

Mercy and Justice in Psalms and Proverbs



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ps. 9:7–9, 13–20; Psalm 82; Psalm 101; Psalm 146; Prov. 10:4; 13:23, 25; 30:7–9.*

Memory Text: “Defend the poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy; free them from the hand of the wicked” (*Psalm 82:3, 4, NKJV*).

Psalms and Proverbs depict the experience of living with God in the common things of life, not just in times of worship or in other religious activities. While the book of Proverbs offers a range of practical wisdom—from relationships and families to business and government—Psalms is a collection of songs that cover a variety of emotions and spiritual experiences from laments to exultant praise and everything in between. It is easy to see that our faith should make a difference in every aspect and experience of our lives, because God cares about every aspect of our lives.

Meanwhile, any reflection on life in this fallen world could hardly ignore the injustice that so permeates the human condition. In fact, injustice is repeatedly described as something that our Lord cares about and seeks to relieve. It is He who is the hope of the hopeless.

Though we can only touch on what these books say about this topic, perhaps this lesson might inspire you to be more proactive in ministering to the needs of the poor, the oppressed, and the forgotten who exist all around us and whom we are obligated to help.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 27.

Psalms: Songs of Hope for the Oppressed

As we have already noted, God sees and hears people who are in distress and trouble. Most often in the Psalms we hear those cries from people who have trusted in God but are not seeing justice done. The affirmations of the goodness, justice, and power of God can seem overwhelmed by the injustice and oppression that the voices in these songs experience or observe.

Yet, these are the songs of those who are still singing. Neither their life nor their faith has been quenched. There is still hope; and the urgency is for God to act before it is too late, before evil triumphs, before the oppressed are destroyed by the weight of the evil brought against them. In this way, the writers of the Psalms try to bridge the gap between the affirmations of their faith and the trials and tragedies of life.

Read Psalm 9:7–9, 13–20. Can you imagine the circumstances David—the writer of the psalm—was in? Can you feel the tension between his faith in God’s goodness and his present experience? How have you dealt with the struggle of faith in God amid times of severe trial?

Throughout the Psalms, the repeated answer to this tension is the hope and promise of God’s good and just judgment. Evil and injustice may seem triumphant for now, but God will judge the evildoers and the unjust. They will be punished, while those they have hurt and oppressed will be restored and renewed.

In *Reflections on the Psalms*, C. S. Lewis describes his initial surprise at the excitement and longing for God’s judgment as expressed repeatedly in the Psalms. Observing that many Bible readers today consider judgment something to be feared, he considers the original Jewish perspective and writes, “Thousands of people who have been stripped of all they possess and who have the right entirely on their side will at last be heard. Of course they are not afraid of judgment. They know their case is unanswerable—if only it could be heard. When God comes to judge, at last it will.”—C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), p. 11.

In the Psalms, we see hope for the oppressed, even now, even amid their present sufferings and disappointments.

What reasons do we have to view the idea of judgment as positive, and not something to be feared?

“Do Something, God!”

Read Psalm 82. What is the message here to us?

Despite the ordering and rules of society that God gave to them, at various times in their history the Israelites failed to live up to this plan. They too easily became like the nations around them, living by a pattern of injustice and oppression. Leaders and judges looked after only themselves, and their favor could be purchased with bribes. Without courts to protect them, ordinary people, and the poor especially, were subject to exploitation.

Psalm 82 is a response to such a situation. It describes God’s role as Supreme Judge, and it depicts a scene in which He judges the leaders and even the judges of the people. This psalm emphasizes that those who fill such roles in society “are appointed to act as judges under Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 198. They hold their position and conduct their work as representatives and subordinates of God. In the psalmist’s view, the justice of God is a model for how earthly justice should function, and it also provides the measure against which such justice or injustice—and those who dispense it—will be judged.

The psalm concludes with a specific call for God to act (*Ps. 82:8*), to intervene and to stop the injustice that is so prevalent in the nation. Like many of the psalms, this one gives a voice to the voiceless and to the oppressed, those whose voices have been silenced by the unjust systems in which they live and work.

Psalm 82 makes an appeal to God in His position of Supreme Judge and Sovereign Ruler of the universe and of all the nations. There is no higher court or authority to which such an appeal could be made. The assurance comes that when earthly courts do not hear or uphold the cries of the poor and oppressed, which is so often the case here, there is still an undeniable opportunity to call for help.

