

Jesus *and* Those *in* Need



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 1:46–55, 4:16–21, 7:18–23, Matt. 12:15–21, Matt. 21:12–16, Mark 11:15–19, Isa. 53:3–6.*

Memory Text: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD’ ” (*Luke 4:18, 19, NKJV*).

Among other reasons for His incarnation, Jesus came to show us what God is like. He did this by His teaching, by His sacrifice, and by His life; that is, by how He interacted with ordinary people. Many of His actions made immediate, real-world changes in the lives of others.

This aspect of the Messiah's ministry had been predicted by the Old Testament prophets, by Jesus' mother, Mary, and even by Jesus Himself when He defined His mission in His first recorded sermon (*Luke 4*). In addition, the Gospel writers often used the language of the Old Testament prophets to explain what Jesus was doing as they narrated His story. In this way, Jesus' life was seen clearly in the tradition of these prophets, including their compassion for the poor and oppressed.

The religious leaders, however, perceived Jesus as a threat. In a horrible example of injustice and cruelty, they had Jesus arrested, unjustly tried, and crucified. In Jesus, God knows what injustice feels like—and, in His death, He exposed the horror of evil. In His resurrection, though, He triumphed for life, goodness, and salvation.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 17.

Mary's Song

Imagine the scene: Mary had received a message from the angel Gabriel just a few days earlier. He had told her that she was to be the mother of Jesus, the Son of the Most High. She has not yet told anyone but goes to visit Elizabeth, her older relative, who also is expecting a miracle baby. With spiritual insight Elizabeth recognizes Mary's news before Mary has a chance to say anything, and together they celebrate the promises and goodness of God.

Read Luke 1:46–55. Notice the mix of praise between what was meant only for her—“‘for the Mighty One has done great things for me’” (Luke 1:49, NIV)—to the much more general. Why should our praise and worship to God include both personal and general emphases?

This is a remarkable song that could fit well among the psalms or in the writings of the Hebrew prophets. Mary is overflowing with a sense of wonder and gratitude to God. She has obviously seen God working in her own life, but she also is well aware of the larger implications of God's plan for her nation and for the human race.

But in Mary's understanding, not only is God powerful and praiseworthy, He also is merciful and seems to have a particular regard for the humble, the downtrodden, and the poor. The angel had barely left after announcing the “good news” of the impending birth to Mary before she was singing the following: “‘He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty’” (Luke 1:52, 53, NIV).

Right at the beginning of the story of Jesus' life on earth, He is introduced as a ruler (see Luke 1:43)—but as the ruler of a different kind of kingdom. As many commentators have described it, the kingdom of God that Jesus came to inaugurate and establish was to be an “upside-down kingdom” when compared to the usual social ordering of the kingdoms of this world. In the descriptions we have of Jesus' kingdom, the powerful and wealthy of this world are the least, and the poor and oppressed are liberated, “filled,” and lifted up.

If the church should be an expression of the kingdom of God, how well does the church do in modeling the “upside-down kingdom” that Mary described? How could something such as this be modeled—but without being unfair to the rich and powerful, as well, who also are recipients of Christ's love?

Jesus' Mission Statement

Whether it was the prescribed reading for the day or whether Jesus intentionally found the relevant verses (*Isa. 61:1, 2*) in the scroll He was given to read, it was no coincidence these verses were the text for His first public sermon. Neither is it a coincidence that the story of Jesus' short sermon in Luke 4:16–21—“ ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’ ” (*Luke 4:21, NIV*)—begins Luke's record of Jesus' public ministry.

Jesus seemed to be picking up the tune from Mary's song of an “upside-down kingdom” and beginning to put it into effect in His ministry. Jesus—and Luke in his retelling of Jesus' story—used the prophecy of Isaiah to explain what Jesus was doing and was about to do, but it also was another way of expressing what Mary had described 30 years earlier. The poor, the hurting, and the oppressed are the special focus and recipients of the good news that Jesus was bringing.

Jesus adopted these verses from Isaiah 61 as His mission statement. His ministry and mission were to be both spiritual and practical, and He would demonstrate that the spiritual and practical are not as far apart as we sometimes assume. For Jesus and His disciples, caring for people physically and practically were at least part of caring for them spiritually.

Read and compare Luke 4:16–21 and 7:18–23. Why do you think Jesus answered in this way? How would you respond to similar questions about the divinity and Messiahship of Jesus?

When Jesus sent out His disciples, the commission He gave to them also was in accord with this mission. While they were to announce that “ ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near’ ” (*Matt. 10:7, NIV*), Jesus' further instructions to His disciples were to “ ‘heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give’ ” (*Matt. 10:8, NIV*). Their ministry in His name was to reflect and enact the values and principles of Jesus' ministry and the kingdom He invited people to. The disciples, too, were to join with Jesus in His mission to lift up the last, the least, and the lost.

