marriages went from 2.6 in 1970 to 5.5 in 2008. In the European Union, separations went from 0.8 in 1965 to 2 in 2017, and while the divorce rate grew, the number of marriages decreased by 50%. Part of this trend is due to the fact that several countries have legalized divorce, as well as socio-cultural changes that are transforming the way we live together" ("Until the judge separate us." <https://worldorder.com/maps/oecd-divorce-rate/>). In Uruguay, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean says that there's "a culture of divorce"... "The dissolution of marriage is becoming an increasingly more recurring and normal phenomenon of society" (CEPAL. *On hidden revolutions: The family in Uruguay*, p.25).

This is the world we live in, and to which we're called to serve. Our service must be verbal and in deeds (Colossians 3:17). Therefore, self-examination is imperative in the light of the Word. We need to check how we're doing before judging others by the way in which they live. We're not the judges of the universe; we're reconcilers on behalf of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17-20). The Lord's church must serve all and help them to enter into a love relationship with God, rather than persecute people to get married as if that was the solution to all problems. Instead, from the church we must develop a strong ministry to people who are living together, married couples and families. We need to share God's plan

for mankind, and that because of our redemption in Jesus Christ, it's possible to live according to God's vision for marriage and families today.

### **Questions:**

- How do we apply Romans 12:2 to what we live today?
- How can we apply 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 to the variety of family formats that are approaching the church today?

### **Conclusion**

In the midst of society, we must live and serve. Let's live the principles that God established in His Word, embodying the Word of God in our married life and families. Let's show everyone with our lives what God has always wanted for human beings.



# Gender Ideology

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (Cuba)

**Study passages:** Genesis 1:27-28; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Matthew 22:39; Mark 10:7-9; 1 Corinthians 6:9; Jude 7

**Memory Verse:** “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” Genesis 1:27.

**Lesson Purpose:** To provide an overview of gender ideology, provide the biblical perspective, and look at the role of the church as it faces this issue.

## Introduction

It's crucial to delve into this topic of gender ideology which is very contemporary and creates a lot of social interest. Knowledge about it will help us make knowledgeable assessments of the consequences that come as it gathers more interest, as well as discover the important role the church needs to take on this subject.

Although there are different types of scientific knowledge considered important that offer valuable contributions to a truthful understanding of the gender ideology perspective, none can beat the life manual, the Bible, that our Creator gave us. Disobedience to this, wanting to live without God directing our lives, has led humanity to live negative consequences. Today we have to face the question day by day: who determines what's right or what's wrong?

The answer for our societies depends on their conceptions of what it means to be human. What seems to count in today's world is self-perception, or self-constructions. This is a result of postmodern thought, where truth is a matter of perspective, and as a consequence, there are no definite absolute truths. This becomes the ideal platform where ideologies, such as that of gender, spread easily.

## I. Description and explanation of the gender ideology (G.I.)

### A. Definitions

Although there are many different opinions regarding concepts that can be offered about gender ideology or perspective, it can be defined as an ideology that proposes that the differences between men and women aren't of a fixed nature, but are purely conventional constructions as well as cultural patterns manufactured according to stereotypes and roles of sexuality that each particular society decides.

### B. Premises of gender ideology

The very meaning of gender ideology is based on what it drives or promotes, so, we must explore some of its fundamental premises:

### 1. Change in the terminology from 'sex' to 'gender:'

This ideology proposes to use the term 'gender' instead of 'sex' because sex implies two well-established biological possibilities: Male and female, while gender allows for the following: masculine, feminine and neuter. So, they define gender to be, therefore, socially constructed. Consequently, there are no sexes, only roles; orientations which in turn are mutants, that is, they can change as many times as the person wants to in life. It's about putting aside biological sex, that may or may not correspond to the feelings a person may have, giving place to what we can call a person's own perceived sexual orientation.

### 2. Gender orientation may differ from the sex assigned at birth.

“At birth, babies are assigned male or female based on physical characteristics. This refers to the 'sex' or 'assigned gender' of the child. Meanwhile, 'gender identity' refers to an internal sense people have of who they are that comes from an interaction of biological traits, developmental influences, and environmental conditions. This may be male, female, somewhere in between, a combination of both or neither” (Dr. Jason Rafferty Gender Identity Development in Children, <https://www.healthychildren.org/>). To summarize this point, according to G.I., just because we're born with certain sexual organs doesn't necessary define our sexual orientation.

### 3. Deconstruction of male and female roles.

Here the proponents of G.I. are saying that people are born neutral, that is, without a defined gender; and subsequently that a decision must be made. The parents should give their children freedom to decide how they feel. While they're very young, the children are they in their parents' hands, but eventually, it will have to be the child's personal decision.

## Questions:

- What do you understand by gender ideology?
- Briefly explain at least one of its fundamental premises.

## II. Biblical perspective of how to see the gender ideology issue

The Word of God doesn't support G.I. "The Church of the Nazarene views human sexuality as one expression of the holiness and beauty that God the Creator intended. Because all humans are beings created in the image of God, they're of inestimable value and worth. As a result, we believe that human sexuality is meant to include more than the sensual experience, and is a gift of God designed to reflect the whole of our physical and relational createdness" (Church of the Nazarene Manual, 2017-2021).

When God created the first couple, it's clear that He created the man and the woman genetically, biologically and psychologically different. Science confirms the perfect creation of the human being. Even before we're born, science can know if the baby is male or female because God put a unique DNA for each person. Consider this: even after death, science can define whether the person was male or female through the bone, the brain composition, etc. God created us in such a way that our whole body can be defined as a man or woman (Genesis 1:27). God commanded mankind to reproduce; he designed that this would occur through sexual union between the male and the female (Genesis 1:28).

This has been modified by Gender Ideology, who uses the term 'sexual orientation.' The American Psychological Association states: "Sexual Orientation is an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to another person. It's easily distinguished from other components of sexuality including biological sex, gender identity (the psychological sense of being male or female) and the social gender role (adherence to cultural norms for feminine and masculine behavior) ( <https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq/sexual-orientation>). Generally, society identifies us by our sexuality in the same way that we're identified by our ethnic backgrounds, etc. But those who uphold G.I. take another line: "Sexual orientation is different from sexual behavior because it refers to feelings and self-concept. Persons may or may not express their sexual orientation in their behaviors" ( <https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq/sexual-orientation>).

If sexual orientation is defined as attraction or inclination, then it's true to say that people are attracted by many things such as sport, recreation, food, etc. And if we don't like something, it doesn't make us phobic about it. Following this reasoning in relation to sexuality, not agreeing with homosexuality doesn't make a person

homophobic. We must understand, therefore, that an inclination or an attraction shouldn't be legislated against, because there would be an innumerable list of our likes and dislikes. Tastes and attractions are private issues of each human being.

Gender ideology wants to place terms of differentiation in an area that has no relation with sex. They say that some people who are born with what we could call biological sex don't feel right about the sex they have. This desire to be different is born in the mind (the psyche). So, the person wants to be a woman or a man, or both, ignoring biological sex, because they decide according to their inclination or attraction.

Discrimination based on sex, race, etc. can't be put on the same level as sexual orientation. What is being rejected by the person is their sex, because they want to be something that biologically isn't true. God created sex in such a way that it cannot be changed.

"The human being has a physiological, anatomical and psychological makeup. The complementarity of the sex organs is a determination of nature, not a cultural invention or a religious prejudice. It's a way to ensure the procreation and continuity of the species. Nature gives sex naturally with concrete manifestations (DNA, biology, morphology). What makes a person born male or female? Life gives them an established genetic code. That is the general rule" ("Magazine on Education and Society, 2019". <https://doi.org/10.35756/educaumch.v0i14.103>).

Gender ideology attempts to substitute natural scientific truth designed by God for a truth that depends on culture. But Scripture is clear, God created man and woman as the only genders according to biological sex. God condemns the practice of homosexuality. Regarding homosexuality, the Manual of the Church of the Nazarene states: "Because we believe that it's God's intention for our sexuality to be lived out in the covenantal union between one woman and one man, we believe the practice of same-sex sexual intimacy is contrary to God's will for human sexuality. While a person's homosexual or bisexual attraction may have complex and differing origins, and the implication of this call to sexual purity is costly, we believe the grace of God is sufficient for such a calling" (Church of the Nazarene Manual, 2017-2021, pp.46-47).

The practice of homosexuality is explicitly condemned in the Bible in Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Jude 7; 1 Cor. 6:9-10.

## Questions:

- How are the concepts of sexuality and family expressed in the Bible?
- What biblical texts can you cite that reveal that God is against gender ideology?
- What does the Bible say about homosexuality?

### III. What can we do as the church about gender ideology?

Throughout history, the church, as the people of God, has been a light shining out against the different ideologies that have risen up against the Bible and are detrimental to society.

It has fallen to the contemporary church to face the issue of gender ideology, opposing the ideology, but not its practitioners. We keep acting as our God has shown us - to hate sin and love the sinner. Thus, there's a clear distinction between the ideology and the people who practice it.

#### A. The church and gender ideology

The church is called to raise its prophetic voice in each society, declaring the disastrous impacts spiritually, psychologically and socially that come with the practice of gender ideology. Therefore, we strongly oppose this ideology because it goes against the Word of God, can be destructive for people, and can bring negative social and global consequences.

The church cannot remain neutral or passive in the face of an ideology that promotes sin and destroys family. The church understands that each person has the freedom to live as they wish, but that doesn't mean that it's right or true or that we should accept gender ideology.

#### B. Attitude of the church toward people who embrace gender ideology

It must be understood that just because we don't agree with gender ideology, that doesn't give us permission to discriminate or practice homophobia against our fellow human beings. The church cannot be homophobic or act with discrimination. The church practices the maxim that Jesus taught us (Matthew 22:39). The relationship and treatment of each person in this world by a disciple of Christ must be full of respect, courtesy and love. Our churches must act in the same way: "We recognize the shared responsibility of the body of Christ to be a welcoming, forgiving, and loving community where hospitality, encouragement, transformation, and accountability are available to all" (Church Manual of the Nazarene, 2017-2021. USA: CNP, 2018, p.47).

But the mission of the church will always be to preach to everyone globally, encouraging them to repent of their sins, turn to God, attain salvation, and live an abundant life in Christ. "Everyone" includes the LGBTIQ+ community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex, queer, and other genders that don't conform to those described above).

Next, a brief definition of each will be presented:

- Lesbian: a woman who is attracted emotionally, physically and sexually to other women.
- Gay: a man who is attracted emotionally, physically, and sexually to other men.

- Bisexual: a person who is attracted emotionally, physically and sexually to men and women alike.
- Transsexual: the person who identifies with the sex opposite to their biological sex given at birth, and feels the desire to modify their body towards the physical and genital qualities opposite of what they were born with.
- Intersex: a person whose reproductive anatomy doesn't conform to the genitalia traditionally associated with men or women.
- Queer or non-binary: a person who doesn't identify with the label 'man' or 'woman'. It can include someone identifying with both genders at the same time or with neither of the two.

#### C. The church acting as a community of healing and education

The church needs to promote education based on the moral and ethical values of the Word of God. It must continue promoting education in all the areas, and fundamentally in sexuality. This needs to take place not only in our churches and institutions, but within each home, allowing healthy spiritual growth of the family. The necessary means and resources must be provided, including audiovisuals, documents, and a series of classes that help with the education of children, adolescents, and young people to help them enjoy a full life in Christ and sexuality in accordance with God's purpose.

Those involved in the ministry of counseling in the church should offer specialized care for people in the LGBTQ+ community in order to help them in their spiritual growth.

#### Questions:

- What action should the church take as an institution in the face of gender ideology?
- What should be the attitude of a disciple of Christ towards the LGBTIQ+ community?

#### Conclusion

We have analyzed that gender ideology goes against the Word of God, is unscientific, and attempts to break God's design for sexuality, marriage, the family etc. Therefore, as a church, we have God's call to serve as a divine instrument to proclaim His holy and liberating truth to this world.



# Emotions: God's special gift

Natalia Pesado (U.S.A.)

**Study passages:** Psalm 42:3-6; Mark 11:15-19; 2 Corinthians 1:8-9

**Memory Verse:** "Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up" Proverbs 12:25.

**Lesson Purpose:** To reflect on emotions as a gift from God, and recognize that God gives us guidance in His Word about how to handle our emotions.

## Introduction

Emotions are a special gift that God gives us, His human creatures, to experience life in a unique way. Unlike plants that don't have the same capacity for feelings, and animals, guided rather by emotions caused by instinct, we're endowed with the ability to feel not only by instincts or impulses, but also by reflection on the situations that are happening around us, and through empathy for and from others.

Anyone will recognize that there are emotions which we experience that aren't very pleasant, such as anger, sadness or fear. But also, as God's beloved children, we understand that we're not alone in experiencing these feelings in our minds and hearts, and that God has provided His grace and many tools to help us healthily manage the emotions we experience. In this lesson, we'll address this topic.

### I. What are emotions?

Human emotions are the focus of much study in the field of mental health. We enjoy pleasurable emotions such as joy, surprise and happiness, as well as emotions that aren't so easy to manage, such as anger, sadness or fear. Emotions catch the attention of scientists and people in general primarily by the great impact they have on how a person functions. If we're experiencing pleasant feelings, generally we enjoy life and carry out our regular functions (sleeping, eating, work, socialize, study, etc.).

However, when we experience feelings of sadness, anxiety, or irritability, our day to day life may not be so manageable and there may be a significant decline, which may make the people around us concerned about us. Although there are several emotions that aren't pleasant or fun to experience, we must recognize that these emotions have a special function in our life, such as the ability they give us to understand other people in their experiences.

For example, a computer is very useful for doing many math activities and calculations. However, it doesn't have feelings. But, we can feel tired, sad, pain, fear etc., and as a result, we can understand how other people feel when they experience these emotions. We have the ability to interact socially with empathy and mutual understanding. Similarly, the feelings of love, attraction, fun, security, and peace are pleasurable experiences that help create an intimate emotional bond between people, making the experiences of life of exceptional value. This is why God created our brain in such a wonderful and interesting way. Scientists tell us that our brains, with their capacities to experience emotions, is irreplaceable, and God gave each of us one.

Organically speaking, emotions are based not only in the circumstances around the person, but also in the chemicals that are in the brain. The chemicals or hormones that work in the brain are varied and each one has a function. Dopamine "is associated with the regulation of memory and cognitive processes factors associated with learning... a greater presence of dopamine in certain brain regions is associated with taste and enjoyment for strong emotions" (Retrieved from <https://www.santalucia.es/blog/como-influyen-lashormonas-in-our-behavior/>, April 10 of 2021).

Dopamine is also called 'the brain chemical' or the 'reward.' It helps us feel good after an achievement. Oxytocin "promotes social relations, but low levels give rise to sadness and depressive states" (<https://www.santalucia.es/blog/how-hormones-influence-our-behavior/>).

"Serotonin influences certain aspects such as the appearance of hunger or its absence, its deficit is associated with depression. It controls body temperature levels and throughout the day its levels are modified to adjust to the circadian cycle" (<https://www.santalucia.es/blog/how-how-hormones-influence-our-behavior/>).

Endorphins “stimulate pleasure and have a relaxing effect on the body. The human body secretes this hormone when exercising or when laughing. This hormone in high levels causes states of euphoria and well-being” (<https://www.santalucia.es/blog/como-influyen-las-hormonas-en-nuestro-comportamiento/>).

We must remember that most of the time, emotions are generally temporary states of mind. A large number of people experience emotions for a while, and then, just as they came, they almost always go away on their own. There are exceptions as generalized depression or anxiety lengthen their symptoms, at then the best advice is to look for the help of a professional counselor.

### Questions:

- What emotions do you enjoy most in your life? What emotions make you suffer?
- What struck you most from the description about the different hormones or brain chemicals that affect emotions?

## II. What does the Word of God tell us about emotions?

In His Word, our heavenly Father shows us that from the beginning, emotions have been part of the human experience, and He has provided His guidance for all the moments of our life.

### A. Anger

In Mark 11:15-19, we can see an example when Jesus himself felt frustration and anger during his earthly life, seeing that the temple merchants financially abused the people who wanted to bring their offering to God. We see that Jesus became so angry that he “entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves...” (Mark 11:15).

We can understand that there are times when people's wickedness or offenses can be so strong that it's hard not to feel anger, or seeing someone, including ourselves, suffer. However, we must also recognize that we need to reach a point where we work to manage the emotion of anger in order not to hurt those around us. Otherwise, the pain will be greater for everybody.

For this reason, the Master Jesus himself taught us that we must not give place to revenge or resentment: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, don't resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your

shirt, hand over your coat as well” (Matthew 5:38-40); and “In your anger don't sin: Don't let the sun go down while you're still angry, and don't give the devil a foothold” (Ephesians 4:26-27).

### B. Sadness

The psalms are beautiful poems that express the emotions of its writers. Psalm 42:3-4 says, “My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’ These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.” And verses 5 and 6 of the same psalm describe: “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. My soul is downcast within me; therefore, I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.”

We see that sadness was clearly an experience that the psalmist was going through, and we can learn, as he did, to take refuge in the presence of the Father, to receive consolation for the past, sustenance for the present, and renewed hope for the future. When reading of the miracles that God has done to redeem and restore His people, the human heart can stop focusing on situations that produce sadness and focus on the power of our loving God and his presence that's always ready to sustain us.

### C. Fear

In 2 Corinthians 1:8-9a, the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about the great difficulties and sufferings that he and his companions were facing in their missions: “We don't want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.”

We see that even in the midst of carrying out God's will in service to the churches, Paul felt a lot of fear, including the fear of losing his life. However, the apostle concluded that expression saying, “But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead...” (2 Corinthians 1:9b). Paul himself would also bear witness to the church at Philippi of the peace of God that neutralizes the fear that our human heart can come to feel, by writing to them: “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

## D. Joy

In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster devoted an entire chapter to the discipline of celebration and joy. He describes: "celebration brings joy to life, and joy makes us strong. Scripture tells us that the joy of the Lord is our strength (Nehemiah 8:10)" (Argentina: PENIEL, 2009, p.196). He continues: "the most important benefit of celebration is that it stops us from taking ourselves too seriously...One risk that devout people run is that of becoming too heavy and boring. It shouldn't be like that. We should all be fully free, alive, and interesting" (Argentina: PENIEL, 2009, p.200). Finally, he mentioned a phrase from Augustine of Hippo that says: "The Christian should be Hallelujah from head to feet!" (Argentina: PENIEL, 2009, p.195).

### Questions:

- What emotions can we see expressed in the following passages: Nehemiah 8:10; Psalm 42:3-4; Mark 11:15-19; 2 Corinthians 1:8-9a.
- Can you share a Bible passage that helped you through an emotionally intense moment in your life?

## III. What can we do to manage our emotions?

As children of God, we can use the wisdom that He has given us to manage our emotions successfully and healthily as we face them. As mentioned earlier, science has discovered the relationship between certain brain chemicals and their emotional outcome for the person. For this, there are several activities we can do to increase levels of chemicals that help us feel good ([https://www.reddit.com/r/coolguides/comments/hyi7dw/happiness\\_chemicals\\_and\\_how\\_to\\_hack\\_them/](https://www.reddit.com/r/coolguides/comments/hyi7dw/happiness_chemicals_and_how_to_hack_them/), April 10, 2021):

1. Dopamine or 'the reward chemical' can be increased by completing a chore or task; performing personal care activities (bathe, comb hair, shave, dress well), eat food (especially if it's healthy), and celebrate small gains or achievements (personal or those of other people).
2. Oxytocin, or 'the hormone of love,' can be increased when playing with a pet (dog, cat, etc.), playing with a baby, holding someone's hand, embracing a family member, and giving a compliment.
3. Serotonin, or 'the chemical that stabilizes mood,' can be increased by meditating or praying, running, sunbathing, walking in nature, listening to birds singing or the running of water in a creek, swimming or riding a bike.

4. Endorphins, or 'the hormone that takes away pain,' can be increased by laughing, using essential aromatic oils, looking at something funny, eating dark chocolate, exercising (weight lifting, walking or running, muscle stretching and flexibility. You can find free classes on the Internet).

Apart from the ideas just described, as spiritual children, we can also remember that spending time in the presence of our Master is an irreplaceable practice for leading a life guided by His truth and power, instead of by the passing emotions of the human experience. That is, every time we feel that we're experiencing anger, sadness, or fear more intensely than normal, we can take some time apart in the Lord Jesus' presence to express to Him what we feel, and perhaps receive direction about what's causing the emotion, and also receive relief for the heart. (Sing a hymn, pray with words or spend time in silence to listen to the Father, or read a portion of the Bible that helps you better understand your situation and what God wants and can do.) These are practices that heal the soul supernaturally.

And finally, some things may need to be dealt with, such as asking for forgiveness, making changes in certain relationships or behaviors, etc. We can also come to our Father when our hearts overflow with joy since He is the author of each of our blessings.

Emotions are part of our experiences as human beings, created by our heavenly Father. Emotions themselves shouldn't be categorized as good or bad since they're simply feelings that we experience in our brain through the action at different levels of certain chemicals or hormones. Many times, they're related to experiences around us, such as seeing others suffer, feeling offended by someone, feeling afraid of dangers of losing life or other things. Emotions also run high when we receive good news, such as marriage, a birth, a promotion, and physical or emotional healing.

### Questions:

- Which of the activities described in this point to improve brain chemicals caught your attention the most?
- What other ways have you found to manage emotions healthily?

## Conclusion

God provided in His Word examples of other people who went through these experiences and emotions. He always offers us His company and guidance to manage with wisdom every emotion we experience. Thank you, Lord, for your constant provision!



# Compulsive Gambling and Nomophobia

Laura López (Mexico)

**Study passages:** Romans 6:16, 7:19; Ephesians 3:16-17; Titus 2:11-12

**Memory Verse:** “It’s for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and don’t let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” Galatians 5:1.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the main characteristics of compulsive gambling and nomophobia so that we can work towards preventing these addictions.

## Introduction

To live in harmony, people need to maintain a balanced life. This includes the biological, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions. However, the demands and stress that we face sometimes exceed the capacity of people to face life. This creates feelings of emptiness and despair that, if left unattended, may be precursors to harmful behaviors such as addictions. These constitute a scourge on society because they generate delinquency, violence, physical and mental diseases, and family disintegration. In addition, it keeps people from having a healthy relationship with God (Colossians 2:8).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “an addiction is a physical and psycho-emotional disease that creates a dependency or need towards a substance or activity or relationship” ([https://www.who.int/substance\\_abuse/publications/neuroscience\\_spanish.pdf](https://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/neuroscience_spanish.pdf)). The most well-known addictions are those related to alcohol and drug use. But in the last few years, addictive behaviors to video games have grown as people became more dependent on cell phones. Sometimes, we’re not aware that these practices are as harmful as chemical addictions. We need to maintain a constant renewal of our minds in communion with God so as not to fall into these sort of temptations (Romans 12:2).

In order to identify the risk of addictive behaviors, we need to start by acknowledging them. In this lesson, we’re going to deal with compulsive gambling and nomophobia or excessive dependence on cell phones. These addictions entrap people in a disastrous dependency which is difficult to get out of. Among the causes of the increase of pathological gambling and nomophobia are anxiety, depression and dissatisfaction with life, which result in the search for quick exits from trouble, pushing away worrying thoughts and feelings of despair.

Nomophobia and pathological gambling can escalate or be accompanied by alcoholism and drug addiction.

Addictions have two components: compulsion and obsession. Compulsion has to do with recurring thoughts that affect the person and prevents them from resisting addiction. Initially, the addict feels satisfaction and pleasure counteracting the heavy and painful burdens of their lives. Obsession is when a person gradually loses control of their life, but doesn’t want to accept it, and minimizes the harmful consequences of their behavior. This situation allows vicious cycles to be installed in their lives. Even Christians may be prone to addictions, either because they grew up in families that caused them suffering, or because they’re finding it difficult to manage problems and crises (2 Timothy 2:26).

## I. What are Compulsive Gambling and Nomophobia?

The games played consist of the activities aimed to recreate, relax, get out of the routine, laugh, live together and enjoy. We must not fall into the extreme of thinking that rewarding activities make us at risk for pathological gambling, because all human beings need time to enjoy themselves. The difference between recreational games and pathological gambling is that gambling commits time, money, resources, and relationships to an activity that has ceased to be rewarding. Gambling becomes a liability, and the addict cannot stop by their own will power (Romans 6:16, 7:19).

In the case of games of chance, casual players set an established limit for their expenses for this activity. They can stop it easily. But the gambler doesn’t stop, resulting in feelings of guilt for this inability to control impulses towards gaming. The amount of money they bet increases, and the gambling addicts look for ways to obtain resources to keep on playing.

They can get to the point where they realize that they no longer have control. They can try to stop gambling temporarily, but they're at a high risk of relapse.

The following are among the signs and symptoms of developing an addiction: a strong desire to perform the addictive activity; problems controlling time and resources devoted to the addiction; suffering or anxiety when stopping the addictive activity; growth of time dedicated to the addictive practice, leaving aside other family interests, as well as work and spiritually.

Sometimes people play games because they consider it to be a way to earn money easily and fast to get out of economic problems or get more resources, but they don't recognize the risk they have of losing everything. Obtaining the economic resource becomes a mirage because the more they play, they have fewer wins, and the player falls into greed that kills contentment and they're in danger of losing their faith (1 Timothy 6:10).

According to the Mayo Clinic, pathological gambling is "the irrepensible desire to continue betting despite the havoc this causes in your life. Gambling means that you're willing to risk something you value in the hope to receive something that has an even greater value"

(Retrieved from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/es-es/diseases-conditions/compulsive-gambling/symptoms-causes/syc-20355178>, on February 12, 2021).

The signs of pathological gambling are the following: trying to find ways to earn money with bets; attempting to reduce unsuccessful game time; trying to recover lost money with new bets; not being accountable to anyone about the amount spent on gambling; and running the risk of losing family, work and friendships for this addiction.

Every day we observe people with nomophobia or 'no mobile phone phobia', who are people of all ages that cannot be separated from their cell phones. When this happens, they fall into panic attacks or despair. We can even see this in churches, during worship or preaching, brothers and sisters who cannot concentrate on the service because they cannot control the urge to check their phones, thus interfering with time to be with the Lord (John 4:24). Also, cell phone addiction isn't just for certain ages. It's very common to find parents who provide the phone for small children 'to entertain them,' interfering with their normal development processes.

As for adolescents and young people, we must review the signs of nomophobia such as being anxious when they're offline, mood or personality changes when they're away from their phone, and attempts not to be separated from the device for any reason. Adults have

taken advantage of the convenience of being permanently in communication, but some have developed nefarious links with their cell phone during their daily activities, conversations and relationships. Sometimes due to excessive attention to the device, they're disconnected from people and end up isolated, depressed and anxious.

Unfortunately, this addiction is socially accepted because we hardly ever establish a limit to our cellphone usage, exceeding exposure time to the device while it interacts with us. This over attention to a device, rather than to a person, damages relationships and leaves the nomophobic very lonely. We need to prevent these behaviors and stop them to reduce their consequences, especially among the youngest, who, because of their mastery of technology, are more likely to fall into nomophobia (Psalms 119:9; 1 John 2:14).

### **Questions:**

- Based on what you've learned so far, write down the definition of compulsive gambling and nomophobia.
- Why is addiction a sin?

## **II. What does the Bible say about addictions?**

The Word of God calls us to freedom. We must move away from lifestyles that harm our relationship with God and separate us from those we love. Addictions are an enslaving sin that may cause a lifetime of suffering (John 8:34). The addict needs to recognize that they may not be able to get out of addiction on their own, and that it requires spiritual and professional help. They also need to ask God for His help. He must ask God for forgiveness for their sin, and then be restored spiritually with the support of the brothers and sisters (Galatians 6:1).

Faith in Jesus Christ offers the addict the security to trust that the reaches of salvation can set them free from the yoke of slavery and sin (1 Cor. 6:12-13; Galatians 5:1). They can have another chance in life to enjoy the blessings of God under the Holy Spirit's guidance (Romans 15:13). For this, we need to stay close to the Word of God (John 8:31-32) and revive our faith in order not to fall again into sinful practices that lead to despair.

In addition, the person who suffers from addictions should seek enough strength in the Holy Spirit to live in victory (Ephesians 3:14-17; Titus 2:11-12). We must consolidate our relationship with God to prevent addictions since spiritual life brings us invaluable resources to deal with unforeseen situations that put us at risk of falling into addictions.



Christians aren't immune to problems and needs, so when we're passing through difficult times is when we should be extra diligent about maintaining our devotional practices (Philippians 4:6-7). Even in situations of greater despair and pain, God waits for us to come closer to Him to renew our strength and continue forward in the Christian life (Psalm 46:1-2).

### **Questions:**

- According to Galatians 6:1, how can we support the spiritual restoration of the addict?
- How can the Holy Spirit empower the addict to overcome their addiction (Ephesians 3:14-17)?

### **III. What can we do to battle against addictions?**

How can we help the gambler? First, identify behaviors related to abuse in games of chance. Secondly, approach the person without scolding them, remembering that the person feels unable to contain their desire to gamble. In third place, talk to them about the addiction to play, expressing some alternatives, and guide them to recognize their need for God in their life. It's fundamental to present the message of salvation to the addict so that they can be released from their sin, and guide them to ask for spiritual and professional help. We must also encourage them to join a support program and church activities, and motivate them to develop devotional habits that strengthen their resources to face life.

How can we prevent gambling? Families need to meet together to read the Bible and pray. Each family needs to take time to talk as a family about their joys, sorrows and concerns. All members of the household, from the smallest to the eldest, need to listen to each other so that in case of any problem that overwhelms them, they can express their need. Also, we need to participate actively in our congregation and minister to those brothers and sisters with our gifts and talents, recognizing that God has a purpose for our lives and wants to use us to bless others.

Regarding nomophobia (cell phone addiction), we must become aware of how we're using our cell phone and electronic devices. There are applications to manage our time exposure on these devices. We shouldn't let false priorities, that only exist in the virtual world, control us. Also, we must teach the good use of cell phone with our example, and as far as possible, delay the age of providing children with their first phone. If we have to make cell phones available to our kids, we need to establish strict rules and limits for its use.

The best way to avoid dire consequences of addictions is prevention, so we must inform ourselves about strategies to recognize and avoid these behaviors, such as activities that provide early warning of risks of addictions, to the families that make up our churches, including all age groups. Also, we can connect with the social environment by offering activities of healthy recreation in the facilities of our congregations that can serve as bridges for people to come to Christ and away from the false exit doors of addictions. Likewise, don't be afraid to ask for professional help and consult experts to come up with a plan to help the addict and indicate the role we should play in their recovery.

Susana Wesley expressed that sin is the following: "Anything that weakens your reason, lessens the delicacy of your conscience, dulls your sensitivity to God, or takes away the delight in the spiritual, or anything that elevates the supremacy of the body over your mind, it's sin" (<https://frasecristiana.co/susannawesley/>). So, nothing should take the preeminent place that God should have in our lives. We need to use our discernment so as not to let ourselves be dominated by addictions (1 Corinthians 6:12). We can get help from the Holy Spirit and the community of faith in our spiritual struggles, remembering that the Lord Jesus defeated the enemy of our souls on the cross, and He has the power to break any dominion that addiction may have over people. The Lord is waiting for us to surrender our burdens and struggles to free us from them (Matthew 11:28-29), and He offers to heal our hearts of all unhealthy tendencies and grant us a new chance at life (Isaiah 61:1).

### **Questions:**

- What activities can we develop in the church to prevent addictions?
- How can we guide the addict to ask for spiritual and professional help?

### **Conclusion**

Finally, we need to strengthen our relationship with God through the means of grace: prayer, reading and study of the Bible, fasting and communion with the brothers and sisters in faith, and manage well the freedom to which we have been called (John 8:36). The Lord expects us to recognize our helplessness when we have sinned, and know that He will deliver us and guide us to green pastures.



# Managing Stress

Natalia Pesado (U.S.A.)

**Study passages:** Psalm 94:18-19; Matthew 11:25-30

**Memory Verse:** “When I said, “My foot is slipping,” your unfailing love, Lord, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy” Psalm 94:18-19.

**Lesson Purpose:** To reflect on stress and learn how to manage it with the Lord’s help.

## Introduction

Stress is a common situation for everyone because from time to time, life’s experiences bring us circumstances that seem very difficult to solve or overcome. However, stress levels may vary according to different situations or stages of life, and from person to person. Stress can be a combination of physical experiences similar to anxiety or feeling nervous, and it’s also an internal feeling. We could express it as ‘concerns’ in the very soul of the person. However, we can also reflect on the great sovereignty and power of God to help us, even in times like this. In today’s lesson, we’ll try to understand a little more about stress, learn how to handle it better, and above all, to commit ourselves to seeking refuge in our heavenly Father in these key moments of life.

### I. What is stress?

A certain amount of stress in life is unavoidable. Big changes produce stress, even changes that we can call positive: a new love relationship and/or marriage, the birth of a baby, a house move or job change, including a promotion to a position of greater responsibility, trips (even vacations or visits, etc.). When the situation of stress is temporary, or of a moderate level, it produces mostly positive outcome in our lives. In these cases, it’s called ‘eustress’ or ‘good stress.’

On the other hand, if the stress situation is chronic (of long duration, including months or years), at an intense level that ends up producing a negative result in the person’s life, it’s a dangerous stress for health outcomes. In the field of mental health, stress can be defined as follows:

“Stress can be defined as any type of change that causes physical, emotional, or psychological strain. Stress is your body’s response to anything that requires attention or action” (<https://www.verywellmind.com/stress-and-health-3145086>).

We can understand that when we face situations that demand more energy, more time, more physical or mental effort than what we have available, stress occurs. We may begin to experience strong emotions, worry, irritability, sadness, anxiety, despair or even thoughts of suicide. In the same way, stress “affects all systems of the body, including the musculoskeletal, respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, gastrointestinal, nervous, and reproductive systems” (<https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/body>)

We see, then, that stress can also produce biological changes, including insomnia, increased or lack of appetite, lack of physical energy, changes in physiognomy including body weight, wrinkles or skin texture, premature gray hair, weakening of the immune system, etc.

As mentioned earlier, situations that can cause stress can vary from person to person. There are individuals who really enjoy their work because it’s a good fit for their attributes and personal characteristics. This person can probably take an increased amount of responsibilities or spending more hours in that job. They’ll feel stimulated and refreshed by using their gifts and abilities.

However, there may be another person whose qualities aren’t in tune with the responsibilities of their role in that same job, and in this case, they need to analyze how to limit frustrations, and look for parts of the job or activities out of work hours to use their qualities and feel satisfied and renewed each day. It’s very important know ourselves, understanding what are our emotional needs.

Finally, prolonged stress can cause a condition of severe exhaustion to those who are living with high pressures, and they may end up unable to carry on with their daily responsibilities. Fatigue can become such that they face an emotional or existential crisis, when they get no enjoyment from life. Unfortunately, when a person reaches the exhaustion stage, it can take a long time to recuperate.

People at this point will need to seek professional psychological help. For this reason, it's wiser to manage stress beforehand.

### Questions:

- How do you define stress? What experiences have you had with stress?
- What struck you about the definition of stress offered in today's lesson, especially its double effect: emotionally and physically?

## II. What does Jesus tell us about stress?

The wise Master wasn't a stranger to the experience of stress, and because of that, He advised us that we should come to him to relieve the restlessness of our souls.

### A. "Come to me..." (Matthew 11:28a)

In our study passage for today, we can see Jesus extending an incomparable offer: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened..." (v.28a). Although it's possible to receive encouragement and consolation from our friends and family, they're often busy with their own responsibilities, or don't know how to counsel us emotionally because they may not understand the complexity of the situation. That's why Jesus advises us to approach Him directly, because He's always available, He's always by our side, and He always understands every detail of the situation. We can draw closer to Jesus by spending some time alone, seeking Him in prayer or songs that help us shed our emotions and tears before Him.

### B. "...weary and burdened" (Matthew 11:28a)

The Master invites us to take refuge in Him when we're in our worst moments. A proverb says: "The true friend is the one who arrives when everyone leaves." In other words, there are difficult situations that aren't enjoyable. Jesus is always available to every one of His followers. Our Lord invites us to share with Him the details of our situations and our emotions. The expression "weary and burdened" tells us that there may have been too many demands placed upon us, including in the home (such as caring for children, housework, caring for and worrying about elderly family members, or a family member with a chronic illness). There are many demands in secular work (pressures of production or profits, of the bosses or employees that must be led). Even ministry can be stressful (responsibilities in which it's difficult to measure how much time or effort is enough, and when to rest). Stress can be also caused in our personal economy (debts or lack of sufficient resources), in health (personal illnesses), or by society (a pandemic, corruption in

government), etc.

In times of refreshing with the Lord, we can turn to Scripture (maybe a Psalm) that helps us to express what we feel and allows us to let off steam. We can also use a devotional book or keep a journal/diary where we can write our conversations with the Lord. These moments shouldn't just be when we reach a maximum stress level, but it's very beneficial to do it regularly.

### C. "...and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28b)

In the second part of the verse in Matthew 11:28, Jesus promises us that He himself will give us rest. He will quiet our souls. This process is a supernatural miracle that only the Master can work in the human soul. There are many tools we can use to calm the effects of stress in our lives (we'll see it with more detail in the next point of this lesson). However, nothing will be as effective as receiving the rest that Jesus can bring to our souls. For this, we need to spend time alone with Jesus, making sure that there are no distractions (like work, cell phone or social media, other people, etc.), and focus on what the Master wants to tell us.

Being in His presence, our souls will perceive that the most important thing in our entire existence is God, the salvation that He offers us through His beloved Son, and His constant love (which helps us to be clear about our priorities). Everything else that can come to afflict the human soul will cease to do so.

### Questions:

- What do you feel when you hear the words of Jesus: "Come to me... you who are burdened and weary..." (Matthew 11:28)?
- Do you have any other biblical passages about peace that speak especially to your heart?

## III. What can we do to manage stress?

As children of God, He empowers us through the His Holy Spirit to be able to exercise with discipline the tools that help us wisely manage stressful situations. To begin with, one of the keys is spending time analyzing the causes of stress in our lives:

### A. Examine the number of responsibilities that we have accepted

Although making changes to our way of life can cause some fear, it's well worth asking for the Lord's wisdom to understand if we have taken on some responsibilities in our lives that perhaps we can withdraw, even for a while, to rest and refresh. We need to have time every day, or at least weekly, to dedicate specific time for physical and

mental renewal.

Physical activity is the best way to expel from the body the hormones produced by situations of stress. Exercise relaxes muscles tensed by stress, improves blood circulation and oxygenation of the brain, helps us to breathe well, strengthens the heart, and helps us to sleep better. We should spend more time in nature, being in the fresh air, hearing the singing of the birds, running water, or leaves shaken by the wind, looking at the blue sky and feeling the warmth of the sun, etc. We could listen to recordings of natural sounds, like the roaring of the sea, rainwater, crickets singing, etc. We should spend time with our family playing board games, cooking or cleaning together, enjoying activities in nature, decorating, mending things or doing home repairs. Let's enjoy our togetherness with hugs, tickles, walking hand in hand, singing together etc. Experiencing the feeling of peace together, with a regulated heart rhythm, can help to affirm a healthy attachment between people.

### **B. Analyze priorities**

At each stage of life, the responsibilities that should take priority will vary. For example, when we're young, we generally have more cognitive and emotional energy, as well as time to dedicate to the service to God and others, as well as concluding courses of study. For married couples with small children, it will be important to prioritize meeting the needs of children and spending time delighting in them in order to give them a childhood in which they enjoy a lot of direct parental love, attention, and guidance. Also, we must have a lot of discipline in working hours to provide what is necessary, but also to have energy and time for family and marriage relationship.

In the stage of mature adulthood, when the children don't depend on us anymore, there's more time to enjoy marriage and serving others. After retirement, although physical illnesses may make it difficult to take responsibility, we can always find things to do that entertain us or allow us to serve others. In conclusion, each stage has its responsibilities that we should enjoy, and having the correct priorities will help us reach the end of life without regrets.

### **C. Examine our use of time**

Although in our modern 21st century lives we have a lot of technology to 'save' us time and effort (such as washing machines, automobiles and airplanes, Internet purchases, etc.), regrettably, sometimes, it just seems that we don't have enough time to do the things we must do. However, an honest examination of our schedule can reveal that many times, we waste the valuable time that

we have on activities that don't benefit us, like looking at social media posts, watching TV, spending time in activities that don't produce true or lasting fruit, commitments that distance us from our family, or that produce too much travel bustle, preparations, and therefore, subtract time for relaxation, etc.

To be successful in our use of time, it helps to develop the discipline of planning how we want to spend every hour. We can even make an agenda, and write in each hour what needs to be done: how many hours we should sleep, the hours we should eat, the time we want to spend with the family, the time that we're going to spend working and doing physical exercise, we even need to spend time to simply rest, reflect, and even 'get bored' a little.

God himself showed us this organization in pointing out one day a week that we should dedicate to worship and rest. We can dedicate another day just for the family (for example, on Saturday. We shouldn't make any commitment at work or with friends, but just spend the day with family and renew together). As we plan to manage our time in a good healthful way, we'll leave an example to the next generation so that they too know how to manage their time and stress wisely.

### **Questions:**

- What do you think about the tools to manage stress that we studied in today's lesson? Have you used any of these before?
- What other ways have you found to effectively manage stress?

### **Conclusion**

Stress is part of the human experience. Nevertheless, Jesus clearly calls us to take refuge in Him and in His presence, quietening our souls from the exhaustion that earthly life produces. The Lord also provides us with His wisdom to examine our responsibilities in terms of the quantity and importance of each one of them according to the stage of life we're living, helping us to manage our time wisely. With His help, we can live in a way that brings glory to His name, providing an example of holiness to our family, and sharing the fragrance of the peace that emanates from our souls.

**Study passages:** Leviticus 19:11-15

**Memory Verse:** “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It’s no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot” Matthew 5:13.

**Lesson Purpose:** To reflect on what it means to be the church in the midst of corruption in this world.

## Introduction

The theme of corruption of ethical and moral values is as old as humanity itself, and constitutes one of the main problems in recent times. In this lesson, we’ll analyze three basic points: the problem of corruption, what the Bible says about it, and what is the role of the church in dealing with this evil.

### I. The problem of corruption

#### A. Definition

Corruption is the decomposition or putrefaction of a biological organism killed as part of the process of natural degradation. Politically, corruption is the abuse of power committed by officials and public authorities, through misuse of the power entrusted to them, or the misuse of material, human, and financial resources for personal benefit, as well as benefiting their family or relatives.

This broad definition covers politicians, civil servants, public officials, judges, public notaries, business managers, administrators of schools or universities, hospitals, officials of religious institutions, among others.

#### B. Forms of corruption

There is a wide variety of ways that corruption can be carried out. The most common in many countries has to do with the payment of bribes to authorities, influence peddling, tax evasion, extortions, fraudulent business deals, embezzlement of funds, money laundering, prostitution, and human trafficking.