At different times in our lives we might find ourselves as victims of injustice, but at other times we might be the one committing or profiting from injustice. In passages such as Psalm 82, we can find insight and wisdom, whether we are the oppressed or the oppressor. God is concerned for the unjust judges, too, describing them as His children and wanting them to choose to live better (*see Ps. 82:6*). Thus, there’s hope even for those on the wrong side of oppression, if they will allow themselves to be changed.

A King's Promises

Read Psalm 101. Though written for leaders, what important counsel can we take from it for ourselves, whatever our position in life?

Psalm 101 is a text for leaders. It is thought that these verses were composed by David in the early days of his reign as king of Israel. They may even have been adapted from vows that he made at the time of becoming king. In his experiences as a warrior for Saul and then a fugitive from him, he had witnessed for himself how a king who loses his way could damage the nation and his family. David determined that he was going to be a different kind of leader.

Few of us might be political or national leaders, but we all have roles in life in which we have the opportunity to influence and encourage others. These might be in our working life, community involvement, family, or church. As Ellen G. White comments on one of these settings of leadership, “the vows of David, recorded in the 101st psalm, should be the vows of all upon whom rest the responsibilities of guarding the influences of the home.”—*Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 119.

As we have opportunity, we should be prepared to suggest and uphold these principles to those who fill positions of leadership over us. And all of us, in our leadership and places of influence, have the opportunity to apply David's leadership principles in order to help us be a blessing to others.

The starting point for David is honoring God for His mercy and justice (*Ps. 101:1*), which became the foundation for everything David sought to uphold by his leadership. He sought to learn and practice these same characteristics in his life and work. To do this, he must resist the temptations toward wrongdoing, corruption, and dishonesty, all of which are particular traps for those in positions of power and leadership.

Knowing how important good counselors were to help him to do right, David pledges to seek out trustworthy advisers and to appoint honest officials. Justice and mercy were to mark his leadership, even among those who worked with and for him.

We might not be in a position to have advisers and officials, but how can we fill our lives with influences that help us to live and to lead (where we can) with justice and mercy for those who need it?

Walking With the Lord

As we near the end of the book of Psalms, the exclamations of praise seem to grow in crescendo after crescendo. The final five psalms begin with a simple and direct command to “Praise the LORD!” but the first of these—Psalm 146—has a particular focus on God’s concern for the poor and oppressed as a primary reason for such praise.

Read Psalm 146. What is the message here to us? What is the psalmist saying, especially in Psalm 146:5–9?

As surely as God is Creator of this world (*see Ps. 146:6*), this psalm describes God’s continuing work in the world as judge, provider, liberator, healer, helper, and defender—all of these focused on people in specific need of these kinds of help. It is an inspiring vision of what God does and seeks to do in our lives, in our communities, and in our world.

Sometimes we think of caring for the needy as something we ought to do because God said so. But Psalm 146 says this is something God already does—and we are invited to join with Him. When we work against poverty, oppression, and disease, we are truly working with God and His purposes. What greater privilege can there be than partnering with God in fulfilling something as inspiring as Psalm 146?

But there also are benefits for us. Christians often talk about their search for God and their desire to have a closer relationship with Him. Yet, verses such as Psalm 146:7–9, and so many others throughout the Bible, indicate to us that one way to find God is to join in with what He does. So, if He is working to lift up the poor, sick, and oppressed, as Psalm 146 says He is, we should be working with Him, as well. “Christ came to this earth to walk and work among the poor and suffering. They received the greatest share of His attention. And today, in the person of His children, He visits the poor and needy, relieving woe and alleviating suffering.

“Take away suffering and need, and we should have no way of understanding the mercy and love of God, no way of knowing the compassionate, sympathetic heavenly Father. Never does the gospel put on an aspect of greater loveliness than when it is brought to the most needy and destitute regions.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 226.

What has been your experience in how we become close to God by serving others?

Proverbs: Mercy on the Needy

As a collection of wisdom sayings, the book of Proverbs touches on a diverse range of topics and life experiences. Among these are reflections on poverty, riches, contentment, justice, and injustice—and sometimes from differing angles. Life is not always simple and straightforward, and Proverbs alerts us to the different circumstances and choices that influence how life is lived, even among those who are faithful to God.

