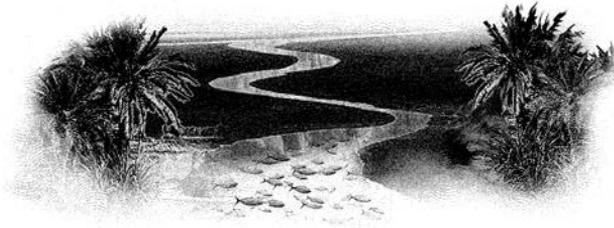


Justice *and* Mercy in the Old Testament: Part 2



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:

- 1 What other Old Testament texts can you find that talk about our obligation to the needy?
- 2 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?
- 3 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.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Isaiah 61*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Comprehend the extent of God’s love for the poor and marginalized in his or her community and the responsibility to help serve them.

Feel: Experience a renewed sense of commitment to join God in caring for the poor and needy.

Do: Show his or her concern for the poor and suffering through prayer, finances, and personal service.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Understanding Justice

A What does Paul mean by saying that we were created to do good works (*Eph. 2:10*)? He has just finished saying that we are saved by faith, not works (*Eph. 2:8, 9*)! And aren’t our best efforts like filthy rags (*Isa. 64:6*)? Discuss.

B What good works would make the most difference in your local community?

C What good news can we, as Christ’s followers, proclaim to the poor (*Isa. 61:1*)?

II. Feel: Showing Sympathy

A Isaiah 61 speaks of replacing mourning with gladness and a “spirit of despair” with “a garment of praise” (*Isa. 61:3, NIV*). Many people today—including fellow Seventh-day Adventists—live with the burden of depression, despair, loneliness. Many mourn. How can we best show sympathetic care and comfort for such people?

III. Do: Working for Justice

A Isaiah 61:8 says that God loves justice. What can we do to work for greater justice in our communities?

► **Summary:** When Jesus separates the sheep from the goats at the end of time, His measure won’t be a deep theological issue that has engaged the attention of the church’s best scholars. The issues that separate are simple: “ ‘I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink’ ” (*Matt. 25:35, 36, NKJV*).

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Isaiah 61*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Issues of helping the poor and marginalized are not just concepts to be debated by politicians—they are themes Scripture emphasizes and that which Jesus Himself proclaims. It is all about the fair and humane treatment of one another, a practical expression of the good news of salvation.

Just for Teachers: Take the opportunity to move the concept of helping the needy out of theoretical and political rhetoric and put it into practical terms: How should we as Christ’s followers treat those who are less fortunate than we are?

Opening Discussion: If you visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., you will see a quote attributed to German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller:

“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Niemöller became an outspoken critic of Nazi policies and served time in concentration camps from 1938 until the end of the war.

Nobody knows the exact words Niemöller used in the above statement—he often spoke off-the-cuff, and he varied the list from time to time. But the point of his quote is clear: if we don’t speak out and work for justice for others, then we shouldn’t expect anyone to seek justice for us.

Consider This: What would you say to someone who argues that concerns about justice are a distraction from our true calling, which is to preach the gospel?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: In delving into Scripture’s deep vein of justice themes, you have the opportunity to help your class see current issues and challenges in society through a distinctly Christian prism. Challenge class members to separate the idea of justice from any political baggage it may have acquired and to ask themselves how God, through His Word, is bidding us to respond to injustices we see around us.

Bible Commentary

I. Jesus and Jubilee (*Review with your class Isaiah 61:1–11.*)

When Jesus returned to Galilee, news about Him spread quickly through the countryside. Luke tells us that He taught in synagogues “and everyone praised” Him (*Luke 4:15, NIV*).

Then Jesus came to His hometown of Nazareth and was invited to speak in the synagogue. He stood up to read and immediately established His close connection to the line of prophetic voices stretching back to the Old Testament. Jesus chose to read from Isaiah 61 and claimed it as the blueprint for His own ministry. This is a chapter that highlights the importance of ministry to society’s outcasts and the marginalized:

“The Spirit of the LORD is on Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me . . .
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*).

And so, early in His ministry, Jesus clearly proclaims that care for these people will be central to His agenda.