#### C. Corruption in history

Corruption is as old as civilization itself, when humans systematically left their nomadic life to gather together in villages and cities, with their respective social, political and economic ways of life. This led to the establishment of the state, with its laws that regulate social and commercial conduct, government activities and religion, enabling

people to cover their basic needs for subsistence, as well as the satisfaction of their legitimate claims for success and economic prosperity.

The strongest monopolized the rest, and the others suffered when they saw their aspirations dashed. This caused discontent, competitiveness and discord, which forced the groups to establish laws and regulations to prevent wars. There was always a genetic predisposition to hoard things, even above the needs of the rest. Our parents passed it on to us, and we continue the chain of genetic transmission with sinful characteristics: “When Adam committed his first sin, all mankind sinned in him, so that the sin of Adam became the sin of all members of the race” (Somoza, J. S. Continental Commentary: Romans, 1997, p.118).

This is repeated by all peoples, cultures and civilizations. The ancient Sumerians, in the Code of Hammurabi, expressed laws with “some resemblance to O.T. laws... include trade issues, tariffs, prices, marriage, adultery, adoption as well as laws against robbery, assault, slavery and other themes. There are statutory different penalties, depending on the seriousness of the offences” (Lockward, A. New dictionary of the Bible, p.456). The same was done in Egypt, China, Greece and Rome. In the Inca empire of South America, three laws were established: Ama sua (Don’t be a thief), Ama Llulla (Don’t be a liar), and Ama quella (Don’t be idle).

Feudalism was based on slavery: the desire to lord it over others. In the middle Ages, the great corruption of the church can be highlighted. With the Industrial Revolution, the proletariat or working class grew and worked in extreme poverty for the benefit of their industrial masters. We find the same evils today in capitalist, communists and socialists societies, in rich and poor countries, in atheist and ‘Christian’ nations. Corruption is a universal evil inherent in human nature, an expression of original sin.

## D. Causes of corruption

**1. Socioeconomic causes.** Social inequality where the privileged dominant sector serve their own interests at the cost of the hunger and misery of those who are weak, and when the poor come to power, they tend to repeat the same behavior of their predecessors as a kind of revenge. The bad distribution of wealth, inequality of opportunity, and the needs created by the globalized market arouse greed and the temptation to make money in the easiest way.

**2. Political causes.** Authorities that govern in favor of their own elite, family or partisan interests, and the obsession to rule over others and to prolong their stay in the power, lead many government officials to design and apply cruel policies to the detriment of the citizenship.

**3. Spiritual causes.** Basically, this is evident in self-centeredness, greed, envy and resentment, in other words, 'original sin,' the hereditary tendency that we received from Adam and Eve. Corruption becomes the external manifestation of the internal corruption of the human soul. Corruption is a multifaceted sin that seeks to monopolize an infinity of illicit means, such as those indicated in the second subpoint of this section (forms of corruption).

## E. Consequences of corruption

The impact of corruption in the nation produces multiple effects. For example:

**1. Increase in poverty.** Fraudulent operators make up the accounting figures to cover their illicit acts, and make it appear that all operations are well justified. They resort to bribery of authorities and cover their criminal activities. When they cannot balance the books, they change them by raising rates to the consumers. Public officials and bureaucratic apparatuses assign juicy salaries that aren't justified in terms of work and production, while the working class receives a measly salary in return with which they barely survive, because they are in the most affected vulnerable sectors.

**2. Inefficiency and deterioration of institutions.** The company, the institution or the State are weakened when the financial resources and raw material are used indiscriminately.

Work and money are running out due to diversion of funds and poor management practices by authorities and government officials.

**3. Underdevelopment and postponement.** No investor seriously wants to partner with a country or institution that has a bad reputation. Corrupt governments lead their countries into debt in the long term. They sell in

advance, via concessions, their natural resources at laughable prices, and the money, instead of being invested in educational programs, roads, health, housing, etc., goes to their accounts in tax havens. Consequently, our countries with all their rich natural resources will continue to depend economically, politically and technologically on other countries.

**4. Increase in crime.** International organized crime result in the inevitability of the growth of crime. The statistics are frightening. You can check them in your own locality or country: street crime, prostitution, slavery, murders, etc. The powers of the State are captured by criminal gangs, highly educated in legal matters, for the service of crime. International criminal organizations, with sufficient capacity to finance electoral campaigns, give themselves the luxury of placing or removing presidents according to their darkest interests.

## Questions:

- Briefly describe the main manifestations of corruption in your locality.
- Indicate three consequences of corruption that are most felt in your country.

## II. The Bible and the problem of corruption

The Word of God condemns theft (Exodus 20:15), forbids bribery (Deuteronomy 16:19, Jeremiah 5:28), forbids oppression and usury (Leviticus 19:13), and condemns fraud in business (Leviticus 19:36). Now, let's see some recorded cases of corruption in the Bible. Examples:

### A. The case of the judge/priest Eli and his sons (1 Samuel 2:12-36).

The sons were a true mafia of abusers and petty dictators who threatened and blackmailed the naive people, and they slept with the women of the town at the door of the sanctuary while the high priest was unaware of these shameful acts and so nothing was done about it.

### B. The mafia of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 21:12-13).

These trafficked with the faith of the people, having turned the house of God into an exchange market for money and sale of animals.

### C. Judas' business when he sold Jesus (Matt. 26:14-16; Luke 22:3-6).

This was corruption at its maximum expression. Judas Iscariot signed his business with a kiss, after having agreed to the sale of his Master for a sum of money.

#### **D. False preachers of the gospel.**

Christ and the apostles warned of the coming of false prophets, lovers of money and power, who would make the people of God merchandise (2 Peter 2:1-3). Unscrupulous men and women appeared, taking advantage of the faith of the believers, among them, a certain Diotrefes, an autocrat who always liked to be first, who overwhelmed and subdued the members of the congregation (3 John 9-10).

In terms of administration in the religious sphere, indications abound, and sometimes scandals of mismanagement of money, that generally everything goes unpunished with the argument that “the love of Christ covers a multitude of sins” (cf. 1 Peter 4:8).

#### **Questions:**

- What do the following passages condemn (Exodus 20:15; Leviticus 19:13,36; Deuteronomy 16:19; Jeremiah 5:28).
- Cite some cases of corruption in the Bible.

### **III. The role of the church in dealing with the problem of corruption**

#### **A. Preach authentic conversion and sanctification of individuals**

Born-again citizens are supposed to be baptized with the Holy Spirit to reflect in their daily lives “... the fruit of the Spirit [which] is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...” (Galatians 5:22-23). That is, they should be like Christ. What kind of gospel are we preaching and teaching? What sort of disciples are we? What about our discipleship programs? Unfortunately, in many of our churches, this isn't a high priority.

#### **B. Denounce sin**

John the Baptist, with his message and with his life of holiness, became a real nightmare for Herod's corrupt government, and in the end, the king ordered John's beheading. When Jesus appeared preaching and performing miracles, Herod trembled, believing that the Baptist had risen from the dead (Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9). I wish corrupt politicians would tremble before the message of Christians backed by unquestionable lives of holiness.

#### **C. Building a society with Christian values**

“The most important thing churches can do to improve civil society in their nations is to teach the Christian virtues to their own people” (Monsma, T. Hope for the Southern World: Impacting Societal Problems in the Non-western World, 2006). The ten Commandments, are a set of laws that regulate our relationship with our Creator as well as with our neighbors. Jesus Christ summed them up in

two: the love of God above all, and loving our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31).

Another set of principles and values that point to the formation of the character of the citizens of the kingdom of God is the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 to 7). Both are the absolute and universal values by which the new community facing a world of relativism should be governed.

For the internalization of these absolute values, God has made provision (Ezekiel 36:25-27): He said: “I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols [a profound purification]. [He promise to regenerate His people by giving them] a new heart and [putting] a new spirit in [them]...They will then follow [His] decrees and be careful to keep [His] laws (v.27).” (Cevallos, J. C., & Zorzoli, R. O. Hispanic World Biblical Commentary, vol. 12: Ezekiel and Daniel. 2009, pp.308-312).

#### **D. Exerting influence: being ‘light to world’ and the ‘salt of the earth.’**

“Individualistic relativism [postmodern] where each handles his own convictions [has given rise to a] Christian relativism” (Donner, T. G. Faith and postmodernity: A Christian worldview for a world fragmented. 2004, p.86). There are no absolute truths, there's no right or wrong, there's no white or black; it all depends on the color of the glass with which things are seen through. As a result, a ‘light culture’ arose (without substance), and in this context, a ‘light church’ appeared with a ‘light gospel’ (without life or spiritual power), and therefore, without transformational influence in the world. Christ warned us about salt when it loses its flavor (Matthew 5:13). Therefore, a church called to holiness has the opportunity to contribute their lifestyle and testimony (transformational influence) in construction of a fairer, more humane, peaceful and fraternal society. But if the salt loses its flavor (essence), it has simply lost its reason for being.

#### **Questions:**

- What concrete actions do you think your church and you personally could take to counteract the problem of corruption in your locality?
- How do you think you can work on preparing citizens with solid values and firm convictions that can be light in a world where corruption prevails?

#### **Conclusion**

Corruption is like cancer that eats away people's minds, blinds them and prevents them from seeing the harm they cause to others and to themselves. It's a phenomenon that lacerates all societies, democratic or no, Christian or atheist. Today, as never before, there's an urgent need for the influence of the “salt of the earth” (Matt.5:13).



# Defending life from conception

Maria del Carmen Miranda Rojas (Peru)

**Study passages:** Psalm 139:13-16

**Memory Verse:** “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” Jeremiah 1:5.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the value of life, and to be willing to take care of and defend unborn babes by speaking out for “those who have no voice”.

## Introduction

“The Church of the Nazarene affirms the sanctity of human life as established by God the Creator and believes that such sanctity extends to the child not yet born. Life is a gift from God. All human life, including life developing in the womb, is created by God in His image and is, therefore, to be nurtured, supported, and protected” (Church of the Nazarene Manual, 2017-2021. USA: CNP, 2018, p.51). Life is a gift from God. Therefore, God is the only owner and lord of life, and we humans cannot dispose of it (1 Samuel 2:6).

The right to life is recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 3, states: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person” (Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/es/about-us/universal-declarationof-human-rights>, 2021). Although this right has been recognized, unfortunately it has been violated in many ways. This decree recognized that the right to life, inherent in each one of the inhabitants of the world's nations, constitutes the main axis of human rights, and therefore deserves the determined attention of the State, its institutions, and the whole of society.

Among the initiatives promoted by the pro-life movement is the creation of the “Day of the Unborn Child” celebrated every March 25th. This day was first celebrated in the world in El Salvador in 1993. Initially, it was named “the Day of the right to be born”. Today, many countries have joined this noble cause. As children of God, we must defend life in all its forms, especially human life, which is very vulnerable at its inception.

## I. The problem of abortion

Abortion has always been a controversial and complex issue, seen from many perspectives (baby, mother and society). It's a problem with serious human implications and, in today's society, has become a practice which is defended with misleading arguments.

Abortion is the premature termination of a pregnancy, naturally or voluntarily, carried out before the fetus can survive outside the womb. From a medical point of view, abortion is the interruption of pregnancy before 22 weeks of gestation, or before the child reaches 500 grams of weight. Some abortions occur spontaneously, and when deliberate steps are taken to end a pregnancy, it's called an induced abortion.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “Around 73 million induced abortions take place worldwide each year. Six out of 10 (61%) of all unintended pregnancies, and 3 out of 10 (29%) of all pregnancies, end in induced abortion” (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/abortion>).

Many countries have legalized induced abortion without apparent cause (which can be done up to 12 weeks' gestation). “A therapeutic abortion is the interruption of a pregnancy before the 20th week of gestation because it endangers the mother's life or health or because the baby presumably wouldn't be normal” (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/therapeutic-abortion>).

Only five countries in the world (El Salvador, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, The Vatican and Malta) consider abortion as a crime, prohibited in any situation, resulting in sanctions for those who perform it and for the woman who submits to it (<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/news-latin-america-40677494> //, February 17, 2021).

Some people consider abortion as a birth control method because it can do away with ‘unwanted’ pregnancies. This is one of the most important causes of abortions recently. Bad information about sexuality, carelessness on the part of parents in relation to their adolescent children, low self-esteem, among others, have led to unwanted pregnancies.



Today, with the formation of the 'Pro-choice' movements (in favor of access to induced abortion), the idea of legalization or decriminalization has gained acceptance for abortion in any circumstance, arguing that human rights law clearly specifies that decisions about our body are ours alone, a principle known as 'physical autonomy.' Thus, many of those who are in favor of abortion promote the following ideas:

- The woman owns her own body and she can do with it whatever she wants.
- Not all women are born to be mothers.
- It's inhumane to force a woman to have her child as a result of a rape.
- The human embryo isn't considered a person.

The creation of 'Pro-choice' movements has also resulted in the formation of the 'Pro-life' movement, which doesn't support abortion. The latter argue that every human being has the right to live.

### Questions:

- What is the definition of abortion?
- What do you think about the legalization or decriminalization of abortion?

## II. Biblical arguments to face the abortion problem

The Bible doesn't specify much about abortion, but it does say in Job 12:10 the following: "In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind." Deuteronomy 5:17 says: "You shall not murder", and definitively, abortion involves destroying 'innocent' lives.

As Christians, we must base our faith and our life on the Word of God, where we find great arguments for the defense of life, which will help us to deal with the problem of abortion. Here are some of those arguments:

### A. God has absolute dominion over human life

This theme is reflected in the creation account and in the Scripture passages where God is declared to be the Creator of all things, Lord of the universe. Because God has made us, our life and body aren't our own; they belong to Him. Paul told us that we belong to our Lord, and whether we live or die, we do it for Him (Romans 14:8). Life is holy, pure and immutable, so, we have to respect it just as we respect God, the Giver of life itself.

Pro-choice advocates claim that women can do with their bodies what they want because their bodies belong to them. As Christians, we know that God's Word in 1 Cor. 6 tells us that our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and isn't ours (v.19). Therefore, we must glorify God in our body (v.20).

### B. Human beings have been made in God's image

In Genesis 1:26-31 and 2:4-25, where the Bible talks about the creation of man and woman, we're told: "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). So as human beings, we're not just a bunch of random cells thrown together, but rather, we have been created by God.

We must remember that He knew us before birth in our mother's womb (Jeremiah 1:5). God not only knows each person before they're born, but He also has a purpose for each one of us (Psalms 138:8, 139:13).

### C. The child in the womb of his mother is a person

The word 'conceived' is used several times in the Bible (Genesis 4:1,17). The individual has the same identity before as well as after their birth. God created each part of the unborn child according to Psalm 139:13-16. Studies in fetal medicine tell us that the heart of the baby is detectable from 18 days of life; by eight weeks, all their systems are formed (and the baby is called an 'embryo'), and at eleven weeks gestation, their whole organism is functioning, giving the unborn child the ability to feel and perceive everything that happens around it. All this clearly contradicts the declaration of the pro-abortionists when they indicate that the embryo, or unborn child, shouldn't be considered a human person because it doesn't have the capacities characteristic of a human being, being just 'a bunch of cells.' Human life must be respected and protected absolutely, from the moment of conception.

### D. God condemns the slaughter of the innocent

One of the commandments that God left us is: "you shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). Therefore, it's wrong to take the life of an unborn child, because that child is a living soul from the moment of conception. In Revelation 22:15, the Bible further tells us that murderers won't enter the kingdom of heaven (unless they repent). Therefore, the Bible is clear by saying that abortion is "sin."

### E. God teaches us to love

The Word says: "For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another" (1 John 3:11). To take the life of another is to break the command to love. To stop helping those in need and danger is also to stop loving. Let's remember that God is love (1 John 4:8). Love in the human being is what gives meaning to life. It's love then, that feeds the 'pro-life movement.' This drives them to save children's lives, and to offer alternatives for life to their parents.

Abortion, in short, is the opposite of love. Love means “I sacrifice myself for the good of the other person,” while abortion means “Sacrifice the other person for the good of oneself.”

### **Questions:**

- What do you understand when the Bible says that we’re created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-31)?
- Why do we say that the child in the womb of his mother should be considered a human being (Psalm 139:13-16)?

### **III. The church’s response to the abortion problem**

As children of God, we need to raise our voices in defense of life. We must not stay silent watching how those who “do not have a voice” die (Proverbs 31:8). Since ancient times, the great church leaders and theologians have spoken out against abortion. John Calvin said the following: “The fetus, even if it’s locked in the womb of its mother, is already a human being and the most monstrous of crimes is to take away the life that hasn’t yet started to enjoy life... surely we should judge as more heinous the destruction of a fetus in the womb of its mother before it has seen the light” (Calvin, John. Commentaries on the last four books of Moses, translation by Charles William Bingham, vol.4. USA: Nabu Press, 1950, pp.41-42).

How should we as the church respond to the abortion question? We know that every baby in the womb has been created by God, and He has designed a plan for that baby’s life. Even more, Christ loves that child, and one of the ways that He proves that is that He made himself a child to come into this world (Isaiah 7:14). So, when you want to defend life, use the arguments of the Word of God.

To help prevent this problem, it isn’t sufficient to know what the Word of God tells us about the life of the unborn child, but we must also work actively with all those who have a stake in this problem, such as the family and society, educating them on emotional and sexual issues, and providing emotional, spiritual, economic, and social support for women. Our aim is that women will reconsider the decision to abort, bearing in mind the trauma that goes with it, supporting pregnant woman who live in vulnerable contexts.

The Church of the Nazarene states in the Manual: “Responsible opposition to abortion requires our commitment to the initiation and support of programs designed to provide care for mothers and children. The crisis of an unwanted pregnancy calls for the community of

believers (represented only by those for whom knowledge of the crisis is appropriate) to provide a context of love, prayer, and counsel. In such instances, support can take the form of counseling centers, homes for expectant mothers, and the creation or utilization of Christian adoption services” (Church of the Nazarene Manual, 2017-2021. USA: CNP, 2018, p.51).

Abortion leaves deep scars in the life of every woman who has had the experience of losing a baby, even more so when this was an induced abortion. Those scars are imprinted on the soul, in the conscience, in the female psyche, and also to a lesser degree, to partners too. If for any reason we come across a lady and her family who has already had an abortion, we must do the following: 1) help her get closer to God, confessing her sin and seeking forgiveness from God (1 John 1:9); 2) She must forgive herself and no longer live under the shame of the condemnation of the abortion. Let’s remember that the church has a mission to restore and lift up the fallen (Psalm 145:14).

The church today must be saturated with grace and truth in our approach to the issue of abortion. The gospel message is sublime and saturated with grace and truth. Christians are called to not be intimidated by those who push for abortion as every woman’s right. Let’s arm ourselves with courage and defend life, which God has entrusted to us! Let’s teach that abortion is tantamount to murder; it can damage the life of mother, the family, and society. Human life is a sacred gift from God. We need to assume this truth and teach it. Induced voluntary abortion is against God’s will and commandments.

### **Questions:**

- What would you do to help or support someone who has had an induced abortion?
- As Christians, what should be our position on the issue of abortion?

### **Conclusion**

As Christians, we cannot be oblivious to the dynamics of the society in which we live. Several of the topics currently debated put at risk freedoms that have lasted for many centuries. Abortion may not affect us individually, but it does affect families, the church and society. We must learn to respect life from its simplest fragile form, just as we respect human life in its more complex manifestations.



# Our Jesus, our Prince of Peace

Natalia Pesado (U.S.A.)

**Study passages:** Isaiah 9:6, 26:3, 48:18; Matthew 26:38-39; Luke 22:44; John 14:27, 16:33

**Memory Verse:** "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you" Isaiah 26:3.

**Lesson Purpose:** To reflect on the peace that only God can give in the midst of anxious life experiences.

## Introduction

Anxiety is a feeling common to us all. Sometimes we call it 'being afraid' or 'having an attack of nerves.' It includes physical sensations as well as psychological emotions. Anxiety is an experience which can vary in intensity, from mild to almost debilitating, and in almost all cases, we can agree that it's a very uncomfortable experience.

In our study today, we'll delve deeper into the psychological perspective of anxiety, as well as in the spiritual help our Creator offers us to deal with it. Finally, we'll reflect on what we can do as a church today to wisely manage the experience of anxiety.

### I. What is anxiety?

Mental health experts have been studying anxiety for a long time and have been trying to understand it. In general, anxiety can be defined as an emotional state that includes emotions of fear and insecurity, worries, anguish and terror at the thought of danger or personal death.

Anxiety can also include physical sensations which include the feeling of shortness of breath, heart palpitations, muscle tension (usually on the head, nape or neck, shoulders and/or stomach), sweaty or cold hands, tremors in the legs and nausea, etc. A way to understand the experience of anxiety more broadly is to understand that fear is an instinct that also exists in the animal world. We can imagine a zebra grazing in the African savannah who suddenly observes that something is moving in the tall grasses around him. He sees a predatory lion crouching ready to attack. In that instant, the alarm system for the protection of the zebra activates. That is, his brain, which works

tirelessly to promote survival, activates part of the nervous system. The zebra begins to breathe shallowly, his nose works quickly, his digestion processes stop automatically because now all his energy must focus on a possible fight or flight to escape to save his life. So all his muscles tense to be able to run with agility when the moment comes. The blood begins to circulate to concentrate in the center of the body, thus avoiding a possible exsanguination in case of suffering a wound by a bite or scratch on one of his limbs.

We can see that each of these symptoms form part of a complex protection system designed by our Creator. When the lion takes its first leap to attack him, the zebra is ready to run and escape to save his life. After running a long distance, the zebra will stop and his muscles will relax after so much physical effort. He will breathe heavily at first, but then will return to his slow, deep breathing, and he will be able to eat and rest again. In this example, the protection system fulfilled its function perfectly.

In our current human experience, we must recognize that sometimes what causes us anxiety isn't the wild beasts because we usually don't face them in our urban cities. But there are other concerns or dangers we face, such as diseases and the recent pandemic, economic and relational concerns, legal problems, listening to political conflicts, worry about the future, etc. Unfortunately, many times we can't solve our worries like the zebra by escaping, but the stress sometimes lasts for a long time, becoming chronic stress, and we don't have enough exercise activity to relax body tensions.

Some people inherit a tendency to be more anxious than others, in the same way that some people can be more likely to suffer from sadness, lack of focus, diabetes, etc. We can also consider that sometimes our brain is activating the alarm system, but giving us 'false alarms,' that is, overreacting when perhaps we aren't in danger at that moment. So, we can develop tools that help us to handle these experiences with a good spirit. We can also seek help from a mental health professional to guide us according to the wisdom and preparation that God has provided.

### Questions:

- How would you define anxiety physiologically (i.e. physical and psychological effects) based on today's lesson?
- Have you ever experienced anxiety? How did you get over it?

## II. What does God tell us about anxiety?

Our Creator fully understands when we experience feelings of anxiety. As we have seen, He has designed us with an excellent protection system that alarms us when we face existential danger. In His Word, He has left us many promises to help us in the moments of our life when anxiety becomes overwhelming. Let's remember together some of them:

In Isaiah 26:3, the prophet wrote: "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you." In this promise, God reminds us that He'll keep us in complete peace, namely a peace that leaves no room for anxiety. Our part to achieve this promise requires us to trust God and concentrate on Him. I can testify that the more I read the Bible and trust God's promises and supernatural unfailing love, the more I experience His peace in my heart because I'm convinced that He's in control of my life.

In Isaiah 48:18, the prophet also gave a word of exhortation to the people of God: "If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your well-being like the waves of the sea." We can accept that anxiety can sometimes be the result of stressful situations caused by decisions that aren't in line with God's guidance. In this case, I can testify that God Himself provides the bridge to return to His will and experience His renewal, and peace is the result. We cannot judge others, as Job's friends did (Job 4 to 23). We can only examine ourselves under the love of God to remove any human-caused stress.

In the New Testament, we can find that Jesus spoke directly to us about this theme. In the book of John, we find these two verses to reflect upon:

a) John 14:27 says: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I don't give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and don't be afraid." and

b) in John 16:33, we read: "I've told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I've overcome the world."

In these passages, we have the words of Jesus himself who gives advice about what to do in times of anxiety and fear that we may experience in our lives. Our Lord Jesus qualifies as a counselor because he himself experienced moments of intense anxiety in his earthly life as we read in the passages that recount the great anxiety that Jesus suffered anticipating being betrayed by Judas and arrested by the religious leaders. In Matthew 26:38, our Lord said: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." He continued pleading with God: "...My Father, if it's possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). Luke 22:44 tells us another detail of Jesus' anguish as he was praying before being handed over: "And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground."

Remembering how Jesus experienced anxiety so personally and intensely, we can understand why He wants to leave us His peace. In this moment we see the weak human side of the Messiah, but He was also part of the almighty divine Trinity. In Isaiah 9:6 we read: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (emphasis added). We see that the momentary anxiety that Jesus faced led to victory, because victory belongs to God.

In Philippians 4:7, we read: "The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Our Savior invites us to trust His words and receive and experience this peace. Thank God for this provision!

### Questions:

- What passages from the Bible that we read today caught your attention the most? Why?
- Do you have a passage about anxiety or peace that speaks to you and/or helps you in a special way in your daily life?

### III. What can we do in the face of anxiety?

As a 21st century church, we're not exempt from experiencing anxiety. We have seen how people suffered in the time of Isaiah, and how even our Lord Jesus himself was troubled, so, we can be quite certain that past generations probably faced it too. Maybe our grandparents or great-grandparents suffered from experiencing the world wars, the pandemic of the last century, and the personal stresses of daily life. However, as children of God, we also have many tools to help us manage the emotions of anxiety.

From a practical point of view, we can take care of our body and brain with a healthy diet, abundant amount of physical exercise, and enough restful sleep each night. We can also manage the sources of stress in our life wisely: whether it's the excessive consumption of negative news, substances that affect our nerves (this can vary from person to person and include beverages such as coffee or caffeinated soft drinks, for example), toxic relationships, work stress, to mention just a few.

From a mental health point of view, we can also develop practical disciplines to help us care for our emotional wellbeing, such as taking deep breaths, progressive muscle relaxation, spending time in nature under the sun, air and trees. Also, if we need to, we can seek the guidance of a Christian counseling professional who can help us learn more about what human science can offer to overcome anxiety.

Finally, from the spiritual point of view, as the Holy Church of Christ, we must be sure to trust fully in God and not turn away from our Lord, even in these moments of suffering. Just as importantly, as a church, we must always maintain an attitude of love and respect for the people around us who are experiencing anxiety. Maybe we don't experience anxiety personally. It can be difficult to understand the intensity of emotions and thoughts that can cause anxiety, and we can fall into an attitude of impatience or judgment (e.g., 'Anxiety is a result of sin,' or an anxious person is 'far from God'). Unfortunately, these interpersonal dynamics won't give

support or recovery for our family, friends, or fellow believers experiencing anxiety. Rather, we should ask Jesus to help us have words of understanding, support, encouragement and love as the person next to us needs our understanding and care.

We can reflect on some practical ways to help someone who is dealing with anxiety. Instead of saying, "Calm down!" (since the person, many times, cannot handle the emotion if it's so intense), it may be more appropriate to say, "I'm here for you; I'm here to listen to you." Instead of saying, "It's no big deal!", we can say: "I can see that you're very worried". Instead of saying, "Stop worrying!", we can say, "It's totally normal to feel stressed." Instead of saying, "It's all in your head," we can offer the person some music to listen to, or go out for a walk with them. Or instead of saying, "Get over it!" we can say, "This is hard, but we'll get through this together" (<https://www.healthgrades.com/rightcare/anxiety-disorders/9-things-not-to-say-to-someonewith-anxiety>, by Jennifer L. W. Fink, Jan 17, 2021; you can see more ideas in the shared link).

Our best gift can be intercession in prayer for the supernatural hand of God to work with power and produce the fruit of the peace of Jesus. He wishes to use us to give His peace to others!

### Questions:

- What do you think of the tools to manage anxiety? Have you used any before?
- What attitude do you think we should have towards those around us who suffer from anxiety? Why?

### Conclusion

Anxiety can be a very uncomfortable experience, both physically and emotionally, and even neurologically. However, as children of God, we acknowledge that He is almighty to act, even in the chemical imbalances in our biological brain, as well as in our souls, to help us experience the peace that only He can give us. Let's not forget to do our part, trusting God fully in moments of anxiety and practicing activities and disciplines that can help us. As brothers and sisters in Christ, let's pray for each other. Our Prince of Peace is by our side to be our constant refuge.

# Relevant messages for the church (1 and 2 Corinthians)

Third quarter

The Church and its Leaders  
How to handle conflicts in the church?  
Marriage and other related matters  
Living for God's Glory  
Controversial points around Worship  
Spiritual gifts in the church  
Perfect love  
The importance of Jesus' resurrection  
Challenges and blessing in Christian ministry  
God's call to ministry  
Paul's recommendations and praise  
Giving generously  
Paul, the pioneer missionary



# The Church and its Leaders

Gabriel Yip (Mexico)

**Study passages:** I Corinthians 1:10-31, 2, 3, 4

**Memory Verse:** "...Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord" I Corinthians 1:31.

**Lesson Purpose:** To learn about the importance of safeguarding the unity of the church, the body of Christ

## Introduction

To begin, we'll give a brief brushstroke about the city of Corinth where Paul lived for over a year (Acts 18:11). Corinth was one of the main Greek cities. According to mythological accounts, Corinth was the site of a dispute between Poseidon and Helios, between the sea and the sun ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient\\_Corinth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Corinth)). By the 1st century AD, Corinth was no longer in its moment of splendor, since it had been destroyed by Rome. Ironically, Julius Caesar, rebuilt the city because it was an important place for trade routes by sea and land. So, the city of Corinth had a second economic and cultural atmosphere by the middle of the 1st century BC. This province became the second largest Roman city in the times of the early church (Uteley, Bob. Paul's Letters to a Troubled Church: 1st and 2nd Corinthians. USA: Biblical Lessons International, 2012, p.1).

Today nobody lives in the old city of Corinth. What remains is archaeological evidence; however it's close to the current city of Corinth. In this lesson, we'll study some key points in the first four chapters of the first letter to the Corinthians.

## I. Divisions in the Corinthian church (I Corinthians 1-3)

In this letter, Paul acknowledged that the Corinthian church members were faithful followers of Jesus (1:2-7), although after a few paragraphs, he confronted them with some of their problems. He shared his belief that God was working in the church, and that in spite of the problems they were experiencing, God would keep them blameless until the day of Jesus' second coming (v.8).

One of the problems that Paul dealt with was the question of rivalry among the church leaders and teachers: "One of you says, 'I follow Paul' another, 'I follow Apollos';

another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ' (vv.11-12). Infighting among leaders is a worldly way of acting. He wrote: "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1:10). Later, he encourages them as followers of Jesus to discern between human judgement and Christlike thinking (1 Cor. 2:15-16). These divisions in the congregation were symptoms of immaturity. He writes: "You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not mere human beings?" (1 Cor. 3:1-4).

### A. Paul versus the Greek thinkers of his day (2:1-5)

What did the Greeks think of this Jewish preacher? In 1 Cor 2:1-3 he tells them: "When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God."

Luke shares how Paul went to Athens, the seat of worldly wisdom. The "Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, 'What is this babbling trying to say?' (Acts 17:18). They were intrigued and invited him to share his ideas: 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean' (vv. 19-20). Luke comments "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (v.21).

But Paul didn't come to impress people with his eloquence. He told the Corinthians: "I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Cor. 2:4-5).

### **B. Jew or Greek (1:18-31)**

Christians, Jews and Greeks had different ways of considering the cross of Christ. Paul tells them in his letter that the Jews considered it blasphemous for Jesus to be the Messiah because he had been crucified (Deuteronomy 21:23). It was also inconceivable that he would name himself the Son of God. Although many prophecies were fulfilled thoroughly in Jesus in relation to his birth, life, death and resurrection, these didn't convince the Jews.

The Greeks, for their part, described the cross as foolish madness. The idea of the God-Man limited by time and space was inconceivable. For them, it was unheard of to think of bodily resurrection. The Stoics saw death as the union of soul, in the 'all.' The Gnostics believed that death was the liberation of the soul. The materialistic epicureans following the teachings of philosophers like Democritus and Epicurean said that everything ended in death, so what was important was the pursuit of happiness through seeking pleasure in the here and now. So for them, the possibility of Jesus' resurrection, and the judgment of all humanity in a future time, was farfetched (Barclay, William. *New Testament Commentary*, volume 7. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1991, p.70).

Author Antonio Cruz brings these ideas up to date: "The new atheism that proliferates today in university environments aimed at making people believe that the image of the wise God of the Bible, who has intelligently planned the world, does not coincide with the approaches of modern science" (Cruz, Antonio. *New Atheism*. USA: Editorial CLIE, 2019, pp.7-8).

Jews and Greeks didn't want to share the Christian beliefs. Barclay says: "The Jews wanted only more signs. They expected that when the golden age of God came, amazing things would happen...the Greeks' gods were incapable of feeling anything, so nothing could affect them. A suffering God was for the Greeks a contradiction" (Barclay, William. *New Testament Commentary*, volume 9. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1991, pp.12-13). What God had revealed in Christ Jesus as Savior and Lord was a confrontation of both their ways of thinking and acting.

### **C. The Corinthian Church (1 Corinthians 3)**

Corinth was about 90 km from Athens, a city of commercial, religious and cultural movement that had ethnic diversity and where ideas were exchanged.

Economy prosperity had opened the door to delights that could be bought, and there were many excesses and eccentricities. There were many ideas or philosophical positions that would give explanations and/or justifications for how the people wanted to live. So, it was quite normal for people to choose to follow the schools of some prominent philosopher or poet.

Probably the church at Corinth repeated that cultural practice that they had before believing in Christ. They chose the church leader they wanted to follow which gave the impression that they were very spiritual, but they really were immature (v.4). There was also a large community of Jews who met in the local synagogue. Paul, as a Jew by birth, presented the gospel to them. But the Jews were strongly opposed (Acts 18:4-6), and the apostle decided to leave the synagogue to share the message to the Gentiles, although there was a group of Jews who believed in Jesus (Acts 18:8).

### **Questions:**

- How common is it that there are disputes/dissensions in churches?
- What situations or differences can cause divisions in the church?

## **II. Faith in Christ (1 Corinthians 2, 4)**

The apostle Paul didn't hesitate to discard human wisdom to know God (1 Corinthians 2:11). In contrast to this, he claimed that the Creator of all that exists decided to become man and make himself known to men and women, and after having lived as a man, he died, was crucified and rose again (1 Corinthians 15:3-4; 1 Timothy 3:16). Before the risen Christ ascended to heaven, he gave his followers the task of sharing the good news of salvation (that others named madness) (1 Cor.2:14). But if this message was seen as crazy or ridiculous (1 Corinthians 1:21), how could they understand and trust that mystery? The Holy Spirit shows us the depths of God (Matthew 16:17; 1 Corinthians 1:23) Recognizing Jesus, the Son of God, in whom the law and the prophets are fulfilled (Matthew 5:17) would be peace for the Jews. Jesus is the light of God that enlightens every human being (John 1:9), whether he is a Jew or a Gentile. So, Jesus Christ is and will be enough!

### **A. Lack of maturity (1 Corinthians 2)**

The apostle Paul pointed out the limitations of the Jewish and Greek ways of thinking by clearly presenting "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (v.2). Jesus demonstrated the power and wisdom of God (vv.1-5).



Paul expressed that human wisdom and incorrect Jewish thinking was the cause of these disputes. He pointed to the followers of Paul, Apollos, Cephas and Christ (1:12), as “carnal” (3:3). Sometimes, we reduce this word to unbridled sensual behavior, but it can also mean worldly ways of thinking. Carnality isn't only slavery to certain passions, but to thinking and acting immaturity.

Ask: How are we acting and how are we thinking?

To follow someone for their gifts, intellectual formation or ministry, and to form groups is immaturity and carnality (vv.5-7). This church needed to remember the importance that Christ is our foundation, and we all need to collaborate together. There is nothing that we have that has not been given to us by God, so that no one has the right to brag or feel superior to their brother or sister. How beautiful it is to be in Christ, who saves us from our vainglory and competition!

### **B. From Corinth to us (1 Corinthians 4)**

How are our attitudes?

1. When we participate as part of the body of Christ, we recognize that everything is from God, as our memory verse says (1 Corinthians 1:31). We are only something in Christ! We have nothing to brag or feel superior about. We shouldn't boast about our gifts, ministry, educational background, position social, ideological or theological trend as this may lead to divisions. We need to check out our attitudes, and if we see that these things are present, we have to realize our immaturity. We need to go back to the centrality of Jesus Christ as Savior and foundation of the whole church, in which by grace we're members, and we serve one another in love for the world to see our unity (John 17).
2. We must be careful not to do what the Corinthian church did in seeking superiority over others, blowing ourselves up because we think we have the right idea, the best plan or style of leadership. This sort of worldly attitude may lead some to become well known or having spectacular events. But leaders and members with pride or ambition won't help the church to be united.

Paul asks them in his letter: “What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?” (4:21). He was going to have to deal with the divisions in the Corinthian church. They say that ‘prevention is better than cure’ so we need to see that these seeds of discord aren't allowed to grow into ugly plants that will hinder God's work.

Ask: what is best for our church? Are there similarities between our churches and the Corinthians?

Cultural influences sometimes inadvertently seduce us, and we go to the meetings or congresses to see what is new, but we often aren't seeking Christ. This happens because we're still immature, chasing popular figures, idolizing ministries or exalting certain theologies instead of looking for Christ.

### **Questions:**

- Name any current mindsets that exalt personality or promote idolatry in the church today.
- What ways does the world undermine Christian belief? What are some of the intellectual doubts that young people (and adults) have to face?
- How can we use our gifts and abilities for the glory of God? What sometimes gets in the way?

### **Conclusion**

How can we avoid divisions in the church? We need to turn our attention fully back to Christ, who is worthy of being loved, worshipped and obeyed. We need to be critical of our cultural patterns that disqualify faith in Christ, accusing it of being illogical, absurd or obsolete. Our churches need to unite around our one Lord, and not be carried away by charismatic leaders or new-fangled theological currents.



# How to manage conflicts in the church?

Mary Prado (Peru)

**Study passages:** I Corinthians 5, 6

**Memory Verse:** “Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!” I Corinthians 6:3.

**Lesson Purpose:** To learn how to deal with conflict situations in the church following Bible guidelines

## Introduction

In chapters 5 and 6 of I Corinthians, we see several disorderly behaviors and negative attitudes that occurred in the life of the congregation at Corinth, and the result was a bad testimony to the world around them (5:1-2). Paul described the Corinthians as a confused church who was trying to live according to the practices of the libertine and immoral society that surrounded them. This congregation overlooked the sins of immorality without correcting them. They thought that they had all the answers and boasted about their “knowledge” which contrasted with the teachings of the Word of God.

Much of this situation was due to the depraved Corinthian social context where there was a lot of sexual immorality and vain philosophies. “In previous centuries to Christianity, Greek and Roman authors often described Corinth as a city of fornication and prostitution. The Greeks coined the term *corinthiazethai* (literally: “to live like a Corinthian”) to describe the immorality of the city” (Kistemaker, Simon J. Commentary on the New Testament. USA: Books Challenge, 1998, p.13).

Nowadays, we’re facing similar situations. Our societies are just as corrupt, or perhaps worse than those times. Also, sometimes within the church, these types of sins are overlooked or dealt with in a superficial way.

## I. How to deal with the sin of sexual immorality in the believer? (I Corinthians 5)

In the I Corinthians 5, Paul gives us several guidelines for dealing with sexual sin in the church. He did it from the basis of a new morality: that of the gospel. “The Christian gospel presented a new faith religion and a new ethical vision... The new morality. Likewise, it was founded on the life and teachings of Jesus” (Greathouse, W. M., Metz, D. S., and Carver, F. G, Beacon Bible Commentary Volume VIII. USA: CNP, 1969, p.373).

The life of the Christian, and therefore of the church, shouldn’t allow the practice of sin, or overlook it, as was the case in the Corinthian church (vv.1-2). The first verse tells us: “... It’s actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans don’t tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father’s wife.” The incest referred to by Paul was notorious and brought bad testimony to the church. After revealing how the church had been acting in the face of this sinful situation, the apostle instructed them about how to proceed in this case. Paul personally took a clear and firm position of zero tolerance towards sexual immorality. “Paul’s judgment may seem severe, but [the case judged] was a flagrant violation of Christian ethics” (Greathouse, W. M., Metz, D. S., and Carver, F. G. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume VIII. USA: CNP, 1969, p.377).

Some of the basic principles Paul taught to deal with this type of sin in the church were the following:

1. Summon the congregation to discuss the matter: “So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present...” (v.4). This type of delicate situation must never be kept hidden from the congregation because in the end, the church will always be affected. When dealing with these issues in the congregation, all must be done in obedience to the Lord and in accordance with his Holy Word.
2. Exercising discipline on the one who commits the sin (vv.2-5): This means confronting those involved with their sin, and helping them in a restoration process. However, if people don’t recognize their sin and persist in it, the church must take the painful measure of excluding them from the fellowship. Conversely, when the people who have fallen into sin show true signs of repentance, the church must welcome them lovingly. In 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, we’re shown an example of a case when Paul forgave the offender, and he gave precise instructions to the church to

forgive and restore fellowship to that person. The application of discipline is a sign of true Christian love. Church leaders have a duty to judge those who sin in the manner mentioned, but the purpose of discipline is repentance and restoration to a righteous life (Hebrews 12:11). It's by no means condemnatory (1 Corinthians 5:5).

3. Do not create bad precedents: By not judging cases of sexual sin, bad precedents are created, staining the testimony of the church and the gospel (v.6). The church needs to act radically, as Paul taught in verses 6 through 8. This is what he meant when he used the illustration of yeast which spreads everywhere in the dough, just as the sin of immorality will affect all the congregation if it's not dealt with.
4. Christ's church must take a stand against immoral practices and not allow them in the fellowship. As a church, we must be different from people who have not received Christ (Romans 12). The church must be distinguished by its transparency and moral rectitude.
5. The church has the authority and the duty to judge those who commit sins of sexual immorality (v.12). God has established this in His Word. In this sense, the correction of its members is a duty that the church must continually exercise. "When a church member intentionally persists in sin and refuses to repent, the church is bound to exercise discipline" (Kistemaker, Simón J. Commentary on New Testament. USA: Challenge Books, 1998, p.156).
6. The church has the responsibility to judge and act with its members, helping them to repent. God himself will judge those who are outside the church (vv.12-13).

### Questions:

- Name two biblical principles you learned in the lesson for dealing with the sin of sexual immorality.
- In what case should one who has committed sexual sin be excluded from the fellowship of the church?