Read and compare Proverbs 10:4; 13:23, 25; 14:31; 15:15, 16; 19:15, 17; and 30:7–9. What are these texts saying that is relevant to wealth, poverty, and helping those in need?

Proverbs emphasizes the concern and attention God has for the poor and vulnerable. Sometimes people are poor because of circumstances, poor choices, or exploitation, but whatever the causes of their situation, the Lord is still described as their Creator (*see Prov. 22:2*) and Defender (*see Prov. 22:22, 23*). These people are not to be oppressed or taken advantage of, whatever their mistakes.

While Proverbs does offer a better life through choosing wisdom and obeying God, riches are not always the result of God's blessing. Faithfulness to God is always seen as more important and ultimately more rewarding than material gain: "Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice" (*Prov. 16:8, NIV*).

Another concern in Proverbs is honesty and fair dealing in business, government, and in administering justice (*see Prov. 14:5, 25; 16:11–13; 17:15; 20:23; 21:28; 28:14–16*). Proverbs is not only concerned with the lives of individuals but also offers insight as to how society as a whole should function for the benefit of all, particularly for those who need protection. We are reminded again that at their best, those who govern and lead do so with the help of God (*see Prov. 8:15, 16*) and should be acting as agents of His grace and compassion toward those in need.

It's easy for anyone to feel sorry for those in bad situations. How, though, can we take that feeling of sorrow and turn it into action?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Last Years of David,” pp. 746–755, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; C. S. Lewis, “‘Judgment’ in the Psalms,” pp. 15–22, in *Reflections on the Psalms*.

“The psalms of David pass through the whole range of experience, from the depths of conscious guilt and self-condemnation to the loftiest faith and the most exalted communing with God. His life record declares that sin can bring only shame and woe, but that God’s love and mercy can reach to the deepest depths, that faith will lift up the repenting soul to share the adoption of the sons of God. Of all the assurances which His word contains, it is one of the strongest testimonies to the faithfulness, the justice, and the covenant mercy of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 754.

Referring to the wisdom in the book of Proverbs: “These are principles with which are bound up the well-being of society, of both secular and religious associations. It is these principles that give security to property and life. For all that makes confidence and cooperation possible, the world is indebted to the law of God, as given in His word, and as still traced, in lines often obscure and well-nigh obliterated, in the hearts of men.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 137.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In what ways would you consider yourself a leader or in a position of influence? How can you be an agent of justice in that aspect of your life?
- 2 Think about the culture and social structures of the place where you live. In what way can you work within the existing system to better the lot of those in need?
- 3 Why are the principles of justice and fairness so important for building a strong society?
- 4 While the book of Proverbs is focused on wisdom for living well, what does it tell us about what God is like?

Summary: Psalms and Proverbs are two books particularly tuned to the challenges of living faithfully amid life’s common experiences and trials. Both offer insights into God’s vision for society and His special concern for the poor and oppressed. The cry of the Psalms and the wisdom of Proverbs are that God does notice and will intervene to protect those too often ignored or exploited. And if that’s what God’s about, it’s what we should be about, as well.

Missionary SUV

By ANDREW McCHESNEY, Adventist Mission

Parking at home in the U.S. state of Maryland, Joe Marcellino saw a trail of oil winding up the street from his Isuzu Trooper SUV. “Uh-oh,” he said to his wife, Susan. “Things aren’t good.”

Joe, a 33-year-old IT manager at the Seventh-day Adventist world church headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, called a friend for help. The friend, Eric Armer, found oil spewing from the oil filter and warned that engine repairs probably would cost more than \$3,000.

Joe and Susan, recently married, had exactly \$3,000 in the bank. But Joe was reluctant to spend the money on the SUV because the couple had fallen behind in returning tithe. They owed \$1,500 for the past three months. Susan saw no room for discussion. “We need to give our firstfruits,” she said.

Joe and Susan prayed and decided to return tithe rather than repair the SUV. After the decision, Eric advised Joe to call the filling station that had changed the oil shortly before the spill. The filling station sent a mechanic to Joe’s house and, after an inspection, offered to rebuild the engine for free. Joe, however, wasn’t sure he trusted the gas station, so he accepted a \$3,000 payment instead. Joe asked another friend, Bill Brody, a car mechanic, to rebuild the engine. When the repairs were finished, Joe received the bill—for \$1,500. To his surprise, the \$3,000 from the gas station had been enough to cover repairs and tithe.