Jesus even goes so far as to proclaim “the year of the LORD’s favor” (*NIV*) or, as the King James Version translates it, the “acceptable year of the Lord.” This year to which He refers has a specific meaning; it’s the jubilee of Leviticus—a time of fresh starts during which debts are canceled, slaves are set free, and land is returned to its original owners (*Lev. 25:10–13*). Now Jesus claims this verse as part of His mission statement: “‘Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’ ” (*Luke 4:21, NKJV*).

The people in the Nazareth synagogue, like those elsewhere in Galilee, were happy to hear Jesus’ teaching: “All bore witness to Him and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth” (*Luke 4:22, NKJV*). There was even a bit of name-dropping and insider-gossip going on as they asked one another in amazement, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” And they were more than eager to welcome the miracles He performed.

However, the tide of public opinion in Nazareth quickly changed as Jesus outlined the broader scope of His mission vision. To their great disappoint-

ment, He had no plans to put on a miracle show in Nazareth. Rather, He took the opportunity to reveal how His mission of love would not be confined to Galilee or Israel—it was a mission to the entire world. He pointed out two occasions in history in which God chose to perform miracles among Gentiles—the widow in Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian—rather than among the Jewish people.

The people in the synagogue were shocked. No longer singing His praises, they drove Jesus out of town and tried unsuccessfully to throw Him over a cliff (*Luke 4:28–30*).

Consider This: Why did Jesus choose to undermine the goodwill He was enjoying in Galilee? Why was His message of justice and salvation to all people so threatening to His listeners?

II. God’s Workmanship (*Review with your class Ephesians 2:10.*)

The apostle Paul writes, “For we are God’s *poiēma*, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (*Eph. 2:10, NIV*). Most versions of the Bible translate the Greek word *poiēma* as “workmanship.” The only other place this word appears in the New Testament is in Romans 1:20: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from *poiēma*, so that men are without excuse” (*NIV*). Here most versions translate *poiēma* along the lines of “what has been made.”

Some scholars have pointed out that the English word “poem” derives from *poiēma* and suggest that in these verses there is the sense that God’s creation of nature and His creation of human beings were works of poetry, of art. Whatever the true meaning, this verse tells us that we are created for a very specific purpose: “to do good works.”

Consider This: This verse gives us a very specific purpose in our lives as Christians—we are created to live and “to do good works.” What sort of good works do you think Paul had in mind?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: It’s not good enough for us as Christians to just feel sorry for the poor or the oppressed. Take the opportunity to discuss with class members various ways we can respond in a positive and helpful way to injustices we observe.

Thought Questions:

- 1 How can Seventh-day Adventists advocate for public policy on

behalf of the poor? Are Seventh-day Adventists supposed to stay away from politics? Discuss.

② Is your church involved in sponsoring or participating in programs that address the causes of poverty? If not, should it be? Give reasons for your answer. How would you start such an activity?

③ What does it mean to “live lives of simplicity and modesty”? How can that make a difference in addressing social issues?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Our expectation of Jesus’ second coming, and the ultimate restoration of justice, should not leave the class with an attitude of “Well, I don’t have to do anything if God is going to sort it all out anyway.” Use this final section of the lesson study to focus on the benefits of caring for the poor and needy, for those doing the sharing, and also for those who receive that care.

Activity: Draw two columns on a chalkboard or whiteboard. (If you don’t have these supplies, just discuss with the class.) Make the headings “Helping” for column 1 and “Receiving” for column 2. As the class participates in the discussion, summarize their ideas on the board.

Ask the following types of questions:

What differences does it make in the life of a Christian when he or she cares for those in need and works for justice?

Can you be a Christian and not care for the poor and needy? Why, or why not?

Invite class members to share from their own experiences or from what they’ve observed in others.

After discussing the effects on the person involved in service, focus on the person receiving. How can we avoid causing that person to feel as though he or she is just a “charity case”? How do we preserve his or her dignity? How can we appropriately share spiritually with people in need without their thinking there are strings attached to our help?

Finally, invite the class to make a list of practical ways they can become involved in God’s mission to the world.