## II. How to resolve disputes between believers? (1 Corinthians 6:1-11)

Sometimes sin involves offenses or grievances to other brothers and sisters in the faith. These cases are quite difficult, and sometimes have even resulted in the division of congregations. These differences at the level of interpersonal relationships must be treated very wisely, according to Christian values, and not according to worldly justice. That is what Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 6:1-11, which is the second passage for this lesson.

As this passage teaches, any conflict that arises within the church must be dealt with inside the fellowship and by its own authorities. The Corinthians, however, were taking their differences to the public courts to deal with. This procedure was completely against Christian principles. "A commentator suggests that Paul's language indicates that he considers the public litigation as 'treason against the Christian brotherhood'" (Greathouse, W. M., Metz, D. S., and Carver, F. G. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume VIII. USA: CNP, 1969, p.386).

Preferring the judgment of the lay courts about the problems of the church undervalues and underestimates Christians values and those who represent them. Such attitudes go against the laws of God. So, as a church, all litigation between believers must be dealt with among ourselves and by the relevant Christian authorities, including the pastors and other ministerial leaders. "The Christian church, on the other hand, operates as a personal, united group that lives according to the motives of mercy, love, and kindness concern for one another" (Greathouse, W. M., Metz, D. S., and Carver, F. G. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume VIII. USA: CNP, 1969, p.387).

As the church of Christ, we must deal with the problems internally in the church from a Christian perspective, avoiding all kinds of lawsuits before outsiders, trying not to defame others but rather, acting with a spirit of reconciliation and restoration. When disputes between Christians are confronted, we need to consider primarily the spiritual part above the material values that are at stake.

Communion between brothers and sisters is more important than what might be lost materially, although we must always achieve moral and material restitution between the two parties. The idea isn't to stop fixing the problem, but to do it in a loving way, always considering both parties with empathy and without seeking revenge (vv.7-8).

Paul made it clear to them that it wasn't enough to declare that they were Christians if their unrighteous actions were evidenced in their frequent lawsuits. Acting like this made them like the people of the world who practiced all kinds of sins (v.9). Being unfair made them undeserving of the kingdom of God. "Perhaps the Corinthians thought they would be saved by the mere fact of openly making a profession of faith or being publicly baptized" (Greathouse, W. M., Metz, D. S., and Carver, F. G. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume VIII. USA: CNP, 1969, p.391).

On the other hand, it's important to remain humble and not forget what we were before knowing Christ: "And that is what some of you were.

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (v.11). This expression of Paul "alludes to the abysses from which the grace of God in Christ had ransomed them" (Harrison, Everett F., Moody Bible Commentary. USA: Publisher Speaker, 1998, p. 295).

### Questions:

- Why shouldn't we go to public courts to deal with differences between brothers and sisters? How should we treat each other in these cases?
- What is the correct way to deal with disputes among Christians?

### III. How can we glorify God with our Body? (1 Corinthians 6:12-20)

Glorifying God with our body is something that is intimately related to our free will.

How we manage our bodies will either move us away or bring us closer to God. The freedom to choose can be applied to our entire physical and spiritual being. "But carnal Christians seem inclined to make any point as an excuse to turn freedom into license" (Greathouse, W. M., Metz, D. S., and Carver, F. G. Beacon Bible Commentary, Vol. VIII. USA: CNP, 1969, p.393).

1 Corinthians 6:12-20 teaches us the correct meaning of freedom for those who want to live in holiness. Paul taught the Corinthians that there are limits to freedom that must be voluntarily set by ourselves. 1 Corinthians 6:12 says: "I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything."

As we consider Paul's statements, it's clear that we need to glorify God with our bodies. One of the issues that Paul deals with here is the question of whether to eat meat which has been sacrificed to idols (a topic he deals with in depth later). Paul states that Christians can eat anything, but it must be done in a disciplined way, without falling into gluttony and excesses, which are harmful to the body. The principle applied here is that of self-control.

We have real freedom when we exercise control about what we eat, and not the other way around. "All things are under my power, but I will not be placed under the power of anyone. Giving in to a habit that dominates one isn't freedom but slavery" (Harrison, Everett F. Moody Bible Commentary. USA: Editorial Portavoz, 1998, p.296). We must be convinced about establishing limits for our spiritual growth. These too must be established in our eating habits.

Secondly, with regard to sexual immorality Paul teaches the following: We must bear in mind that what we do with our bodies is closely related to holiness, and how we act can help or destroy us spiritually. When we use our bodies for immoral and dishonest purposes, like sexual promiscuity, it not only affects us physically, but also psychologically and spiritually. The Lord requires that our body be pure and consecrated to Him: "... The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body..." (v.13).

Developing a character that shows God's holiness (v.14) is the way to glorify God with our Body. The expression "Flee from sexual immorality" (v.18a) is an imperative. It isn't an option. This mandate isn't only referring to fleeing illicit sexual relations, but also from everything that involves the impure use of the body, what we do with our eyes, ears or any other organ of the body, thereby dishonoring God. An important parallel passage is Philippians 4:8, where he talks about the purity of our thoughts: "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

Christian congregational life isn't exempt from conflicts. Relational issues and individual conflicts are situations that impact church life. The cases of immorality committed by some members often become triggers of deep congregational crises. At the same time, they call into question the testimony of the gospel.

### Questions:

- How should we eat to glorify God?
- How can we fulfill the biblical imperative: "Flee from sexual immorality"?

### Conclusion

Fortunately, God has provided us with the wise instructions of His Word about how to handle conflicts correctly. Acting with justice and love in the handling of such situations can be accomplished, achieving the purpose that God desires for His church.



# Marriage and other related matters

Dorothy Bullón (Costa Rica)

**Study passages:** I Corinthians 7:1-40

**Memory Verse:** “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate” Matthew 19:6.

**Lesson Purpose:** To study Paul’s advice on marriage for the Corinthians and reflect on how we can contextualize it for our environment.

## Introduction

Up to this point in the letter, Paul was responding to themes reported by Chloe’s house (1:11); but the first verse of chapter 7 implies that here, Paul was answering questions that had been put to him in a letter sent to him by the church: “Now for the matters you wrote...” This letter is lost, but we can imagine some questions they were asking, such as the following: is it more spiritual not to get married, since marriage is of the flesh? Is it sinful to have sex? In a mixed marriage (Christian-pagan), would it be better to separate? Can Christians divorce if the marriage doesn’t work out? Can widows remarry?

The city of Corinth was the center of cultic prostitution. In the temple of the goddess Aphrodite, located in the Corinthian acropolis, 1,000 priests and priestesses were given into prostitution. Many of them were sold as boys and girls into sexual slavery by relatives seeking favors from this goddess of fertility. Apart from this, Corinth was an important port where all kinds of immorality was practiced.

Among the Greek philosophers, there were two inclinations: the hedonists, who encouraged the search for pleasure, and the ascetics, who wanted to purify the spirit by denying the material pleasures. Paul, as a Jewish-Christian, had to answer the questions from this church with a strong pagan background. How did he respond?

But we also have questions... How should we handle sexual relations in marriage? How should the church treat singles, single mothers, the divorced and widows? Would it be better not to be married, and

simply live in common law? Should a church allow divorce? Is it correct that pastors should remain celibate? Let’s examine this chapter of I Corinthians 7 to try to find some guidelines and principles for our current world.

## I. Sexual duty in the context of marriage (I Corinthians 7:1-5)

### A. Paul’s Guidelines

The first verse suggests that Paul was against marriage: “...It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” However in other letters, Paul developed a rich theology of marriage (Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:18-19). It’s possible that this phrase was in the letter that the Corinthians sent to Paul.

Many have asked if Paul had been married. Jewish families arranged marriages for their children when they were very young. Also, in Acts it seems that Paul had authority as a member of the Sanhedrin when he began to persecute Christians. Only married men could be members of the Sanhedrin. It’s obvious that at that time, when he wrote this letter to the Corinthians, he had no wife. But the question arises as to whether he was actually widowed in Tarsus during the period before he came to Antioch. I Corinthians 7:8 reads: “Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do.” Fee writes that in the Greek ‘unmarried’ implies widowers (Fee, Gordon. First Epistle to the Corinthians. Argentina: Publisher New Creation, 1994, p.327).

So, it's likely that Paul was speaking from his experience, and not from mere observations of the married life of others. There is one more thing we should know about Paul, he believed that the Second Coming of Christ was very imminent, and this was the background of the advice he gives in this chapter.

### **B. Advice for Christian couples**

In Corinthian society, a woman didn't count for much. It was a very patriarchal and 'macho' culture. Divorce was easy and common. Many men visited the brothels, thus being unfaithful to their wives. In verses one to five, Paul elevated marriage to a higher position, describing the duties in a Christian marriage.

The couple should mutually enjoy their sexual relationship: The husband should fulfill the conjugal duty to the wife, and likewise the wife with her husband" (v.3). Each must fulfill their conjugal duty, and neither should refuse the other. Sexual satisfaction in marriage isn't exclusive only of the man or of the woman, it belongs to both. This mutuality that Paul offered here is revolutionary as it implies that both spouses should enjoy the sexual experience. Basically, it's based on Christian agape love that seeks the best for the other person, and not only personal pleasure. Verse 4 demonstrates this idea of reciprocity: "The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife." In verse 5, Paul advised that for spouses, unless married couples decide by mutual consent to refrain from sexual relations in order to spend time together in prayer, they shouldn't refuse the sexual advances of their partner because this could result in infidelity.

What lessons can we draw from these verses? Marriage is an invention of God, and solid marriages are a healthy foundation for family, church, and society. The sexual part is only one part, but it's an important part, and shouldn't be ignored. The couples should have open honest conversations about their sexual needs.

### **Questions:**

- What advice did Paul give married people? What is the importance of communication in marriage?

- Paul taught that the two spouses have equal rights. Do you consider that in our societies it's like that?

## **II. Advice for singles and widows (I Corinthians 7:6-9,25-38)**

### **A. Development of Paul's argument**

Paul recognized that on this subject, he was giving personal advice and not necessarily mandates from God: "I say this as a concession, not as a command" (6). In verse 25, he confirmed that he didn't have a commandment of the Lord for the 'virgins' or young ladies. It seems that Paul saw that the times were complicated and urgent, perhaps because of imminent persecution, and also because he believed that Jesus was going to return very soon: "brothers and sisters, is that the time is short" (v.29).

The apostle Paul recognized that sexuality plays an important role in life. In the first section, he advised married couples to enjoy their sexual relations, which is always God's plan. He was aware that sexuality can push a person into temptations and sins, such as adultery and improper relationships between singles (the Bible calls it fornication). In verse 9, he counseled, "But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion."

In this section, there are a number of different characters or cases. Let's look at them:

1. He adds one more observation for married people: "...But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—" (v.33). Here Paul was arguing that marriage and the family occupy time and income; while the single person who is working for the Lord can devote their efforts to the divine work. The dedication to women here is a very positive note in a Greek society where women didn't count for much.
2. For single women or young ladies, Paul had some advice similar to the previous one: "An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband" (v.34).

3. To the engaged gentleman Paul said: "If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning" (v.36).
4. Paul advised widowers and widowers not to remarry in order to devote themselves to the work of the Lord (v.8). Here we must add something that Jesus said: "For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it" (Matthew 19:12). The eunuch was a castrated man that in the East used to look after the harem of the lord of the house This third category that Jesus mentioned is interesting. It implies that there may be people who choose not marry in order to serve in the kingdom of God better.

### **B. Conclusions of Paul's argument**

It seems that Paul felt the urgency of the times. He advised the brothers to stay as they were, without seeking marriage, to be able to dedicate themselves to God's work: "Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife" (v.27). Paul, however, isn't saying that sexuality is sin (v.28). In verse 38, he gave his verdict: "So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better." He was concerned about their good testimony: "I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord" (v.35).

### **Questions:**

- What different groups did Paul counsel in this section (vv.6-9,25-38)?
- What would a church ministry look like for single mothers, young ladies, and widows?

## **III. Divorce and mixed marriages (I Corinthians 7:10-24,39-40)**

### **A. The issue of divorce**

Deuteronomy 24:1-2 says: "If a man marries a

woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man..." Thus, since Moses' times, male Jews could get divorced easily. As for the Greco-Roman culture, writes Javier Ramos (2012): "The act of Roman divorce was as informal as marriage because it was enough for the husband to get up that day with the left foot. The wife, was divorced by mutual consent or repudiated, she left the marital home taking her dowry. The children stayed with the father. (<http://www.arquehistoria.com/matrimonio-and-divorce-in-ancient-rome>, in Marriage and divorce in ancient Rome, on March 23, 2021).

After seeing this context, quite fatal to the wife in both cases, let's examine what Paul said on the subject. In the first place, Paul was no longer here giving his personal preferences, rather, he spoke with the authority of the Lord. Jesus said about divorce: "...Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19:4-6). Then, in Matthew 19:9, Jesus added: "... I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

In I Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul dealt with the subject of separation or divorce. Following the teachings of Jesus, Paul advised that the woman shouldn't separate from her husband, and the man shouldn't abandon his wife. Gordon Fee highlights a very important point: both women and men could make the decision to separate. Fee notes: "As in the entire chapter, Paul addresses men and women alike" (Fee, Gordon. First Epistle to the Corinthians. Argentina: Editorial New Creation, 1994, p.330). This is a revolutionary change considering the customs cited before. If the woman is widowed, Paul said that she can remarry (v.39).

## B. Mixed marriages

Paul also referred to couples where one of the spouses had accepted Christianity. The question was should the spouses remain married if they don't share the same faith? But Paul advised them to continue in their marriage. The message of I Corinthians 7:14-16 is that a spouse who is a Christian can influence the conversion of his or her partner, and be a blessing for the children.

*Ask: Is it a sin to get divorced? How common is the divorce between Nazarene brothers and sisters? Is there something we can do to prevent it? What pastoral needs does a person or a family have who has suffered a separation or divorce? What should the church do with couples who live in free union? Is this sexual immorality, even if it's legal in our countries?*

In our contexts, we have mixed marriages also. There are couples in which one of the spouses is Catholic and the other Protestant, or a spouse is from a country and the other from another part of the world, or as in the cases mentioned by Paul, one is converted and the other person not. What advice can we give them?

## C. Let each one remain as he is (vv.20-24)

Paul mentioned a number of situations where it would be better to be at peace, and not look for changes. Again, it seems that Paul felt there was an urgency because of imminent persecution, or the approach of the Second Coming of Jesus. Verse 20 says, "Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them." So, if the person is circumcised or not, is free or a slave, married or single, they must not seek to change their status.

### Questions:

- Should a Christian get divorced? (Matthew 19:4-6; I Corinthians 7:10-11).
- What do you think of this passage: I Corinthians 7:14-16?

### Conclusion

Established marriages where the foundation is love and mutual support are very important, both for the stability of society as well as of the community of faith. In answering the questions of the Corinthian brothers and sisters, Paul left us principles that can

open conversations. May they enrich our marriages and families.





# Living for God's Glory

Walter Rodríguez Castro (Uruguay)

**Study passages:** 1 Corinthians 8, 10, 11:1

**Memory Verse:** "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others" 1 Corinthians 10:24.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the importance of supporting each other as we develop as Christians.

## Introduction

Paul continued answering questions that he had received from the Corinthian church. This was a very particular city, a society that reflected the social and religious situation of the Roman Empire. John Fletcher Hurst points out the following: "Mythology no longer had the great influence that it had exercised in the minds of the people... pagan faith and ideas failed utterly to try to meet the people's spiritual needs, since the soul cannot be filled with the triumphs of art, literature, eloquence or laws" (Fletcher Hurst, J. Abridged History of the Christian Church: Argentina, Editorial La Aurora, 1946, p. 11). Religion was reduced to the formality of worship that appealed to the senses.

Worship for some of the divinities popular in Corinth included animal sacrifice and acts of 'sacred immorality.' The Christian church, in this context, had to fight against influences from both philosophy and the different existing cults. In 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul had to correct a number of contentious issues, such as disorders in the worship celebration, problems with interpersonal relationship, and immorality. In the study passages, we'll find some of them. The theme of eating meat sacrificed to idols uncovered several other problems that he had to attend to.

### I. Let us grow together (1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

In chapter 8, Paul began to deal with the matter of meat offered to idols. This topic was causing problems among the Corinthian believers, and the Church leaders were concerned about it. "The Greco-Roman religions present in the city of Corinth had a number of rites and practices. These practices included animal sacrifices. A small part of the meat was donated to the priests, and the rest was returned to the devotees who consumed it in 'sacred' banquets; and most of it was sold in the public markets at deeply discounted prices" (R. C. Fuller (ed.), A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture. USA: Thomas Nelson And Sons Ltd., 1975, p. 1152).

There were some believers who were clear that neither idols nor anything offered to those gods had any value. As they declared God's presence in their lives, they felt free not to be limited by such popular practices. Therefore, they felt that they could buy and eat that meat that was for sale in the public markets (vv.2-6). Other believers, however, perhaps newer ones who had come out of those cults with animal sacrifices, were still not so clear that their old gods were false and that sacrificing to them was worthlessness. Paul suggested that those new believers who had been involved in idolatry for a long time were still processing in their minds and hearts the freedom that God gives (vv.7-8). So, when they saw more mature believers eating that type of meat, they were confused and were asking questions about their new faith (v.10).

Paul recognized that some understood the Christian point of view about idols and rituals, but immediately, he pointed out that knowledge puffs up (v.1). It isn't rare that a greater knowledge of the things of God sometimes produces an attitude of superiority. Pride, whether intellectual and/or 'spiritual', may not always allow us to use that 'knowledge' constructively. There is the danger of being too self-centered, resulting in spiritual failure by believing that one is better than the rest. This goes for new believers as well as for the most outstanding leaders; in fact, it includes all of us. Respect and appreciation of any brother or sister in the faith is what Paul referred to when he said: "...but love builds up" (v.1). People who grow in knowledge and wisdom in any discipline often surprise us by recognizing their limitations by the vast knowledge that they haven't yet managed to obtain. When this happens, we can talk about the humility of the truly 'great' ones.

The apostle Paul diverted the focus from the meat offered to idols, which appears to be a legalistic approach to the matter, to what is possible and what isn't, and how to treat the relationships that should exist between Christians (vv.10-12). He preferred to reaffirm values of coexistence, such as mutual support and care, rather than to legislate on the subject of meat. Just as within a family, minors are protected, fed and educated, so it is in the family of faith, one cares for and nurtures those who are newly 'born' in the gospel.

When we think about the possible idolatries of today, we should support and teach the weakest believers on topics that the Lord Jesus Christ teaches, such as truth and freedom, to stimulate their growth in faith (John 8:32).

### Questions:

- Think of a believer whose experience is still weak. Write one way you can help this person to grow in his life with Christ.
- Write an activity by which others could also help this believer.

## II. Learn from history (I Corinthians 10:1-13)

In the first part of chapter 10, Paul resorted to the history of the Hebrew people to illustrate what he had said in chapter 8. He pointed out the episode of the exodus of the chosen people under Moses' leadership. He spoke of 'our fathers' when he addressed Gentile believers, because he considered that the people of God had nothing to do with ties of blood, but of faith. He also mentioned the same concept in Galatians 3:7 and Romans 9:6.

The apostle used the figure of 'baptism' when referring to the people who participated with Moses in the crossing of the Sea Red (Exodus 14:19-31), and the presence of the cloud that guided and protected the people during the journey through the desert (Exodus 13:21, 14:19). They didn't drown in the sea, just like in baptism by immersion. They walked on the dry seabed. The cloud was overhead when they stopped and they followed it when they were moving on. However, the figure illustrated events experienced under Moses' leadership. The Corinthian believers fully understood that in the life of the church, baptism was a symbol with which they were identified with Christ and union within the Christian family.

Another figure in I Corinthians 10:3-4 is the 'spiritual drink,' the water in the desert, and the 'spiritual food,' the manna, referring to the elements of communion. Barclay says: "Paul means that they drank from the rock that followed them...from the rabbinical tradition... which said that (Numbers 20:1-11) the Rock followed the people and always gave them water to drink. (Barclay, William. The Annotated

New Testament, vol. 9: I and II Corinthians. Argentina: Editorial La Aurora, 1973, p.100). This was a legend known to all Jews of the time.

However, Paul said: "Nevertheless, God wasn't pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness" (v.5), pointing out that of those who came out of Egypt, only Joshua and Caleb entered the promised land (Numbers 14:29-30). All were freed from slavery and experienced the wonderful actions of God in the desert, however, except for two, none reached the goal, although their descendants did. Here we can reflect on the words of the Lord Jesus Christ: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

I Corinthians 10:6-11 gives a short list of sins committed by the chosen people during the exodus, deeds that God didn't tolerate: They coveted bad things (Numbers 11:4), were idolaters (Exodus 32:6), committed sexual immoralities (Numbers 25:1-18), tempted God (Numbers 21:5-6), and murmured (Numbers 16:41-49). Paul advised the Corinthians not to do same. They should learn from history. We would do well to identify similar sins today to correct them. We need to pay urgent attention to the idolatries that are around today, like: Coveting, sexual immoralities, complaining and gossiping. Barclay comments: "Currently we don't worship idols so openly; but if the god of a man is that to which he bestows all his time, thought and energy, men adore still more the works of their hands rather than God" (Barclay, William. The Annotated New Testament, Volume 9: I and II Corinthians. Argentina: Editorial La Aurora, 1973, p.101).

There are other idolatries in society that the church must face: superstition, rise of pagan cults, wild consumerism, social networks, the Internet, sports fans, and politicians, among others.

### Questions:

- In a few words, name two things you learned from the Exodus.
- How can a Christian identify an existing idolatry in their life? What should they do about it?

## III. Let's be responsible for our actions (I Corinthians 10:14-22)

"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (v.12). Some Corinthian believers felt too sure of their spiritual strength, and subtly, they started to depend on themselves and not upon God. Self-sufficiency leads to pride and takes us away from a close relationship with God on a daily basis.

Next, Paul addressed the subject of temptation. While the enemy intends to make God's project in our lives as Christians fail, temptation can be transformed into an exercise that strengthens the will and commitment of each one to God and to the path we have undertaken. Verse 13 says: "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."

This is an opportunity for victory and growth. Far from being a simple voluntary harangue: "Go ahead, everything will be fine." With great respect he tells them: "I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say" (v.15). Paul talked it over with them, encouraging them to make well thought-out decisions. Today, we say that we seek to develop a relationship with God based on convictions and considered decisions, not based on emotional situations.

In verses 12 through 15, Paul emphasized the same concept that he recommended to the church in Philippi: "...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12b-13).

We can add the words of the apostle in Romans 12:1: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."

#### **Questions:**

- In the midst of a temptation, what could be a way out?
- Name a fairly common excuse regarding temptation.

#### **IV. Let us identify ourselves with Christ (I Corinthians 10:23-11:1)**

At the end of the passage, Paul explained why it's important to consider the sensitivity of other siblings in the faith as well as our own personal convictions. He starts to elaborate the meaning of the celebration of communion and the symbolism of the elements of this sacrament.

He goes on to refer to the meaning of animal sacrifice in Judaism of the time, finally talking about the symbolic relationship of sacrifice to idols with pagans who participated in these cults. In verse 21 he declared: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons."

Participating at the table of the Lord expresses a personal commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, while voluntary participation in those pagan cults symbolized and expressed adherence to the deity they were worshipping. Commitment to the Lord implies a total consecration to Him, nothing else will do. Our relationship with Christ today should transcend all aspects of our lives. There is no area of human existence that isn't covered by the teachings of the Master. The Lord has instructed us to love God with all our hearts and every part of our being. (Luke 10:27).

Finally, Paul returned to the theme of loving care for those weaker in faith. He proposed a possible scene: if a Christian participated in a social meal with pagans, knowing that they were possibly eating meat offered to idols, he could be comfortable being clear in his thinking that neither the idols nor the sacrifices had any value in themselves. However, if someone mentioned that meat had been sacrificed, then he should refrain to bear a clear witness to his faith in Christ (1 Cor. 10:27-29).

What we do and what we refuse must be for the glory of God. Here the apostle briefly elaborated about the second part of the summary in Luke 10:27 alluded to above: "... and your neighbor as yourself." In 1 Corinthians 10:32, Paul's concern included the testimony to Jews and Gentiles as well as Christians.

He emphasized a clear testimony for the brothers and sisters and for those who were not yet Christians. It's good to remember that people are watching, and how they view Christianity will differ if they see our good testimony or if our lives give a bad one.

#### **Questions:**

- Why is it important to walk the talk?
- Name a place or circumstance where it's difficult to identify with Christ. Why?

#### **Conclusion**

It's everyone's task to avoid idolatry, grow in faith, be respectful of the sensibilities of the weakest, and ensure that everything we do openly or in private is done for the glory of God. Remembering that temptation is part of the school of life, let us exercise the muscles of faith in Jesus Christ.



# Controversial points around Worship

Samuel E. Pérez Rivera (Puerto Rico)

**Study passages:** I Corinthians 11:2-34

**Memory Verse:** “For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God” I Corinthians 11:12.

**Lesson Purpose:** To consider the place of women in our worship services and the correct way to celebrate the Lord’s supper.

## Introduction

The passage from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians contains a series of controversial and conflicting realities that occurred within the Christian community in Corinth. The first controversial issue (11:2-16) has to do with the participation of men and women in joint religious activities and practices in the church, specifically at times of prayer and prophecy (v.5).

However, the text addresses the issue of the men’s authority over the woman, and of the supposed hierarchical subjection of women by men.

The second controversial issue that Paul faced, recorded in verses 17-34, has to do with the Lord’s Supper. He received news about the scandalous way that the church members were treating the most disadvantaged who were trying to participate in the celebration of the community dinner that took place at the same time as the Holy Communion.

One of the first considerations that we must observe are the pagan exoteric cults prevalent during the first centuries of Christianity. An example of this was the cult of Dionysus, as well as worship of the goddesses Isis and Aphrodite (goddesses of sexual desire), where ‘sacred prostitution’ was practiced. In these cults, as in other many, the women, in moments of ecstasy, let down their hair while dancing, arousing the sexual attention of the opposite sexes.

### I. Moderation in worship (I Cor. 11:2-16)

According to I Corinthians 11:3-15, the apostle Paul alluded to a series of religious practices that should regulate the manner and form in which women and men were to act in Christian worship. This, of course, responded to a contextual reality of the time and to the practices of decorum and moderation carried out in Judaism and the different practices in the Greco-Roman world.

It’s important to remember that Paul didn’t intend to write a theological treatise, rather, he was dealing with a pastoral matter relating to worship in the context of the Corinthian community. It’s evident from the passage that both men and women performed key functions in worship: they represented the congregation before God in prayer, and addressed the Word of God to the congregation through prophecy (vv.4-5). The difficulty lay in the fact that some people had included in the worship celebration some practices related to personal grooming that were obviously questioned for being considered harmful to the Christian faith. Some men pretended to follow the Roman practice of covering their head during worship, which was seen by Paul as offensive, since it was actually a custom of the Greek oligarchy (Foulkes, Irene. Latin American Bible Commentary. Spain: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2003, p.845).

On the other hand, the women had been negligent regarding the social norm of wearing the head ‘cover.’ It’s very important to note that Paul wasn’t actually against women joining Christian worship; instead, he wanted to convince them to take care of their appearances as far as their personal grooming was concerned, so as not to be confused with women who participated in pagan cults.

#### A. The social significance of hair

Wearing your hair neatly tied up was considered a good custom, and this went for both the Jewish culture as well as in Greco-Roman society. On the other hand, loose hair meant something else: it was considered an erotic stimulation that only the husband should observe, and this in private. According to Jewish tradition, for a woman to let her hair down in public was a serious offense, comparable only to what would be considered today, going without clothes on (Foulkes, Irene. Pastoral Problems in Corinth: Exegetical-Pastoral Commentary on I Corinthians. Costa Rica: Editorial Sebila, 2011, p.295).

## B. The meaning of wearing the veil

Here there's a difference between the Jews and the Greco-Romans. In the Jewish custom, the woman had to have her head covered by a 'shawl' or scarf. But in the Greco-Roman world, this wasn't required, though women of lowly births in Greece wore the veil (R. MacMullen. *Women in Public. Italy: Editorial History*, 1980, pp.209-218). In ancient times, both among Jews as among the Greeks, women wore a 'scarf' on their head as a symbol of modesty and moderation. According to the book of Numbers 5:18, she would have to have her hair loosened if she was caught in adultery.

In 1 Corinthians 11:7-10, a whole argument is developed that we won't be able to cover in this lesson. However, we can summarize the whole argument in verse 11: "For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman." That is, neither can claim independence from the other, nor can a hierarchical relationship can be established between them.

The hermeneutical question of the section should be this: what is the value of verses 2 to 16 today for believers? We can recognize at least three options:

1. The woman is required to put something on her head (at least during worship), and this practice is interpreted as a sign of her subordination to the man.
2. The text doesn't transcend the cultural context of the first century; and therefore, has nothing to say to us today.
3. The text supports the leading role of women in worship but at the same time recognizes the importance that men and women keep the rules of decorum. As usual, this interpretation accompanies an ecclesiastical practice that excludes women from leadership, which contradicts the authorization of her as a leader that Paul presents in this text.

Can we really try today to establish rules of conduct in Christian worship based on how men and women looked in Paul's time? I don't think that this does justice to the passage. The apostle was answering a particular moment and reality in the Corinthian community. He wasn't setting a decalogue of universal rules regarding the matter at hand. Paul, as a man of his time, thought it prudent to give some guidelines to prevent both men and women of the church in Corinth from being identified or confused with people participating in pagan worship.

## Questions:

- What should we pay more attention to: the form (appearance) or the intention of the male and female worshippers?

- Do you consider that there should be a hierarchical subjection of women to men in Christian worship? Explain.
- What's your opinion of the participation of women in worship and pastoral ministry? Comment.

## II. The Lord's Supper: requirement of solidarity (1 Corinthians 11:17-34)

The second controversial issue faced by the apostle Paul is found in verses 17-34. Paul addressed several issues that had to deal with worship in the Corinthian church. As we have already seen, the first had to do with the personal grooming of the people who exercised some leadership in the services, both males as well as females (vv.2-16).

However in this second half of chapter 11, there's a conflict linked to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. According to the report that had come to the apostle (v.18), some people were acting in a selfish individualistic way, even getting drunk while others ended up hungry (vv.21-22).

### A. Denunciation: they look down on the poor during the Lord's Supper

Paul began this section with a strong and forceful disapproval: "I have no praise for you"

(v.17). The meetings, instead of serving to edify the brothers, "...did more harm than good" (v.17b). The division referred to consisted of a socioeconomic division, class distinction between rich and poor (vv.21-22). However, their attitude to each other made it clear who were the true believers. According to the ruling of verse 20, the practice of social inequality invalidated the Lord's Supper as a true sign of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

For the apostle, this attitude of contempt towards the most vulnerable opposed the essence of the Christian faith because it contradicted the example Jesus gave us. The Lord, according to the testimony of the gospels, went and had meals, an emblem of entire acceptance and mutual communion, with other people, regardless of their social status and morals. This proved to be scandalous to the legalists and Pharisees of His time (Mark 2:16; Luke 5:29-30, 15:2). We must remember as a church in the Holiness tradition that Wesley affirmed that the Lord's Supper is a 'means of grace.'

How easy it is to criticize and single out the Corinthians as insensitive and self-centered! However, we too could also be committing the same discrimination by ignoring the needs of others and those of our own disadvantaged siblings.

Traditionally in our evangelical circles, it has been more comfortable and convenient to interpret the text from the 'moral' and 'individual' perspective, evading our social responsibility as a community. The question we need to ask ourselves is this: what does it mean to take the Lord's Supper unworthily?

### **B. Paul delivered Jesus' tradition (vv. 23-26).**

Everything that follows in the passage is very important. The following is a synthesis of the message of the passage. The apostle Paul commented on what he had 'received' and 'been taught' about Jesus (v. 23a). He wanted to lay down his credentials so that followers of all ages, motivated out of selfishness, would not ignore this teaching.

The Lord Jesus commanded that we always remember what he did for us. To commemorate is not just about pronouncing words of praise; we're called to act following His example. In biblical language, 'to remember' is not limited to thinking, but it also includes actions (cf. Exodus 2:24, God "remembered his covenant," that is, he did something to help his people). Before dealing with the issue of injustice against the needy, we must make a brief comment on the way the church has interpreted and taught the meaning of the body and blood of Christ.

There are three more recognized interpretations. Firstly, Christ really becomes present to believers through the bread and wine, though the bread and wine aren't transformed in any way. A second interpretation of Jesus' sentence has been developed in Catholic theology, which uses the term 'transubstantiation' for their concept of what happens with the elements of the Eucharist in the Mass; they actually become the body and blood of Christ. In third place, the elements represent the body and blood of Christ metaphorically. The New Testament has many typical figures of Semitic images, for example, "I am the door..." "the good shepherd..." (John 10:9,11). The Lord's supper is a commemorative act: "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (v.26).

### **C. Exhortation: respect the Church or suffer judgment (vv.27-34)**

Verse 27 states: "So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord." The church shouldn't sin against the new body of Christ, the church. In verses 20-22, we have already seen the unfair treatment of the

poor and needy in the Lord's Supper celebrations. In the following verses (27-34), the apostle outlines some possible outcomes of the scandalous behavior previously observed. Paul tells them: "For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep" (29-30)..

### **D. Warning: self-judgment and judgment (vv.31-32)**

The idea of this warning is that Christians need to examine themselves, reflecting on whether or not they are contributing to the church, the true body of Christ, as a caring and inclusive community. The Lord's Supper isn't just for the 'holiest' of the church, but represents an opportunity for everyone to celebrate the free grace of God, incarnated in Jesus and displayed in His sacrifice and death.

The two sections of the passage covered in the lesson provide us with the opportunity to reflect in terms of how we handle these issues in our congregations today. *Ask: How much emphasis do we put on what people wear or behave to include them in worship? What do we value more: the 'form' or the 'intention' of the worshipers? How can we achieve a balance between the form and the intention? What are the controversies that arise today? Can we learn from how Paul dealt with them in Corinth?*

*In our services, do we treat the needy the same as we do those who may be better off? How often do we celebrate the Lord's supper? Do we do it understanding the true significance? What should be the emphasis in the celebration? What does it mean to take the Supper unworthily? In this lesson, we have tried to adopt a renewed understanding of the two controversial arguments that Paul faced as seen in I Corinthians 11:2-16 and 17-34.*

### **Questions:**

- How does the way we have approached the issue of the Supper conflict allow you to consider other approaches when discussing the passage?
- Mention who may be discriminated against today at the Supper in your context.

### **Conclusion**

We must discern and apply biblical principles that the study passage teaches us; we shouldn't undervalue women or treat the poor badly in our churches.



# Spiritual Gifts in the Church

Herbert Barco (Peru)

**Study passages:** I Corinthians 12, 14

**Memory Verse:** “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord” I Corinthians 12:4-5.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that God gives gifts to every believer so that we can all fulfill our function in the body of Christ.

## Introduction

The apostle Paul is one of the greatest exponents of spiritual gifts in the New Testament. His development of the theme of spiritual gifts within ecclesiology is a major contribution, both to Christian thinking and organization, through the centuries to the present day. There's no person in the church without spiritual gifts. They have an internal, spiritual and invisible dimension that is externalized in the life of Christians as they use their gifts in ministry.

Here Paul is trying to answer a problem that was stirring up in the Corinthian church where more attention was being given to the gift of tongues, and where there were some unacceptable attitudes before God and the assembly of Christians which were affecting the testimony of the church in the Corinthian community.

### I. The diversity of gifts (I Cor.12:1-11)

The first eleven verses of chapter 12 tell us of the diversity of gifts. At the beginning of verses 4, 5 and 6, the apostle Paul uses the Greek term Dieresis which can be translated as 'variety' and 'diversity' (Vine, W. F. Vine's Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament Words, USA: Editorial Caribe, 1999, p.858). “A Spiritual Gift is a special divine empowerment bestowed on each believer by the Holy Spirit to accomplish a given ministry God's way according to His grace and discernment to be used within the context of the Body of Christ” (<https://mintools.com/spiritual-gifts-definition.htm>).

Paul was responding to the needs of the Corinthian church. In other Pauline letters, other varieties of

spiritual gifts are mentioned. Let's look at the list of gifts in the study passage:

1. “A message of wisdom” (v.8a). This gift offers two dimensions of wisdom: a supernatural one to discern the affairs of God, and natural one to understand human affairs. It's a gift that preachers use.
2. “A message of knowledge” (v.8b). This gift is used by Christian teachers in the church to share knowledge from Scripture with fellow believers.
3. “Faith” (v.9a). Being moved to have great faith in God, through the impulse of the Holy Spirit. God uses this gift to originate amazing miracles. All Christian can use this gift.
4. “Gifts of Healing” (v.9b). They are the capacities that the Spirit gives to some Christians to heal physical, psychosomatic diseases and ailments of the soul using different healing methods, especially that of discernment of spirits.
5. “Miraculous powers” (v.10a). The Holy Spirit gives certain Christians extraordinary supernatural power to perform miracles of healing and other miracles.
6. “Prophecy” (v.10b). Dr. Purkiser, Eminent Theologian of our denomination, writes: “But in the New Testament, prophesying means more than prediction. Paul defines it in I Corinthians 14:3 as “Speak to men for edification, exhortation and consolation.” Rather than predicting, prophesying means sharing the Word of God with those who need to hear it. It comes from the Greek word “profeteia,” from pro (forward) and femi (to speak).

In the time of the Apostle, it was used to refer to the one who proclaimed a message or interpreted the oracles (messages generally very ambiguous) of the gods. When Christians used it, it meant messages from the only true God” (W. T. Purkiser, *The gifts of the Spirit*. USA: CNP, 1979, p.10).

7. “Distinguishing between spirits,” (v.10c). It’s the gift of the Holy Spirit that some Christians have, enabling them to discern between what comes from the Spirit of God, evil spirits or human spirits. It’s important to distinguish between what comes from the ‘evil one’ and from our own human spiritual problems.
8. “Speaking in different kinds of tongues” (v.10d). This represents the ability given to some by the Holy Spirit to speak languages learned and unlearned with the purpose of building up the church.
9. “Interpretation of tongues” (v.10e). This is the ability given by the Holy Spirit to some Christians to interpret what is spoken in other languages.

In this list, Paul is presenting a variety of gifts for our biblical and theological understanding so that Christians in all ages can comprehend the need for discipleship and service in the life of the church. The gifts are distributed by the Holy Spirit as He wants. We are all given different gifts to build up the body of Christ. Each person has to answer before God for their work. Service is valued by the Lord, so we shouldn’t think that these gifts are in any way ours or that we can use them for personal gain.

### Questions:

- What are the two dangers for the Christian in dishonest use of spiritual gifts?
  - a. We make them our own and make personal gains.
  - b. We don’t use them and despise them.
  - c. None of the previous.
- From the list of spiritual gifts presented in this lesson, which ones are seen in this local church? Comment.

## II. The mutual need for gifts (1 Cor. 12:12-26)

Next, the apostle Paul used the analogy of the body to explain the dynamics of church life and spiritual gifts. A church that doesn’t use its spiritual gifts is like a dead body, whereas when God’s gifts are being used, it’s a living organism. But just as each part depends on the rest of the organs in our bodies, spiritual gifts supplement each other in the body of Christ. The apostle explains it clearly:

1. The unity of the church is a vital unity (v.12). In this verse, we find the theology of this analogy: the body of Christ is like the human body. It has many members, but it’s only one body. So, in Christ, the spiritual gifts make this unity possible in the church, which is Christ’s body. This affirmation invites us to focus now on the call and mandate that the church has been given (Matthew 28:16-20).
2. Common experiences shared by the church (v.13). The work of the Holy Spirit is what unites Christians as one body, one church. However, the apostle proceeded to explain two experiences that the church shares:
  - Baptism (v.13a). In the perspective of the apostle, all believers have been baptized by the Holy Spirit into one body. This doesn’t admit the distinctions which occurred in the church in Corinth. While there were religious or rational differences between Jews and Gentiles, and socioeconomic differences between slaves and the free, the Holy Spirit makes it possible for the church to transcend all distinctions, in unity.
  - The fellowship of the Spirit (v.13b). This is another analogy to say that all Christians have received the same Spirit. Here the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in each Christian is emphasized showing that this is what unites us.
3. The importance of diversity (vv.14-26). Paul expresses the following logic to the church in Corinth:
  - All members of the body are important (vv.14-26).



- The body doesn't have just one member, but many. (v.14).
- No member should feel that he has no value (vv.15-19). No member should think that not having certain gifts makes them insignificant. If they all had the same gift, there would be no body. If they all had the same gift, the other gifts would be lacking. God distributes the gifts in the body as He wants, not according to human merit. There will be no body without a diversity of gifts.
- No member of the body should act as if he didn't need the others (vv.20-26). Though the members are many, they all form one body. No one should feel that they don't need all the other members.

### Questions:

- What do we need spiritual gifts for?
  - a. To evangelize the lost.
  - b. To implement the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ.
  - c. To do social work in the community.
- What capacities do you use to strengthen the unity of the body of Christ in your local church? Why?

### III. Specific gifts (1 Corinthians 12:27-31)

In this section, we find a theological truth from our Arminian-Wesleyan heritage: The church is united, but diversified. Namely, Christians in the church don't choose their spiritual gifts. It's God who, in His goodness and mercy, grants specific gifts to develop ministries, not chosen by the person, but given by the Lord. Let's see each of them in their missional role:

For the establishment and building of churches (v.28):

- 1. Apostles.** It's God's call to preach the risen Christ as the first fruit of the Gospel to every person without God, and start new congregations of believers in any part of the planet.
- 2. Prophets.** People called locally to build up the churches. "The noun Prophetes, according to

the Vine Dictionary, is placed after the 'apostles' because they aren't the prophets of Israel mentioned before, but the 'gifts' of the ascended Lord (cf. Acts 13:1; Eph. 4:8,11). The purpose of the ministry of these prophets is to edify, comfort, and encourage believers (1 Corinthians 14:3), while their effect on unbelievers is to show that the secrets of the heart of man are known to God, convincing of sin, and calling them to worship" (1 Corinthians 14:24-25) (Vine, W. E. Dictionary Vine's Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament Words, USA: Editorial Caribe, 1999, p.1427).

- 3. Teachers.** Faculty in which certain Christians give their time to the instruction of the Word of God within congregations.
- 4. Those who perform miracles.** A spiritual faculty when certain Christians perform supernatural works through the power of the Holy Spirit for the fulfillment of the mission of Christ.
- 5. Gifts of healing.** A spiritual capacity in certain Christians to meet the physical needs of people according to the will of God.
- 6. Those who help.** This is the spiritual capacity given to some Christians to cover the needs and problems of the most needy, for the life and action of the congregations (v.28):
- 7. Guidance.** Those who have the spiritual aptitude for leadership, direction and government and counselling in the church communities
- 8. Those who have the gift of tongues.** In the first part of this lesson, the apostle referred to ecstatic tongues or unknown tongues, which were favored by the Corinthian church. However, they must be followed by the gift of interpretation of tongues to make their use in the church valid. It appears that the congregation of Corinth was putting too much attention on this gift.

