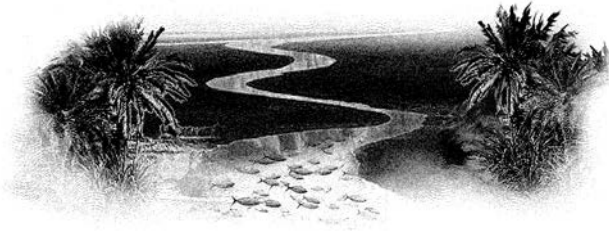


Justice *and* Mercy in the Old Testament: Part 2



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ezek. 37:1–14; Eph. 2:10; Ezek. 47:1–8; Matt. 5:16; Rev. 22:1, 2; Isa. 61:1–11.*

Memory Text: “Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live” (*Ezekiel 47:9, NIV*).

A neighborhood that had flourished in the 1950s and early 1960s had become like a war zone in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The majority of the families moved away, leaving behind a trail of abandoned, run-down, and burned-out tenements. Businesses moved out and drugs and crime moved in, further making the neighborhood very undesirable.

In 1986 a Christian family left their comfortable home in suburbia and moved into this depressed urban community. A pastor from another city joined them. They rebuilt two burned-out buildings and made them their homes. The two families spent time in the streets, meeting with community groups and mingling with those who remained in the area. These two families were the catalyst that God used to begin a church that brought healing and transformation to this dead community. Their work and impact continues today, having made a big difference in many lives there.

God has something to say about the role of His church in “hopeless” situations such as this. This week’s lesson continues “listening” to the chorus of Old Testament voices that call upon God’s people to reveal His character of benevolence to the world.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 23.

Alive in Christ

The grace of God that brings revival to those who are dead in transgression and sin is graphically revealed in Ezekiel 37. In vision, the prophet Ezekiel is transported by the Spirit to a valley full of dead, dry, and scattered bones. These bones represent the whole house of Israel. God asks, “Son of man, can these bones live?” (*Ezek. 37:3*).

The answer to this question unfolds as the prophet prophesies to the bones.

Read Ezekiel 37:1–14. What was God going to do for His people?

The results of the message delivered to the dry bones are that (1) they “came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army” (*Ezek. 37:10, NIV*); (2) God will settle His people in their own land (*Ezek. 37:14*); (3) and they will know that it was God who did it (*Ezek. 37:14*).

But being revived is not enough. God’s people are revived for a mission, for a purpose. Israel was to be a light to the nations.

Read Ephesians 2:10. Why are we made alive—spiritually re-created—in Christ?

“Our acceptance with God is sure only through His beloved Son, and good works are but the result of the working of His sin-pardoning love. They are no credit to us, and we have nothing accorded to us for our good works by which we may claim a part in the salvation of our souls. Salvation is God’s free gift to the believer, given to him for Christ’s sake alone. The troubled soul may find peace through faith in Christ, and his peace will be in proportion to his faith and trust. He cannot present his good works as a plea for the salvation of his soul.

“But are good works of no real value? Is the sinner who commits sin every day with impunity, regarded of God with the same favor as the one who through faith in Christ tries to work in his integrity? The Scripture answers, ‘We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.’

“In His divine arrangement, through His unmerited favor, the Lord has ordained that good works shall be rewarded. We are accepted through Christ’s merit alone; and the acts of mercy, the deeds of charity, which we perform, are the fruits of faith.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, pp. 199, 200.

A Flowing River

Read Ezekiel 47:1–8. What’s going on with the temple that Ezekiel saw in vision?

The temple appears to have sprung a leak. You may wonder, did a pipe break, or what? In this case, the leak was a good thing.

This water leaking out of the temple was going “toward the east.” East of Jerusalem is the Salt Sea (also known as the Dead Sea), the lowest body of water on earth. Between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea is approximately 21 miles (about 34 kilometers) of largely desert country, which includes the Arabah, also known as the depression of the Jordan and the Dead Sea. That sea itself is so salty that nothing can live there.

However, when the water from the temple reaches it, the dead waters of the sea are “healed.” This can be understood symbolically as God’s church, the temple (*1 Pet. 2:4, 5*), reaching out and being a source of health and healing to those dead in trespasses and in sin.

Read Matthew 5:16. What is Jesus saying to us here in regard to how we are to represent Him to the world?

The Zambezi River in Zambia, Africa, starts as a shallow brook that comes from under a tree. As it flows toward Victoria Falls it grows from a brook (ankle-deep) to knee-deep, to waist-deep, and then to a river that is deep enough to swim in. Likewise, though small at the beginning, the river from the temple increased in momentum and impact and became a river “deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross” (*Ezek. 47:5, NIV*).