How do we balance this work with the crucial message of preaching the three angels' messages to a lost world, as well? Why must all that we do be related, in one way or another, to the proclaiming of “present truth”?

Jesus Heals

The Gospels are peppered with the stories of Jesus' miracles, particularly those of healing. As Isaiah had prophesied, He healed the blind and released those who had been held captive by disease, sometimes after many years of suffering (*see, for example, Mark 5:24–34, John 5:1–15*). But He did more than this: He made the lame walk again; He healed lepers—not just by word but by touching them, “unclean” though they were; He confronted demons who were possessing people's minds and bodies; and He even raised the dead.

We might expect these miracles to have been about attracting crowds and proving His powers to His many doubters and critics. But this was not always the case. Instead, often Jesus gave instructions to the person healed not to tell anyone about it. While it seems the just-healed people were unlikely to follow these instructions and keep their wonderful news to themselves, Jesus was trying to show that His miracles were about something more significant than a spectacle. The ultimate goal, of course, was for the people to receive salvation in Him.

Yet, the healing miracles of Jesus were an expression of His compassion. For example, in the lead-up to the feeding of the 5,000, Matthew narrates, “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick” (*Matt. 14:14, NIV*). Jesus felt the pain of those who were hurting and did what He could for the people He came into contact with to help them and lift them up.

Read Isaiah's prophecy in Matthew 12:15–21. In what ways do Isaiah and Matthew identify what Jesus was doing as something larger than healing a few—or even a few hundred—sick people?

“Every miracle that Christ performed was a sign of His divinity. He was doing the very work that had been foretold of the Messiah; but to the Pharisees these works of mercy were a positive offense. The Jewish leaders looked with heartless indifference on human suffering. In many cases their selfishness and oppression had caused the affliction that Christ relieved. Thus His miracles were to them a reproach.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 406.

Jesus' healing miracles were acts of compassion and justice. But in all cases, they were not an end in and of themselves. Ultimately all that Christ did was for the purpose of leading people to eternal life (*see John 17:3*).

Clearing the Temple

When we read the stories of Jesus in the Gospels, we are often attracted to the gentle images of Jesus—His care for the sick and for children, His stories of searching for the lost, and His talk about the kingdom of God. This might be why other stories in which we see Him acting forcefully and bluntly—particularly against the religious leaders of His day and some of their practices—can take us by surprise.

Read Matthew 21:12–16, Mark 11:15–19, Luke 19:45–48, and John 2:13–17. What is the significance of the fact that these similar stories are told in every one of the Gospel accounts?

It is hardly surprising that this incident is included in each of the Gospels. It is a story filled with drama, action, and passion. Jesus was obviously concerned about the use of the temple in this way and about the replacement of true worship with the sale of sacrificial animals. What a desecration of all that those sacrifices were to represent, which was His substitutionary death for the sins of the world!

Such direct action fits well in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. This point is suggested in each of the Gospel accounts by either Jesus or the Gospel writers quoting from Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Psalms to explain what was happening in this story. The people recognized Jesus as a prophet (*see Matt. 21:11*) and came to Him as He healed and taught in the temple court after He had driven out the merchants and money changers. It was the people who found healing in His touch and hope growing in their hearts as they listened to His teaching.

The religious leaders also recognized Jesus as a prophet—as someone who was dangerous to their power and the stability of their social order—and went away to plot to kill Jesus, in the same way as their predecessors had plotted against the prophets in previous centuries (*see this contrast in Luke 19:47, 48*).

As church members, how can we do our part to make sure that our local churches never become places that need what the temple needed in Christ's day? How can we avoid those spiritual dangers? What might some of them be, in fact?

The Cross of Christ

That God is a God who sees and hears the cries of the poor and oppressed is comforting. That God is a God who, in Jesus, has experienced and endured the worst of our world's inhumanity, oppression, and injustice is astounding. Despite all the compassion and goodness Jesus demonstrated in His life and ministry, His death came as a result of hatred, jealousy, and injustice.

From Jesus' anguished prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane to His arrest, "trials," torture, mocking, crucifixion, and death, He endured a grueling ordeal of pain, cruelty, evil, and oppressive power. All of this was exacerbated by the innocence, purity, and goodness of the One who suffered it: "He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (*Phil. 2:7, 8, NIV*). Through the lens of salvation's story, we see the beauty of Jesus' sacrifice for us, but we should not forget the brutality of the suffering and injustice He experienced.

Read Isaiah 53:3–6. What does this tell us about what happened to Jesus, the innocent suffering for the guilty? How does this help us understand what He went through in our behalf?