### Questions:

- What is your gift or gifts?
- How are you using it in your service to God and the church?

## **IV. The gift of tongues and prophecy (I Corinthians 14:1-40)**

### **A. Rules for these gifts**

We advance to chapter 14 for the specific Pauline teaching in these forty verses. The Corinthians were to seek the gift of prophecy instead of the gift of tongues, because prophecy is better for building up the church (vv.1-25). Prophecy, articulated as local preaching in the Pauline perspective, is one of the greatest gifts, but it's finite in nature, that is, it will come to an end (13:8a). Speaking in tongues will also end (13:8b).

However, the Corinthian church favored the gift of tongues, but were misusing it selfishly, boasting of their abilities. This isn't conducive to church growth; meanwhile, the gift of prophecy would help the church to grow and mature. Put another way, speaking in tongues isn't an uplifting gift to the church while it's being misused, while prophecy is the pronouncement of God's Word. Paul gave concrete and practical instructions regarding the exercise of the gifts (14:26-40).

#### **1. Rules for the exercise of the gift of tongues (vv.27-28):**

- No more than two or three people should speak.
- They must speak in turn.
- They must be interpreted.

#### **2. Rules for the exercise of the gift of prophecy (vv.29-33a):**

- No more than two or three people should speak.
- The others must evaluate.
- They must prophesy in turn.

### **B. Conclusion of the Corinthian affair (vv.36-40)**

The following statements can be distinguished in Paul's apostolic intervention:

1. Paul stressed the authority of his teaching. If the Corinthians rejected Paul's teaching, they would be acting from pride, believing they were the only ones who received God's message. A test of the true prophet or spiritual person

is that they recognize that what Paul wrote is commanded of the Lord. He who doesn't recognize that isn't recognized by God.

Paul summed up this chapter in a few words. The church must give high priority to prophecy, without prohibiting the speaking in tongues. In light of this verse, a Christian should desire the gift of prophecy. Paul said: "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Corinthians 14:39-40).

### **Questions:**

- Do you agree with the following statement: "The gift of choice in the Corinthian church was the gift of tongues used selfishly and boastfully"? Why or why not?

### **Conclusion**

This lesson teaches us that Christians don't deliberately choose their spiritual gifts because the Holy Spirit grants gifts according to His will. When we discover our gift, we should rejoice that we can use it to minister for God to the church and the wider community.

# Perfect Love

Hilda E. Navarro (Mexico)

**Study passages:** 1 Corinthians 13

**Memory Verse:** “Love never fails...” 1 Corinthians 13:8a.

**Lesson Purpose:** To reflect on the biblical concept of God’s perfect love (agape) for us, as an example for us to apply to our daily lives.

## Introduction

In the book of John, we read about when Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. Peter said “yes.” Some translations aren’t faithful to the original meaning of the words for ‘love’ that Jesus and Peter used. The Living Bible Translation gives the true expression of their conversation: “After breakfast Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others?’ ‘Yes,’ Peter replied, ‘you know I am your friend.’ ‘Then feed my lambs,’ Jesus told him” (John 21:15). There’s a big difference between ‘love’ and ‘friendship,’ Jesus used the Greek verb agape, while Peter answered with philo, from the verb philein (Interlinear Bible of New Testament. Retrieved on 30.10.2020 from <https://www.logosklogos.com/interlinear/NT>).

The first expresses a perfect, unconditional love; the second is more of a brotherly affection or love. Perfect love is “the experienced reality of a relationship with God in which the believer loves God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and their neighbor as himself,” while brotherly love is “the natural and healthy affection among friends” (Taylor, Richard. Beacon Theological Dictionary, USA: CNP, 1984, p.45). There are two more Greek words used to express ‘love’ in the New Testament: - storge, which is empathy or bonding, and eros, which is romantic love.

Unfortunately, our everyday language doesn’t make a difference between one love and another. In fact, we can ‘love’ a person, a pair of shoes or our pet. This makes it a bit confusing to understand what the Bible means when it speaks of perfect love.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul was emphatic, and in chapter 13, every time he used

the word ‘love’, he was talking about agape love, an unconditional and perfect love.

## I. The superiority of love (1 Cor. 13:1-3)

Previously in chapter 12, Paul spoke of the spiritual gifts, and he used the image of a body that needs its different members to function, and how each of them has a specific task to carry out. In the same way, in the church, the gifts are complementary and all are necessary. In 1 Corinthians 12:31, the apostle told his readers to seek out the best gifts and at the same time, he showed them a still more excellent way.

Now in the 13th chapter, he told the Corinthians that not one of the gifts mentioned previously was more important than love. Throughout the text, when he refers to love, he uses the word agape. Paul wanted to make the Corinthians see that spiritual gifts without perfect love have no value. He made a list of gifts that Christians can receive and exercise for the edification of the church, but he was clear in stating that gifts like tongues, prophecy and special knowledge, without perfect love (agape), were useless (v.1-3).

Paul uses the conditional tense - if it was possible for him to speak in tongues, prophesy or have all knowledge, there would be no benefit unless it came from true love. When done for the wrong reasons, speaking in tongues would be like “a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal (v.1). He said that even if he could “fathom all mysteries and all knowledge,” without love, it would be worthless. In verses 2 and 3, Paul emphasized that love must be greater even than faith and compassion. Charitable works, visiting the sick and prisoners, bringing food to the needy, and caring for the poor and the helpless are good things to do, but without love, they might lead to pride.

In the Corinthian church, there were members who, as well as other characteristics, “competed with each other for spiritual prestige” (Raymond Brown, J. Fitzmayer, and R. Murphy. *New Saint Jerome Biblical Commentary, New Testament*. Spain: Divine Word, 1972, p.315). In the first chapter, we see that they even formed groups. Some claimed to be from Paul, others from Apollos, others from Cephas, or even of Christ (v.12). They didn’t understand that they were all one. It was necessary to put an end to this division and competition. Paul insisted that if there was something great, something that spiritually would surpass everything, it was love.

It was also important to make them see that no gift was for private use, and that people could do charitable deeds without love. Currently, there are non-governmental organizations that promote aid for others, who fight for justice, who give financial support to low-income families, or medical care free of charge for those who cannot pay. What is the difference between those actions and what we do as Christians? For Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, it must be love; and this agape love would have to fill and mold the person. And as a result of this, it would flow naturally as a demonstration of love in action. The Message Translation (MSG) has a good phrase at the end of verse three: “So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love.”

### Questions:

- According to verses 1-3, what is love superior to?
- Do you consider that the church could end up carrying out activities that aren’t motivated by love? Comment.

## II. What is perfect love? (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

One way to conceptualize love was to describe it. In this second section, in verses 4 to 7 of chapter 13, Paul explained to the Corinthians what the perfect love or agape is in terms they could understand. Every characteristic that the apostle mentions was known to the Corinthians as well as to us. The New Living Translation (NLT) translates verse 4 as: “love is patient and kind...” The Message (MSG) “love never gives up”. Only perfect love is able to endure everything, to show itself patient and wait. No other kind of love gives completely without expectation of retribution.

This love, Paul said, “does nothing wrong” (v.5). The scope of this includes what we say and what we do. It’s a love that transforms the minds and hearts of people so that there’s congruence between what we say we are, and what we really are. Moreover, this love doesn’t feel envy, doesn’t presume, isn’t rude, doesn’t offend. It doesn’t keep grudges or remind others of their past offenses (v.4-6). This love doesn’t make a list of the faults of others in order to bring them up years later. It leaves everything in the past and no longer remember it.

Even when hurt, this love isn’t happy when evil happens to others (v.6). It does only what is good, and rejoices when the truth triumphs. Verse 7 in The New Living Translation (NLT) says: “If you love someone, you will be loyal to him no matter what the cost. You will always believe in him, always expect the best of him, and always stand your ground in defending him.” Who doesn’t want to be loved with that kind of love? Sometimes young couples don’t make it to the marriage ceremony because they give up. Some married couples who said they loved each other gave up in midst of the first arguments and storms. Perfect love isn’t defeated but it stands firm.

It’s clear that Paul wasn’t speaking of a love that occurs between friends (philein), or spouses (eros). This love that the apostle is showing the Corinthians was much larger. We see this love in the well-known verse in John: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Only the Father was able to love us in such a way that he sent His son to deliver us. That’s perfect love. We weren’t worthy of His love because we sinned, walking away from God.

He stood firm and constant, seeking us to reconcile us with Himself. All the adjectives mentioned in Paul’s list are directly related to God’s love for us. He’s patient to forgive us (2 Peter 3:9), even when people don’t want to know of Him.

The Father’s love welcomes us with open arms, even after sinning against Him (Luke 15:11-32). When others would be envious or jealous, perfect love strips itself and surrenders. Instead of getting puffed up, love builds (1 Corinthians 8:1b). It doesn’t subtract, it always adds. When we read Paul’s description of love, we can only thank God for loving us in such a way, and ask him to teach us to love like this.

## Questions:

- What characteristics of perfect love caught your attention the most and why?
- How would you describe agape love to non-believers?

### III. Love will never end (1 Cor. 13:8-13)

The third and final section of chapter 13 speaks of the eternal existence of love. Paul began the chapter by mentioning the gifts of tongues, of prophecy and knowledge (vv.1-2). In the final part, he emphasized that all of this will one day come to an end (v.8). The gifts that were so valued by the Corinthians were actually ephemeral, temporary. However, "love never fails" (v.8). God is love (1 John 4:8); love is, then, eternal.

Our western society, accustomed to using disposable articles, has trouble understanding the depth of the eternal. Our finite and temporary mind doesn't help either. In verses 8, 10, and 11, Paul used a Greek term (katargeon) which translated means 'discard', 'stop being', 'cease', 'pass' (Strong's Greek Lexicon on September 30, 2020). Speaking in tongues will stop, prophecies will cease, knowledge and the sciences will be discarded. Love, on the other hand, will remain.

In the very next verse (v.9), Paul told the Corinthians that what they knew and prophesied was incomplete; they knew in part and prophesied in part. "But when completeness comes, what is in part disappears" (v.10). He didn't clarify if what was in part referred to his ability to know and prophesy. Some scholars are inclined to think that he referred to the Second Coming of Christ, when the spiritual gifts they were partially exercising will cease and then be exchanged for a state of completeness or perfection. In other words, what the Corinthians knew was only something very small of what they were going to know when the Day of the Lord came.

In the same way, Paul compared the traits of a child and an adult (v.11). A child has a distinctive way of speaking, of cognitively processing things and making judgements. In this way, a child isn't expected to act like a mature adult. Paul told the Corinthians that when he grew up, he left childish things. He continued his argument using the example of a mirror (v.12). According to Kistemaker, mirrors in Paul's day were pieces of polished metal, and when people saw themselves in the reflection, they had a distorted image of themselves. The Corinthians knew

well what Paul was describing to them. Kistemaker adds that the city was known for its mirrors. So, a mirror gave a dark distorted vision (Kistemaker, S. Commentary on the New Testament. Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. USA: Challenge Books, 1998, p.409). But there will come a day, Paul said, when "we will see face to face" (v.12). What they knew at that time was a blurred vision of things, but the time will come when everything will be clear.

To conclude, Paul returned to the theme of love; he told the Corinthians that there were three things that remained forever: faith, hope and love. But the most important was love (v.13). These three virtues are mentioned together several times in the Bible. We see them in Romans 5:2-5; Galatians 5:5-6; Colossians 1:4-5; Hebrews 10:22-24; among others. The question that arises is: why did Paul say that love was greater? Throughout 1 Corinthians 13, he took pains to explain what love was and its pre-eminence over everything mentioned.

In Galatians 5:22, we're told of the fruit of the Spirit, and love is the first to be mentioned. The apostle Peter also recommended in one of his letters that above all else we should have love (1 Peter 4:8). In a way, faith and hope are subordinated to love, but not to any type of love, but to agape love.

## Questions:

- What relevance does it have for the Christian that agape love never ceases to be?
- Do you agree with Paul that love is greater than faith and hope? Why?

## Conclusion

Paul felt that it was important for the Corinthians to understand perfect love, the love that comes from God; it was the highest thing they could aspire to. No spiritual gift is greater than love; in fact, spiritual gifts without love are worthless. God's love being poured into our hearts is capable of transforming people's lives, both in Corinth yesterday, and in our world today.



# The importance of Jesus' resurrection

Ela González de Enriquez (Guatemala)

**Study passages:** I Corinthians 15:1-28,51-58

**Memory Verse:** "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" I Corinthians 15:13-14.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the spiritual meaning of the resurrection of Christ for every believer.

## Introduction

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus is one of the memorable and most momentous events of history; it's the foundation of the gospel and what marks our Christian faith. Jesus himself announced His resurrection in the gospels. His resurrection is confirmed in the gospels, in the Acts of the Apostles, and in the epistles of the New Testament. There is some extrabiblical evidence also. This event was prophesied, and its fulfillment isn't a fable but the actual manifestation of God's promise for the salvation of mankind.

### I. The resurrection is a proven fact (I Cor. 15:4-8, 12, 20)

#### A. Prophecy and promise

The prophets of old spoke on behalf of God to the people, declaring His divine will and purpose. This often included references to the future as predictions. A promise, on the other hand, is an oral or written agreement to do or not to do something. The promises of the Lord are like prophecy, where God states that a certain event will happen. However, there's a difference. The promises are personal undertakings and can be seen as covenants or contracts. So, 'prophecy' and 'promise' are two different terms that are found in the Bible. The first refers to a supernatural prediction by divine inspiration, and the second to a voluntary offer to do something.

#### B. Prophecies about Jesus' resurrection

We believe that the resurrection is the event in which Jesus Christ came back to life after He had been crucified by the Roman soldiers. For there to have been a resurrection, there had to have been a death first. The Old Testament prophets foretold Jesus' birth. In Isaiah 9:6 we read: "For to us a child is born,

to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

In several of the Psalms of King David, there seem to be prophecies regarding Christ's suffering on the cross at Calvary and His death: "My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment. (Psalm 22:15-18).

The prophet Isaiah wrote: "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities" (Isaiah 53:10-11).

We can also find the following verses that speak of resurrection in the Old Testament. In Hosea 6:2, we find the following: "After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence." Likewise, Job 19:25 says: "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth." Also Psalm 16:9-10 says: "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay."

In the New Testament, Jesus himself, using figurative language, spoke about His resurrection with the disciples and Jewish leaders, clarifying that when he was talking about the temple, he was referring to His body (John 2:8-22).

In Matthew 12:40 we read this statement by Jesus: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

The Apostle Paul, in Romans 6:9 wrote, "For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him." When the women who travelled with Jesus went to the tomb to anoint him, an angel spoke to them confirming that the one they were looking for had risen (Matthew 28:5-6).

The apostle Paul dedicated several passages to speak about Jesus' resurrection, but it was in 1 Corinthians 15 where he wrote to the Corinthians more on this subject to reaffirm what he had previously taught them. We read in verse 4: "...He was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

The disciples witnessed the resurrection as Jesus appeared to them on several occasions. Five hundred other followers saw the risen Christ, and even Paul saw Him on the Road to Damascus. (vv.5-8). The preaching of the apostles emphasized the resurrection of Christ, the first to be raised, as verses 12 and 20 affirm. The Scriptures attest to the resurrection of our Lord Jesus.

### C. Other documents and writings

There aren't many documents outside the Bible that narrate the resurrection or comment on it. Flavius Josephus wrote about the life of Jesus: "During this time, there was a wise man named Jesus. His conduct was good and he was considered virtuous. A lots of Jews and people of other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to crucifixion and death. Those who became his disciples didn't abandon him. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive" (Flavius Josephus. 90 AD. Antiquities XVIII. 3.3).

In all four gospels, we read about the women who found the tomb empty. Jesus himself told them to tell the good news to the disciples. In Stagg's words: "While others found women as unqualified or authorized to teach, all four Gospels show that the risen Christ commissioned the women to announce the resurrection, the foundation of Christianity, to the men, among them Peter and the other apostles," (Stagg, Evelyn; Stagg, F. Woman in the World of Jesus. USA: Westminster Press, 1978, pp.144-150).

### Questions:

- According to 1 Corinthians 15:5-8, to whom did the risen Jesus appear?
- Do you consider the resurrection important in our life of faith? Why?

## II. The basis of our faith (1 Cor. 15:15-17)

Those who believe in Jesus Christ and follow him are called Christians. They accept what is in the Scriptures about the life of the Son of God, his birth, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension to heaven, which is the basis of faith Christian. The Word of God affirms in 1 Corinthians 15:15-17 that God raised Christ from the dead, and that if Christ had not been resurrected, our faith as Christians would have no value. Without Jesus' resurrection, we would still be slaves to sin. As we've seen, the prophets received the revelation that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, would come to the world to offer the hope of salvation through His death and His mighty resurrection.

In 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, the Apostle Paul emphasized the appearance of the risen Lord, not only to the disciples, but to more than five hundred people. What's more, he recounted his experience of having a personal encounter with the Master, after all the others. Christian Faith, then, has a solid foundation: the secure knowledge that Christ was sent to earth for the purpose of saving humanity.

Luke, the doctor companion of Paul, narrated the appearance of the risen Jesus to His chosen ones, where He continued to speak to them about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3-8). Paul knew about the Old Testament prophecies of the resurrection of the Messiah (Psalm 16:8-10; Isaiah 53:5-12 and Hosea 6:2). He told the Corinthians that if Christ had not risen from the dead, preaching would be in vain and faith invalid. In 1 Corinthians 15:20, the apostle emphasized that Christ "has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" and that His resurrection is the foundation of our faith as Christians.

### Questions:

- What is for you the foundation of the Christian faith?
- How do you interpret 1 Corinthians 15:16-17 in your life today?

### III. God's plan to save the humanity

#### A. Mankind was separated from God

Since we human beings disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, a rift between us and God was formed. Isaiah 59:2 says, "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." As Paul says in Romans: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). But God, in Christ, did what was necessary to free us from sin and give us the precious gift of salvation.

#### B. God's love and mercy

Out of love and mercy for His creation, God values us and tells us that He will keep His promise not to end the human species, although at one time he regretted having created mankind, and had sorrow in his heart to the point of wanting to exterminate mankind from the face of the earth. This punishment wasn't just for people but also for the animals (Genesis 6:6-7). God is saddened by human sin, but His mercy is great, and He values the human species more than the animals. Jesus said in Matthew 6:26: "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"

Because God values humanity, His plan wasn't to destroy us but to save us because He loves us. Romans 5:8 affirms this, because even though we all have sinned, God offered Christ as the Paschal Lamb who bore the sin of the whole world. It's embodied in the Old Testament as a prophecy and a promise, as we can see in Jeremiah 33:8. The matchless love of God is forever, it never ends. Psalm 136:26 says: "Give thanks to the God of heaven. His love endures forever." We each have to decide if we want to accept or reject the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. God offers salvation, and we must decide to accept it or not, although the Father's desire is that all people should be saved (2 Peter 3:9).

#### Questions:

- What caused the sadness in God's heart (Genesis 6:6-7)?
- Why was the plan of salvation necessary?

### IV. If Jesus rose from the dead then His followers too will be resurrected (1 Cor. 15:1-2, 51-58)

The plan of salvation for humanity doesn't end with the death of Jesus on the cross. He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, and took His place on His throne, at the right hand of the Father. Jesus' resurrection is an authentic expression of His deity. Jesus' promise is that where he is, there his followers will be also. He expressed it to his disciples in John 14:3: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

When Jesus expressed that promise, it was because he will return for his disciples. But not only for the twelve who walked with Him then, but for all believers for whom He prayed in John 17:20. The apostle Paul underscored this teaching for the church in Corinth, "...Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3b-4).

In verses 32 and 33 of this chapter 15, the apostle Paul reminded the congregation that many were preaching that there was no resurrection, and he urged them not to listen to them or have conversations with them because that would make them fall into deception. In the resurrection of humanity, those who have died before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will be transformed: the physical body, whose flesh has become corrupted, "the animal body", will be transformed into a "spiritual body". As it says in 1 Corinthians 15:50, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable."

And in verse 52, it says that the dead will be raised incorruptible and transformed. In 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17, we read that Jesus died and rose again, and that those believers who have died before His second coming will rise again. Those who are physically alive when He comes back will join them and we'll be transformed and incorruptible and we'll be with the Lord forever and ever.

#### Questions:

- How do you interpret 1 Corinthians 15:50?
- How does the resurrection hope motivate us to live?

#### Conclusion

Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and is sitting at the right hand of the Father, having overcome death. We humans cannot escape death. Jesus too had to die but he rose from the dead in a glorious way. God wants everyone to repent, receive salvation and be sure of a glorious future resurrection, and future eternal life in God's presence.





# Challenges and blessings in Christian ministry

Joel Castro (Spain)

**Study passages:** 2 Corinthians 1:3-24, 2

**Memory Verse:** “But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.” 2 Corinthians 2:14.

**Lesson Purpose:** To know how to face each challenge with wisdom to obtain spiritual victory.

## Introduction

The second letter to the Corinthians was written in circumstances somewhat complicated for the apostle Paul. There were Christians who, in response to the first letter, wanted to minimize the apostle's calling and ministry. From this letter, we know that Paul was even reduced to tears by this church (2 Corinthians 2:4). But there was a wonderful collaborator who helped by interceding between the apostle and the Corinthians. That trusted man was Titus.

Surprisingly, the book of Acts doesn't name him in the missionary trips that the apostle had, nevertheless, of the thirteen times he is named in the New Testament, eight times we find his name in this second epistle of Paul to the Corinthians. This indicates the great role that Titus had in interceding in the spiritual development of the Corinthian church.

New Testament scholars believe that in this book, there are fragments of several epistles, in which in each fragment the apostle shows concern for several issues and gives answers to many topics. In this lesson, we'll study the first two chapters of 2 Corinthians where the love and authority given by God to Paul for the church is manifested. Service to God has many fronts, and what better way to see it than through the lens of the apostle Paul.

## I. Enduring tribulations (2 Corinthians 1:3-11)

The apostle Paul was a person who gave himself completely to the work of God, and that cost him a lot of afflictions and hardships on more than one occasion, not only physically, but in all the areas

involved in ministry. The book of Acts tells us about many things Paul had to suffer (Acts 13:50, 14:19, 18:12). But what he described in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 is special because he taught the church that afflictions, besides being part of the call and obedience to Christ, have divine purposes of spiritual growth. Ask: *what can we learn from troubles and afflictions?*

### A. Tribulations bring comfort (vv.3-7)

There is no better way to explain tribulations than through personal experience, and that's what Paul was communicating to the Corinthians. In none of his writing do we find the apostle complaining when he referred to suffering; rather, he conveyed a positive spirit through those adversities. In these verses (3 through 7), Paul spoke of his afflictions, and he used several terms to refer to suffering, like “troubles,” sharing in “the sufferings of Christ,” and “distress.” However, the word “comfort” is repeated 9 times in these verses. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort” (v.3). God keeps His promises of care.

This passage reminds us about when Job had a series of calamities, but as deep as his suffering were, “he fell to the ground and worshipped” (Job 1:20) saying: “... The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised” (Job 1:21). The apostle did the same; in the midst of his afflictions, he blessed God (2 Corinthians 1:3) and glorified Him because God brings mercy and consolation. As our father, he is the source of compassion, and as God, He is the source of the deepest consolation.

“The story goes that one day an evangelical pastor died in Scotland. The next day his wife woke up extremely distressed. She stayed in a corner of her house with her head in her hands. When her youngest son approached her he asked: “Mom, has God died?” At that moment, a celestial radiance illuminated her countenance. She turned to him and replied: “No my son, God has not died, but He lives and has said: ‘Do not fear because I am with you. Do not be dismayed for I am your God, I will strive for you, I will always help you, I will always uphold you with my right hand of my justice’” (Limardo, Miguel A. Open Windows. Spain: CNP, 1972, p.212).

That’s right, when we serve Christ sake, in the saddest experience or affliction, Christ’s consolation abounds (2 Corinthians 1:5). It’s clear that before all affliction or anguish in the Christian life, God accompanies us with his great consolation. But if there’s no suffering, there will be no consolation.

### **B. Tribulations bring empathy**

This is another purpose of troubles: they teach us empathy. Paul said about God, “who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (v.4). The sufferings, once overcome, enable us to help others when they pass through adversity.

I remember a sister who came to church looking for comfort because her daughter had made the decision to be independent, running away from her home. This affected her so much, so we helped her in prayer, counseling and companionship. She thanked God that she was able to overcome it after a few months. After a while, she realized that through her previous fight and victory, she had been trained to comfort other mothers passing through the same problem, giving them the same encouragement she had received from God.

Paul saw in his afflictions God’s special preparation. He didn’t see it as a hindrance or an occasion to complain, or that God had abandoned him. Notice these words: “who comforts us...so that we may... comfort those who are in any tribulation... But if we are troubled, it’s for your consolation...” (vv.4,6). For Paul, afflictions are part of the Christian life, so, he was a companion with the Corinthians both in afflictions and encouragements (v.7).

The apostle John spoke of the Holy Spirit as the paraklete, that is, “the Comforter.” So, we who have the Spirit have the Comforter who comforts and helps us encourage others (John 14:16). The comfort we receive from God isn’t only for our benefit, but it prepares us so that we’ll be able to bring comfort and salvation to anyone who needs it (v.6). Tribulations allow us to have joy because we have received comfort and strength from God, and in that way, we’ll also help those who are going through difficult circumstances now, or will go through them in the future.

### **C. Troubles increase our faith in God (vv.8-11)**

Another thing we learn from troubles and trials is that they motivate us to trust in God. In verses 8 to 10, Paul recounted one of his experiences in which he lost all hope of living. However, according to verse 9, in the midst of this situation, he was motivated to put his total trust in God alone, and God delivered him from “a deadly peril” (v.10). As children of God, our faith must be put in Him, even though sometimes, God will allow troubles and sufferings to come that even threaten our lives. We must trust His wisdom. Faith is the thermometer of how much we depend on God.

Furthermore, according to verse 11, Paul assumed that the Corinthians were praying for him to have God’s favor so that he would continue to be a blessing to others. How important it is to pray for pastors and missionaries! Often missionaries find themselves in a context of criticism, harshness, persecution and even death. We must pray for our leaders. Troubles and afflictions motivate Christians to seek the will of God in prayer. This will strengthen our faith.

### **Questions:**

- Have you had an adverse experience where you have been able to receive God’s comfort? Share a brief testimony.
- Read Job 1:20-21 and 2 Corinthians 1:3. How are the reactions of Job and the apostle Paul similar?

## II. Explaining the missed pastoral visit (2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4)

The apostle Paul was one of those people who planned his trips, and although he already had plans to pass twice through Corinth, once on his way to Macedonia and then on the return journey back to Judea (1:16), he thought it over and noted that there were impediments that prevented his visit.

Paul had the difficult task of making this church understand that he was unable to make his visit. Verse 17 says, according to the Living Bible (TLB) “Then why, you may be asking, did I change my plan? Hadn’t I really made up my mind yet? Or am I like a man of the world who says yes when he really means no?” Paul argued that he would explain his decision with the corresponding simplicity and sincerity, alluding to the testimony of his conscience “relying not on worldly wisdom but on God’s grace” (v.12). The apostle knew that if he went, he would have to deal with some sinful scandals that had arisen within the church, and making use of his authority, he would have to expel some of the congregation.

Therefore, he only sent the letter as a token of his indulgence and love for them (1:23, 2:1-4). Paul teaches us here that whatever the circumstance, we must always show our faces and be sincere and transparent. These are characteristics of walking in holiness. Otherwise, it will cause an occasion for rumors, gossip and false interpretations. Even when truth and sincerity is hard, you have to show it, because avoiding it will bring consequences such as lack of credibility and veracity in the leader.

### Questions:

- Why was Paul unable to visit the Corinthian church?
- How important are clear interpersonal relationships, and what do we avoid with them?

## III. Forgiving offenses (2 Corinthians 2:5-11)

Another challenge the apostle Paul needed to face in relation to his ministry within the church of Corinth was about the issue of forgiveness. In this passage, we find six spiritual actions that relate to forgiveness and the offender. First, an offense affects not only one person, but everyone concerned is

touched (v.5). The Apostle James, speaking of the tongue, said: “Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark” (James 3:5). So the offense not only transcends one person, but many. Paul stated that whoever spoke ill of him didn’t only offend him, but the whole church. We should be careful of letting our tongues rule in our relationships! We need to be wise not to infect the body of Christ with our criticism.

Secondly, Paul told them that “the punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient” (v.6). Paul told them that their warning and punishment was correct. If someone has failed and infected the good spirit of the church, they must be reprimanded so that they don’t do it again. Permissiveness can be a bad attitude of parents towards their children, and the same is true inside the church; we must not be permissive because it will be the beginning of irreverence and disorder.

Thirdly, the repentant offender must be restored (v.7). Many of us are witnesses to how Christ’s forgiveness has restored us. The same is true in the congregation. Every offender must be restored with love so that the offender would not “... be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (v.7). Anguish can bring despair and destruction and could make the penitent end up far from the body of Christ.

In fourth place, forgiveness is synonymous with love (v.8). If Christians claim to be holy sons and daughters of God, they need to prove it through forgiveness. Only the love of Christ will enable a person to forgive.

Fifthly, forgiveness must be communal (v.10). The discipline within the church must seek restoration. If the offender is repentant, the church must accept him into the fellowship. On Paul’s part, there was no problem about forgiving the offender: “Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake...” (v.11)

Lastly, forgiveness closes the door to the devil (v.11). Ultimately, unforgiveness opens the door to the devil whose plan is to “outwit us.” The devil is cunning, injecting resentment into the offended party, who may end up moving away from the church. Therefore, we must not ignore his schemes.

### Questions:

- What have you learned about forgiveness?
- What happens to the devil when we forgive each other's trespasses (v.11)?

### IV. Experiencing Triumph in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 2:12-17)

The apostle Paul, after sharing about consolation in the midst of afflictions, and explaining the change of plans of his journey to Corinth, and his plea for forgiveness for the offender, now shares about some positive experiences he had on his journeys in the name of Jesus. He was anxious because he had not been able to go to Corinth; he wanted to get a letter from Titus with news about the Corinthians, but when he got to Troas, he didn't find Titus, and even though he had the opportunity of preaching at Troas, he left almost immediately for Macedonia wanting to find Titus (vv.12-13). "But thanks be to God..." (v.14), he was finally able to receive good news, although here he doesn't say so, but that later shared this in chapter 7:6-7.

In these last four verses (2:14-17), Paul spoke of victory; the letter he had sent with Titus to Corinth was bearing fruit. With this result, the apostle was convinced that they were like a pleasant aroma for Christ (vv.15-16), for those who reject the grace of Christ, sadly, are like "an aroma that brings death." But they are like an aroma of life for those who accept the grace and discipline of the Lord. "...And who is equal to such a task?" (v.16c). This rhetorical question was answered in verse 17. Of course, there are false preachers who "peddle the Word of God for profit," but also there are those who work for the Great Commission "with sincerity, as those sent from God..." (17b).

The servants of Christ must be patient and persevering in their call, and just like Paul, they will find the triumph in the midst of struggles. Ministry for the Lord is full of challenges, but also blessings because we work for Christ, and He as the owner of this company fulfills His promises of grace to those who serve Him wholeheartedly.

### Questions:

- What was the triumphant joy of the apostle Paul regarding the church at Corinth?
- Name two ministerial qualities that you could see in the apostle Paul, and which are worthy of imitation.

### Conclusion

The apostle Paul showed us that work in ministry isn't easy, but we must face every challenge with wisdom so that in the end, we'll triumph in Jesus Christ. Are your challenges for the Lord turned into victories? Today we have learned from Paul not to see challenges as failures.



# God's call to ministry

Alicia Sardiello (Argentina)

**Study passages:** 2 Corinthians 3, 4, 5, 6:1-13

**Memory Verse:** "He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" 2 Corinthians 3:6.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand and appreciate that God has called us to be His ministers.

## Introduction

One of the most anticipated and significant moments after a change of government in a nation is the official photo of the elected President, or the Prime Minister, next to his appointed ministers. The photo is meaningful for many reasons; we can mention a few:

1. Officially, it's the beginning of a new government and a new era.
2. Usually, there's extra joy since the maximum authority was almost always chosen by popular vote and the adherents celebrate it.
3. Those who will be responsible for the different government areas, such as economy, foreign relations, defense, health, and education (etc.), are made public.

Although these new government ministers have rarely been elected by the people, it's important to note that the new ruler has chosen them personally. The highest authority in the land trusts them to carry out sensitive areas of management, and the citizens want to know who will be those people who have accepted the call.

God has done the same with you and with me. He has chosen us personally. Our Lord and Sovereign has honored us by calling each of us by our names: "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" (Ephesians 1:4). This call must not be taken lightly because God himself has chosen us and has honored us with His call.

## I. Ministers of the New Covenant (2 Cor. 3:1-18)

In the introduction, we underscored the importance of a change of government and all that this entails. We were talking about how important this is for a particular nation, but consider how much more important is the longstanding inauguration of the New Covenant between God and us! It isn't just another pact, but is the new and definitive alliance that God is proposing for us: to be messengers of the New Covenant. God has made alliances with different individuals and groups of people. He made a pact with Noah (Genesis 9:9), Abram (Genesis 15:18), and all the people of Israel (Exodus 19:5). But when we further investigate, and we come to the book of Hebrews, we discover that "...Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant" (7:22). This is also confirmed in Hebrews 8:6. And in case we have any doubts Hebrews 13:20 tells us that it's an eternal covenant.

God isn't calling us to a small task in some particular flock, but He has inaugurated a new eternal alliance and He calls us to be His ministers. We have become so accustomed to receiving blessings and privileges as children of God that perhaps we have overlooked these little details. But this is really important: God is calling each of us to be His ministers, as we read in 2 Corinthians 3:9, 11 and following verses, and this covenant is much more glorious than the former one.

We are ministers of the New Covenant for the purpose of honoring only God! What a great privilege!

## Questions:

- Who can be ministers of the New Covenant? Explain.
- What are the characteristics of that New Covenant?

## II. Fully approved ministers (2 Corinthians 4:1-18)

As we read and analyze this passage, we can see different facets: First, while being a minister is a great privilege which God has established, and we believe to be true, let's not think that it's easy, light or unimportant. To represent Jesus Christ is to be His face before the world, and that never was or is easy. The number of Christian martyrs testifies to this fact. Christians who want take their place in the front line of Christian service must be clear that they will be the target of many.

Paul said, "...we do not lose heart" (v.1). Let's think about those soldiers who get ready for a battle, They have trained with responsibility and obedience. In the combat zone, the days go by, the forces decline, family is missed, and inevitably, many loyal and brave soldiers give up the fight. This happens because they are wounded in battle, although but many times, it is simply due to fatigue, discouragement, lack of perseverance and the environment that affected them in a big way which caused them to end up putting down arms and abandoning their combat positions.

Paul exhorted us not to grow weary, to not abandon the fight, but to remember that we can keep going as His ministers, thanks to the continued mercy of God over our lives. He is the one who renews our strength and encourages us every morning (Isaiah 40:31).

In the times of lockdown of COVID-19, (years 2020-2021) we saw many people whose emotional and even physical health was affected by the quarantine. This wasn't because it was impossible to stay at home, but because they simply got tired, their strength weakened, they grew dispirited, and finally, they couldn't cope. God calls us, trains us and strengthens us so that, as upright and approved ministers, we can fulfill His will.

Secondly, we must remember that the Christian life is a constant growth in grace and knowledge of God (Colossians 1:10). This implies perseverance, resistance, and accepting changes. It's an active struggle that involves actions and initiatives such as the following:

1. **Renounce:** "renounced secret and shameful ways..." (2 Corinthians 4:2). Every Christians is involved in the action of give things up, letting go of things, such as habits that separate us from God. Resignation implies a mature, voluntary personal decision, taken in obedient response to what God asks of us. Many people, in their search for a total filling of God in their lives, have discovered that the first thing they had to do was empty themselves, strip themselves of themselves and of hidden, unconfessed sin so that the Holy Spirit could do His wonderful work of restoration and renewal. We need to actively take second place (4:5). How difficult it is not to become permanently self-referential, showing that our experience is unique and valuable! Good Christians, correct disciples, obedient evangelists don't talk about themselves but rather of their Lord, seeking only to glorify Him. Paul encouraged us to preach Jesus Christ, putting Him first, not allowing that we or others occupy the place that belongs to Him. We are God's ambassadors or representatives, His New Covenant ministers, and therefore both the message and the results belong only to God.
2. **Have an attitude of empathy and love towards others and God (4:15).** When we use the word "empathy," it refers to putting ourselves in the place of another person, feeling what "the other" is feeling, understanding the circumstances of others, with love and mercy. It's important to clarify that this shouldn't be confused with "feeling sorry for others," but as the Word says: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; cry with those who weep." (Romans 12:15). In other words, an approved minister must put into practice the commandment that says: "...You shall love... your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).
3. **Be willing to suffer (4:17).** Although the Christian life is a life of victory, joy, and peace, we aren't free from situations of stress or concern that cause pain and confusion. We need to maintain a patient and hopeful attitude towards suffering, anguish, bitterness, despair or all that life presents. This isn't always simple, and something we aren't prepared for it. The good news is that the Word of God assures us that this moment of affliction or tribulation, whatever we call it, is momentary and passing, and victory is assured, since there will be a coming glory that overcomes any difficulty.

This is because we have Jesus Christ, and the guidance of the Spirit Holy, who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13).

4. **Look with the eyes of faith (4:18).** In these times, there are those who run and set their sights on temporary superfluous things. Paul recognized that the world looks only on the outside; their vision is limited. It's only as we look through the eyes of Christ that we'll be enabled to see those things that are eternal, that don't fade or perish. To look with the eyes of faith is to look at life and experiences, sustained by the truths of the Word of God that give us a correct perspective on reality.

#### **Questions:**

- Define the following words: minister, upright, proven.
- Give examples of a minister with integrity and approved by God..

### **III. Ministers with full confidence in God (2 Corinthians 5 - 6:13)**

While presumably the children of God put their trust in Him, it's good to remember and underline that good Christian ministers have absolute confidence in God, that is, they depend unconditionally upon Him. Christian ministers don't feed on the reality around them, neither are they guided by their emotions or the problems that life poses. On the contrary, they rest, wait, seek refuge and protection every day in their God, and declare with courage: "for we walk by faith, not by sight" (v.7).

The writer of the book of Hebrews stated: "But without faith it is impossible to please God..." (Hebrews 11:6). If God, with all His omniscience and omnipotence, has decided to trust us, how are we not going to trust Him!

#### **Questions:**

- List three differences that you find between a government minister and a minister of God.

### **IV. Ministers with the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-6:13)**

If we continue with the example of a President or a Prime Minister who is appointing and commissioning His ministers, we can understand that it would be logical and even expected that he would meet with them and give them general and specific directives according to his vision and mission to govern.

Anyone who wants to be a good minister will wait and listen to what is demanded of them, and listen with care to what is their role so that they can fulfill the goals of the authority entrusted to them. As ministers of Jesus Christ, we have a message and specific directives from the very beginning as followers of the Lord. God charges us with the ministry of reconciliation: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (5:18). This is totally logical if we remember that the reason of the incarnation and death of our Lord Jesus Christ was to give us salvation and reconcile us with the father.

The word "reconcile," according to the Britannica Dictionary, is "to cause people or groups to become friendly again after an argument or disagreement" (<https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/reconcile>). Before the fall, Adam and Eve were in perfect relationship and harmony with their Creator. Genesis tells us that God walked through Eden and talked with them (Genesis 3:8), but sin created a separation between God and us: "Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1-2).

Reconciliation is possible, thanks to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross of Calvary. Although we have been distanced from God through our sin, we can be reconciled to God through Him. In this reconciliation, we see once again that salvation goes beyond the forgiveness of sins, allowing us to be perfectly reconciled with our Creator. This message of love and restoration is the one that every minister of Christ must proclaim. This is the good news of salvation.

#### **Questions:**

- What characteristics can you identify in the reconciliation message?

#### **Conclusion**

Being considered a minister of God is quite a responsibility, and at the same time, a great challenge that makes us happy, encourages and honor us. Therefore, ministers must be people whose lives and testimony show attributes of holiness, being approved, in the first place by God, by those around them, and by their authorities.



# Paul's Recommendations and Praise

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (Cuba)

**Study passages:** 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, 7

**Memory Verse:** "Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" 2 Corinthians 7:1.

**Lesson Purpose:** To learn to welcome both recommendations and praise from our pastoral leadership, because these are useful in building the body of Christ.

## Introduction

The profound and varied problems in the church of Corinth were the stage that moved the pen of the apostle Paul to give us some very timely advice so that the believers could live worthy of the gospel of Christ. At the same time, he also recognized that there things worthy of praise that they needed to keep on doing.

Let's analyze in this lesson the words of the apostle, which are guidelines for the Christian church.

### I. Warning not to associate with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14-18)

We are faced with one of the most used texts of the entire New Testament by different Christian congregations, which is very useful and important, but not free from diverse interpretations. It's very appropriate to start asking some questions that will help us to understand better what the apostle Paul meant when he expressed: "yoked together with unbelievers" (v.14) Was he referring to themes related to courtship or marriage? Or does it include something else?

#### A. Relevant throughout Old Testament history

From very early times in the relationship between God and His people Israel, something that became clear between them was the divine opposition to mingling, uniting, even in marriage, with other peoples or nations (Genesis 28:1). But Israel didn't always comply with this normative, and their disobedience

damaged their relationship with God, bringing divine consequences (Judges 3:6-8). This biblical principle has run through all the covenants until reaching this last 'New Covenant', in which the call of the apostle Paul was clear to a church that was closely linked to the paganism of the time. His instruction was separation.

#### B. Biblical principle in the New Covenant (vv.14-18)

What did Paul mean by not being "yoked with unbelievers" (v.14)? How should we understand these words in context? The first impression that may come to mind is the unequal yoke of a believer choosing a non-Christian person as a partner. This has been the common interpretation most assumed by the church. But if we analyze a little more deeply the words of the apostle Paul, we'll understand that he wanted to express much more. Kistemaker, referring to this text, conceptualizes the unequal yoke saying: "The Greek text reveals that coming together as an unequal team means establishing a relationship with a person who is totally different from us. In this text, we speak of a person who is a member of the family of faith, and that makes the believer break the covenant with God" (Kistemaker, Simon J. Commentary on the New Testament. USA: Grand Rapids, 2004, pp.193-194).

In Paul's mind, that was the intention behind this warning that he gave to the Corinthian church. It was advice to avoid all kinds of relationships or associations with non-believers who were not compatible with the law of the New Covenant ... with the new life in Christ.