Your church’s healing influence may start small, but it can grow until it transforms your community! “Our work has been presented to me as, in its beginning, a small, very small, rivulet.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 171.

Light, water—both of these are images used to talk about what God can do through us to help others. How can we become better conduits for ministering to those in need?

The Church: A Source of Life

“Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish . . . ; where the river flows everything will live” (Ezek. 47:9, NIV).

Ezekiel’s prophecy illustrates that where the river that comes from God’s church flows, there is life. Ezekiel 47:10 adds to the amazement of it all. What a strange sight that would be: the banks of a body of water known as being without fish because nothing can live there suddenly become a place where fishermen are casting their nets because many fish are caught there.

The whole point is that through the power of God working in His people, life can exist where before there was none.

“Where God is at work there is no hopeless situation, no group of people who are beyond redemption, no heritage from an unhappy past which need condemn us to a future delivered over to despair.”—*The Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), vol. 6, p. 328.

God’s amazing grace does amazing things—for anyone who will accept it. Here again, we have the message of the gospel. God, through us, can give hope to those who are discouraged, despondent, dry, and dying, both spiritually and physically.

Compare Ezekiel 47:12 with Revelation 22:1, 2. **What do these two passages tell you about the ultimate destiny of those who are healed and made alive by Jesus through His church?**

Someday God’s people—including community members God has healed and made alive through the selflessness of church members—will be in the new earth, where there is another river, one flowing from the throne of God. There will be no deserts, dryness, or death there.

In the meantime—while we wait for that blessed reality—God wants His churches to be places from which flow healing and abundant life to the community. He wants to work through us to revitalize and transform the deserts, depressions, and Dead Seas in our territory, bringing them abundant life in Jesus (*John 10:10*), which is the wholistic Seventh-day Adventist message in a nutshell.

The prophet Amos presents a similar picture to Ezekiel 47. Read Amos 5:24. How does this picture compare with the role of your church in your community? In what tangible ways is your church a healing river there?

Jubilee Promises

The Old Testament is filled with the idea that those who have been blessed materially and spiritually will reach out to those who have not been.

Read Isaiah 61:1–11. What is God saying to His people here, and how can we apply what’s said here to ourselves and to our calling before the Lord? See also Luke 4:18.

Isaiah 61 begins with a declaration that the Spirit of the Lord works through the Anointed One to preach good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim freedom for the captives, and release the prisoners from darkness and despair (*Isa. 61:1*). All of the elements of this promise have their fulfillment in the “year of the LORD’s favor.” The “year of the LORD’s favor” is a reference to the year of jubilee, which we already saw was filled with implications for the necessity of ministering to the needs of the poor.

Thus, the mourners who are comforted, the grieving ones in Zion who are provided for, those who receive “beauty instead of ashes” and “the oil of joy instead of mourning,” and those who wear “a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair” (*Isa. 61:3, NIV*) are the very ones who will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated. Those blessed by the Messianic jubilee become transformers of society, renewing the ruined cities (*Isa. 61:4*). God’s servants are called priests and ministers and are supported by the wealth of the surrounding nations (*Isa. 61:5, 6*).

The images that we find in Isaiah 61 of God’s Anointed One transforming the surrounding peoples through the prosperity of those who are in covenant with Him (*Isa. 61:8, 9*) apply to those who, in the present day, have been called to be ministers and missionaries in communities around the world. Shouldn’t the same transforming influence of this prophecy be felt when we delight greatly in the Lord, rejoice in our God, and stand clothed in garments of salvation and righteousness in the midst of our community (*Isa. 61:10, 11*)?

Read Isaiah 61:9. What a powerful testimony to what God could do in His people. Could the same thing be said about us today? Why, or why not?

The Church—A Change Agent

Read Micah 6. What is the Lord speaking out against here?

Micah joins the other Old Testament prophets who emphasize that external forms of religion that lack a humble and intentional manifestation of justice and mercy are never acceptable to a just and merciful God.

What is the crucial message of Micah 6:8?

“True religion is practical. To be sure, it includes the rites and ceremonies of the church, but . . . it is not so much a matter of abstaining from food as it is of sharing food with the hungry. Practical godliness is the only kind of religion recognized at the judgment bar of God (Matt. 25:34–46).”
The SDA Bible Commentary, vol. 4, p. 306.

Today God continues to reject the apostasy of an external religion that excludes the practical godliness expressed in Micah 6:8. Our religious forms are not an end in and of themselves; they are a means to an end, and that end is Christ, who is to be revealed in us.