In Jesus, God knows what it feels like to be a victim of evil and injustice. The execution of an innocent man is an outrage; the murder of God more so. God has so identified Himself with us in our broken and fallen condition that we cannot doubt His empathy, compassion, and faithfulness: "For we do not have a high priest [Jesus] who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (*Heb. 4:15, NIV*). What a revelation of the character of our God! How do we even begin to wrap our minds around the good news about God that the Cross represents?

In all that we do for the Lord, especially in reaching out to the needy, why must we always keep the death of Jesus, as our Substitute—not just for ourselves but for those whom we help—at the center of our mission and purpose?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “In the Footsteps of the Master,” pp. 117–124, in *Welfare Ministry*; “Days of Ministry,” pp. 29–50, in *The Ministry of Healing*; “The Temple Cleansed Again,” pp. 589–600; “In Pilate’s Judgment Hall,” pp. 723–740, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“God has given in His word decisive evidence that He will punish the transgressors of His law. Those who flatter themselves that He is too merciful to execute justice upon the sinner, have only to look to the cross of Calvary. The death of the spotless Son of God testifies that ‘the wages of sin is death,’ that every violation of God’s law must receive its just retribution. Christ the sinless became sin for man. He bore the guilt of transgression, and the hiding of His Father’s face, until His heart was broken and His life crushed out. All this sacrifice was made that sinners might be redeemed. In no other way could man be freed from the penalty of sin. And every soul that refuses to become a partaker of the atonement provided at such a cost must bear in his own person the guilt and punishment of transgression.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 539, 540.

Discussion Questions:

- ① **Read the Ellen G. White statement above. Talk about the reality of injustice: Christ, the innocent, suffering the penalty of the guilty! Why is it so important to keep this crucial truth before us?**
- ② **Jesus never advocated political reform in order to bring about the kind of “kingdom” He referred to. After all, history is filled with very sad stories of people who used violence and oppression, all in the name of helping the downtrodden and the oppressed. So often all that had been accomplished was the replacement of one oppressive class with another one. Though Christians can and should work with the powers that be in order to try to help the downtrodden, why must they always be wary of using politics to achieve these ends?**
- ③ **Think about what the plan of salvation entailed. Jesus, the just, suffering for the unjust—which means each one of us. Why should this great sacrifice, in our behalf, make us new people in Christ?**

Summary: In the Gospels, Jesus’ ministry is introduced and explained with reference to the work of the Old Testament prophets. Good news to the poor, freedom for the oppressed, and healing for the broken were proclaimed as markers of the Messiah—and something Jesus demonstrated throughout His ministry. Yet, in His death, He also suffered the brunt of injustice and ultimately overcame the worst of fallen humanity and inhumanity. Thanks to His unjust death in our behalf, our sins can be forgiven, and we have the promise of eternal life.

Fired for the Sabbath

By AURORA CARLOS JUSTINO

I grew up in Nampula, Mozambique's third-largest city, where 80 percent of the population is Muslim. I didn't feel comfortable with the faith of my mother, who got divorced when I was small. Something in my mind kept telling me that I should examine Christianity to find peace in my heart.

One day, I told my mother about my desire. "Mommy, I want to be a Christian."

My mother said, "If you want to be a Christian, don't call me 'Mommy' anymore. You will no longer be my daughter."

Her words frightened me. I stopped going to her place of worship. I didn't go to any place of worship. I wanted to see how Mother would react. When Mother saw that I wasn't worshipping at all, she said, "Fine, you can go look for a Christian church."

I was so happy! But I didn't immediately start looking for a church, because I was drinking and going to parties.

One day, a young man approached me on the street.

"Do you know that God loves you?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"You must leave all your sins," he said.

Those words bothered me. The man introduced himself as Armando and invited me to his church nearby.

After we parted ways, however, I couldn't remember the name of the church. A month later, I looked around the neighborhood and learned that the only local church was Seventh-day Adventist. The pastor at the church, Eleuterio Marage, didn't know Armando, but he offered me Bible studies. Three months later, I was baptized.

Life became difficult immediately. The restaurant where I worked scheduled me to work on Saturday, and I thought, *If I don't work on Sabbath, then I won't have any work. If I don't have a job, how will my mother and younger sister survive, because I am the only one taking care of them?*

After spending a month wondering what to do, I read Jesus' promise in Matthew 6:33, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (NKJV).



I quit my job. My mother was upset initially, but God has provided. One of my three older brothers has stepped in to support my mother and sister.

But what has impressed me the most is how drastically my thinking has changed. I have a peace that I never had before. I thank my Lord for changing my life. I am now 22, and I haven't been able to find a full-time job. But by God's grace I have led four people to baptism during the past year.