The New Living Bible (NTB) version says: “Don’t be teamed with those who do not love the Lord, for what do the people of God have in common with the people of sin?” (v.14a). The danger was that intimate associations would lead to falling back into the paganism of the time, which for Paul was an “unequal yoke.” A Christian regenerated by Christ shouldn’t participate or associate with all existing worldliness. The Message (MSG) translation puts it like this: “Don’t become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? That’s not partnership, that’s war. Is light best friends with dark? Does Christ go strolling with the Devil? The Current Language version translates it in the following way: “Do not participate in anything that those who are not followers of Christ do” (v.14).

So, when Paul wrote this letter of 2 Corinthians, he was thinking beyond the framework of marriage alone. The apostle was making a warning covering all areas: social, family, business, profession-work. His warning was strong, and he developed his thesis through various questions, all of them rhetorical and with a negative response, which are summarized in zero tolerance of communion between the kingdom of God and that of darkness.

Two completely opposite worlds that shouldn’t join: unbelievers versus Christian, Justice vs injustice or wickedness (v.14b), light versus darkness (v.14c), Christ versus the devil (v.15a), believer versus unbeliever (v.15b), and God’s temple versus idols (v.16a). Paul offered a forceful statement: “...For we’re the temple of the living God...” (v.16). With this statement, he meant the following: they were not like the pagans who have temples full of idols of statues. They didn’t have to depend on a temple for worship, as the Jews have done for centuries, because they themselves were the temple of God, and His presence was in them through Christ.

This Pauline statement in verse 16 was stirring centuries-old concepts of worship that still remained in the mindset of many Corinthian believers. They didn’t have to go worship in a pagan or Jewish temple in this New Covenant because the believers are the temple of God, and any intimacy with unbelievers is an uneven yoke, which God hates.

In the text of 2 Corinthians 6:16c-18, Paul appealed to his memory of them. These verses aren’t a direct quotation from the Old Testament, but they come from a mixture of various OT texts (Ex. 25:8, 29:45; Lev. 26:12; 2 Samuel 7:14; Isaiah 52:11; Ezekiel 20:34, 37:27). With these words, he was only supporting his warning of non-association with unbelievers.

### **C. Significance of association with unbelievers for the current church**

The apostle Paul’s idea is that the great treasures of Christian integrity and purity don’t mix with the immorality of the fallen and pagan world. Without a doubt, falling in love and marrying someone following Christ is something that God totally approves of. If you have the privilege of being in Christ and choosing a partner, look for a person who is also a Christian, because this is the beginning of receiving God’s blessing.

We should avoid having friendships, businesses, jobs that encourage evil, breaking God’s laws. Paul’s words are conclusive for any association of a believer with an unbeliever that encourages lying, going to parties or dances, drinking alcoholic beverages, taking drugs, smoking, premarital relations and extramarital sexual relationships, etc. We must beware of having this kind of association or close friendship with someone who doesn’t share our faith, and can be used as an instrument of the devil to hurt us. Because before God, this is an unequal yoke.

#### **Questions:**

- To what did the apostle Paul refer when he expressed: “unequally yoked with unbelievers” (v.14)?
- Give examples of being unequally yoked today; and say how you think this can be avoided.

## **II. God’s Perfect holiness (2 Cor. 7:1)**

So far in the preceding text (6:14-18), Paul’s emphasis was for believers to turn away from everything pagan, and their need to eliminate all association that can harm them through the society around us. Now (7:1), his recommendation was to encourage them to order their own lives, to perfect their holiness, but from the inside of their lives. Ask: *How we can do this?*

### **A. Leaning on God's promises (v.1a)**

God's promises are a special incentive to live confidently in what God's going to do, and in the glorious future that awaits us. Paul was referring to promises that push us to live securely in holiness. He declared that "we already have them." So, there's no excuse not to be holy.

The Bible is full of promises, but let's see which ones Paul was referring to in this text.

1. The guarantee of his presence: "... I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people" (2 Corinthians 6:16). We cannot be saints without being the people of God, without belonging to Him. God's presence produces in every believer a sincere longing to please Him. His presence is enough to help us in life, and its importance for the believer has no comparison.
2. Welcomed, received by God: "... and I will receive you" (2 Corinthians 6:17c). God receives us, but with the condition that we separate ourselves from what is unclean. For this reason, it's easy to achieve because we know that by doing so, immediately the promise will be fulfilled.
3. His paternity: "'and I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,' says the Lord Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:18). This promise contains intimacy, for not only will He be 'God' for us, but a father. And now we'll not only be a people, but sons and daughters. As a good Father, He'll guide us along the right way, and we, as children, will please Him, not because he demands it, but out of love, which is considered the highest degree that can exist in a relationship. This is what we call holiness.

These promises provide everything a believer needs to live in holiness in a natural way.

### **B. Cleansing ourselves from all contamination (v.1b)**

Pollution has been present in every society. The recommendation is to "cleanse ourselves" of everything that can contaminate our flesh and also our spirits. Paul emphasized that complete cleanliness includes everything we do, think and say.

### **C. Fearing God (v.1c)**

The fear of God helps us to reach complete holiness. It isn't fear of a God who punishes, but respect and honor to a God who loves us and has given everything for us. The fear of God is based on love. Thus, we aren't going to be sexually immoral, lie, steal, etc. because He doesn't like us to do those things, and we like children are happy to please our Father. Before committing sin, we should remember how much it hurts Him when we fall. He gave up his Son for us, so we shouldn't pursue wrong paths. We should fear God every day. Whoever fears Him worships Him with devotion, gives themselves completely to Him, is humble, loves passionately, and works for Him with devotion.

#### **Questions:**

- Explain, based on Paul's words, how God's holiness can be perfected in our lives?
- How do you apply Paul's words to your daily life to live in holiness?

### **III. Joy for the ministerial fruit (2 Corinthians 7:2-16)**

In these verses, the apostle Paul expressed His joy about the response of the Corinthians to His admonitions, which had resulted in genuine repentance and loyalty to his leadership. As we read the text, we'll notice a sudden change of language: the previous passages are loaded with severity and recommendations, encouraging the brothers and sisters to be pure and holy (chapter 6), and then we find a chapter full of joy, love, trust and concern for them (chapter 7).

#### **A. Happiness for trust in the church (vv.2-4,13-16)**

Paul showed them the confidence he had in the Corinthians, even though some still harbored grudges against him, possibly for collecting the offering for the Jerusalem church as well as the case of incest (1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 16:1-3). Hence the words of the apostle in 7:2, but immediately, he made it clear that they were on his heart, which shows Paul's great love (v.3), full trust, and how proud he was of them, to the point of being happy in the midst of so many difficulties (v.4).

It wasn't just Paul who was pleased, but Titus also was happy about the way that they had received him (v.13) with great fear, respect and obedience (v.15). This brought great joy to Paul (v.16).

The "how" we treat our pastors and leadership is of great importance. The church must receive, obey and respect our leaders to the point that they feel proud and happy to be able to work together with us. How beautiful, not only for the earth, but also in heaven, when the reports about a congregation are welcome! That's achieved when every believer faithfully follows in the footsteps of Christ.

### **B. Joy at loyalty (vv.6-7)**

Loyalty is something which is very precious. Some say that betrayals are like being stabbed in the back. Paul knew how to praise this quality in a church with disparate conflicts. Often, it's because of someone else that we get to know if they have been loyal to us or not. This was the case of Titus, who arrived where Paul was, in good spirits after receiving from Corinth the message that the church was longing to see the apostle. These words filled Paul with joy and delight (v.7).

We are called to be loyal all the time. We shouldn't speak badly against our leaders behind their backs when they are absent, but if we have a constructive criticism to make, we should do it openly when they're present. This has to do with Christian commitment, respect, honor and love.

### **C. Joy at repentance (vv.8-12)**

Paul regretted a little having sent them a letter which he himself considered severe, and had caused pain to the Corinthians (v.8), but afterwards he was glad he had sent it because it had achieved a great purpose: repentance and a change in behavior (v.9). That's what God wants: a sorrow that would turn them away from sin and result in salvation, which is different from the sadness of the world that doesn't contain repentance and therefore, brings spiritual death (v.10).

Moved by the apostle's words, the Corinthians set out to punish what was done wrongly and to correct the existing situation with great care (v.11). We don't know who Paul was referring to, but undoubtedly it

was a case that had offended him, and had broken the church's testimony, which was why it had to be confronted. Paul wrote to them to check their loyalty to the leadership and he was glad to see their changed attitudes (v.12).

No matter the mistakes or sins committed if genuine regret exists. We have to be thankful for the severe words that come to us from God, because they help to change our behavior, to radically turn our life around. That's regret. What's wrong must be corrected in the eyes of God. The Church must always learn to receive the Word of God, however hard it may seem, because it leads us to salvation. Words that sweeten our ears, like many today, don't bring about change or transformation.

### **Questions:**

- Mention the attitudes of the Corinthians that brought joy to the apostle Paul.
- Explain how important loyalty is.
- In your opinion, what should the church do to earn the trust and happiness of its pastors?

### **Conclusion**

Let's comply with the recommendations given to not associate with unbelievers and perfectly live the holiness of God. Let's always be commended for being a repentant, loyal and trustworthy church.



# Giving generously

Marco Velasco (Costa Rica)

**Study passages:** 2 Corinthians 8, 9

**Memory Verse:** "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously" 2 Corinthians 9:6.

**Lesson Purpose:** To develop an attitude of sharing liberally.

## Introduction

The apostle Paul devoted two chapters of the second letter to the Corinthians to talk about collections. The reason behind his comments had to do with their relationship as gentile churches that they had with the church in Jerusalem. According to Galatians 2:9-10, Paul wrote that the believers in Jerusalem had given him "the right hand of fellowship," in other words, accepting his ministry among the gentile churches. They only asked that the poor be remembered.

On his third missionary journey, Paul decided to raise a collection for the financial needs of the Jerusalem churches. We don't know the exact reason for this economic crisis they were suffering, but it could have included the following factors: "(1) the continuity of the results of the famine, (2) economic persecution, (3) the church was composed of very few rich and many poor, and (4) the dissipation of resources they had possessed" (Carver, F. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 8, 2 Corinthians. USA: CNP, 1985, p.609).

The background to Paul's concern wasn't about interest in personal gain but in the ethics of covenant in the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:17-18). The offerings served to ratify the covenant with God in the context of worship. This suggested an attitude of gratitude towards God, rather than duty, thanking Him for His mercies, and this demanded a response of loyalty. "The key word is the Hebrew word *chesed* (mercy, kindness or loyalty), which connects the merciful character of God for his people, and is a sign of being a faithful people" (Martin, R. The Theology of Worship. USA: Editorial Vida, 1993, p.81).

In the New Testament, with the revelation of Jesus Christ, the meaning of offerings was deepened. Jesus declared that He came to give His life "a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45); this must be understood in terms of sacrifice. On the other hand, the New Testament scholar Markus Barth comments on Ephesians 5:2 where we read: "and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as

a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." "The presentation of Christ as expiatory sacrifice has its origin in the Old Testament, but his sacrifice is symbolic, hinting to the love that he shows in its delivery" (Martin, R. The Theology of Worship. USA: Editorial Vida, 1993, p.84).

The offering that was being collected among the Gentiles for the Jerusalem Christians (Romans 15:26) bore witness to the solidarity of the church as "one body in Christ" (cf. Romans 5:5; 1 Corinthians 10:17, 12:12-27; Galatians 3:28) (Carver, F. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 8, 2 Corinthians. USA: CNP, 1985, p.608). Paul hoped that Gentiles who partook of the spiritual blessings of the Jews also felt the 'obligation' to provide a service through material blessings (Rom. 15:26-29). So, the Christian Jewish community was moved to glorify God (2 Corinthians 9:12-15) by the authenticity of the faith in Christ of the Christian Gentiles.

A year earlier, Paul had invited the Corinthian church to give weekly for the offering of Christians in Jerusalem, and that they appointed people from the congregation to accompany him to deliver it (1 Cor. 16:1-4). But the church had hardly remembered the apostle's request (2 Corinthians 8:10, 9:).

## I. Generosity in the midst of poverty (2 Corinthians 8:1-7)

The Macedonian Christians showed the best example of giving as a testimony of their faith in Christ. "Paul tactfully introduced the topic of money. He applied the term *charis*, that is, 'grace,' to the offering itself, instead of the term 'collection' (cf. 1 Cor. 16:1)" (Carver, F. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 8, 2 Corinthians. USA: CNP, 1985, p.611). By then, the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea had already begun giving their gifts liberally and generously.

Paul didn't show the Corinthians his apostolic authority, but the nature of the grace of God that had been given to the churches of Macedonia (8:1). Grace is God's free favor for all mankind (v.9).

But there's a paradox because while they were under persecution and in the midst of poverty, Macedonians still gave with joy and generous liberality, illustrating what the grace of God was doing in their lives.

The generous liberality of the Macedonian Christians showed itself in three ways, as seen in verses 3 to 5. The word "gave" (v.5), as Carver says, is the center of all the action (Carver, F. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 8, 2 Corinthians. USA: CNP, 1985, p.610).

Let's see these three ways:

1. First, they gave "even beyond their ability" (v.3). Paul didn't even have to remind them why they ought to give.
2. Second, they requested "the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people" (v.4). "The key word is "sharing", from the Greek *koinonia*. This sharing sprang from their fellowship in Christ, which was expressed visibly in the collection of the offering for the those in Jerusalem. In the context of service for the Lord, this is considered an essential act of Christian fellowship" (Carver, F. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 8, 2 Corinthians. USA: CNP, 1985, p.610).
3. Third, "they gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us" (v.5). It means that their free and generous answer came first of all from their dedication to Jesus Christ.

Based on this example of the Macedonians, Paul appealed to the Corinthians to give on the basis of grace. For the grace of God abounded in them with many gifts. Paul then motivated the Corinthians because of the abundance of their gifts, that they should see that they "also excel in this grace of giving" (8:7). Note that the apostle didn't use the word 'collection,' but 'grace', to something so material and ordinary as an offering. Paul placed the offerings in the realm of the spiritual, not just the material! (vv.1,5,9).

### Questions:

- According to 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, what do you think would be the correct order to give?
  - a. With abundance of joy and generosity.
  - b. Give ourselves first to the Lord.
  - c. Give even in the midst of scarcity and poverty.
- Why do you think Paul equated the gifts of faith, knowledge, etc., with material offerings (v.7)?

## II. The example of Christ (2 Cor. 8:8-15)

Paul wanted them to give joyfully. But this joyful giving was to express the grace of Jesus Christ, who 'being rich' (v.9b), i.e. before the incarnation (Philippians 2:6;

Colossians 1:15), become poor as a man because "the poverty of Christ, voluntarily assumed, included becoming a man (Phil 2:7f), with the obedience that led him to give himself on the cross" (Martin, R. The Theology of Worship. USA: Editorial Vida, 1993, p.93), but without losing joy (Hebrews 12:2b).

Paul went on to exhort the Corinthians to decide at once to raise the offering for the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. The apostle didn't need to command the Corinthians to do this, but he reminded them of his intention of wanting to give before the Macedonians (2 Corinthians 8:10). Now, they had to act (v.11).

When it came to giving, Paul also appealed to the principle of equality, because the intention of the collection wasn't to enrich some and impoverish others (vv.13-14). Rather, the abundance of the Corinthians should supply the scarcity of the poor Christians of Jerusalem so that there would be equality that is, relief from need (v.14b),

All of the above leads us to consider the supreme example of Christ (v.9). The abundant grace that He expressed though His love should be the rule with which we measure our Christian giving. This was the best example for the Corinthians, and it must have been enough to motivate them. Only Christ's love can make our motivations and actions genuine. Paul said: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little" (v.15). This text is a quote from Exodus 16:18 about the story of the manna gathering that speaks of mutual reciprocity in terms of resources. Paul showed what was the true nature of the church: "All wealth is a manna from the Lord, destined not for excesses and luxury, but to the relief of the needs of the brethren" (Carver, F. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 8, 2 Corinthians. USA: CNP, 1985, p.613).

The economic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic 19, (2020-2021) and so many other crises of the past and those that may come in the future, present the church with the opportunities to be able to share with other brothers and sisters through the grace and love of Jesus Christ. As believers, we must proactively seek the good for others so that there's no place for scarcity and poverty.

Let's apply the principle of J. Wesley's economy: earn, save and give all you can (Wesley, John. Sermons III. USA: Wesley Heritage Foundation, 1996, p.211). Contrary to the world, the ultimate goal isn't to win and accumulate wealth, but to give all we can. Christian giving can be "expensive," not because of the amount of money that can be given, but because it imitates Christ's love, generosity, humility and obedience, even in situations of crisis or suffering.

### Questions:

- Explain what the principle of equality in giving consists of (vv.13-14).
- What is the rule by which we best measure our giving? What would be the visible consequences if we adopted it as our lifestyle (v.9)?

### III. Stewards of our offerings (2 Cor. 8:16-9:15)

The spiritual nature of the offerings isn't a pretext to not take care of our administration and good management of public accounts. The church shouldn't keep 'secrets' about its resource management. Results in the work of the ministry are directly related to good responsible management.

#### A. Three people are recommended for their wholesome character (vv.16-24)

Verses 16 to 24 were like a letter of recommendation about the integrity of those who administered the collected offerings in order to maintain the good testimony before the church. As Dr. Frank Carver comments: "Paul stimulated the Corinthians to a full participation in the offering (1) by managing the project in a way that didn't leave room for suspicion. He did this (2) by delegating part of the participation by the collection and the supervision of it by others, (3) spiritual men duly qualified to be their representatives and those of the churches that sent them." (Carver, F. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 8, 2 Corinthians. USA: CNP, 1985, p.616).

#### B. Resource management

The money we ask for in churches, whether they are tithes or regular offerings, should never be questioned, but must always be transparent, under supervision of several people who, because of their mature Christian character, are qualified and trustworthy. Paul acted wisely by sending these brothers (9:3,5) so that they would raise the offering promised by the Corinthians, and in this way, they wouldn't be taken by surprise by Macedonians who waited, according to the testimony of Paul (9:2,4), for the Corinthians to give generously without any pressure.

#### C. When offerings are a source of blessing (9:6-15)

Offerings aren't about boasting about the possessions we may have or of the economic position that we hold. On the contrary, what we have was given by God (v.10). So, we must be humble and grateful. The metaphor that Paul expounded for the brothers who offered was that of the sower and the harvest. Dr. Frank Carver comments that "Paul has given us three valid motives for the generous attitudes and joyful giving: (1) Giving in a good spirit is a sowing that guarantees a harvest, v 6-7; (2) God can and wants to give everything one needs internally and

externally, lovingly sharing it with others v8-10; (3) What is given means much more than just materials needs. It has exciting implications-they are a source of blessing, (11-15)" (Carver, F. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 8, 2 Corinthians. USA: CNP, 1985, p.620).

The true meaning of giving lies within us; it's that of a joyful heart (9:7c). This means the following: (a) that it's a freely made decision from our heart; (b) we don't do it sadly or in a bad mood, not even out of necessity or force. It doesn't come from an external force, as if we paid a tax. Rather it should be in accordance with having "the same mindset as Jesus" (Philippians 2:5); (c) "because God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7c).

The Old Testament contains parallel expressions as in Proverbs 22:9 where we read: "The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor." We shouldn't give with sadness or obligation. The joyful heart gives freely. His sense of dependence is on God alone. This heart is free from all calculation, sadness or unwilling stinginess. Instead, it's oriented by a noble dependence and contentment in the love of God. In this way, Christian giving becomes a source of blessing. It produces in those who receive, actions of thanksgiving (2 Corinthians 9:11) that glorify God (v.13) and accompany prayers of intercession (v.14).

The apostle spoke forcefully in this section of the offerings with great emotion for the ineffable gift of God, of His Son Jesus Christ, who for love of us gave himself; "... so that with his poverty we might be made rich" (8:9). He is the source of all grace and the love that flowed from the churches for their generosity and liberality through offerings for the poor brothers and sisters of Jerusalem.

In a time when the church defines worship as something subjective and sentimental, the offering is a good corrective. No matter what we've done in worship, if we haven't offered it with the genuine marks of Christ's sacrifice, our worship has fallen short, and hasn't achieved its full purpose.

### Questions:

- What advice did the apostle Paul give for the stewardship of offerings? Do you think this is useful for our days? (vv.16-24).
- Why do you think Paul used the metaphor of planting the seed to giving? Have you planted with the attitude that Paul proposes to the church?

### Conclusion

Offerings are like Jesus Christ's sacrifice. We offer to God our sacrifice of thanksgiving and we offer him our being, soul and body, as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to Him. Amen.



# Paul, the Pioneer Missionary

Romina Miño (Argentina)

**Study passages:** 2 Corinthians 10, 11, 12, 13

**Memory Verse:** “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” 2 Corinthians 12:10.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the implications of being an Apostle in a leadership position, recognizing that God receives glory when leaders accept their weaknesses and recognize that divine grace is enough.

## Introduction

What are the characteristics of true Christian Missionary leadership? What inherent challenges, must they face daily? Many times, being a pioneer missionary is a romantic and attractive idea, but it has certain implications. At present, some biblical terms have been given unbiblical definitions. For this, it’s essential to go to the source and extract from it principles for true apostolic leadership, not based on fashions or biased readings of the Word of God.

Invite your students to share what is meant by these words: “apostolic leadership.”

From Paul and his letters, we have a clear example of how he led. In this lesson, we’ll focus on the last four chapters of the second letter to the Corinthians.

### I. Fighting false accusations (2 Corinthians 10:1-12)

In our service and walk as followers of Jesus, we’re inevitably going to face “false accusations.” According to the Online Dictionary, to accuse is “to charge (someone) with an offense or crime” (<https://www.google.com/search?q=define+accuse>). To be accused by someone isn’t pleasant at all, and being falsely accused is very painful. Ask: *what would we do? How would you react if someone accused you falsely? What criteria should we follow?* Paul gives us a good example, since he was forced to defend his ministry. He would never have bothered to defend his position as an Apostle against men, but since the gospel was at stake, he had to do it.

Paul was aware of the opinions and accusations against him. He sought to clarify and defend each case, but above all, he used them as teaching moments. He didn’t want to use the same weapons that some use to hurt people and damage to church, but he was able to make each confrontation a teaching act. In our service, not everyone will like us. Consider this: for some, Paul was too shy, or on the contrary, very rude. Not only did they criticize his service, but they also intruded on his personality. But he didn’t defend himself against that. He didn’t clarify or deny anything. Here we have the first lesson: we cannot always be defensive. No need to spend energy on what doesn’t merit it. There are those who judge everything according to the wickedness that is in their hearts.

On the contrary, if what was at stake was his behavior as an apostle, if they doubted his consecration and total surrender to the lordship of Christ in his life, then he deserved to be accused. But by slandering the messenger, it affected the credibility of the message. The noted scholar Marshall McLuhan said: “The medium is the message” (Retrieved from on January 07, 2021, [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall\\_McLuhan](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_McLuhan)).

The following were some of the accusations made against the apostle Paul. They said he was crazy; they considered him to be inferior. They said he wasn’t a good preacher and that he didn’t love the Corinthians. They suggested that he was a burden and that he had deceived them (2 Corinthians 11:1-11, 12:16-17).

Paul defended himself, pointing out that these things were not true, and were just opinions based on human worldly criteria.

## A. How do we fight, according to 2 Corinthians 10:1-12?

1. We don't fight battles as the world does (v.3). It's common for those who don't have Christ in their lives to resolve conflicts by giving 'low blows', seeking to hurt, avoiding confrontation, denying the situation, letting it get exaggerated etc. In our service, we may be tempted to use the same weapons, which will guarantee disastrous results. Surely, we'll be attacked and beaten, intentionally or not. The point is to be clear that we don't fight like the world does.
2. Our weapons have divine power to strike down strongholds (v.4). Paul didn't conduct his ministry with weapons like those used by the world: "Talent or human ingenuity. Ability to organize, eloquent diatribes, or confidence in the charm or strength of the person..." (Carver, Frank G. Beacon Bible Commentary, 2 Corinthians. USA: CNP, 1968, p.625).

These weapons, which are based on human logic, become obsolete and inoperative in the spiritual realm. They have a temporary effect, and achieve very little compared to when we govern ourselves within God's parameters.

The weapons used by those who serve the Lord are powerful because they are divine. When we understand the power of the gospel, the explosive transformative effect of grace, forgiveness, love that transforms, and that power that overcomes human wisdom or timidity, we see that we don't need to use the same weapons as the enemy.

## B. Where do we stand?

Paul based his ministry on the following truths:

1. We belong to Christ (v.7). Paul belonged to Christ. When we affirm this, we have no control over our life; we can't and we don't want to change this. Only God can change our situation because we are His. When our 'need of belonging' is met, we don't need anything else. Many leaders make their moves according to their loyalties, in favor of preserving positions, rank, recognition, but above all, because of the need to not be excluded, without a place of belonging. This fear causes great errors in leadership.

2. Our authority from the Lord is to build (v.8). It's important to consider the origin of our authority. This doesn't come by our trajectory, reputation, or inheritance of a surname. It isn't achieved through personal merits, nor by the commitment or quality of our service. Our authority comes from the Lord. By understanding this, we can exercise authority with freedom and balance, without fear, without falling into abuse of power. The goal, according to Paul, is always to build up. So how significant is it to use authority to establish, and affirm the church! If in the exercise of our authority we don't see the church developing, then we must ask ourselves, what are we doing?
3. We don't promote ourselves or take pride (vv.13,15,17). How imperceptible pride can be for some people, and how obvious for others! Those who suffer from arrogance are usually the last to know or admit it. This is a very common sin among those who have leadership positions. To have a position is the same as exercising leadership, because the one who leads, serves. And whoever serves is willing to humble himself out of love for those he serves.

Paul said, "We do not boast excessively..." (v.15). There are those who praise themselves excessively when they do the work of the Lord. So, they maybe don't talk about it, but deep down, they believe that they have contributed a lot to the work. That's to say, although they don't request it, they intend to be recognized, and if no one notices them, they promote themselves. The competition and comparison with their fellow servants is a constant and regrettable practice.

## Questions:

- What has been the hardest blows you have received throughout your ministry? How did being hurt affect you in your life and service?
- What weapons does the world use? What weapons do we who serve the Lord use?
- Name three truths on which Paul based his ministry. How does each of these truths benefit you in your service?



## II. Boasting in God (2 Cor. 10:13-18, 12:1-11)

What does it mean to boast in the Lord? If we go to the Scriptures, we'll see that it's simply a question of recognizing that "...in him we live and move and have our being..." (Acts 17:28). Always remember that we were all created through Him and for Him (Colossians 1:16). In short, the Lord says that "everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made" (Isaiah 43:7), which implies that everything we are and do should bring glory to God, not to us. It's very easy to fall into this error.

The following are some Principles that help us to boast in God:

1. The place where we serve is given by the Lord (2 Cor. 10:13), not by the institution, or leadership, or necessity, or imposition.
2. Growth in the work and in people is also produced by the Lord, in whom we hope, not by our service, endeavor or teaching. (v.15).
3. The one who recommends/promotes is the Lord (vv.17-18). It isn't the people or our efforts and/or capabilities.
4. The one who provides extraordinary experiences is the Lord (2 Corinthians 12:2), not our faith, spiritual disciplines or mysticism.
5. The one that allows painful experiences in our lives is the Lord. (2 Corinthians 12:7), not the devil, or our unbelief or sin (although both can bring pain into our lives). In this sense, it refers to those trials or tribulations that produce the best in us.
6. The one who perfects and strengthens us in our weakness is the Lord (vv.8-10), not our will, prayers or efforts.

We can then, like Paul, in any circumstance, give glory in the Lord...because He is enough!

He is sovereign. He works according to His purpose. He doesn't have to submit to our plans. We should be filled with joy that His grace is sufficient; it's all we need. This is what allows us to affirm and live in the conviction: "...when I am weak, then I am strong" (v.10).

## Questions:

- Mention the principle that most caught your attention.
- What situation in your life reminds you that divine grace is sufficient?

## III. Showing competent leadership (2 Corinthians 11:1-33, 12:12-18)

Competent leadership is focused on the church, in the body of Christ. Let's take a closer look at this.

1. He cared about bringing the church to life in holiness, in order to please Christ. Paul had a clear objective: to present a pure church, without blemish or sin (11:2).
2. He watches over the church, warning about those who deceive and divert the Christians from a pure and sincere commitment to Christ (11:3). This goal would be threatened if the Corinthians were deceived. So, Paul raised the huge and significant contrasting features between him and the "false apostles."

I PAUL	THEM...THE "FALSE APOSTLES"
Untrained as a speaker, marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles (11:6, 12:12)	They present a different Jesus (11:4).
I preached the gospel freely (11:8).	They enslave or exploit or take advantage
I wasn't a burden to you (11:9, 12:13).	False apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ (11:13)
God knows I love you; (11:11,12:14).	They are swindlers 11:20

Paul then denounced these 'apostles,' and called them 'false apostles' (11:13-15). Paul declared his love to the Corinthians, and he reminded them of his demonstrations of this genuine love (11:7-11).

3. He's the one who's willing to suffer (11:23-29). Paul listed all of his service experience as apostle of Jesus, which was far beyond what most of those who aspire to be pioneer missionaries (apostles) pretend.

The following are the dangers that the apostle Paul faced in his years of missionary work, attending to the churches that had planted on his trips:

- Danger of “exhaustion”. Paul worked as a tent maker, and he also worked intensely in ministry. The continuous responsibility he had as an apostle implied being fully involved, which brought with it fatigue, exhaustion, etc.
- Danger of suffering from worry. Paul referred to the fact that every day the concern for the whole church weighed on him. There wasn't a day that passed that he didn't have this burden. And it wasn't just for a church, mission or ministry, but for the whole church. He empathized and identified with the pain of his brothers and sisters. He was also indignant at those who tripped them up.
- Danger of persecution. He suffered times in jail, physical punishment of all kinds, harassment, accusations, intrigues etc.
- Dangers of an unknown geography. He underwent shipwrecks, misfortunes in rivers, seas, fields and cities. He was always exploring new places, going further.
- Dangers of continuous comings and goings. All the time he was uprooting, adapting, saying goodbyes, resignations, hunger and thirst, cold and nakedness.
- Dangers in interpersonal relationships. This on the part of his fellow Jews, from false Christians, and also from those whom he intended to reach with the gospel, the Gentiles, confronting sin and offering the way to spiritual maturity (2 Corinthians 12:19-13:14)

Paul didn't limit himself to defending his ministry, acknowledging his weaknesses and giving glory to God for the privilege of suffering for Him. All he wanted was to reach the heart of the Corinthians, that the veil of deception would fall from their eyes, and that they would have the opportunity to repent and walk towards maturity.

We must confront with love and sincerity in order to build. We can do this because we put our hope on the fact that He is powerful, even if we have to face the worst scenario (12:20-21). Because, although we're weak, we have a mighty God in His dealings with our lives (13:3); always bearing in mind that everything we do must be to strengthen the church. For this reason, we cannot help but confront sin, but with the same impetus, to offer the path to maturity.

Paul recommended that the Corinthians made sure that their lives bore a clear testimony of genuine faith. They needed to be willing to receive correction, and do what is right, as a sign that they were on the right track. Lastly, the apostle urged them to be joyful, grow to maturity, encourage one another, and live in peace and harmony (v.11).

### **Questions:**

- List three characteristics of competent leadership.
- Have you been through any of the sufferings that Paul mentioned? What was it, and how did you feel about it?

### **Conclusion**

Serving is a privilege that often includes suffering. We are sent out despite our weakness because the power of God is perfected in it. Leadership is an opportunity to give glory to God through a life of dedication and service, based on conviction that divine grace is sufficient.

# Punishment and Reward (Ezekiel)

FOURTH QUARTER

A call full of glory and responsibility  
God's judgments against sin  
Choose protection or punishment  
Infallible Justice and Powerful Grace  
God calls His people to repent  
The consequences of sin  
The Watchman and the Good Shepherd  
Promises for new hearts  
The Valley of the Dry Bones  
The Restoration of God's People  
God's Glory Returns to the Temple  
God will Restore His People  
Fresh living water



# A call full of glory and responsibility

David Balcázar Medina (Peru)

**Study passages:** Ezekiel 1, 2, 3

**Memory Verse:** “But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says.’ Whoever will listen let them listen, and whoever will refuse let them refuse; for they are a rebellious people” Ezekiel 3:27.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand, and accept the responsibility of the Lord’s call to announce the gospel.

## Introduction

God keeps calling people even now. He wants to see as many people as possible learn about His love through the gospel, and for this, He chooses to use His children. Today, we’ll learn about God’s call through the experience of the prophet Ezekiel.

The book of Ezekiel is classified as one of the five major prophets because of the extent of its content. Some peculiar features of the book are as follows: the writer’s name Ezekiel means “God makes strong” or “God strengthens” (Zevallos, Juan. *Hispanic World Bible Study*. USA: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 2012, p.1563). At that time, Ezekiel was captive in Babylon (Ezekiel 1:1, 11:24-25) and began the story describing God’s call to be a prophet.

Since this is a prophetic book, it’s important to remember what we mean by prophecy or what is the function of the prophet. To prophesy is to announce God’s message. The inspiration for prophecy comes from God’s Holy Spirit. These two elements are described in Ezekiel’s call, and they apply to us as well.

### I. The vision of the glory of the God who calls (Ezekiel 1:1-28)

#### A. Where was Ezekiel when he saw this vision?

He was in the midst of the captives (the Jews who had been taken out of their land and taken to Babylon) (v.1). Along with Ezekiel, in the first deportation, Nebuchadnezzar took 10,000 men from the most prominent of the nation, such as artisans, blacksmiths, princes, mighty men, and even King Jehoiachin himself (2 Kings 24:8-17). At the time

of the writing of Ezekiel’s prophecy, he was in the land of the Chaldeans (or Babylon), next to the river Kebar.

#### B. What did Ezekiel see?

Ezekiel says that a windstorm was “coming out of the north: an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light” (v.4). In the middle of everything, he observed the following:

1. Four living creatures, like men (vv.4-14):
  - a. Each one had four faces: that of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle (vv.6,10). There are different interpretations of the meaning of these faces. In Revelations 4:6-7, we find four living creatures with faces similar to those mentioned in this passage.
  - b. Each had four wings, with two they covered their bodies (Ezekiel 1: 6,11).
  - c. “Their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze” (v.7).
  - d. They looked like burning coals of fire or like torches (v.13). “The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning” (v.14). Likewise, these living beings “went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved” (v.9).
2. There were greenish yellow wheels the color of topaz. (vv.15-18) “Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel” (v.16) and they had “high and awesome” rims, and “all four rims were full of eyes all around” (v.18). The living creatures and the wheels moved together, that is to say, at the same time.

3. "Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked something like a vault, sparkling like crystal, and awesome" (v.22). They had two wings which were raised to move, and lowered when they stopped.
4. Someone who looked like a man was sitting on a throne which seemed to be made "of lapis lazuli" (vv.25-28) This man had the appearance of "glowing metal, as if full of fire" all over his body. His radiance was like "the rainbow."

Really, this vision is amazing. Ask your students to try to imagine it. The record that Ezekiel made allows us to share some of this vision of the glory of the Lord which amazes us. We can't even imagine the greatness of our God. His glory shown to Ezekiel was awesome.

There is a diversity of interpretation attempts on what really was "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" that Ezekiel saw (v.28). Some have claimed that it was a kind of spaceship! In 1973, a NASA engineer Josef F. Blumrich published a book named *The Spaceships of Ezekiel*. But it shouldn't be understood in that way. To analyze this carefully, we can conclude that our God is great and wonderful, and that there are mysteries and precious things that surround the throne of God. So much of what He has created is far beyond our imagination.

Someday we'll understand when we meet with Him in eternity! Visualizing what Ezekiel saw, we can only be amazed and spiritually assume the attitude that the prophet took: he fell on his face (v.28).

### Questions:

- What amazed you most about the description of the glory of the Lord?
- What would have been your reaction to the sight of the glory of the Lord?

## II. The work of the Spirit and the call of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 2:1-3:3)

He who was on the throne spoke to Ezekiel to give him a mission. But at that moment, something different and new happened: The Holy Spirit entered Ezekiel (v.2). The presence of the Spirit was preparing him for the mission that he would receive, just as He trains us today with His power (Acts 1: 8).

### A. Go to a rebellious people (vv.3-7)

Ezekiel's mission wasn't easy because he was being sent to very rebellious people. It's noteworthy that in these five verses, the word "rebellious" or other similar word is used a total of six times when talking about the people of Israel. In addition, other qualifiers such as these are used: - "are obstinate and stubborn" people (v.4), "briers and thorns" ...and "scorpions" (v.6)

Although this nation was so rebellious, Ezekiel shouldn't be afraid because it was the Lord himself who was sending him. He wanted Ezekiel to speak to them, whether they listened or not. In this way, the people of Israel would know that no matter how rebellious they may have been, there was always a prophet among them. We too have been sent "to every creature" whether they listen or stop listening (Mark 16:15). The Spirit entered Ezekiel, and he was told to speak the words of the Lord.

### B. "...eat this roll" (2:8-3:3).

In those times, there were no books like the ones we know today. The books we know now are made from paper and printed with ink. They are also produced en masse. "The scroll, like the one Ezekiel ate in the vision, was a long strip of leather that probably measured about 10 meters long by 25 cm wide "(Zevallos, Juan. *Hispanic World Bible Study*. USA: Publisher Hispanic World, 2012, p.1568). Usually a scroll was written only on one side, but this was written on both sides, and what it contained were "words of lament and mourning and woe" (v.10).

This scroll was preparing Ezekiel for what he would have to tell the people of Israel. It's interesting to see how God deals with his servants in different ways. God helped Jeremiah to write a scroll with the help of Baruch (Jeremiah 36:18), and he made Ezekiel eat one. We aren't asked to eat a book or scroll, but He has indeed given us the gospel to announce to others (Matthew 28:20).

### C. Listen or stop listening (vv.4-11)

Ezekiel wasn't being sent to a foreign people who spoke another difficult language, but to his own people who spoke his own language (vv.4-5). Although they were a rebellious nation, Ezekiel was to deliver the message (v.5).

What does this tell us? We also have the opportunity to preach to people who have the same language as us. What excuse will we give for being silent?

The Lord warned Ezekiel that the people would not hear him because they didn't want to hear what God wanted to tell them, because they were rebellious (v.7). But He also said to the prophet "listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious people; open your mouth and eat what I give you" (v.8).

When the Lord sends us, we shouldn't be afraid, even if the people are "tough" that we have to preach God's Word to. The Lord will prepare us to fulfill this mission. As the Lord told Ezekiel, he was to speak to the people whether they... "listen, or stop listening" (v.11).

#### **D. Epilogue to Ezekiel's first vision (3:12-15)**

Ezekiel was lifted up by the Spirit and placed next to the captives who were in Tel Aviv, by the Kebar river (v.15). During this time, Ezekiel was indignant and bitter; most likely due to the rebellion of the house of Israel (v.14). He heard the sound of the wings of living beings and a voice blessing the glory of Jehovah (vv.12-13). It was the Lord himself who had spoken, and He commissioned him to warn His rebellious people. How wonderful was the glory of the Lord!

In light of all of these events, Ezekiel was stunned, not knowing what to say for seven days (v.15). How would we have been if we had been there? Would we have reacted like Ezekiel? How are we reacting now to the glory of the Lord and His call?

#### **Questions:**

- What had been the work of the Holy Spirit in his life?
- Have you also felt the call of the Lord? What are you doing about it?

### **III. Responsibilities and challenges of Ezekiel's call (Ezekiel 3:16-27)**

Seven days after Ezekiel's first vision, the Lord spoke to him again. Ezekiel was instructed about his responsibility to the call, and how he had to act.

#### **A. Ezekiel, watchman to the house of Israel**

In ancient times, the 'watchman' was a man who was usually located in a tower from the which he could observe if an enemy army or other dangers were approaching. His function was to observe danger and announce it to the king or to whoever needed to take necessary actions and prevent harm. There are some other examples of the role of watchmen in Israel (2 Samuel 13:34; 2 Kings 9:17).

Ezekiel, then, received by divine commission the function to be a watchman for the house of Israel. Let's look at the cases that he was to act upon as a watchman:

1. The Lord told the wicked that they would die for their wickedness (vv.18-19). Ezekiel had to admonish them; if he didn't, Ezekiel would be blamed for that person's blood. If Ezekiel admonished them, and they didn't repent, the impious would die, but Ezekiel would be blameless, for he would have fulfilled the role of watchman.
2. If the righteous turned away from their righteousness and began to act wickedly (vv.20-21), and Ezekiel didn't admonish them and they died, then the prophet would be blamed for their blood. But if he admonished them and they repented, the just would live, and Ezekiel would have saved their souls.

What an important function that the Lord entrusted to Ezekiel! It makes us reflect about the responsibility that we have with our fellow men and women. All of us who have experienced salvation through Jesus Christ have the blessing of sharing the gospel. We are people looking out of the "watchtower" for our families, neighbors, and friends, etc.?

#### **B. The second vision of Jehovah's glory**

The same expression from 1:3 is used here which says that "the hand of the Lord" came upon Ezekiel (3:22). In others words, Ezekiel repeats the experience that he recounted in the first chapter of the vision of the glory of the Lord. Although in the last verses of the third chapter, he doesn't describe it in so much details; however, the prophet mentioned that "the glory of the Lord was standing there, like the glory I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown" (v.23).

The glory of the Lord can be manifested in any place, even today to us by His presence through His Holy Spirit! And Ezekiel had a new experience with the Holy Spirit, preparing him to receive the following message:

**C. “...when I have spoken to you, I will open your mouth...”**

The prophet received three indications: “... Go, shut yourself inside your house” (v.24); “...You will be silent and unable to rebuke them, for they are a rebellious people” (v.26), “I will open your mouth and you shall say to them...” (v.27). These different situations would happen to the prophet, but he would always be a prophet.

As stated at the beginning of the lesson, a prophet is the one who announces God’s message, not his own message, under the influence of the Holy Spirit. So, if the Lord tells us to be quiet, we must be quiet. If He tells us to go out, we must go out. If He tells us to go home and lock ourselves in, we must do it. With the presence of the Holy Spirit, we’re called to obey His voice and serve Him in whatever way He asks of us.

**D. What can we learn from today’s lesson?**

God remains the same and His glory unequalled, much bigger and more wonderful than we imagined. We must not forget that when God calls us, He is still that great and glorious God who called Ezekiel. The Holy Spirit continues to prepare His servants to fulfill God’s call. Others won’t always be willing to listen to us, they might even be rebellious.

However, we shouldn’t be silent because we have been called by the Lord. We must speak to them without fear. What shall we tell them? The Good News that we have salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ. How often? All the times that are necessary. God’s call to us implies great responsibility. If we don’t obey, we’ll be guilty. So, this call means we must obey always and in every circumstance. Obeying God’s call, we must always follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit tells us: “don’t speak,” we must be silent, if he tells us to “speak,” we must speak, in whatever circumstances. This is how we’ll fulfill the Lord’s will.