In the introduction to this week’s lesson we met two families who moved into a “hopeless” community in order to minister to their needs. The two families formed a small group in one of their living rooms with new friends from the neighborhood. The members of this growing small group earnestly prayed that God would show them how to revive their community. They partnered with a Christian development agency and began recruiting volunteers to join them in rebuilding the run-down tenements around them.

If you visited this community today, you would see a thriving new community doing so much better than before. This became a reality because a small church was intent on demonstrating Jesus’ love in a practical way, which transformed their community. What this work reveals is one very practical and powerful way in which Christ was able to work through His people to reach out and minister to others.

Though God was speaking to His people as a whole, in verse 8 the “you” was in the singular. God was talking to each one personally. How well do you, personally, reveal what the Lord says here “is good”?

Further Thought: Read Jeremiah 22:1–16; Ezekiel 16:49; Zechariah 7:9, 10. Read Ellen G. White Comments, pp. 1165, 1166, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4; “God’s Design in Our Sanitariums,” pp. 227, 228, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6.

“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” (*Mic. 6:8, NIV*). How much clearer could the Lord be in regard to what He asks of His people? God has shown us what is “good,” and this “good” is the same word used again and again in Genesis 1, referring to the pre-Fall Creation. Thus, implicitly we are pointed back to the ideal, to what God originally had for us and, ultimately, what He will restore to us after Jesus returns. The phrase translated “require of you” could also be (and perhaps more accurately) translated as “seek from you.” That is, what does God “seek from” us, His redeemed people covered by the grace of Christ? The answer is shown in how we are to relate to others and to God. First, we are *to act justly*. This is so appropriate given the topic of this quarter, which is on how we can help those who are often helpless victims of injustice. Second, we are *to love mercy*. We live in a world that, at times, can be so unmerciful. What a powerful witness we could be were we to love mercy and show that love by revealing mercy in our lives toward others. Third, we are *to walk humbly before God*. If the Lord in Micah 6:4 referred them back to their deliverance from Egypt as a reason for them to be humble and faithful before Him, how much more so should that apply to us, we who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus? The reality of the Cross, and what it cost to redeem us, should always keep us humble before our God.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What other Old Testament texts can you find that talk about our obligation to the needy?
- ❷ In Amos 5, especially verses 21–24, we find strong words about the religious people in the time of Amos, about God’s showing more interest in how others are treated than in the religious rituals that He Himself instituted. What should this be saying to us about where we should have our emphasis?
- ❸ How can we guard against the danger of getting so caught up in reaching out to people’s material needs that we neglect their spiritual ones? How can we strike the right balance between the two in our desire to minister to the less fortunate and needy among us?

Baxter's Bible Studies

Due to the civil war in Sudan, Baxter had to leave his home for a long time. While away, he met some Seventh-day Adventists and studied the Bible with them. He joined the Adventist Church and was eager to share his new faith with his family. When he was finally able to return home, he learned to his dismay that his family wasn't interested in hearing anything about Seventh-day Adventists.

"What's wrong with the church we already go to?" Baxter's brother asked. "Why do you have to stir everything up?"

Then Baxter's nephew died. At the funeral, Baxter shared his hope that they would all see his nephew again when Jesus comes. After the funeral, the local priest confronted him.

"Who gave you permission to preach here?" the priest demanded.

Baxter responded, "My permission comes from Jesus Christ, who said to go into all the world and preach the gospel."

The priest became angrier and threatened to hit Baxter, but another man stepped between the two. "We can't fight at a funeral," the man said. "Let's sit down and discuss this matter carefully."

After the funeral, Baxter and the priest sat under a mango tree to talk while about 200 people gathered to listen. The two men talked for several hours. The priest would state a traditional belief, and Baxter would show him what the Bible said on the subject. Little by little, the people gathered around began to understand the differences between what they had been taught all their lives and what the Bible taught.

Some were unhappy that Baxter would discredit their church, but others wanted to know more about this new faith.

Baxter began visiting every home in the village. The people's culture considered it rude not to sit and listen to a visitor who comes to their homes, so again and again Baxter was invited to share his faith with the villagers. Even those who didn't want to hear what he had to say would listen to him just to be polite. One family, afraid to offend their visitor, invited him to sit down. Then they left their own home so they wouldn't have to listen to him!

But Baxter didn't give up. He kept returning until some members of the family would listen to him. After five months of study, this family was among the first to take their stand for the Bible and join the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Baxter taught the new believers to give Bible studies, and soon the little group doubled to 32 members. They built a small church and school of local materials, and the congregation continues to grow.