**Questions:**

- How are you sharing the gospel with those who don’t yet know Jesus as their Savior?
- Briefly recount an experience in which you have felt the Lord’s guidance in sharing the gospel.

**Conclusion**

God is the same glorious God who called Ezekiel. Likewise, it’s the same Holy Spirit who enables us to obey the Lord’s call to announce His message, whether they listen to us or not. Let’s be prepared and obedient to God’s command.



# God's judgments against sin

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**Study passages:** Ezekiel 4, 5, 6, 7

**Memory Verse:** "Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" Exodus 15:11.

**Lesson Purpose:** To recognize that God is the sovereign of the universe, therefore, He must also be Lord of our lives, and we must always be willing to obey His commandments and keep His laws.

## Introduction

The Bible, and also the long experience of mankind through the centuries, clearly show the nature of the moral disease that affects all people. The sins, crimes and vices that have ruined our lives since the dawn of history are 'eloquent' testimonies of the truth, that something is fundamentally wrong within us, both in what we are, and in what we do. Article Five (original and personal sin) of the doctrine of the Church of the Nazarene deals with this basic problem of human perversion (Purkiser, W. T. An Overview of Biblical Doctrine. USA: CNP, 1989, p.71).

This situation that encompasses the social, moral and spiritual areas was present and expanded in the midst of God's people when the prophet Ezekiel announced God's message. This message was about the punishment that God was going to place on His people. This punishment was necessary to stop and correct bad behavior, and the consequences that would follow for God's children. As we study this lesson, let's try to discover what the message was that God gave to Ezekiel for His people, and what His holy and eternal Word can tell us for our world today.

### I. God no longer protected His people because of their sins (Ezekiel 4, 5, 6:11-12)

Ezekiel was in Babylon, but the Jewish people in Jerusalem were suffering under the siege of Nebuchadnezzar's army. God had called and commissioned the prophet to announce His words, as well as to be a watchman looking out for the people (Ezekiel 3:4,16-17). God warned him that the task was serious and that he couldn't shirk his responsibility for any reason.

The Old Testament prophets were often told to drive home their message by strange enacted parables. Ezekiel was trying to get the people to understand that they were all going to spend some time in exile in Babylon as a result of their sins. Those in Babylon with Ezekiel didn't believe that Jerusalem could fall.

#### A. The sign of Jerusalem's siege (Ezekiel 4)

God asked him to act out a scene for the people to observe. God said: "Take a block of clay, put it in front of you and draw the city of Jerusalem on it. Then lay siege to it: Erect siege works against it, build a ramp up to it, set up camps against it and put battering rams around it. Then take an iron pan, place it as an iron wall between you and the city and turn your face toward it. It will be under siege, and you shall besiege it. This will be a sign to the people of Israel" (vv. 1-3).

Ezekiel had to lay siege to the city of Jerusalem. First by lying on his left side for 390 days, then turning over to his right side for 40 days. These days represented the sin of the Jews. He had to eat and drink very little and cook with human excrement, and then afterwards use cow dung as fuel. Then when he had done this, he announced God's message against the Jewish people in Jerusalem. God said: "Son of man, I am about to cut off the food supply in Jerusalem. The people will eat rationed food in anxiety and drink rationed water in despair, for food and water will be scarce. They will be appalled at the sight of each other and will waste away because of their sin" (4:16-18). God's message was that the Jews in Jerusalem were going to suffer a long exile because they had sinned against Him.



## **B. The sword of God's Judgment (Ezekiel 5)**

In chapter 5, Ezekiel is still by his clay besieged city. The parable continues: "Now, son of man, take a sharp sword and use it as a barber's razor to shave your head and your beard. Then take a set of scales and divide up the hair. When the days of your siege come to an end, burn a third of the hair inside the city. Take a third and strike it with the sword all around the city. And scatter a third to the wind... But take a few hairs and tuck them away in the folds of your garment. Again, take a few of these and throw them into the fire and burn them up. A fire will spread from there to all Israel" (vv. 1-3).

Because of their disobedience, terrible sufferings would come to them (vv.8-10). In the parable, God is the barber and the hairs are His people. A third of the people would die of plague or perish by famine inside the city, a third would be killed outside the city walls, and a third would try to escape but many would be caught and slaughtered (vv. 11-12). God's judgement would be devastating. The people would have to suffer for their idolatry and disobedience (vv. 14-17).

We often forget that while God is love, He is also the judge of all the world. His people will always be judged more severely because he wants to correct us so that we can shine as lights in a dark world..

### **Questions:**

- Comment on some current customs that show the moral degradation of society and how you stand up to it.
- Think of an image that represents a warning sign. What attitude do you take towards it?
- Name some signs around you that God might be using as a warning.

## **II. Judgement and restoration from idolatry (Ezekiel 6:1-10,13-14)**

### **A. God destroys the idol worshipers (vv. 1-7)**

The Jewish people down through the years had accepted many of the pagan practices of the Canaanites and other nations around them. One common practice was to worship idols in high places as part of fertility rites. God declared through his prophet: "I am about to bring a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places. Your altars will be demolished and your incense altars will be smashed; and I will slay your people in front of your idols" (vv.3b-4).

Maybe we don't actually worship idols like they did in the fifth century before Christ, still an idol is really anything that comes between us and God. So, it could be money, our jobs, fame or even our families. We need to heed the warning and worship God alone. God chastened the people so that they would know that He is the Lord (v.7). God chose to punish His people in order to restore them. After the exile, the Jews never worshipped idols again.

### **B. The restored remnant (vv.8-10)**

There is hope on the horizon: "But I will spare some, for some of you will escape the sword when you are scattered among the lands and nations. Then in the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember me—how I have been grieved by their adulterous hearts, which have turned away from me, and by their eyes, which have lusted after their idols. They will loathe themselves for the evil they have done and for all their detestable practices "(vv.8-9).

God promised that one day, some of those who had been exiled out of the land of Israel would remember their covenant God and call upon His name. They would repent, and the relationship would be restored. The phrase: "...and they will know that I am the Lord" is repeated three times in this passage (10, 13 and 14)

### **Questions:**

- Mention four aspects in which the authority of God is evidenced in everything that surrounds us; and four other aspects in which the will of God isn't respected.

## **III. The consequence of sin is destruction for God's people (Ezekiel 7:1-27)**

### **A. Imminent intervention of God in the face of evil**

People say and even preach that a loving God won't inflict punishment on His children. This sort of thinking could cause us Christians to relax, neglecting our devotional practices, and more serious still, to participate in situations and actions that are in direct opposition to the Lord's commands. Chapter 7 is a dramatic poem describing what will befall them because of their disobedience. God told them through His prophet: "I am about to pour out my wrath on you and spend my anger against you. I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices. I will not look on you with pity; I will not spare you.

I will repay you for your conduct and for the detestable practices among you. Then you will know that it is I the Lord who strikes you” (vv.8-9). We too need to take notice of this warning against being disloyal to our God, so each point and proposal must be analyzed as carefully and thoroughly as possible.

As we study Ezekiel chapter 7, it becomes evident that because of the sin of the chosen people, God’s patience has ended and their punishment is imminent (v.2). God decreed there would be “panic” instead of “joy” (v.7). “None of the people will be left, none of that crowd, none of their wealth, nothing of value” (v.11). “Those in the country will die by the sword; those in the city will be devoured by famine and plague” (v.15); they will be moaning each one for their sins (v.16); “Every face will be covered with shame...” (v.18); they will seek peace and they won’t find it (v.25). Calamity will follow calamity (v.26).

Therefore, we must pay serious attention to God’s message to His disobedient people. We shouldn’t ignore the warnings that we find in the Scriptures.

The passage ends with this serious message: “The king will mourn, the prince will be clothed with despair, and the hands of the people of the land will tremble. I will deal with them according to their conduct, and by their own standards I will judge them. Then they will know that I am the Lord” (v.27). It was the people’s sins that provoked God’s wrath, bringing destruction and hastening the end.

## **B. God’s purpose**

We have to ask the question: why did the Lord intervene in such a way in the midst of His people, in the midst of His sons and daughters he loved with eternal love? We find the answer to this question in Ezekiel 6:11: “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Strike your hands together and stamp your feet and cry out “Alas!” because of all the wicked and detestable practices of the people of Israel, for they will fall by the sword, famine and plague.” In chapter 7, the purpose is once again declared “And you will know that I am the Lord...” (vv.4, 9, 27). Hallelujah, Glory to God! This, indeed, is a beautiful purpose.

Let’s remember that God’s children suffered the consequences of not having kept God’s commandments and laws. In fact, they had not “even conformed to the standards of the nations around” them (Ez. 5:7). How can we explain that a loving God executes radical punishments on his children? We usually conceive of punishment as the

consequence of wrong actions. But it could also have a preventative purpose, attempting to eradicate evil before it spreads, like when the surgeons remove our appendix. Another example could be the need to amputate a leg because of gangrene. This could also be considered a sacrificial act of love, through which, God is activating an alarm, a warning, as an ambassador.

God’s wants us to recognize Him as the Almighty, the one that has authority over everything. I am writing this lesson in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic that has impacted humanity in the year 2020. Similarly, we could refer to an earthquake, or any other natural disaster, exclaiming: “Only God could do it!” and, this brings a sense of hope and comfort. Or we could say: “Only God can prevent it!” For having suffered calamity after calamity, all of us children of God, far from all pride, arrogance and self-sufficiency, must surrender before the Lord, recognizing Him again as Lord and God, saying: “Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Exodus 15:11; cf. Revelation 15:3-4)..

## **Questions:**

- Do you know the case of a person who accepted Jesus Christ after having suffered a shocking calamity in his or her life? Discuss what was the subsequent outcome in that person’s life.
- How does this statement “And ye shall know that I am the Lord...” relate to us? (Ezekiel 6:13) Are there unfavorable circumstances that help us to know who God is?

## **Conclusion**

If the Lord left us without discipline, we would be orphans, not dearly loved children. During the time of discipline, we don’t have joy, but afterwards, we’ll reap peaceful fruit. Hallelujah! The Lord deliver us from evil always. The only important way to overcome any circumstance is to pray and remain reconciled to God.



# Choose Protection or Punishment

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**Study passages:** Ezekiel 8, 9, 10

**Memory Verse:** “Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it” Ezekiel 9:4

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that our holy God protects those who seek holiness in obedience, but punishes those who don't keep His commandments.

## Introduction

The book of Ezekiel presents the prophet's vision of the glory of God in more than one occasion. In chapter 1, his vision is described in great detail, and in our passage for study this time, the vision appears again. We're limited in the way we can understand what God is like, and only have the Bible to reveal Him to us. So, we can learn from Ezekiel's experiences as the message is also relevant for our times. We too need to decide to follow and please God, persevering to the end, or resign and expose ourselves to the divine plans for those who reject His merciful call.

### I. Revelation of the abominations (Ezekiel 8:1-8)

#### A. God prepares Ezekiel

God established the priestly order after the people were freed from Egypt. Aaron was appointed as the first priest, together with his sons (Exodus 28:1). From then on, the priestly order carried through their descendants, among whom we find the prophet Ezekiel. It wasn't often that priests at that time prophesied. This is because, over time, the priests themselves didn't always stay close to God, accepting the negative influences of some of the kings with regard to the Temple (2 Chronicles 28:22-24, 33:1-7; Jeremiah 19:14-15, 20:1-2).

God speaks to men and women through the Holy Spirit, revealing His purposes. In 8:1, we find Ezekiel's meeting with the elders of Judah, all of them in captivity in exile. The elders were considered to be important members of society for the people of Israel. God had instructed Moses to select 70 elders who, after receiving the same Spirit that was in Moses, would help him carry the burden of leading the people (Numbers 11:16).

In this scene of Ezekiel sitting with the elders, we can see that he was an important person among the captives. Without a doubt, they recognized his close relationship with God and sought to consult with him. Ezekiel was serving the people, even in the midst of captivity. God knew the disposition of Ezekiel's heart, and He shared visions with the prophet to prepare the people for what was about to happen and to exhort the people to repent.

#### B. The abominations in the temple

Ezekiel had a vision in which he saw a figure: “from his waist down he was like fire, and from there up his appearance was as bright as glowing metal” (v.2). This being reached out his hand and took Ezekiel up by his hair and flew on a journey through the air to Jerusalem. There, he entered the Temple in his vision, at “the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood” (v.3). King Manasseh, years ago, had put a statue of Asherah in the temple of God as well as other abominations (2 Kings 21:7).

To his great surprise, he saw the same vision of the glory of God that he had seen on the banks of the Babylonian river (v.4). These two verses (3 and 4) reveal the two opposing attitudes: the people, defiant in their disobedience to God, who proved patient, preserving His glory in the temple despite the abominations. “Here it is worth remembering that, in the vision of the glory of God (Ezekiel 1:28), the prophet described a rainbow, which symbolizes the mercy of God (Genesis 9:13)” (Lacueva, Francisco, translator and adapter. Matthew Henry 's Bible Commentary. USA: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p.901). But His mercy is limited by His commandments, which state that the people were not to worship other Gods (Exodus 20:3).

Also, close to 150 years earlier, the prophet Isaiah had reiterated that God doesn't share His glory (Isaiah 42:8). God wouldn't tolerate this idolatry, and as a result, there would be terrible consequences for God's people. Although Ezekiel and some of the Jews had already been taken into captivity, the abomination persisted, in Jerusalem.

### Questions:

- What relationship do you see between Ezekiel's activity at the time of his vision, and God's choice to give him the vision? (vv.1-2).
- How do we today exemplify the defiant behavior of people and the patience of God?

## II. Protection of those who cry out to God (Ezekiel 9:1-4)

### A. The response to the abomination

After an extensive description of the abominations that occurred in the temple, committed both by priests as well as by the people, God's answered. The Message translation describes the scene vividly: "Then I heard him call out loudly, 'Executioners, come! And bring your deadly weapons with you.' Six men came down the road from the upper gate that faces north, each carrying his lethal weapon. With them was a man dressed in linen with a writing case slung from his shoulder. They entered and stood by the bronze altar" (vv. 1-2 MSG). This passage is very significant because the angels who once guarded Jerusalem had now come to destroy it. In these verses, we can see the situation of the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

We are reminded that Jesus too called the people to repent if they wanted to prevent punishment and disaster (Matthew 4:17). The Manual of the Church of the Nazarene states with regard to prevenient grace: "We believe that the grace of God through Jesus Christ is freely bestowed upon all people, enabling all who will to turn from sin to righteousness, believe on Jesus Christ for pardon and cleansing from sin, and follow good works pleasing and acceptable in His sight" (2017-2021. USA: CNP, 2018, p.29).

### B. The protection of those who seek God

Many of us live in countries where there's a feeling that justice isn't always carried out with due diligence and fairness. This reality is a manifestation of human depravity, resulting from sin. But just as we can choose wrong, through God's prevenient grace, we can identify and choose what is right. That was the experience of a

remnant of the inhabitants of Jerusalem at the time of Ezekiel. God showed His mercy on those who cried out and groaned for the abominations that were taking place.

Here we can see another insight into the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ towards humanity. "Then the Lord called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side..." (Ezekiel 9:3). He was charged to: "Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it" (v.4). We can see God's mercy towards those who conducted themselves well, and this is still a reality for those who choose to walk in a way that pleases God.

The angels bringing destruction were told that they were not to touch those who had the mark on their foreheads (v.6). Just as during the last plague in Egypt, the people of Israel put the mark of lamb's blood on the lintel of their houses so they wouldn't die (Exodus 12:7). This action symbolizes for us the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ poured out on the cross, and which is now the source of salvation. Injustice seems to triumph, but God sees and takes note, and there will be retribution and punishment. But just as the blood on the lintel in Jewish homes in Egypt saved them, Christ's blood will be our protection.

### Questions:

- What importance do you see in announcing punishment for those who defy God's commandments? (v.1).
- How do you think this applies today? Is there a difference between those who are faithful and those who are not? (v.4).

## III. Punishment of sinners (Ezekiel 9:5-11)

### A. God's punishment is just

The instructions the angels received were disturbing. They were ordered to "slaughter the old men, the young men and women, the mothers and children" (v.6a). That sounds very harsh. In the midst of it, we find God's mercy: "but do not touch anyone who has the mark" (v.6b). In Ezekiel 8, the prophet saw the abominations that were happening even in the temple. This was the evidence supporting God's judgment against Judah. It's also evidence that God is just, as the holy God that He is, and reminds us that He will repay each one according to what they have done (Revelation 22:12). He carefully looked after those who were faithful. They were not to be touched (Ezekiel 9:6).

In the vision Ezekiel saw that those who were faithful wouldn't suffer any damage as a consequence of God's punishment, which was directed towards those who had performed the abominations that had made God jealous and who were unwilling to repent.

### **B. God's mercy has limits**

In one of the Sunday School lessons, Patricia Picavea taught about the importance of preaching the full gospel. We tend to focus on those passages which are more comfortable for us, where we read that "God is love." But we also must teach and preach about God's judgements, and why God allows so many unpleasant events (The Path of Truth: Book 9. USA: CNP, 2017, p.93).

At the end of 2019, a pandemic broke out that produced suffering around the world, including death and loss of financial support. This stimulated various reactions. Some questioned why God allowed this, demonstrating our tendency to blame God for the consequences of our fallen nature and bad attitudes. Patricia's lesson reminds us that our understanding about God isn't complete if we just teach about God's love without including His justice. God's promises are accompanied by a command to be fulfilled. The Lord Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

God made a covenant with Solomon with regard to the temple in Jerusalem. The Lord told him that He would be observing, and He warned them that if they fell into idolatry, He would turn away and destroy them (1 Kings 9:1-9). God had been clear about this. Unfortunately, what they shouldn't have done, was what Ezekiel saw them do.

### **Questions:**

- What relationship do you find between the reasons for ordering the angels to destroy, and the society in which you live? (vv.5-6).
- How would you explain that God's love has limits?

## **IV. His glory leaves the temple (Ezekiel 10:1-22)**

### **A. The manifestation of God's glory**

In Ezekiel chapter 10, the prophet again sees the glory of God in the Temple. As a Jewish priest, he was aware that the presence of God was sublime. Seeing the glory of God is awesome. Ezekiel's description for us is a window into the imagination about what we'll see in heaven. It also implies, in the words of Paul (Romans 8:31,38), that if God is for us, who can be against us. But if God, who supports us with His immense power, is no longer with us, it will be truly terrifying.

So even though the glory of God was still there, the punishment of Jerusalem was to continue. There was a new instruction: "The Lord said to the man clothed in linen, 'Go in among the wheels beneath the cherubim. Fill your hands with burning coals from among the cherubim and scatter them over the city'" (Ezekiel 10:2). Matthew Henry comments that "this anticipated the fact that all would be turned to ashes at the moment of its destruction. This adds the purifying symbolism that fire has from the biblical perspective" ((Lacueva, Francisco) Matthew Henry's Bible Commentary, USA: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p.909).

### **B. The glory of God leaves the temple**

The reason Ezekiel saw the glory of God in that moment was truly sad. When the Temple was dedicated in the time of Solomon, the people were filled with joy when the glory of God appeared with a great cloud of smoke. It would now be burnt to the ground. Ezekiel's warning was that God's presence was leaving the Temple. As a priest, this must have been a very strong message for Ezekiel. The Temple no longer had any meaning without the glory of God.

We are God's Temple today. We too need to recognize that everything we do must be dedicated to God. Our bodies, temples of the Holy Spirit, must please Him. The beauty of the temple in Jerusalem in Ezekiel's vision was still preserved, but when the glory of God left, the symbols represented in the Holy of Holies no longer meant anything (vv.18-19). This vision affirms the zeal of God against idolatry and every sacrilege, which was why His glory left the temple.

Today we know that God doesn't dwell in temples made by human hands (Acts 17:24), but we ourselves are His temple (1 Corinthians 6:19). As long as we walk according to the biblical commandments, the Lord won't depart from us.

### **Questions:**

- What things today can make the presence of God move away from my life?
- What is for you the most significant teaching from the study of Ezekiel chapters 8, 9 and 10?

### **Conclusion**

Ezekiel's view of sin and its consequences exemplifies what happens in our lives when we, who have accepted the gospel, turn away from God. Today we are temples of the Spirit. If we persist in committing sin, God will remove His glory from our lives and we'll lose our salvation. We have to decide.



# Infallible Justice and Powerful Grace

Natalia Pesado (U.S.A.)

**Study passages:** Ezekiel 11

**Memory Verse:** “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh” Ezekiel 11:19.

**Lesson Purpose:** To reflect on infallible justice, powerful grace, and the Holy presence of God.

## Introduction

In the relationship between a father or a mother and their child, we can know that the more time they spend together, the more they get to know each other. During these times, many healthy qualities develop in that relationship, such as trust, emotional closeness, a sense of connection and mutual support. As children of God, we must develop in our hearts the desire to know more about our heavenly Father. By getting to know God more closely, our confidence in Him will grow naturally, and we'll feel more intimately related to our loving Creator. In today's lesson, we'll take a closer look at the characteristics of God's justice, grace and presence, by studying Ezekiel 11.

### I. The infallible justice of God (Ezekiel 11:1-13)

In the first part of our study passage, we find the prophet Ezekiel recounting a revelation and message that he had received from God. We see in verse 1 that “the Spirit” Himself came to where Ezekiel was and “lifted him up” and “brought” him to another part of the city. God was leading the prophet, in a supernatural way, to one of the doors of the Temple. There, He showed the prophet the leaders of the people, and what they were doing. God told him: “Son of man, these are the men who are plotting evil and giving wicked advice in this city” (v.2). The passage says that these leaders advised the people on whether they should build houses and/or settle in the city, and if they would be safe, or whether wars and difficult times were coming. These leaders, in their lack of wisdom and in their pride, made evil plans that left the people without protection and without security.

With regard to the misleading advice given by these leaders, the Beacon Bible Commentary explains that “the faithful prophets (referring to Jeremiah and Ezekiel)

wanted the people to accept God's judgment and endure Nebuchadnezzar's oppression” (Grider, J. Kenneth, et.al. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume IV. USA: CNP, 2007, p.566). However, the evil leaders told the people that they would be safe in the city instead of teaching them to repent before God. The Beacon Bible Commentary also expands: “Jeremiah had said that oppression would last 70 years (see Jeremiah 25:11-12). It was useless to try to escape from the yoke after only a few years - as Israel soon tried to do...” (op.cit. 2007, p.566).

We must recognize that the human tendency to avoid discipline happens very often, but in this passage, we can see that God wanted to truly transform them and there were no possible shortcuts. In the verses that follow, we see that God continued talking to Ezekiel and revealing to him that He knew “what was going through their minds” (v.5). The leaders had already “killed many people in this city and filled its streets with the dead” (v.6). Because of these crimes they had committed against the people they were supposed to care for, God was going to send them the punishment they feared (v.8).

The passage says that the leaders feared death by the sword, and that they apparently tried to protect themselves within the walls of the city. However, this injustice of protecting themselves while the people suffered didn't go unnoticed by the eyes of the all-seeing God. The message was clear: “You fear the sword, and the sword is what I will bring against you, declares the Sovereign Lord” (v.8). He added: “I will drive you out of the city and deliver you into the hands of foreigners and inflict punishment on you” (v.9).

When I was younger, it was difficult for me to understand the biblical passages that spoke of destruction as punishment from God. I had learned to trust God as a loving and very forgiving father.

Reading about the rebuke that God gave at times to His people, it seemed to me that I was reading about another sort of God. I was wondering how such a loving God could give such strong punishments. I think internally it scared me. My young mind couldn't reconcile two characteristics, love and justice, that seemed opposite. Have you ever had similar doubts as I did?

In my still immature mind, love and justice couldn't be part of the same God, but both are necessary. At that time in my life, I decided to keep trusting in God, even when there were parts I didn't understand, knowing that His goodness and His holiness would always have my very best interests at heart. As time progressed and I developed spiritually and emotionally and learned more about God, I have been able to understand more about God's justice.

I distinctly remember one summer day, traveling through the state of Colorado in the USA. On an excursion, climbing a hill in the Rocky Mountains, the song came to my mind that says: "Your justice is like a mighty mountain." I realized at that moment that I was on an imposing mountain which was immovable, and I reflected that this is like God's justice.

Another change happened when, in my job as a counselor, I started working with boys and girls who have faced situations of abuse. I had to recognize that the infallible justice of God is present even in the midst of all the injustices of today's society (such as social injustices, child abuse, abuse of power, etc.). This was a consolation that made the difference for me. So, I rejoiced that God's justice is infallible. I didn't understand before, but I now understand that it has an indispensable place in the world.

As we mature, we can understand that God's justice represents a perfect balance with His of love. If the love of Father had no justice, it would cease to be true love. True love needs to set limits to avoid destruction or permanent damage. We can understand the role of a father or a mother in guiding their children. The deep love they have for their children moves them also to set limits that prevent the children from harming themselves. For example, we raise our voice to stop a child who is about to cross the street when a car is coming, or grab onto a child forcibly very close to a cliff from which they might fall down. In those moments of hardness or firmness, the parent isn't being unfair (even though he may be perceived to be so by an immature child). But the opposite is true. The parent is being loving and fair in protecting their child. So, we can conclude that the infallible justice of God punishes sin but is simply an essential part of God's infinite love.

## Questions:

- How have you understood the justice of God in your life?
- Has your perspective about the importance of justice changed with the passage of time and the development of your maturity?

## II. The mighty grace of God (Ezekiel 11:16-20)

In the second part of our study passage for today (vv.16-20), we see a shocking description in the message that God was giving to Ezekiel. The Lord continued talking to the prophet, detailing His wonderful plan of redemption that didn't end with the destruction of evil leaders (see point I of this lesson and previous verses of the passage). God had chosen to work in the lives of the Israelites who had been scattered to other cities, who had been forgotten by the people who had remained in Jerusalem.

God revealed to the prophet that His plan was that He himself would be "a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone" (v.16). There these exiled people would be able to meet with and worship the Lord. The Beacon Bible Commentary explains: "But those who had been scattered abroad and who served the Lord, would receive God's mercy...for "a little while." God would be a "sanctuary in the midst of the lands where they had gone"" (Grider, J. Kenneth, et. al. Beacon Bible Commentary, Vol. IV. USA: CNP, 2007, p.566).

The plan also included collecting them from foreign towns where they were, and gathering them together in the holy city of Jerusalem where they would live reunited in peace and safety (v.17). God also told them that for this, it was necessary to remove all their "vile images and detestable idols" (v.18).

Finally, God's plan speaks of a complete restoration for His people, which included not only being brought back to Jerusalem, but also included an unprecedented transformation on the inside. Verse 19 first reveals to us the human condition: having hearts of stone. The characteristics of such a heart are sad and painful. Stones are hard and rough and may have sharp points; they can be very cold or very hot, and depending on their weight, can cause a lot of damage if they fall on a person or animal. Also, stones are quintessential examples of something totally insensitive and lifeless. Stones don't have any intentional interaction with anything around them.

Secondly, verse 19 reveals to us a great human need: having hearts of flesh. The characteristics of a heart of flesh are totally opposite. Human skin and muscles have a high level of emotional sensitivity. Our skin feels the temperature of the environment, the quality of the air around us, and are sensitive to any touch it receives, whether it's a sting from a mosquito, a hair that falls on the skin, or a caress of another human being. Human flesh is the best example of something that totally interacts and responds to the surrounding environment.

And finally, the passage reveals giving people new hearts is possible for God. He says that He himself will give us all the heart of flesh that every human being needs. The Beacon Bible Commentary describes that "they will have pure hearts; that is, they will be motivated by one thing only - God's will...like Jesus had and he made it possible for us" (Grider, J. Kenneth, et al., Vol. IV. USA: CNP, 2007, p.567). We can see a similarity to Deuteronomy 30:6 which says, "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your offspring, that you love Jehovah your God with all your heart" (op.cit. p.567).

It's impressive and hopeful. We see the creative power of God acting within us, bringing new life to our souls. We see that God wants to change our hearts made of insensitive stone into hearts of sensitive flesh that feel love and compassion for what is around, for the environment, wildlife and for other human beings. God wants to change our existence from being "stony" to being truly human.

It's here that we see the mighty grace of God acting in conjunction with His justice. Even though it was our own sin that caused our hearts to be like stone, God's grace reaches us in our damaged condition and gifts us with a new heart. I beg you to reflect on your own desire to live humanely and sensibly with God's help, and discard the pieces of stone that may stay in your personality and heart. The greatest desire of God is to give us new life. Let's thank Him for his almighty and incomparable grace!

### **Questions:**

- How have you experienced God's grace in your life?
- How would you describe the differences between a heart of stone and a heart of flesh? Could you give an example of what they look like in daily life?

### **III. The holy presence of God (Ezekiel 11:22-25)**

In verse 20, we read of the new condition that God wants to give to His people. By changing our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, our capacities are totally different. We see that now we can live a life apart from evil, according to the desires of God's heart. We see that we can now walk in the Lord's ways and keep His commandments and fulfill them, and finally, to be God's people. Having this united relationship with Him is the most wonderful thing that can happen to us in our existence, and it's exactly what God wants us to experience with Him.

God's presence is holy, and He wants to give us that cleansing from all unrighteousness. In the last verses of our study passage for today (vv.22-25), we see that the Glory of the Lord is leaving Jerusalem because God's holiness cannot remain where there is sin. Frank Moore, a university professor and theologian, explained that in a certain way, it's as if God was "allergic to sin" ("Personal Notes from my Theology classes in Spain: 2000). He cannot stand the smell of it; sin brings Him total discomfort and pain, and it's like the smoke of fire to the eyes. Sadly, God's people had chosen to follow harmful practices that separated them from Him.

It's important to reflect on the figure of the presence of God moving away from the city. Knowing how deep was the Father's love towards His people, this estrangement surely hurt Him very much. Now the decision was in the hands of the people as to what they were going to do: continue to do evil practices, or approach God in obedience. I think today we have the same decision before us: will we choose to do things that harm us and others, or will we choose to be close to the holy presence of God in obedience.

### **Questions:**

- How has the holiness of God worked in your life? Can you share any recent examples?
- How does your heart feel when you read that the presence of God left the city? Why?

### **Conclusion**

God is aware of His children, and when they are on a path of destruction, He moves to intervene with His infallible justice to redeem the people from their evil ways. God moves to attract His children back to His divine arms that are always filled with powerful grace that can transform every human heart. God's presence is holy, and we must meet Him there, because that's His desire for us, and it's the best place for our souls.





# God calls His People to Repent

Pedro Salinas Huaches (Ecuador)

**Study passages:** Ezekiel 12, 13, 14, 16, 17

**Memory Verse:** "Therefore say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: None of my words will be delayed any longer; whatever I say will be fulfilled,' declares the Sovereign Lord." Ezekiel 12:28.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that God calls His children to walk in a right relationship with Him, and that rebellion, false prophecy, idolatry and infidelity distance us from God and make His judgment fall on those who practice such sins.

## Introduction

We belong to a generation that is self-sufficient and wants to be in the limelight everywhere. The book of Ezekiel reminds us that God is the center, He is Lord, and He is seated on His lofty throne, ruling over all His creation.

In 598 BC, King Jehoiakim died and His son Jehoiachin was crowned king. This new king suffered Nebuchadnezzar's siege, which ended in 597 B.C. Jehoiachin surrendered, and was taken prisoner (Ezekiel 17:12). He was in the first deportation to Babylon, which also included Ezekiel.

Nebuchadnezzar made Mattaniah king of Judah, (instead of his nephew Joaquín), changing his name to Zedekiah (2 Kings 24:17), and made him take an oath of faithfulness (Ezekiel 17:12-14).

It was during these circumstances that God revealed himself to Ezekiel in exile to denounce the sins of His people and call them to repent. They urgently needed to change how they were behaving before God.

## I. Rebellion (Ezekiel 12, 17)

Ezekiel had a difficult task because God said that His chosen people were rebellious. They must accept God's rebuke and repent. (12:2-3,9, 17:12).

### A. A people who were spiritually blind and deaf (Ezekiel 12:2).

God said to the prophet: "Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear; for they are a rebellious people" (v.2).

They didn't respond positively to what they could see or to what they heard from the servants, the prophets. They showed radical and deliberate opposition to God. God asked Ezekiel to perform some symbolic actions. Ezekiel had to be like a sign to the house of Israel (Ezekiel 12:6). What he acted out in his little drama was what would happen to the Israelites who were still in Jerusalem (12:11). It wasn't time to pretend, to act dumb, thinking they knew better, and disregard God's warnings. They had to open their eyes to see and unstop their ears to hear, and accept God's message in obedience and humble submission to the Lord. Ezekiel outlined what was going to happen.

1. The inhabitants of Jerusalem were going to be banished, and King Zedekiah would be captured (12:1-16). For this, Ezekiel had to act out a drama before the people. He had to prepare equipment for a long march towards captivity (v.3-4). Verse 7 summarizes what he did: "So I did as I was commanded. During the day I brought out my things packed for exile. Then in the evening I dug through the wall with my hands. I took my belongings out at dusk, carrying them on my shoulders while they watched." When the people asked him what he was doing he explained that it was a prophecy announcing the exile and the unhappy end of King Zedekiah who had not listened to the voice of God (12:8-16, 17:13-21, 2 Kings 25:3-7).
2. Ezekiel told the people that they were going to suffer (12:17-20). "The inhabited towns will be laid waste and the land will be desolate" (v. 20). This was fulfilled in the year 588 BC.

The Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar II laid siege to Jerusalem. The city fell after an 18-month siege, following which the Babylonians pillaged the city and destroyed the temple and took the rest of the people as slaves to Babylon, where they joined the first deportees who had been taken captive in 597 BC.

3. The Word of the Lord will be fulfilled (12:21-28). The people didn't believe that God's message was going to come to pass (v.22). But God warned them: "The days are near when every vision will be fulfilled" (23) and "I will fulfill whatever I say, declares the Sovereign Lord" (v.25), and time confirmed it. Others thought that Ezekiel was prophesying "about the distant future" in the lifetime of future generations (v.27);

Such was the rebellion that they had no intention of considering God's Word "If I don't like it, it's not for me." This logic is still around today. God continues to invite us to "see" and "hear" with humble hearts ready to obey Him.

### **B. Evil abounds**

The people would be judged because they were wicked (Ezekiel 12:19). In their rebellion, they turned their backs on God, refusing to hear His voice; each did what they wanted. The proliferation of evil leads us to our own destruction. God had to intervene to rescue His creatures from destroying themselves.

### **C. The Lord will cause a new shoot to grow**

In chapter 17, we find a poetic allegory of the two great eagles (vv.1-10). God himself explained the meaning (vv.11-21), and ended with a promise of hope for Israel (vv.22-24). The first eagle, Babylon, took the heart of the cedar (King Jehoiakim and Jeconiah) and moved them to Babylon. In its place, he planted a vine (Zedekiah) under his shade, with a sworn covenant in the name of God. But instead of fulfilling it, the vine turned to another great eagle, Egypt.

This was an act of rebellion against God himself, who wouldn't overlook it (v.19). The rebellious house had to accept God's plans and prepare their heart for conversion (v.12). They had to abandon their false securities and rely on the only solid refuge: The Lord Himself. But God, in His love and faithfulness, would not allow them to be completely destroyed.

Only God could plant on His holy mountain a shoot of the Davidic cedar and grow it into one leafy tree, a leafy tree that would welcome all the scattered children of Israel (vv.22-24).

God is showing us that He is the true protagonist and Lord of history, rather than some economic, social or political power.

### **Questions:**

- What was God referring to when he said that his people neither see nor hear? (12:2).

## **II. False prophecy (Ezekiel 13)**

Israel didn't listen to God, but paid attention to the voice of false prophets.

### **A. False prophets and their message**

False prophets are those who speak from their own imagination (vv.2,17) and "follow their own spirit and have seen nothing" (v.3). These are fake messages that haven't come from God. In short, they follow their own desires and try to please those who are listening (2 Timothy 4:3). "Their visions are false and their divinations a lie..." (13:6). It wasn't just men who were false prophets as Ezekiel mentions, but also daughters of the people "who prophesy out of their own imagination" (v.18).

In moments of crisis, people search for a word that might make them feel safe from the fears that oppress them, but these Jews weren't willing to listen to what the Lord had to say to them. It seemed better to resort to false news that may have relieved their suffering momentarily. But this was a foolish way to act. God doesn't just tell us what we want to hear. He speaks and we have to be willing to submit to His Word.

God's prophets announced the imminent fall of Jerusalem and the oppression by her adversaries, but the false prophets spoke of peace, feeding false hopes (vv.10,16). God expects His prophets to warn the people and stand in the breach as God's messengers and intercessors for the people before God (v.5). The real prophet doesn't just scratch the surface of the problem, but deals with the consequences. He goes to the root of the problem, announcing God's Word to encourage the people to repent and be reconciled to God.

God rebuked the false prophets who were leading the people astray, saying: “Peace, when there is no peace”, and building “a flimsy wall” covered, “with whitewash” saying that they had come from God (v.10). When false prophecy is clothed in a guise of religiosity and spirituality, it can even deceive the elect (Matthew 24:24). But God himself promised to tear down the wall they had covered with whitewash and to “level it to the ground so that its foundation will be laid bare” (Ezekiel 13:14).

### **B. The effect of false prophecy**

The Lord warned of the effect of these fake prophecies: “By lying to my people, who listen to lies, you have killed those who should not have died and have spared those who should not live” (v.19). Verse 22 continues “Because you disheartened the righteous with your lies, when I had brought them no grief, and because you encouraged the wicked not to turn from their evil ways and so save their lives.” God wanted the people to repent, but these false messengers were getting in God’s way. God sought repentance. Ezekiel 33:11 is a cry from God’s heart: “As surely as I live...I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live...” God doesn’t despise a “broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17).

### **C. What will the Lord Do with Them?**

God is against false prophets (Ezekiel 13:8), and there’s nothing worse than falling into the hands of a living God (Hebrews 10:31). Ezekiel said that they would be excluded from the “council of the God’s people” (Ezekiel 13:9b), ultimately resulting in their death (Deuteronomy 18:20). God declared: “I am against your magic charms with which you ensnare people like birds and I will tear them from your arms; I will set free the people that you ensnare like birds” (Ezekiel 13:20). God promised to “tear off” their “veils” and save His people from their hands and free them from their power (v.21). His people are precious in His sight, and He won’t allow false teachers to continue deceiving His flock. Let’s pray that God continues doing this today.

#### **Questions:**

- What are the central characteristics of false prophets?

- Do you believe that there are false prophets today? How can you identify them?

### **III. Idolatry (Ezekiel 14)**

God showed Ezekiel the tremendous aberrations and idolatrous acts that the people and their leaders were doing in Jerusalem, even in the temple (Ch.8). God definitely won’t be present where other gods are worshipped. This is the reason why God’s glory left the temple (Ch.10). Idolatry isn’t just about worshipping idols and images. In Ezekiel 14:1-11, we can see that idolatry is a problem of the heart. The leaders of the people who went to talk to Ezekiel had set up their idols in their hearts (v.3). Because of these idols they had turned away from following the Lord (v.7).

Idolatry removes God from the throne of the believer’s heart, causing other things like objects or people to have first place in their deepest affections. When God isn’t on the throne of a person’s heart, something else is there. God cannot reign, and when He doesn’t reign, someone or something else does. So, we despise the call of the Lord to love Him with all our hearts (Matthew 22:37).

God cannot have fellowship with the idolater because he hates idolatry, and won’t accept anything less than the throne of our hearts. God told Ezekiel in the form of a question: “Should I let them inquire of me at all?” (Ezekiel 14:3). God will respond to that person with a multitude of idols (v.4): He will try to “recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted” Him for their idols” (v.5), but if they don’t repent, God said: “I will set my face against them and make them an example and a byword. I will remove them from my people” (v.8).

God doesn’t want to turn away from us, but he cannot have fellowship with the one who harbors idols in their heart. The Lord’s invitation is to repent, to abandon the idols and abominations (v.6).

#### **Questions:**

- Where does the central problem of idolatry lie? (v.3,7).
- Looking back, do you think you still harbor idols in your heart? What will you do from now on?

## IV. Infidelity (Ezekiel 16)

The structure of this chapter is as follows: a) A complaint of Hebrew infidelity and ingratitude (vv.1-34); b) A sentence for the crimes committed (vv.35-43); c) A confrontation of Jerusalem with other cities of Palestine (vv.44-58), and d) God's grace and forgiveness for His unfaithful wife (vv.59-63). Verse 2 sates: "The Lord says to Jerusalem: Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite" (9th-18th centuries B.C.)

Discarded, she was about to bleed to death (v.6). God took pity on her, helped her to grow and develop, took her for His wife (v.8, the Mosaic covenant). From the hand of the Lord, she grew and became a numerous and prosperous people, (vv.9-14, representing the reign of David and Solomon, the time of Israel's greatest splendor). But suddenly, Jerusalem turned her back on Him, and didn't remember all that God had done for her (v.15). She left her faithful and loving benefactor to surrender to the arms of her lovers.

Let's look at some of the central aspects in this whole story:

### A. The Covenant

God took a people for himself and made a covenant with them. They were to be the Lord's special treasure above all other nations, a kingdom of priests and a holy people (Exodus 19:5-6). The covenant with Israel was a token of God's love for His creation, bearing witness that He is a God who wants to relate to us. God revealed Himself to the people as a holy God, and His desire was that they might walk with Him.

### B. Israel's unfaithfulness

God was clear in affirming that Jerusalem (Israel) had been unfaithful (v.15), to the point of calling her a "prostitute" (v.35). But she wasn't an ordinary prostitute because "All prostitutes receive gifts", but they gave gifts to all their lovers, bribing them to come from everywhere for their illicit favors (vv.33-34). Israel wasn't fulfilling the purposes for which God had made them His people. On the contrary, she had fallen so low that her sins didn't compare with those committed by Samaria and Sodom, and was even worse than they were (v.51).

But what happened to Israel? Why did it get to that state? God himself gives the answer: God's people believed themselves to be self-sufficient and independent of their Lord. Ezekiel said it with these words: "But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute" (v.15).

### C. The faithfulness of the Lord

God himself had to intervene to rescue His beloved wife. His judgments and discipline always proceed from His grace and love for His children. Tozer puts it this way: "All judgment of wrath in the history of the world has been a holy act of conservation. The holiness of God, the wrath of God and the health of creation are inseparably linked. The wrath of God is his absolute intolerance towards everything that degrades or destroys" (Tozer, A. W. *The Knowledge of the Holy*. USA: Editorial life, 1996, p. 116).

God reaffirms His faithfulness by disciplining His people: "because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son" (Hebrews 12:6). This discipline is always for our good. God never forgets his covenant (v.60). He's always faithful. The people of Israel would be able to see this attitude in the future and the way God had dealt with them, and they would be ashamed (v.61); but they will rejoice in His grace, love and mercy to them (v.63). And they will know that He is the Lord.

### Questions:

- What is the reason that had caused Israel to come to such a deplorable state before God? (v.15).
- What things turn people away from God today?

### Conclusion

God longs to walk in a loving relationship with each human being. He approaches and seeks to make His holy name known to us. He waits for an answer to His grace and love that He has shown us. He longs that we should be willing to give up sin. If we're going to walk with Him, there's only one way; God himself decided to intervene through Jesus Christ to set us free from the slavery of sin, so that we might bring glory to His name.

**Study passages:** Ezekiel 18, 20-32

**Memory Verse:** “The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them” Ezekiel 18:20.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that sin brings serious consequences to us when we practice it and don't repent.

## Introduction

Chapters 18 to 32 of Ezekiel tell us the sad consequences that sin brings. There is in the Bible a long history describing the sins of the Hebrew nation. The chosen people had stubbornly sinned continually and acted against the will of their Lord. He had freed them with a mighty hand from Pharaoh's dominion in Egypt, given them statutes, decrees and regulations, but they didn't want to listen to His instructions. In this lesson, we'll see this extensively.

### I. Each person is responsible before God for their own sin (Ezekiel 18)

The human tendency is to evade responsibility for sin. We see this in the Bible with Adam and Eve when they sinned and were confronted by God (Genesis 3:12-13).

#### A. Individual responsibility

We've been endowed with freedom to discern between good and evil. We're responsible before God, to whom we have to give an account for our acts. Thus, we cannot spend our lives blaming our ancestors, the environment, much less God. We must acknowledge our guilt, turn away, and move on.

#### B. Individual Consequences

The Bible says: “... The one who sins is the one who will die” (Ezekiel 18:4,20). No one will die or pay the consequences for someone else's sins. Neither will anyone be saved or justified before God through another person's just acts. In Ezekiel's time, people tried not to assume responsibility for their

sin, blaming their ancestors. They were hiding behind a common proverb: “The fathers ate sour grapes, and children's teeth are set on edge...” (v.2) The Lord said: “‘As surely as I live,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die’” (vv.3-4).

#### C. Individual conversion

God calls the sinner to repentance, to confess their sins and live in righteousness. This is the way to escape death and divine judgment. God promises that those who repent and believe in Christ will receive forgiveness and new life. The impious one who repents obtains mercy because God is good and full of grace.

#### D. Life and death

God promised life for the person who does what is right (v.9), and for the good son of a bad father (vv.14-17), and for the wicked who turns away from their wickedness and sins (vv.21-23). They won't die. But God says that the unrighteous man should die (v.18) as well as the bad son of a just father (vv.10-13), as well as the righteous person who returns to their wicked ways (v.24). They won't live.

#### Questions:

- How do you interpret the saying: “The fathers ate sour grapes, and children's teeth are set on edge...” (v.2)?
- What is the meaning of individual responsibility before God?

## II. Damnation and Destruction for God's People (Ezekiel 20-24)

### A. History of Israel's idolatry (20:1-32)

The elders of the people of Israel came to consult with the prophet Ezekiel to inquire of the Lord (v.1). We aren't told what their conversation was about, but we can see from the text that God didn't want to answer their questions (vv.3-4). The prophet's response from God was a denunciation of the nation's apostasy. He listed their past sins and pointed out that the history of God's people had been a history of constant infidelity and idolatry.

1. **In Egypt** (vv.5-9): Egypt was an idolatrous country. Ezekiel claimed, in the name of God, that Israel had stubbornly worshipped idols, and even when they left Egypt, they still clung on to those idols. God asked them to "get rid of their vile images," but they didn't want to.
2. **In the desert** (vv.10-27): verses 13, 16, 21 and 24 show the rebellion of the nation of Israel. God denounced that they didn't walk by keeping His decrees, which they discarded, desecrating the Sabbaths, and their "eyes lusted after their parents' idols."
3. **In Canaan** (vv.28-32): In the Promised Land, Israel continued to disobey God, adopting the centers of worship and rites of the Canaanite religion. They broke the Mosaic Code by offering sacrifices in these centers instead of offering them in the temple or tabernacle (Deuteronomy 12:1-5).

God commanded His people that when they conquered the land of Canaan, they had to destroy all the high places (Exodus 23:24). When the Israelites conquered the land of Canaan, they began to destroy the high places and the deities of the Canaanites, but it wasn't done completely (Ezekiel 20:28-32).

### B. God's judgment: fire and sword (20:45-21:32)

The fire describes the invading forces, as well as the wrath of God against His unfaithful people. God's judgment fell on the south like a raging forest fire. (v.47). God sent war that would consume "all your trees" (v.47). In other words, everyone would be punished.

The sword is a symbol of divine judgment. This "sword sharpened and polished" was ready to be unsheathed (21:9). It wasn't a blunt sword, but one that had been carefully prepared and preserved for the slaughter. This weapon represented the king of Babylon whom God was going to use to execute judgment on His people.

King Nebuchadnezzar was the sword. Ezekiel saw him and his army on the march to besiege and destroy Jerusalem. On his journey, this king found himself at a crossroads and a dilemma (21:21). Which of the two paths should he take first? Should he take the ones to the Ammonites, taking their capital Rabbah, or the road directly to Jerusalem. In his uncertainty, Nebuchadnezzar appealed to divination to make the right decision (v.22). The divination pointed to Jerusalem; therefore, he immediately marched against that city. It was already ready for destruction. Although Nebuchadnezzar didn't realize it, the Lord had made him choose.

### C. Judgment on the nation

God told Israel: "...I am against you..." (21:3). It was a very harsh statement and bad news for the king and His people. Israel had rejected the Lord who had called them in profound love. Now, they had become an enemy. The dethronement of Zedekiah, and those who surrounded him, was a sure thing.

God's people were guilty of idolatry, shedding of blood, despoiling widows and orphans (vv.6-7), aberrant acts such as incest (vv.7,10-11), profaning holy things (Ezekiel 22:8), usury, avarice and extortion (v.12), swearing falsely (v.9), robbery, fraud, greed, dispossession with violence and injustice (Ezekiel 22:7,12), and of sexual immorality, including adultery, fornication and incest (Ezekiel 22:11-12). Therefore, God's severe punishment was inevitable (Ezekiel 22:13-16). All strata of society shared the same guilt and responsibility: rulers, priests, prophets and the people in general. They were all in it together.

### D. Two adulterous sisters (Chapters 23-24)

Oholah (vv.5-10) and Oholibah (vv.11-23) represented Samaria, the capital of Israel, and Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, respectively.

They were both corrupt and behaved as prostitutes, committing spiritual adultery with their lovers, that is, with the heathen idolatrous nations. Of Oholibah, it's said that she surpassed her sister in her fornication (v. 11). Jerusalem was besieged for 18 months before the city fell. The king of Babylon was ready to attack, and no one could enter or leave the city. The siege ended with the destruction of the city by fire.

### Questions:

- The sin of idolatry was the main cause for which God judged and punished his people. Do you think that sin still exists today? Explain.
- Israel and Judah stumbled over the worship of other gods: Baal, Moloch, Ashtoreth, among others. List some gods that God's people might worship today.

### III. Damnation and destruction of the nations (Ezekiel 25-32)

In these chapters, there are seven prophecies directed against seven nations that God was going to judge and punish. Those nations were Ammon (25:1-7); Moab (25:8-11); Edom (25:12-14); Philistia (25:15-17); Terebinth (26-28:19); Sidon (28:20-26) and Egypt (29, 30, 31, 32). Those nations became subject to God's wrath and judgment because they held God's people in contempt and hated them. They had also expressed joy and had celebrated when God's people had fallen. They considered themselves to be active enemies of God's people, and their arrogance and deification became a challenge to the Lord of Hosts.

#### A. Biblical principles of this segment

Let's start with a definition of some biblical principles. A principle is "a fundamental rule or idea that governs thought or behavior" (Dictionary CODESA, volume 3. Spain: Ediciones Credimar, s.a., p.760). Applied to the Bible, principles become those truths, Biblical rules, or laws that govern our thoughts and Christian conduct.

1. **The principle of the sovereignty of God.** Sovereignty is the Lord's right to totally govern the universe because He is Creator and sustainer of creation, including the nations, along with their rulers and people. It must be said, then, that God is the Lord of all nations, no

matter how pagan they may be. In Ezekiel, we find a reaffirmation of the lordship of God. In that capacity, He has the prerogative to execute His righteous judgments on rebellious people. God is Lord of all the world. As such, there's no nation that can escape His judgment, and just as He condemned and punished His own people, He will condemn and punish other nations, who, like His people, rebel against him.

2. **The principle of God's justice** is shown by His faithfulness to himself and His Covenant. Because He is a righteous God, He'll always act in accordance with His holy nature. In the Bible, justice includes God's wrath on wickedness and the destruction of the wicked. God is just, and His justice demands the punishment of the guilty. God won't presume innocent or leave in impunity those who oppress and despise His people. Sooner or later, God intervenes to do justice to those who suffer from injustice.
3. **The principle of prophetic fulfillment.** Biblical prophecy has always been, and always will be, fulfilled. Everything that God announced will come to those heathen nations, and what He says will come to pass today or tomorrow, it will be strictly complied with.
4. **The principle of the holiness of God.** Our Holy God is pure and upright in His relationships and dealings with humanity. His holy character rejects sin in any of its manifestations. He doesn't tolerate sin or let sinners get away with it.
5. **Principle of temporality.** Any human system that isn't subject to weakness and temporary existence doesn't exist, has never existed, or ever will exist. All nations, empires or human systems aren't eternal or all-powerful. Their entire political, military and economic successes are marked by time. Therefore, taking refuge in such systems is to put hope and trust in what is fragile and lacks strength and vigor.
6. **The principle of sowing and reaping.** The nations mentioned in this section sowed evil, idolatry, injustice, rebellion, hatred, revenge and mockery. This brought them the just judgment of God that resulted in their destruction. The gravity of sin always brings grave repercussions.

**7. The principle of exclusivity of God.** The Lord doesn't share His glory with anyone. Humans, however powerful they may be, shouldn't arrogate the power of our Creator and Lord, or presume to be divine, deserving of worship, because this is usurpation, irreverence and a challenge to the Lord of hosts. Idolatry, pride and human self-exaltation are an abomination before God, and are violations of the first commandment (Exodus 20:3).

**8. Principle of the vengeance of the Lord.** Revenge is God's prerogative, not ours (Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30). God created justice, and took vengeance on the enemies of His people. The Lord settled accounts with them.

### **B. Lessons we learn**

1. We shouldn't rejoice when God punishes guilty men or women because this can bring His wrath upon us.
2. Human pride and boasting will be brought down and humiliated by the incomparable God of Hosts (Isaiah 10:33; Daniel 4:37). You have to understand that God exists, and He judges and punishes the sinner.
3. Although Nebuchadnezzar was called "king of kings" (Ezekiel 26:7) because of the fact that many kings had to submit to him, Jesus Christ, from eternity to eternity, is the only King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 17:14, 19:16) established by our heavenly Father as powerful Sovereign over the whole world.
4. Our trust must be in God and not in riches, fame or power. Many people put their trust in riches, which they worship as if it were a god, but when they lose it all, or in the end, they are left alone and unprotected.
5. God is Lord of all the world, and only those who seek Him and serve him can enjoy the manifestation of His glory and power in all aspects of their lives.
6. We need to know who God is, and love him and serve him with all our hearts: "Give me, my son, your heart" (Proverbs 23:26a).

7. People in general, and Christians in particular, need to learn from Jesus Christ and the Word of God about how to live holy lives that please God, and thus avoid divine judgment.

Good living has to do with having a personal relationship with God, who is good and the source of all goodness, as well as loving and serving our neighbors. Contrasted with this, bad living is life far from God, immersed in sin and subject to the just judgment and wrath of God.

### **Questions:**

- What was the main reason why God destroyed the four pagan nations of Ammon, Moab, Edom and Philistia?
- Are there any people today who claim to be gods like the kings of Tyre and Egypt did? Justify your answer.
- How can we apply the message of the prophet Ezekiel in our day?

### **Conclusion**

Ezekiel chapters 18 to 32 show us that when people, nations and rulers sin against God and don't repent, they will have to face the just judgment of God. When this comes, there will be no way to escape except by taking refuge in Jesus Christ. Divine justice corresponds with human guilt when we sin. God cannot be mocked, for whatever we sow, we'll reap.





# The Watchman and the Good Shepherd

Macedonio Daza (Bolivia)

**Study passages:** Ezekiel 33, 34

**Memory Verse:** “Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?’” Ezekiel 33:11.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that implicit in divine restoration are human responsibilities that must be fulfilled.

## Introduction

The Bible contains central themes such as the love of God, the sinful condition of humans, the way of salvation, the condemnation of sinners, and the eternal happiness of believers. In this lesson, based on the book written by the prophet Ezekiel, we’ll find a summary of those central themes: The divine love described in the Good Shepherd looking after His sheep; The condition of humanity scattered, wounded and exposed to the enemy; The importance of hearing God calling through the watchman who says, “Turn back, turn from your evil ways,” a promising future for the sinner who repents and perseveres (Ezekiel 33:11); and the peace that God promises for His kingdom now and in the future.

In the first chapters, the prophet Ezekiel had already warned about the fall of Jerusalem and Israel’s destruction and punishment. There were even prophecies for neighboring nations. But from chapter 33 on, the message that Ezekiel gave from the Lord changed because the exiles heard the news that Jerusalem had fallen. “After this event his main care was to comfort the exiled Jews through promises of future rescue and restoration to their land, encouraging them with the assurance of future blessings” (Pearlman, Myer. *Through the Bible. USA: Editorial LIFE, 1952, p.147*).

Finally, we’ll see the alliance of peace that brings blessing, which is the New Covenant fulfilled through Jesus Christ.

## I. A Watchman who brings the Word (Ezekiel 33:1-34:10,17-22)

“Ezekiel is essentially a preacher of hope and restoration that he must articulate with creativity and care. His redemptive message comes in the middle of a series of complex national and international events” (Pagan, Samuel. *The Prophetic Books of the Old Testament, Spain: Clie, 2016, p.85*).

### A. The Watchman

To restore Israel, God needed someone to speak out on His behalf. In our study passage, we see that one becomes a watchman in two ways: a) by direct assignment from God: “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel...” (Ezekiel 33:7, cf. 3:17). The prophet was commissioned to do a great job on behalf of God; b) The other aspect is the election of the people: “...the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman...” (33:2b).

Our current church practices and government are built on the biblical foundation that leadership is by assignment and also by the people’s choice. So in the case of those who practice episcopal government, God assigns ministerial tasks to the church leadership. On the other hand, the choice exercised by the people comes through a process of election practiced by the congregation. There are also those who practice a combined form of the aforementioned ecclesiastical governments.

## B. The Message

It is God who sends the message verbally as well as non-verbally. We find the first case in the following verses: "...so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me" (v.7). Here specifically, the prophet had to fulfill his task as one who receives God's message and delivers it to the people. His message for God is for both the wicked (vv.8,14) as well as the righteous (v.13).

But God also uses non-verbal ways of communicating: "... When I bring the sword against a land..." (v.2). God allows some incident, even a natural phenomenon, through which he communicates: "Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I have made the land a desolate waste because of all the detestable things they have done" (v.29).

The writer of Hebrews writes: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways..." (Hebrews 1:1). However, the greatest way that God has communicated to us is through Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:2).

## C. The responsibility of the watchman

Here the prophet Ezekiel had to fulfill the task of delivering the Word of God. The prophet is seen as a medium or channel through which the divine message was transmitted. We find that Ezekiel did his job faithfully: "Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11, 34:8); "Then the word of the Lord came to me..." (33:23). "The Sovereign Lord says..." (33:27, 34:30; cf. 34:2,10,11,17,20). The message doesn't come from the prophet; it's not his message because it comes from God. The only thing the prophet had to do was to deliver the divine message from God to the people.

## D. The Content of the Message was Restoration

Restoration is salvation, freedom and life. Ezekiel had to warn the wicked to repent and receive God's offer of new life: "Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live...'" (33:11). Salvation isn't only individual. Here the freedom and restoration

was for God's people: "They will know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them" (34:27).

## E. The recipients

The people had the responsibility to listen and respond. The message was addressed to the leaders, to the people of God, and the wicked. They were responsible to receive it or not. The way they answered would be seen in the decision they made. The responsibility of the watchman was to warn: "But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved" (33:9b); But if the watchman didn't proclaim the message: "but I will hold the watchman accountable for their blood" (33:6b).

The responsibility of the converted person is fair: "Therefore, son of man, say to your people, 'If someone who is righteous disobeys, that person's former righteousness will count for nothing. And if someone who is wicked repents, that person's former wickedness won't bring condemnation. The righteous person who sins won't be allowed to live even though they were formerly righteous. If I tell a righteous person that they will surely live, but then they trust in their righteousness and do evil, none of the righteous things that person has done will be remembered; they will die for the evil they have done'" (33:12-13).

What God demands of those who have been already restored is perseverance. Let's see how one of the commentators rates Ezekiel: "The prophet, an Arminian two thousand years before Arminius, says... 'This seems like a direct attack on the doctrine of 'once in grace', 'always in grace', often called also doctrine of 'eternal security'" (Grider, Kenneth. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume 4. USA: CNP, 1982, p.600).

The responsibility of the wicked is as follows: if they don't listen to the warning, they'll die. Ezekiel tells us: "then if anyone hears the trumpet but doesn't heed the warning and the sword comes and takes their life, their blood will be on their own head" (Ezekiel 33:4). However, when a person heeds the message and turns away from their iniquity, they shall live. We read: "And if a wicked person turns away from their wickedness and does what is just and right, they will live by doing so" (33:19).

## Questions:

- Describe what was the responsibility of a watchman.
- How can we be watchmen today in the place where we live?

## II. The Good Shepherd Provides Pasture and Protection (Ezekiel 34:11-16,23-24)

The Good Shepherd rescues and gathers His flock. The prophet used this metaphor for God's people in exile, for whom this was particularly significant. The kings, magistrates and priests had no compassion and didn't care about the people under their care. The Good Shepherd looks for and rescues the sheep He wants to rescue. He feels responsible because He loves them: "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them..." (34:11). There are parallels with the Good Shepherd in the New Testament. Here, Jesus too speaks of having an intimate relationship with His flock: "I am the Good Shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (John 10:14).

The Good Shepherd provides for and protects His flock. The bad shepherds feed themselves and not the sheep, who were left wandering around scattered, and "became food for all the wild animals" (Ezekiel 34:5). In contrast, the Good Shepherd says: "I will tend them in a good pasture...they will lie down in good grazing land..." (34:14). In Psalm 23:1-4, the sheep describe the Good Shepherd as very caring. Some phrases from this Psalm portray the Good Shepherd as loving and protective. The Good Shepherd cures and cares for His sheep. The bad shepherds have no compassion for the weak, they don't tend the wounded, but take advantage of the sheep while they selfishly are well fed and clothed.

When the people of Israel were deported to Babylon and other nations, they suffered many emotional wounds, such as separation from their families, and leaving their territory and customs. Emotional wounds can affect how we live. No doubt they had to work hard and received unfair and inhuman treatment and needed to be healed: "I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak..." (Ezekiel 34:16).

This message full of God's promises gave them hope. Just like He said through the prophet Isaiah, He had good tidings for the poor, would heal the brokenhearted, give sight to the blind and set the oppressed captives free (Isaiah 61:1-3). God's love involves all parts of our lives. Ezekiel 34:16 goes on to say: "...but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice."

Social justice was an important issue for Ezekiel. God will judge the fat sheep and the strong sheep. It was wrong to exploit their brothers and sisters and take advantage of their peers, with superior attitudes. God will judge fairly the exploitation, cheap labor, trafficking of people and other social ills in our nations.

## Questions:

- What are the characteristics of the good shepherd?
- Have you experienced God as your Good Shepherd? How?

## III. A Covenant of Peace and blessing (Ezekiel 34:25-31)

The first part of Ezekiel 34:25 says, "I will make a covenant of peace with them..."

This has to do with what the prophet Jeremiah also expressed: "The days are coming, - declares the Lord, - when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31). This covenant will be better than the first one because it will be a New Covenant, written in their minds and on their hearts. They will choose God and He will have them as His people.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews gives us an overview of the complete fulfillment of this promise: "Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep..." (Hebrews 13:20). Surely this verse underscores the fact that peace is a gift of God, and it also identifies the Great Shepherd of the sheep and the blood of the New Covenant, which isn't just temporary, but durable.

The new Covenant of peace brings security: “I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of savage beasts so that they may live in the wilderness and sleep in the forests in safety” (Ezekiel 34:25). What is peace? “Basically, the Old Testament term for peace is Shalom, which means complete, solid, well-being. It’s used when asking or praying for the welfare of another (Gen.43:27; Ex. 4:18; Kings.19:20), when we’re in harmony with another (Jos. 9:15; 1R.5:12), when seeking the good of a city or country (Ps. 122:6; Jer.29:7)” (Bruce, et. al. New Bible Dictionary. Colombia: Editorial Certeza United, 2003, p.1041).

The exiles had just received the terrible news of the destruction of Jerusalem, so this message of peace came at just the right moment. The peace of the Lord is the absence of all spiritual restlessness. It’s the continued trust in His promises. Jesus said: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27).

The Covenant of peace is more than the absence of conflicts; it includes comprehensive well-being, being free from the dangers of wild animals. Maybe this will only occur completely in the future Kingdom of God. Figuratively, the wild animals represent the nations, particularly Babylon, that had wronged Israel. They were promised abundant harvests, fertile soil and abundant vegetation. The blessings of obedience are described in Leviticus and Deuteronomy: “I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit” (Leviticus 26:4). “The Lord will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands...” (Deuteronomy 28:12).

There would be freedom from all human oppression. The peace covenant brings freedom: “The people will be secure in their land. They will know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them” (Ezekiel 34:27). They would no longer be plundered by other nations. A glorious future awaits them, where there will be security, justice and peace. They would get to know God by living a restored and perfect society where the Lord

will be their God and they will be His people, the Shepherd and His sheep, God with us.

### **Questions:**

- What does Shalom mean?
- Do you feel that Shalom is in your life and in the church today? How?

### **Conclusion**

The prophet Ezekiel preached a message of hope and restoration. God would do His part; however, there are human responsibilities. As the watchman, Ezekiel would do his part by delivering the message. If he didn’t comply, God would punish him. If the righteous persevere to the end, they will live. There will be justice. If the wicked repent and turn to God, they will live, but if they persist in their sins, they will die. God is the Good Shepherd who preserves, provides and protects His flock, and offers a promising future of much blessing for His people.



# Promises for new hearts

Daniel Pesado (U.S.A.)

**Study passages:** Ezekiel 35, 36

**Memory Verse:** "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" Ezekiel 36:26.

**Lesson Purpose:** To demonstrate biblically and historically that God always delivers His promises of judgment for those who don't obey His commandments, and brings blessing to those who obey Him.

## Introduction

Living on memories makes us lose sight of the great future that God has in store for those who trust and obey Him. But from time to time, we need to look back and remember the full or partial fulfillment of God's promises. This will renew our faith and strengthen our hopes. It's true that God is more interested in our future than in our past, but it's also true that we learn to trust Him by seeing an enormous amount of promises come true which prove that God is absolutely trustworthy. This was also true for Israel, the chosen people He loved, that many times confused why God had chosen them.

Mount Seir is one of the names the Bible uses to describe the nation of Edom. The Edomites who were descended from Esau, Isaac's son and Jacob's brother, received an inheritance from the Lord on Mount Seir (Deuteronomy 2:5). However, they were always at enmity with their neighbors, the Israelites. When Israel was in Kadesh, moving through the desert towards the Promised Land, Edom refused to let them go through their territory (Numbers 20:18-21), which meant that Israel had to go another way. But the main cause of the Lord's anger against Edom was that they cooperated with the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in his siege of Judah, and even killed some who fled for their lives during the attack (Obadiah 10-14).

God never wastes opportunities. What may seem unexpected, or even unwarranted or undeserved, is used by God to develop His purposes of helping us to mature in our Christian faith. God used this circumstance in the history of His people to correct

them. God's judgement on Edom was a warning for the Israelites about the need to live in His will if they wanted to receive all His promised blessings.

## I. God corrects Israel

The abuses committed by the people of Edom against Israel were unjustified, but God's people shouldn't have deviated capriciously from His will, which as Paul affirms is "good... pleasing and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). God's chosen nation disobeyed Him in different circumstances and aspects. We can see at least two occasions prior to the time that Edom abused them.

In Deuteronomy, Moses encouraged the people by reminding them of one of God's greatest promises: "See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land the Lord swore he would give to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and to their descendants after them" (Deuteronomy 1:8). Nevertheless, Israel preferred to accept the report of the ten spies, which was full of exaggeration and discouragement, and they even blamed God for the situation. They stopped believing, and that led them to disobedience: "But you were unwilling to go up; you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 1:26). Because of this, they all had to stay in the desert for 40 years.

But Israel didn't learn from that experience and decided to take the land in their own strength. In their arrogance, they didn't listen to God who told them through Moses: "But the Lord said to me, 'Tell them, 'Do not go up and fight, because I will not be with you. You will be defeated by your enemies.'" (Deut. 1:42).

But this is exactly what Israel did and it went badly for them. This was repeated in the time of the Babylonian conquest.

Edom took advantage of Israel's fragility to prevent the flight of the defeated, putting them within reach of their enemy, killing those who fled for their lives, and entered Jerusalem with the enemy to plunder it. This was one of the most painful lessons experienced by Israel. The reason why God was dealing with the kingdom of Judah like that was because once again they had disobeyed Him. There's a saying: "Until we learn the lesson before us, God won't let us turn the page in the manual of life."

### Questions:

- What do you think was Israel's problem as a nation, why it needed so many times for God to have to discipline her?
- Do you think that the situation Israel experienced is similar to ours today? Explain.

## II. God judges Edom (Ezekiel 35)

My grandmother used to say: "God does not stitch without thread." For her, this meant that in everything that God does or allows, He always has at least one intention. This was demonstrated once again in His treatment of the Edomites, the people of Seir. No one, individual or nation, has the right to take justice into their own hands, much less abuse the weak in their moments of greatest danger or suffering. But that is exactly what Edom did to Israel. The Israelites had forgotten a transcendental fact that when they disobeyed God, they would have to be disciplined, but this didn't stop them from being 'a chosen lineage' and 'a special treasure.'

God won't overlook injustice, no matter who does it or against whom it is committed. Maybe Edom thought that in time the Lord would forget to bring justice. God's apparent delays are opportunities for repentance and restitution, but God never gives up on justice. He punished His people and sent them to Babylon, but He also had to deal with the Edomites. This was demonstrated by Ezekiel saying: "I am against you, Mount Seir, and I will stretch out my hand against you and make you a desolate waste. I will turn your towns into ruins and you will be desolate. Then you will know that I am the Lord" (v.3-4).

The words of the prophet are very revealing. The affirmation "This is what the Sovereign Lord says" and later: "as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord" (v.6a), is so emphatic that it leaves no doubt. He assures us that the one who speaks, God, will do what He says. Joshua reminded the people of this: "...You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed" (Joshua 23:14). The psalmist declared: "I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered" (Psalm 89:34).

The prophet Ezekiel added these words of God for Edom: "...I will give you over to bloodshed and it will pursue you. Since you did not hate bloodshed, bloodshed will pursue you." (Ezekiel 35:6 NIV). But God didn't arbitrarily choose to punish Edom, but he had attentively observed how they permanently opposed Israel, and by opposing God's children, they were opposing His plans. So, Ezekiel declared they would be punished because they "harbored an ancient hostility..." (v.5). Edom had a history of difficulties with Israel, which very likely refers to the prophecy that Rebekah their mother received: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23).

Furthermore, God assured the Edomites through Ezekiel: "Because you rejoiced when the inheritance of Israel became desolate, that is how I will treat you. You will be desolate, Mount Seir, you and all of Edom. Then they will know that I am the Lord" (Ezekiel 35:15). God is the only completely just judge. The effectiveness of His justice consists in His unlimited capacity to discern the intentions and most hidden secrets of the hearts of men. Jeremiah declared: "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve" (17:10). God's discipline seeks to correct and lead us to fulfill His will.

But here we can see clearly that God, after providing opportunities for repentance, inflicted a terrible punishment on those who resisted His warnings. And unfortunately, the punishment led the enemy nation of Israel to its destruction.

The prophet Ezekiel described it in chilling terms: "...I will give you over to bloodshed and it will pursue you... I will make Mount Seir a desolate waste... I will fill your mountains with the slain ...I will make you desolate forever; your towns will not be inhabited" (Ezekiel 35:6-9). The delay in applying the judgment on this nation didn't mean that God forgot His Word.

The prophet Habakkuk announced from God with clarity and firmness: "For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay" (Habakkuk 2:3). No word of God will remain unfulfilled.

### Questions:

- What do these expressions imply? "This is what the Sovereign Lord says" and later: "as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord" (v.6a).
- Are these phrases a reality in your life and in the church today? How?

### III. God blesses His people (Ezekiel 36)

The formula "This is what the Sovereign Lord says" was one of the most used by the prophet Ezekiel, where it's repeated 12 times in chapters 35 and 36. There are various reasons for this repetition, but undoubtedly, the main one is once again to emphasize the infallible, certain, safe and even inexorability of the announced Word. It's the same reason why the writer of Hebrews says about God's great promise to multiply Abraham's family: "...When God made His promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself ..." (Hebrews 6:13).

The Lord also used the prophet Isaiah to remind the people: "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). That 'word' implies not only promises of blessing, but also words of judgment. His Word and his deeds, though sometimes separated by time, are inseparable. Here we have some of the most powerful prophecies from God for Israel:

1. With regard to the nations that invaded the land: because Edom tried to usurp territory from Israel, God assured them that "I swear with uplifted hand that the nations around you will also suffer scorn" (Ezekiel 36:7).

2. With regard to the land of Israel: "But you, mountains of Israel, will produce branches and fruit for my people Israel, for they will soon come home" (vv.8-9).
3. With regard to the population: "I will cause many people to live on you—yes, all of Israel... They will possess you, and you will be their inheritance; you will never again deprive them of their children... This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited" (vv.10,12, cf. 35,37-38).
4. With regard to idolatry: God promised them: "...I will show the holiness of my great name... Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes" (v.23, see vv.16-22,25).
5. They will return to their land from all the ends of the earth: "...For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land" (v.24, cf. v.28).
6. There will be plenty of food for all the people: "I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you. I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine" (vv.29-30).

Many of these promises have already been accomplished, while some of the others will be met. But they have an indispensable and unique condition: faith in Jesus Christ. When the Scriptures declare that God will be exalted, He set Jesus on high: "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11). Among the 'every knee' and 'every tongue' are also included the Jewish people. But the ultimate reality is that "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so, through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God" (2 Cor. 1:20).

## Questions:

- The people of Israel received prophecies, but in the Bible, there are also promises for us. Name a few. Share if any of those promises have already been fulfilled.

## IV. God extends His Grace to us

By faith in Jesus Christ, we're all descendants of Abraham, of the promises that God made to him, and therefore, part of His people. So, these promises that spring from the heart of God, full of grace and mercy, are also for us. The covenant that God made with Abraham was renewed with his son Isaac. In Genesis 26:3, God said to Isaac: "...Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham."

The same covenant was later renewed with the son of Isaac, Jacob. God appeared at Bethel, and confirmed the covenant: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis 28:13-15).

But this covenant between God and Israel is still in force with us. This agreement between both parties is conditioned by our obedience. It's not about sacrifices anymore of bulls and goats that aren't fair satisfaction for everything that dishonors God's name by sin. It's about loyalty, commitment and obedience. The prophet Micah made it clear that it's not about more sacrifices: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Isaiah denounced: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

Then how can a just God just forgive so much sin and free sinners? Again, the answer lies in the future; and God himself answers this question: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:26-27). God looked ahead towards the arrival of His son and his sacrifice that would repair all the damage done to the honor of God through our disobedience.

In a nutshell, God's promises to Israel and us that were freely given under Moses were made possible only by Christ. By faith we obey His commandments and God will keep us from our enemies and will keep His wonderful promises in our lives..

## Questions:

- How does God extend his grace to us today?
- How should we live today, under grace, as descendants in the faith of Abraham?

## Conclusion

What happened to Israel and Edom shows us that God is always consistent with what He says. The history of the human race, including Israel and Edom, and surely our particular histories, will also demonstrate that God always seeks repentance and the blessing of all people. Resisting His lovingkindness and mercy leads us inexorably to experience consequences that God doesn't intend that we have to suffer.





# The Valley of the Dry Bones

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**Study passages:** Ezekiel 37

**Memory Verse:** “My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people” Ezekiel 37:27.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that the valley of dry bones is a lesson of life, and revival comes through the power of the Holy Spirit.

## Introduction

Throughout Biblical history, God revealed to the people of Israel that His one purpose is that all the nations of the earth will get to know the one true God (Genesis 12:2-3). Since sin entered the world through the first Adam (Romans 5:12), death passed to all people and anarchy set in. This rebellion caused us to not seek the good, completely forgetting the plans and purposes that the Lord has for us.

The valley of dry bones represents the state to which God’s people had gotten into. In order to change this situation, divine intervention was called for. Through the power of His word and the Spirit, God breathed spiritual life into those dry bones, raising up His people from among the dead to live according to His eternal purpose as His people.

### I. Their condition: Dry (Ezekiel 37:1-2,11)

In the first verse of this chapter, we’re told the way in which the prophet Ezekiel was taken by God in a vision to a desolate desert place. All that prophet could see around him was a vast expanse of dry human bones. They weren’t complete skeletons, but dry bones scattered everywhere, with no space between bone and bone. This scene showed that an uncountable multitude had died suddenly, as if an army had been killed instantly. But, what captured Ezekiel’s attention most was that the condition of these bones were “very dry” (v.2b).

In 722 B.C., the Assyrians carried away the ten northern Israelite tribes and destroyed the capital city of Samaria. Then, the Babylonians replaced the Assyrians, assuming the role of world empire in the year 612 BC. Ezekiel prophesied during the Babylonian exile when

Nebuchadnezzar was king between the years 604 B.C. and 562 BC. (Price, Ross E.; Gray, C. Paul; Grider, J. Kenneth; Swimm, Roy E. The Major Prophets, volume 4. USA: CNP, 1969, pp.532-533). The cause of all these problems for the Israelites was that they had disobeyed God’s laws. They had turned their back on the Lord, and the consequence was that He abandoned them to their own fate.

Ezekiel began his ministry with a call to repentance for the people of Israel. In chapter 18, the prophet called the people to return to God’s statutes, not only to repent, but to do good to others and act justly. Ezekiel’s description of the condition of the bones as exceedingly dry gives the impression that a lot of time had passed so that the bones had been bleached by the desert sun. They were literally disintegrating. That is why the Israelites said: “... Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off” (v.11b).

### Questions:

- What was the reason that Israel was like “dry bones”?
- Can you identify with that condition? Why?

### II. Their Need: to Listen to God’s Word (Ezekiel 37:3-4)

After the vision of the dry bones, God asked the prophet a very interesting and surprising question: “Son of man, can these bones live?” (v.3). Humanly, the answer is clearly NO! But Ezekiel replied: “Sovereign Lord, you alone know” (v.3b). At a glance, we could judge the answer of the prophet as elusive so as not to look bad to God, or maybe he doubted God’s power. It should be noted that Ezekiel was a servant of God.

He had been called to have a very close communion with His Creator. And without a doubt, he had witnessed the unfolding of the extraordinary power of the one who can do everything: God!

In Ezekiel's response, we note at least two important things: first, God is "sovereign," and God "omniscient". He has eternal purposes for His people and is willing to finish what has been started (Philippians 1:6). One of the shocking parts of the entire Bible is when God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy over dry bones (Ezekiel 37:4). The word 'prophesy' often implies announcing a future fact, yet most of the time in the Old Testament, it means giving a message from God. So far, he had no trouble about how he was going to do his work. But how was he supposed to understand this new order from God: "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!'" (v.4b). God's request seemed absurd and even ridiculous. Imagine the scene: a Hebrew prophet preaching in the desert to a dead audience! How could they listen?

To answer this intriguing question, let's look at a very particular example in the story of Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:52-56). Jesus "took her by the hand and said, 'My child, get up!' Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat" (Luke 8:54-55). Jesus called out, and although she was dead, it wasn't her physical body that listened, but her spirit. In the same way, when we listen to a Word of God through preaching, we understand the message through our spirits.

The reason God commanded the prophet Ezekiel to prophesy over the bones was because the only thing the prophet could see at that time was a lot of dry bones. But they would be recreated by a God who doesn't forget His people and who fulfills His covenant with them. So, it wasn't the physical bones that would hear the prophetic word, but their spirits. When our Creator speaks, things come to existence: "...Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!" (Ezekiel 37:4).

### Questions:

- How is the power of God's Word manifested to those who hear it?
- If every Christian is called to proclaim God's Word, what stops us?

### III. Their return to life: The Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 37:5-10, 12-14)

When we read verses 5 to 10, we immediately think about the first creation: Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:21-

22). In our case study, we're observing a resurrection or recreation of God's people. Ezekiel prophesied: "this is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life" (Ezekiel 37:5b). Here we literally see the creative hand of God designing each of the parts of the human being: over these bones, first the tendons, then flesh (muscles and organs), and finally, the skin. This procedure is almost identical to what is narrated in Genesis 2:7. The raw material is the same, that is, the 'dust of the earth.'

When Ezekiel prophesied (Ezekiel 37:7-10), God displayed His power and many supernatural events happened. First a noise, but we don't know what sort of noise. And although the causes could be very different, the prophet had already heard another noise that probably sounded similar to him (1:24). In both passages, the same word is used. Then a tremor. The earth shuddered in such a way and with such precision that each bone met its nearest bone.

This makes us think that even when God makes the earth tremble and shakes us, on many occasions, He does it to rearrange the things in our lives. Now the prophet saw tendons that covered the skeletons. When he says flesh appeared, we might ask: where did it come from? Certainly, the answer is in Genesis 2:7. Lastly, God covered and placed the largest organ we have: the skin. Ezekiel made a very relevant observation: "...but there was no breath in them" (Ezekiel 37:8b). Immediately, the Lord commanded the prophet to prophesy to the Spirit, in other words, invoking the Spirit of God to breathe on the dead bodies to revive them. When Ezekiel called upon the Spirit, He came and entered those who lay dead and they revived.

They rose to their feet and became "a vast army" (v.10). Verses 12 to 14 suggest possible end-time fulfillment. If this passage was directed only and exclusively to the Hebrew people for the times of Ezekiel, then it refers to the Israelite nation as such, with the promise of a physical and spiritual resurrection. He emphasized that God would bring them into the land that He had given them, the land from which the people had been expelled and exiled from because of their disobedience.

The second interpretation could be that it was addressed to the "true Israelites," as the apostle Paul said (Romans 2:28-29), since in Christ, also the non-Jews, according to the flesh, have been grafted into the same people of God (Romans 11:17). In other words, this prophecy is about salvation for the end times.

We could say that we're already in those times. Jesus came for the first time to proclaim the gospel and the mysteries of the Father. He died to give us eternal life from the very moment we repent and surrender our lives to Christ, and God has already poured out His Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4). If all of this is already a reality. Then we could talk about a prophecy that's in progress. Therefore, what was prophesied by Ezekiel wasn't just about future events but rather, a prophecy that is taking place through the church now.

Only the last part of this story is missing, which is the resurrection of the redeemed, the Second Coming of Christ, the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10), and the judgment before the great white throne, where the wicked will be condemned eternally (Revelation 20:11-15).

These are just two interpretive positions that have been given on this passage. One of the important aspects is seeing the life that the Holy Spirit produces. When He takes His place in us, He always brings life, even though death previously existed.

God brings the dead back to life.

#### **Questions:**

- What is the difference between natural and spiritual life?
- What does the Spirit do when it enters us?

#### **IV. Their Final Situation: A United, single body led by it's His head (Ezekiel 37:15-28)**

Israel was divided into the northern kingdom with ten tribes, and the southern kingdom with two tribes. The main cause of the division was the idolatry of King Solomon (1 Kings 11:9-11), and subsequently, the ambition of Rehoboam, Solomon's son (1 Kings 12:14-15). Israel was a united kingdom ruled by Saul, David and Solomon until 928 B.C., when the tribes from the north rebelled against Rehoboam, which produced this division. All of this was the beginning of the tragedies that happened to Israel, such as the numerous invasions of different empires, and this humiliating exile that led to slavery and diaspora throughout the world.

God promised, through the prophet Ezekiel, to reunite the nation of Israel into one people. The resource that the prophet was to use were two sticks, each marked with the names of the two kingdoms: Ephraim as the northern kingdom, and Judah as the southern kingdom (Ezekiel 37:16).

Ezekiel had to take the two sticks in one hand as a symbol of unity, so that when the Israelites asked what the sticks meant, He was able to tell them that God said that they would become one people again. In addition to this, the Lord wanted to show His purposes in making them one nation again:

1. He was going to collect his people from all over the earth (v.21b);
2. He was going to gather them in the land of Israel under one king (v.22);
3. They would never be divided again (v.22b);
4. They would never again be contaminated by idolatry (v.23a);
5. They would be cleansed from all their rebellion, and God would have fellowship again with His people (v.23b).

Between verses 24-28, God revealed that he would send a Messiah-King-Shepherd, and that then, the people would walk in His precepts. The expression "My servant David" is a reference to Jesus, who was a descendant of king David. Furthermore, it's a reference to the covenant that God had with King David that his kingdom would have no end (Isaiah 9:7). God wished to instill encouragement and faith for those who were faint of heart: "My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever." (Ezekiel 37:27-28). This is a prophecy also for everyone who has given their heart to Christ Jesus. To seal this promise, let's read Revelation 21:3-4.

#### **Questions:**

- What do you think you can do if there is sin in your life that is preventing your personal relationship with God? Take some time for personal prayer and reflection.
- What are the promises that a person receives when they listen to the Word of God and obey it?

#### **Conclusion**

Sin always brings us negative consequences. If we feel like we're in the midst of a valley of dry bones, there's still hope of life. God doesn't forget His promises. He's faithful and just to forgive us if we confess our sins (1 John 1:9). As in the times of Ezekiel, God invites us to listen to His Word and receive His Spirit. Let's spread the Good News of salvation whenever we have chance.



# The restoration of God's people

Jorge L. Julca (Argentina)

**Study passages:** Ezekiel 38, 39:1-10,17-29

**Memory Verse:** "...When I have brought them back from the nations and have gathered them from the countries of their enemies, I will be proved holy through them in the sight of many nations" Ezekiel 39:27.

**Lesson Purpose:** To recognize that our sovereign God is in control of all situations of our lives. He protects His people, and delivers them from all their enemies.

## Introduction

Ezekiel the prophet, author of this book that we're studying, grew up in a priestly family, receiving his training in the Temple where he officiated until the time of the Babylonian conquest. According to the academic scholar Schokel, "We know few facts about Ezekiel. We know that he was the son of a priest called Buzi. Probably he himself was a priest, as his language suggests his knowledge of the sacred law and his interest in the temple" (Schokel, Alonso and J. Luis Sicre. *Ezekiel-Twelve minor prophets-Daniel-Baruch-Letter of Jeremiah*. Spain: Christianity, 1980, p.9).

Ezekiel received his prophetic call from God while in exile. He was closely linked with Jeremiah, another great prophet of that time in Israel's history. Ezekiel's prophetic ministry can be divided into two great periods: (1) From the exile to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, and (2) from the fall of Jerusalem onward. Chapter 38 describes Ezekiel's second period of ministry, characterized by the announcement of the hope of Israel's restoration, and by oracles against enemy nations, affirming the judgment and sovereignty of God.

This passage is preceded by the tremendously descriptive vision that the prophet received of the "valley of dry bones" that communicated the good news that God would bring Israel back from captivity and restore them as His chosen people (Ch. 37). In chapter 38, we learn about how God would help Israel defeat her last mysterious enemy. Like other prophetic books, Ezekiel reiterates the dynamic that

is present in all prophetic literature, framed between the cycles of rebellion, judgment and repentance of God's people; that movement between their defeats, as a result of their disobedience, and their victories, as the fruit of their return to the Lord.

## I. God is the sovereign Judge (Ezekiel 38:1-14)

The passage presents God as the judge over all nations. From the perspective of restoration of His people, He sent Ezekiel to prophesy against Gog.

### A. Gog, Magog, Meshek and Tubal (vv.1-3)

Who do these strange names refer to? The passage is difficult to interpret because it's not known exactly who these new enemies of Israel were. In Genesis 10:2, Magog is mentioned as a descendant of Japheth, but he's never introduced as an enemy of Israel. Meshek and Tubal were towns located north of Israel and are mentioned in 1 Chronicles 1:5 as a country or groups of countries, but there's no explicit reference to them being opponents of God's people.

The apostle John, in Revelation 20:8, mentioned these names, but according to Grider, the apostle "seems to think of Gog as a nation rather than a king. But he could well have interpreted Gog and Magog symbolically – as a representation of the nations that Satan would deceive at the end of time, who will fight against God and his people" (Grider, Kenneth. *Beacon Bible Commentary*, volume IV. USA: CNP, 1984, p.612).

## **B. What characterized Gog and their armies? (vv.4-10)**

The passage shows the military might of the army of Gog: "...your horsemen fully armed, and a great horde with large and small shields, all of them brandishing their swords" (v.4). It also refers to his alliance with other powerful armies, which were Persia, Cush (Ethiopia) and Put (Libya) (vv.5-6).

Verse 2 mentions that Gog, this new enemy of the Israelites, ruled over Meshek and Tubal (v.2), and that their territory was located north of the territory of Israel (v.15). The passage also mentions the cruel attack of these mighty and wicked nations against God's people. In verses 9 and 10, we hear of an invasion that will be "like a storm," and that they were devising an, "evil scheme" against Israel. For their part, verses 15 and 16 also detail that this enemy would come "riding on horses" with a "mighty army." The description shows not only their force but the imminence of their devastating attack.

## **C. Israel's vulnerability (vv.11-14)**

Israel, in contrast to that mighty enemy army, was fragile, vulnerable, defenseless and apparently without protection. From the enemies' perspective, Israel appeared to be easy prey to plunder and conquer. The lack of walls (v.11) showed the fragility exposing Israel to invasion. In ancient times, cities guaranteed their protection against enemy attacks and diseases through the construction of walls. Through these walls, they controlled trade, the transit of people, and the contagion of diseases. The walls were a defense from the attacks of invading armies.

The passage emphasizes that the message comes from the Sovereign God (vv.3,10,14). He is present in the midst of crises and threats against His people, even when all seems to be lost.

### **Questions:**

- What is the dynamic that characterizes the prophetic message of the Old Testament?
- What might be the supposedly unbeatable armies that we face in our day as God's people?

## **II. God is the one in Control of History (Ezekiel 38:15-39:10)**

### **A. Adverse circumstances are the setting of God's action (38:15-23)**

When we're immersed in hopeless situations, unable to see a way out, how do we react? When our faith is confronted in the midst of trials, we ask ourselves, where is God? What is He doing? While Gog considered themselves as the protagonist, and assumed that they were invincible, God had a different plan. The passage shows that He is only using these enemies to demonstrate His faithfulness and holiness (v.16).

Gog's invasion would be the stage for a supernatural demonstration of the divine. God warns that when Gog attacks His people, He will seethe with fury (v.18). His manifestation will be through a theophany in front of which all living beings: fish, birds, animals of the field, small animals and human beings, will recognize the holy presence of the Lord (v.20).

Luis Alonso Schokel has summed up Gog's downfall in the following terms: "The judge announces the charges and pronounces judgment. Judgement may be accompanied by a cosmic theophany. His guilt is summarized in two sections: aggression against defenseless people, and arrogance against God by pretending to be the protagonist of history" (The Pilgrim's Bible, volume II. Spain: EGA-Messenger-Divine Word, p.365).

Do the situations of history and of our own lives happen by chance? How many times have we asked: is there any purpose in this specific situation that I am living through? The passage shows us that, even in the most inexplicable situations, God has a greater purpose.

God showed His plan in these words: "And so I will show my greatness and my holiness, and I will make myself known in the sight of many nations. Then they will know that I am the Lord" (v.23).

### **B. Gog's defeat (39:1-10)**

The military and fearsome strength of Gog fades in the presence of the sovereign God of Israel. Their arrogance and apparent security are nothing compared to the powerful action of God. In the verses where the defeat of Gog is described, the following elements stand out:

1. The one who defends Israel is God himself: "I am against you" (v.1). The following verses clearly show that God is the one who comes out in battle against Gog: "I will turn you around and drag you along" (v.2); "I will strike your bow from your left hand and make your arrows drop from your right hand" (v.3); "On the mountains of Israel you will fall" (v.4); "...I have spoken" (v.5).
2. Gog's Downfall: Gog's military supremacy is displaced by God's sovereignty. How difficult it is to have the God of Israel as an enemy! (v.1). Verses 3 through 6 in The Message Translation describe what God does, showing His power and dominion over Gog: "On the mountains of Israel you'll be slaughtered, you and all your troops and the people with you. I'll serve you up as a meal to carrion birds and scavenging animals. You'll be killed in the open field. I've given my word. Decree of GOD, the Master. I'll set fire to Magog and the far-off islands, where people are so seemingly secure. And they'll realize that I am GOD."
3. The evidence of the glorious victory of the Lord: the defeat of Gog ends with the narration that the people of Israel would collect the weapons of the enemy army and they would use them as firewood for seven years (v.9).

What an unexpected twist! The story of this battle begins with an invader supposedly secure of their military might and weaponry, but ends with an annihilated army, and whose weapons that gave them so much confidence in conquering other peoples were converted in firewood. Isn't the sovereignty and power of God incredible?

Our God is someone who reverses situations in miraculous and unimaginable ways. In this case, those who came to plunder were plundered; and those who came to steal were robbed (v.10).

### Questions:

- How is God's sovereignty evidenced in the most difficult circumstances of our lives?
- Which verses in the study passage show us God as the protagonist of the battle against Gog and his allies?

### III. God restores His People with His Peace (Ezekiel 39:25-29)

Finally, this vision of the prophet ends with the wonderful restoration of the remnant of God's people. The Lord reveals himself as the merciful God who always acts, even in the most unexpected moments. The God of history is active, affirming His covenant and His promises so that His people should recognize Him and be a witness to the nations.

Gog and his allies were annihilated by divine intervention. The Lord gave new blessings as fruit of this renewal of their fidelity. What did God want to teach His people through this restoration?

1. God is the one who delivered them from captivity (v.25).
2. God promised them a life of peace in their own land (v.26a).
3. God's action served to mature His people through a new purification (v.26b).
4. The motive for God's action is that all nations should be witnesses of His holiness (v.27).
5. God is the one who weaves the threads of history: "... I sent them into exile among the nations, I will gather them to their own land" ... (v.28).
6. God is the one who protects, cares for and never abandons His people (vv.28b-29a).
7. His plan and actions are reflection of His sovereignty (v.29).

How should we interpret prophecies? This is a challenging task because first, a large portion of the Scriptures belongs to this literary genre and secondly, this type of literature uses many symbols. Commonly, we understand prophecy as the prediction of future events, and in that understanding, the role of the prophet is interpreted as a doomsayer, a person who can tell the future. However, we have to recognize that in the first instance, the prophets were acute readers of their reality, and the message that they received from God had an immediate application to their own context.

John Stam, a scholar in the interpretation of prophecies, has written: "There is no doubt that God can reveal future events to His prophets; He does this, and it's an aspect to consider in the prophetic books.

But this isn't the essence of prophecy. "Predictions" of the future (even accurate ones) are prophecy, but prophecy isn't always predictive. If we only limit prophecy to its predictive part, we'll end up misunderstanding, even isolating and distorting everything that is prophecy in the biblical sense" (Stam, Juan. *Apocalypse and Prophecy*. Argentina: Kairós Editions, 2007, p.35).

Some commentators on this passage have tried to locate Gog and his allies, naming possible countries where they're going to come from, the might of their armies, and their characteristics, linking this prophecy to some peoples and nations of our contemporary world, indicating some future eschatological battle against the people of God. However, those interpretations have failed to give justice to the passage, proving themselves to be just speculation without much foundation.

Dr. Grider, in his commentary on this prophetic book, wrote: "After studying these chapters as carefully as possible, and with the help that can be obtained from recent archaeology, the identity of Gog and Magog remains uncertain. Some suggest that even the inspired writer cannot give a sure statement of their identity. Adam Clarke talks about the "ocean of conjecture" that surrounds them, and says: "we must admit that this is the hardest prophecy to decipher in the Old Testament"" (Grider, Kenneth. *Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume IV*. USA: CNP, 1984, p.611).

Who are these passages referring to when they mention Gog and his allies? We don't know exactly, but what is evident in the passage is that God is the protagonist. As the sovereign Judge of the nations, He is present in history and acts on behalf of His people to benefit them. He can use any circumstance in order that His name should be glorified, and that His people should know him. Gog and his ferocious allies were only an opportunity for the sovereignty of God to shine in glorious victory. The contrast between Gog's might and the vulnerability of Israel is reversed by the miraculous intervention of our powerful God.

In light of this prophetic vision, we should ask ourselves: How do we react to extreme situations? When do we feel vulnerable? When seemingly invincible armies rise up against us, where is God?

## Questions:

- What are the most important lessons that God wanted to teach his people in the midst of this threatening situation?
- Do those teachings also apply to the church today?
- In some extreme situations in life, has God shown you that He had a greater and perfect plan that, in that moment, you couldn't see?

## Conclusion

The passage shows us that the sovereign God of history is present and committed to His covenant to protect His people. He can reverse any situation so that His name may be exalted and all the nations may see the testimony of His people.



# God's Glory Returns to the Temple

Elí Porrás Salinas (Peru)

**Study passages:** Ezekiel 40, 41, 42, 43, 44

**Memory Verse:** "They are to teach my people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean" Ezekiel 44:23.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that God always seeks to restore His people.

## Introduction

A new temple! It isn't difficult to imagine the deep sentiment that would have been aroused in the prophet Ezekiel as he saw this vision. Let's remember that in addition to being a prophet, this man was a priest who lived in exile. Hence, he was very interested in the sacred things which made this vision exciting. We who have recently gone through a pandemic where we weren't able to meet in our churches or places of worship, understand perfectly the feeling that this vision awakened in Ezekiel, and probably in his countrymen too.

The passages chosen for this lesson describe with details the construction of a new temple. Let's look at the context in which this vision was presented or given.

### I. After a time without a temple (Ezekiel 40:1-4)

Ezekiel narrated in his book the misfortune of living in exile, and also, the judgment of the wicked nations. But above all, he warned the Jewish exiles about one of the saddest tragedies for the people of Israel: the destruction of God's temple. This must have been very discouraging. Nevertheless, from chapter 40 onwards, Ezekiel spoke no longer about divine judgment, but of the restoration of God's people. This included the restoration, or rather, the rebuilding of a new temple.

#### A. A prophetic vision

The Word of God says: "In visions of God He took me to the land of Israel..." (v.2). Ezekiel was taken to Jerusalem after this city had been conquered and its temple had been left in ruins. God has a peculiar way

of showing His messages, and they often generate curiosities. Let's imagine how Ezekiel felt as he received this vision directly from God. In the first verse, we're struck by the expression: "The hand of the Lord was on me and he took me there..." There is no doubt that this vision came from God.

The character who appears as a guide in this vision was possibly an angel. However, God was clearly presenting a message to the prophet that He was determined to restore His people who had been sent to exile as a result of idolatry. This is why Ezekiel's prophesy in the first chapters announced in no uncertain terms God's condemnation.

#### B. Interpretations of this prophecy

The chapters that follow deal purely with the restoration, including the temple. It should be noted that there were many prophets who also spoke of the temple, such as Jeremiah, Isaiah, Haggai, Zephaniah, etc., but it was Ezekiel who gave a detailed vision with details of how the new temple was to be established.

After the exile, the chosen people actually rebuilt the temple, as we read in Ezra 5:2, 6:14-15. But scholars believe that Ezekiel's vision is for a future temple to be built in the time of the Messiah. In this regard, consulting an important bibliography we find the following: "The last nine chapters are devoted to the vision of the spiritual temple that will be built in Israel. This isn't the temple of the restoration, as some suppose, but a purely idealistic one, with which the prophet heralds the coming messianic age. Through the same use of images, Paul describes the true church of Christ (Eph. 2:19-22)" (Purkiser, W. T. Exploring the Old Testament. USA: CNP, 1974, p.353).



For his part, the commentator Adam Clarke says: "...all that was majestic or illustrious in the prophetic figures was unfulfilled literally in his own time or in the nearby dates. The ancient Jews considered it properly as pertaining to the time of the Messiah. Since the second temple wasn't like the model described by Ezekiel, they assumed that the prophecy referred at least in part to the period mentioned..." (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Bible, volume II. USA: CNP, 1974, p.313). It's clear that God's intention was to show that after the audacity and rebellion of the people, He was going to offer a new opportunity. God, in His love, brings new opportunities.

### Questions:

- What was the vision given to Ezekiel?
- God gave hope of restoration to a people who suffered greatly. How do you think this applies today?

## II. The description of a new temple (Ezekiel 40:5-42:20)

The passages that detail the measurements and construction of the new temple show that this temple is partly similar to the one that was built by Solomon (1 Kings 6:2,17). Ezekiel was shown a restorative vision of a people, Israel, that although they had sinned and suffered much in captivity, God was offering to restore them again.

### A. Symmetry, harmony and order

Architects often add elements of symmetry, beauty and stability when planning the construction of a building. It's obvious that the divine Architect does so too, and He does it perfectly. Let's take a look at just chapter 40. Here, Ezekiel presented us with the following: (1) description from the eastern gate (vv.6-19); (2) from the north gate (vv.20-23); (3) from the south gate (vv.24-31). Then he came back to provide details of the eastern gate (vv.32-34) and of the north gate (vv.35-38). Then the prophet made the presentation of the eight tables (vv.39-43), of the chambers (vv.44-47), and the locker room (vv.48-49).

God shows how perfect and orderly His work is by means of His designs. According to the descriptions the prophet Ezekiel made in chapter 41, measurements are shown for the parts of the

tabernacle, the chambers, and the special decorations. Each thing in its place, and the priests always had to be located correctly. Note the order: there's always a place for everything, the holy and the holy of holies. This is indicated by the expression "...for the place is holy" (42:13).

The inner and outer courts, the walls, and the chambers have measurements that are indicated in this vision. They are perfect. This is so because we aren't just talking about any house, it was the house of God. We believe that what was really important wasn't the building itself, but its structure revealed the presence of God. What is the temple, in our time, that we must take care of because God's spirit lives in it?

### B. Elements for the temple

What are the essential characteristics that they should take care of in the temple? We could highlight many in the list. But trying to make a summary, there are at least two crucial characteristics to consider in this new tabernacle:

1. The consecration of things: Ezekiel always remembered that one of the factors of the ruin of the temple earlier was that it had been profaned, revealing no respect, not only to the place, but to the presence of God. This shouldn't be so in the new building. One sample is that even the garments remain consecrated (42:14). This, without a doubt, shows how serious ministry is, because holiness must be emphasized even in things.
2. The holiness of people: let's not forget that Ezekiel was a priest (1:3). He knew that ministers should be 'pure.' This is similar to what was said to Moses: "You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy..." (Lev. 20:26).

The biblical pattern for life is purity. Our distinctive doctrine of entire sanctification is present tacitly in the vision of the new temple. We read here details about the consecration of material things and people who served in the temple. Today, all of us who believe must consecrate of our lives to God. How can we do this?

## Questions:

- What impressions do you have of the measurements and spaces described in Ezekiel 41 and 42?
- The consecration of things in the temple and holiness as a lifestyle were related aspects in Ezekiel's times. How does this apply to your life today?

### III. The Glory of God returns to the Temple (Ezekiel 43, 44)

Without the glory of God, this new temple would be no more than a simple harmoniously designed building. Now that there was talk of a new temple for the worship of God, the following question arises:

#### A. What was the meaning of this glory? (43:1-5)

For Ezekiel, the details of the perfect measurements weren't sufficient without God's glory. This glory definitely meant the following:

**His presence:** according to the passage, the presence of God had gone from the previous temple, the product of the abominations and rebellion of the people. However, this presence accompanied the exiles like Ezekiel; it moved with them to Babylon. It was now returning to the new temple, according to this vision. For the exiles, it was so important to return to the Temple in Jerusalem. However, it's very clear that God didn't shut himself up in a building. In the New Testament, we find the concept that God cannot simply be locked up in a place of worship. For example, the Samaritan lady asked Jesus about the place of worship. The Master replied: "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). This helps us to understand that, beyond the physical place, we who believe in God need His presence in our lives.

But let's go back to the context of Ezekiel 43. The presence of God (His glory) is understood to be returning to the glorious operation of the new temple. This is what the prophet's vision was promising them.

How do we understand the presence of God after having lived in confinement during the COVID 19 pandemic? (a) That God is everywhere, not only in our places of worship, but also in our home. The apostle

Paul said so in Acts 17:24. (b) After the pandemic was over God allowed us to go back to the places where the church used to congregate. As in the case of some of the exiles who never lost their identity, we too must hold on to what we believe and stand for, regardless of the difficult times we have to go through. Making a comparison with the church today, we're challenged to maintain our identity even in the context of a modern, changing world where everything is relative and the airways are full of so much information. We must have one clear identity, just as in Ezekiel's time.

**The reestablishment of his covenant:** "...I will dwell among the Israelites forever..." (Ezekiel 43:7). The indignation of divine wrath led Israel into captivity because the chosen people had broken the Mosaic covenant. However, God returned with mercy to give hope to His people. Even after the disastrous experience of exile, the people had the opportunity of going home. This restorative hope fits in with the promise of Deuteronomy 30:3. The glory of God was going to return to the temple.

Applying this truth to our times, we see that if we seek God and are faithful, God continues to be faithful, and He continues to fulfill His promises.

#### B. This glory demands that the people obey

The laws of the temple must be kept (Ezekiel 43:12). These precepts not only governed the way in which they were to build the temple, but also the social behavior of the priests and the population. The fact that the Lord was showing them mercy didn't mean that repentance should be excluded (v.10). The Israelites needed to be ashamed of their former sins as a nation. The rules for the offerings are described in Leviticus 6:17: "...Like the sin offering and the guilt offering, it is most holy." In this temple, as in the previous one, there would be strict laws regarding the sacred offerings or sacrifices (expiation at the altar). Holiness should be strictly and absolutely observed. This was the fundamental law of the temple (Ezekiel 43:12).

They were reminded of who wouldn't be admitted to the temple because of their earlier desecration (Ezekiel 44:9-10). God warned that those who served idols were stumbling blocks who had caused the people to sin (v.12). In this temple, impurities wouldn't be admitted (v.13).

Everything must be holy, and this without a doubt, implied both those who served in the temple as well as the sacred things.

### **C. This glory demands holiness**

Ezekiel 44:23 says: "They are to teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean." This is a very important maximum for the priests. Those who minister in the temple are in charge of teaching holiness to the people.

The history of the people of Israel show us that, up to this point, they had learned with a lot of pain how to distinguish between holy actions and pagan ones. Although this new temple had to be built with abundant symmetric measurements and very detailed explanations about how to operate, there was one unequivocal demand of the people - holiness. Should they just be saints in the temple? No! They should be holy in everything they do, inside the temple or around and about. The teaching of this truth has a wider scope. God's people, then and now, should always be holy. We must discern between holy actions and impure ones (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

As we said, whether inside or outside the temple, God always demands holiness as a continuous life-style. Having lived in confinement in these recent times of the pandemic, we can partly understand how the captives would have felt in exile. Obviously, even without the temple, they had to maintain holy conduct considering at all times the presence of God. This applies to us now too, committing ourselves to living holy lives, not only when we go to church, but in every aspect of our lives. As we have seen, God's presence isn't limited to a place.

God gave opportunity to a people who suffered the consequences of their sin. The temple, for Israel, was the national symbol they had been deprived of, and they certainly missed it. But God brought hope through the prophet. Although this building that Ezekiel saw in his vision had measurements and spaces beautifully crafted, he kept reminding them that desecration like they had done in the past wouldn't be permitted, since the glory of God's presence was to return. This demanded that the people live in true holiness.

### **Questions:**

- Of what does the glory of God consist?
- Having been restored in Christ, is it possible to glorify God at this time with our lives?

### **Conclusion**

When the captives, who had missed their temple, returned, they had to be holy and stay away from all kinds of evil. The church today is to live in holiness and proclaim restoration for the fallen person through the gospel of Jesus Christ.



# God will Restore His People

Eudo Prado (Peru)

**Study passages:** Ezekiel 45, 46, 47:13-48:35

**Memory Verse:** "You are to divide it equally among them. Because I swore with uplifted hand to give it to your ancestors, this land will become your inheritance" Ezekiel 47:14.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand God's restorative purpose for our lives.

## Introduction

When peoples' lives are separated from God, they suffer from spiritual decomposition because sin disfigures the divine design for us. However, the Bible shows us that God universally offers us His grace to restore us through redemption in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17; Titus 2:11). This wonderful truth is revealed in different ways in both Testaments. Ezekiel is one of the books that teaches us a lot about this. The section at the end of the book, which we'll study in this lesson, shows us God's desires for complete renewal for his people.

## I. A New Sort of Worship (Ezekiel 45:1-7, 13-46:24)

According to the Bible, God's priority for us is that we have communion with Him (Deuteronomy 6:5; Proverbs 23:26; Matthew 6:33). Material prosperity is useless since it often leads to us losing our souls. God created us for a transcendent purpose. Hence the crucial question of Jesus: "... What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Mark 8:36).

Since ancient times, God has always provided a place of worship for His people so they could have fellowship with Him. In the Old Testament, the Temple was a sacred place where God's presence was manifested, and the people could be reconciled to Him through atoning sacrifices and offerings (Leviticus 5:14-6:7). The Jewish temple was destroyed as a result of the siege of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile, which is the historical background of the book of Ezekiel. The destruction of the Temple was a consequence of God's judgment for the Israelites' idolatry and contempt for His holiness (Jeremiah 7:10-14; Ezekiel 8). The first chapter of the book mentions that Ezekiel's visions began in "the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin" (1:2). "If Jehoiachin's

deportation occurred in the year 598 BC, we can put the date of the beginning of his ministry as 593 BC." (Cevallos, J.C. and Zorzoli, R.O., eds. *Hispanic World Biblical Commentary*, volume 12, Ezekiel and Daniel. USA: Editorial Hispanic World, 2009, p.28).

The first passage we'll study in this lesson refers to the prophetic vision of restoration of the temple and worship: 45:1-7, 13-46:24. In 45:1-7, we can see the instructions to set aside special portions of land for the construction of the new temple, with rooms for the priests, city administration, and the ruling prince. So, when they got to go back to Israel, God told them: "When you allot the land as an inheritance, you are to present to the Lord a portion of the land as a sacred district..." (45:1). It was to be Holy ground. Earlier in the book of Ezekiel, before the exile, the people had practiced Baalism in the temple. One commentator notes that Baalism had a materialistic character based on the direct relationship with the cycles of nature. Israel's economy was based on farming, which followed the predictable pattern of the seasons. "Baalism offered concrete and precise promises, including better crops, more children, etc., what today would be called a 'prosperity theology' (Eze. 23:1-49)" (Cevallos, J.C., and Zorzoli, R.O., eds. *Hispanic World Biblical Commentary*, Volume 12, Ezekiel and Daniel. USA: Editorial Mundo Hispanic, 2009, p.29).

Idolatry, with its consequent materialism, had been the center of Israel's sin. Materialism makes us lose sight of God's purpose and corrupts religion. It leads us to establish forms of worship that are contrary to true biblical worship. Perhaps today, like in the times of the prophet Ezekiel, materialism has led a large part of Christians to worship more for the benefits they can get out of it rather than truly worshipping our Holy God. This is obviously the cause of the spiritual ruin of many Christians, as it was for the people of Israel.

On the other hand, one of the main causes of the crisis in which Israel was plunged into in those times was the corruption of the Levitical priesthood (Ezekiel 44:10-14). Remember that the priesthood was a key institution provided by God for the edification of His people. For many centuries, the priestly office fulfilled a very important place in the life of the people of Israel. A commentator notes that: "They led the people to do the prescribed offerings, assuring them of atonement for sin (Ex. 28:1-43; Lev. 16:1-34). They were called to discern God's will for the people as a most solemn obligation (Num. 27:21; Deut. 33:8). They were custodians of the law, and were commissioned to instruct the laity. The care and administration of the tabernacle was also under their jurisdiction" (Schultz, Samuel J. *The Old Testament Speaks*, 2nd ed. USA: Outreach Publications, 1982, p.63). However, by Ezekiel's time, the priesthood had reached a critically corrupt state, described in various passages of his prophetic visions (chaps. 8-9). When the ministry is corrupt, God's people are brought into a condition of spiritual misery.

God's purpose is great! The book of Ezekiel tells us of God's purpose to establish a new faithful and sanctified priesthood, fulfilling a key role in restoration. In this passage, the prophet described the regulations for offerings, festivals and solemn assemblies in the renewed worship. Let's notice the instructions for worship at the new sanctuary we find in the section of 45:13-46:15. In the previous chapter (44), the prophet described what God expected of ministers of the sanctuary: fidelity, righteousness, and holiness. Especially, he echoes the 23rd verse of that chapter: "They are to teach my people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean."

Today, even though we have buildings that are meeting places to worship God, we know that our bodies are the true temples of the Holy Spirit. We worship God with holy lives (1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1). We no longer worship through sacrifices of animals, but we present ourselves as "...living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God..." (Romans 12:1). Worship isn't limited to a mere act, or the participation of a ritual, for we worship with all of our lives.

We also learn in this part of the lesson the importance of a holy ministry whose perfect model is our Lord Jesus Christ. Those who are called to

exercise the sacred ministry must do it with integrity and righteousness, depending always on God's grace (2 Corinthians 3:5, 4:1-2). Finally, it's wonderful to know that today all believers are priests, as 1 Peter 2:9 says: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

### Questions:

- How does the ancient idolatrous practice of Baalism in Israel sometimes resemble present-day worship?
- What do we learn from the corrupt conditions of the priesthood in Ezekiel's days?

## II. A new ethic (Ezekiel 45:8-12)

Another issue that led to Israel's failure in the time of the prophet Ezekiel was the practice of injustice among citizens. In 45:8-12, let's look at some social evils that had brought God's judgment on the nation, and that without doubt, are present and are increasing more and more in our societies. These are the former sins, and the new rules to be followed:

1. Oppressive greedy rulers take away the people's lands: "...And my princes will no longer oppress my people but will allow the people of Israel to possess the land according to their tribes" (v.8).
2. Perversion of justice and law: "... Give up your violence and oppression and do what is just and right" (v.9a).
3. Unfair taxes: "...Stop dispossessing my people" (v.9b).
4. Deceitful trade: "You are to use accurate scales, an accurate ephah and an accurate bath" (v.10).

Throughout the Bible, we see that injustice not only was a problem of Ezekiel's time, but was present at different times in the history of Israel (Isaiah 1:23, 5:23, 10:1; Jeremiah 5:27-28). This is because sin is inherent in human nature (Jer. 13:23, 17:9), and the only remedy is to be found in God. According to the prophet's vision, after the restoration, justice should characterize the life of God's people, and especially their rulers. God demands of His children the just treatment of neighbors, which had been clearly established in the law of Moses (Leviticus 10), but had often been put aside. The abandonment of divine principles and holy conduct was always the cause of the people of Israel being defeated (Jeremiah 4:18).

The Word of God demands that we live with correct conduct toward all people (Colossians 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:6; 1 Peter 2:12). But Christian ethics don't consist of legalistic obedience to norms or moral precepts. According to the Bible, "The source of goodness in mankind rests on the nature of God, not on the nature of man. Correctness, justice, mercy and kindness aren't abstractions apart from the will of God or the result of internal impulses. They are responses to directions from above" (Purkiser, W. T.; Taylor, R. S.; Taylor, W. H. *God, Man and Salvation*. USA: CNP, 1977, p.117).

In other words, the power for the experience of holiness comes only from our relationship with God, and is received by grace. God calls us to fully enjoy that new life for which we have to be under the lordship of Christ (Romans 8:2; 2 Corinthians 5:17)..

### Questions:

- What evils similar to those practiced by Israel in the time of the prophet Ezekiel can we identify in today's society?
- Based on what you learned in the lesson, what is Christian ethics?

### III. A new inheritance (Ezekiel 47:13-48:35)

This passage shows us that God is interested in giving a possession to each of His children so that they will have abundant lives. In the old Testament, the possession of land represented one of the greatest blessings, and was considered to be an inheritance from God (Deuteronomy 26:1; Joshua 1:15). In order to prevent the dispossession of these inheritances for the descendants, Moses laid down rules about this (Numbers 27:8-11). Nevertheless, the dispossession of the land by neighbors was one of the sins frequently denounced by the prophets of Israel (Isaiah 5:8; Micah 2:1-2).

Ezekiel 47:13-48:35 establishes the regulations for the distribution of land among the tribes of Israel when the land was restored. This, without a doubt, was a message of hope, both for the inhabitants of Jerusalem and for the dispossessed who were exiles in Babylon. It was God's will that everyone in Israel had their own inheritance: "You are to divide it equally among them. Because I swore with uplifted hand to give it to your ancestors, this land will become your inheritance" (47:14).

Another significant matter in the passage is about the regulations for the division of the land, for which God also made provision for the foreigners who lived in Israel (v.22). This continues God's provisions in the law of Moses regarding the equal treatment of foreigners (Leviticus 24:22).

Finally, "...the name of the city from that time on will be: The Lord is there" (48:35). Hoff notes: "The last name for God found in the Old Testament is Yahweh-shama (Ez. 48:35). It is used as the decisive name of the holy city that the prophet had described, but its fulfillment probably awaits the descent from the sky of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21). The glory of this, like that of Ezekiel, consists in the presence of God (21:11,22,23)" (Hoff, Pablo. *Evangelical Theology*. USA: Editorial Life, 2005, pp.202-203).

How wonderful it is to know that God has promised us an inheritance, and that His promises are faithful and true! God's inheritance for us has to do with granting us every blessing in Christ, both the spiritual as well as material. As Paul stated: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). We can start enjoying that inheritance from God, from the present onwards, as we believe in the mighty promises of God. On the other hand, our inheritance has a superior dimension to that promised to the Israelite captives, as shown in 1 Peter 1:4. It says that we're waiting for: "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade."

### Questions:

- What does the name "Jehovah-sama" refer to in Ezekiel 48:35?
- What is God's inheritance for us?

### Conclusion

God's purpose is to restore our lives to His original design for which we were created. This work begins with our reconciliation to Him through redemption in Christ. Being reconciled, we can have fellowship with Him, who is the source of life. That life of God in us is expressed through holy conduct, characterized by the manifestation of our love for God and our love for our neighbors. Along with enjoying His holiness, God grants us an eternal inheritance, and the presence of the Holy Spirit is the greatest guarantee for all of this (Ephesians 1:14).

**Study passages:** Ezekiel 47:1-12

**Memory Verse:** “Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing” Ezekiel 47:12.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the importance of the image of water in the biblical text and learn what God can and wants to do in us through His living water.

## Introduction

God's message is always full of hope for His people. The final chapters of the book of the prophet Ezekiel are a clear example of this. Ezekiel prophesied to a nation that had been taken into captivity in the year 586 BC. Ezekiel's ministry was developed among the exiles, people who had been forced to leave their homes abruptly. They were far away from their way of life, and many had been separated from their families. They had seen their hopes and dreams crushed, and they suffered sorrow and sickness as forced emigrants, whose lives lacked hope, surrounded by pain, slavery, suffering and harassment.

Twelve years after the great exile, approximately in the year 574 BC, the prophet Ezekiel had a prophetic vision from God about restoration that is reported from chapter 40 onwards. The Lord showed the prophet what the rebuilt temple would be like. They had lost their temple, which had been looted and destroyed by the Babylonians during the siege of Jerusalem.

The language used in the vision is symbolic. Through this message, God wanted to communicate to His people their future restoration. The Lord longed that His people would know that he hadn't forgotten them, and that just like the temple, their lives too would be renewed and rebuilt by divine power through His grace and love.

This vision includes the physical measurements and characteristics of the construction of this temple (chaps.40-42), as well as the laws for worship, rules

for the priests, and information about offerings and sacrifices (chaps. 43-46). In the midst of all these details, a special section appears which doesn't show how the temple was to be on the inside, or what should happen there, but rather it speaks of what comes out of the temple. God's restorative process, bathed in love, won't just affect the temple, but also the people, and even all of humanity. We'll analyze these important parts.

## I. Water that comes from God (Ezekiel 47:1)

At the beginning of chapter 47, the prophet described having seen "...water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar" (v.1). First of all, this water, which later became a river, flowed from the temple itself. A river receives water from smaller sources such as streams, aquifers, etc. The source from which water can sprout to form a river, without the need of feeding on other hydrological sources, is a spring, usually found on a mountain. This was a very important message for the Jewish people in exile, and it's a wonderful symbol for us today: the presence of God is enough to give life.

The water springs directly from the temple where the Lord is in His fullness. The chosen people would not need other gods, things, or people to be restored. God himself was more than enough to raise these people up and revive them. It's the same today; we don't need anything or anyone else. God is all we need to find fullness, redemption, forgiveness and life in abundance.

On the other hand, the image used by the prophet is 'water.' This water will be the object of our study in this class. This is a very powerful symbol of life, blessing and prosperity. The Bible show us in different passages the importance of water for creation, life, health and full life within God's purposes. Let's look at some cases:

1. A great river was put in the Garden of Eden to give fertility to the garden (Genesis 2:10-14).
2. The first psalm compares the person who obeys God with a tree that grows by a river (Psalm 1:3).
3. The prophecy of Isaiah about the restoration of the people of God includes the pouring of water on the dry land (Isaiah 44:3-4).
4. The prophet Joel, speaking of the liberation of Judah, used the image of streams (Joel 3:18).
5. The prophet Zechariah spoke of the Day of the Lord where there will be living waters (Zechariah 14:8).
6. Lastly, Jesus Christ spoke of "rivers of living water" (John 7:37-39).

We can conclude that in biblical language, water is a symbol of life, blessing, health, prosperity and salvation. This understanding will help us to interpret the prophetic message that God gave His people in the development of this chapter. Let's see the characteristics of this water.

### Questions:

- Of all the examples and biblical cases in which water is mentioned, which one seems most important to you? Why?
- What does it mean for your Christian life that the river of healing comes from the temple and not from other rivers?

## II. Water that invites us to walk in it (Ezekiel 47:3-5)

After describing the origin of the water, the prophet narrated his first encounter with it. A man, who is an angel of God, or God himself, was measuring distances between the water flow in segments of five hundred meters. On his first approach, the water was up to the prophet's ankles (v.3); five hundred meters later, it was already up to his knees (v.4a); five hundred meters later, up to his waist (v.4b), and finally, after another

five hundred meters, the stream had already become a river that couldn't be crossed. It had grown so much that it could only be crossed by swimming (v.5).

This is one of the most beautiful invitations we can find in Ezekiel's prophetic vision. There is only one source of water that springs from the presence of God, and that implies prosperity, abundance and blessing for us, and God Himself invites us to walk in those waters. The Lord's invitation was very clear to Ezekiel, and it's clear for us too today: to go deeper and deeper.

God led the prophet Ezekiel, guiding him closely, making him follow Him, so bit by bit, his body is submerged in that divine water, ankles, knees, the waist and, in the end, all of his body was being bathed in a torrent of water that came out of God's temple. This could be a disturbing image for some, especially for those who know the currents of mighty rivers, or who have had negative experiences in very deep rivers.

Some might think that it would be better with the water just up to the ankles, or even up to the knees, but that going further could be dangerous. However, we must keep in mind the origin of this water: This water was coming from the very presence of God. He who invites us to enter is the Lord himself. This water cannot be harmful; its flow isn't intended to sink us or drown us in its channel. In no way will any harm come to us; on the contrary, this river is there to heal, strengthen, feed and give us life. God is the one who invites us to enter. He wants us to go deeper and deeper in our knowledge of Him. This image is an excellent metaphor about our progress in the Christian life. At first, we know little of God, we know something of the Bible, we understand part of the Christian doctrine, and we have gotten to know our Creator a bit. Nevertheless, as time goes by and the closer we are to Him, the more times we receive the invitation from God Himself to go deeper and deeper.

At this point, there's something important that we must remember: It's God who's interested in us, and we're led by His grace to get to know Him more and more. It isn't that we're very good or very fit to go to the Lord, but it's He who opens the way and gives us the ability to immerse ourselves in His river. He takes the first step, looks for us, invites us, and enables us.



The words of Douglas Steere, in his work *Prayer and Adoration*, which Richard Foster recovers in the *Devotional Classics* collection, remind us that “Before we begin to pray, we can be aware of God’s love for us, and that He’s actively interested in awakening each one and lead us to the true center. He gently touches the beach of this life calling us to enter” (Foster, Richard. *Classic Devotionals*. USA: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 2004, p.105).

Listen to the Lord’s invitation, accept it and follow it, go deeper and deeper in the knowledge of the Lord. Pray more, fast more, read the Bible more. Be an active church member, seek more and more the means of God’s grace, and get involved in the active service of your congregation. Don’t just be content with paddling around in the shallows where God’s river just reaches the ankles or knees, go so deep that you have to swim, where you are totally flooded with the grace of the Lord.

### Questions:

- How deep is your relationship with God today? Are you submerged up to “ankles,” “knees,” “waist,” or is it already “whole body”?
- In your experience, why are there people who don’t decide to go deeper into their relationship with God? What are the consequences if you have this attitude?

### III. Life-giving water (Ezekiel 47:7-10)

The following image is full of life. Firstly, the prophet tells us that the bank of the river was full of trees (v.7). This description tells us of a beautiful landscape, green, overflowing, worthy of a high-quality photograph, which even reminds us of the Garden of Eden. But that detail doesn’t remain there, because that water not only gave life to its own environment, but it was also going to give life to other regions.

The next verse contains the following Word of God: “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh” (v.8). A bit of geography will help us understand this: the Arabah is a geological depression located in Asia Minor, characterized by being completely deserted, with

few human settlements to this day, and whose lands aren’t very fertile, so much so that in the Biblical text, it’s called the “Valley of Salt” (2 Samuel 8:13; 2 Kings 14:7).

Within this enclave, we find the Dead Sea, a huge natural lake that owes its name to the very high concentration of salt in the water. There’s so much salt that in fact that there’s no life in that sea, no one can fish in it, or even use it for any other activity for human benefit. However, God promised to give life to this entire region. The mighty river that comes from God’s presence will descend to this sea and fill it with life. So much so that the Lord promises that there will be “large numbers of fish” (v.9), so many, in fact, that “Fishermen will stand along the shore... spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds—like the fish of the Mediterranean Sea” (v.10).

These are all declarations of hope from God. The water coming from the temple will be able to bring life, abundance, and prosperity to a region that historically has been arid, desert and unusable for fishing and trade. The original recipients of this prophecy surely were amazed to hear it. How could it be possible that in the sea of the Arabah (Dead Sea), there could be as much life as in the Great Sea (Mediterranean)? How could God restore a place that was almost dead? This is what God was promising to do with His people: To raise them up, restore them, bring them back from exile to their homes.

This is exactly what God wants to do with us: cleanse us from our sins, rescue us from our bad ways of living, bring us from death to life, and make our arid hearts shine through the light of life through Jesus Christ.

### Questions:

- According to the description of the Arabah region, how can we describe the life of a person in that condition?
- Do you know of any testimony of how a person got new life after having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? Share it.

#### **IV. Water that restores (Ezekiel 47:11-12)**

The last verse of this part of Ezekiel's vision shows us the benefits of this river. It's interesting to see how similar this verse is to the apostle John's vision of the end of time (Revelation 22:1-2). In both passages, a river with very similar characteristics is mentioned:

1. It's a river that comes out of the presence of God (Ezekiel 47:1; Revelation 22:1).
2. With trees on both sides (Ezekiel 47:12; Revelation 22:2).
3. It bears fruit each month (Ezekiel 47:12; Rev. 22:2).
4. The leaves of the tree are medicinal (Ezekiel 47:12; Revelation 22:2).

This is a message of vital importance for us. The prophecy that God gave to His people through Ezekiel is the same promise that God gives us that will be fully fulfilled at the Second Coming of the Lord. In both cases, we have an eschatological message: The prophet Ezekiel presented a prophecy that was fulfilled when God's people were brought back to Jerusalem, and they rebuilt the temple and the city of Jerusalem. But here there's also unfulfilled eschatology which will see its complete fulfillment at a future time when Christ comes for His church. Through this image, God wants to take us back to the original river that was in Eden, a clean, crystalline river with prosperous trees that served for food. The message in Genesis, Ezekiel and Revelation is the same: God wants to restore His original image in us. That image that has been corrupted by sin can be reconstituted in us by God, through Jesus Christ, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

#### **Questions:**

- Which of the four features of the river, mentioned in Ezekiel 47 and Revelation 22, is most hopeful for you? Why?
- What does the expression, "God wants to restore the original image of Himself in us," mean to you?

#### **Conclusion**

Ezekiel's prophetic message was fresh to the captive people. It gave them hope for the future and allowed them to trust in God again. In the same way, may our hearts be filled with joy and faith as we look to God for the future, knowing that His waters are available to us and we can immerse ourselves in them so that we receive healing, restoration and eternal life.

## Christian education book for youth and adults

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