Bill cautioned Joe as a friend to sell the SUV, saying it could break down at any time. Days later, Wayne Calbi, purchasing director at Adventist Church headquarters, asked Joe whether he would be willing to sell the SUV. “A missionary in Africa has asked specifically to buy an Isuzu Trooper,” he said.

Joe immediately shared the SUV’s history, but Wayne said he was willing to take the risk. He gave Joe a fair price and shipped the vehicle to Africa. The SUV had about 40,000 miles (64,000 kilometers) on it. About 18 months passed, and Wayne told Joe, “You remember that SUV? Now it has more than 100,000 miles on it.”

“Praise the Lord!” Joe said. “I didn’t think it would last that long.”

A couple years later, Wayne announced that it had passed 200,000 miles. Then 300,000 miles. Joe was amazed. “It is the Lord who kept it going for this missionary!” he said.



JOE, now 61 and pictured left, said the experience taught him a lesson about mission and tithe. “The Lord met our needs when we sat down [and decided] as husband and wife to give our firstfruits to Him,” he said. “He didn’t only meet our needs, but He also met the needs of the missionary in Africa. The SUV became a blessing that kept on giving year after year after year.”

Part I: Overview

Music is a mnemonic device. We learn the alphabet best by singing it. Likewise, one of the best ways to memorize Scripture is to set it to song. The psalmists implicitly understood this connection between memory and music, between the message God gave them and melody as a vehicle for transporting that truth.

No wonder, then, that cries and pleas for God's mercy and His justice are expressed melodically in the Psalms. In these divinely inspired lyrics, we encounter expressions of eager yearning and longing for God's presence. We find fervent prayers and sacred songs of joy, of anger over injustice, of praise, repentance, trust, and even of believers wrestling with despair. These prayers and songs are expressed in beautiful and inspired terms.

Likewise, in the book of Proverbs we find similar themes and exhortations to depend on God's justice and mercy. Through the vehicle of figurative maxims and aphorisms, the splendor of God's infinite wisdom confronts us. In this encounter, God illuminates His people with divine directives to express compassion for the excluded, oppressed, and marginalized.

This lesson highlights songs of hope for those oppressed and in need of mercy and justice.

Teacher's Aims:

- Challenge class members to recognize God's passion for compassion and His intentional judgment in favor of those who suffer.
- Invite students to listen to the pleading lyrics of the voiceless in Psalm 82, calling for God's intervention in their behalf because earthly courts have failed to hear their cries.
- Discuss the principles of righteous leadership that King David pledged to live by.
- Enjoin your students to implement these principles in their smaller, more intimate circles of influence.
- Assure class members that God will sustain and deliver the oppressed and the disadvantaged.
- Emphasize the point that God calls us to be partners in His efforts.
- Inspire class members to move toward imitating God.
- Ultimately, as we journey toward understanding the themes of justice and mercy, seek with your class to answer the questions: Why do we, and the church, exist?

Part II: Commentary

Scripture: King David was the only person God described as “a man after mine own heart” (*Acts 13:22*). Yet, David was not without sin. David committed adultery with Bathsheba, sinning against her greatly, then arranged to have Uriah, her husband, killed. In response, the prophet Nathan approached the king with a convicting story of the rich man who took a poor man’s only lamb.

David’s verdict in 2 Samuel 12:5, 6 to Nathan’s parable was that the man should die and restore fourfold what he had extorted by stealing. When David was confronted with the fact that he was the extortioner, he did not excuse himself. His response was simple and straightforward: “I have sinned against the LORD” (*2 Sam. 12:13*).

David repented deeply. As a consequence, God extended to him a mercy equally deep, for David himself did not have to die for his own sin and God allowed him to continue to reign over Israel. But the mercy that God extended to David did not eliminate the repercussions that included the death of four of his sons.¹

In the aftermath of his fall and subsequent contrition, David wrote Psalm 51, one of his most moving poems. It expresses his full remorse and repentance. David asked God to forgive him and to extend mercy to him: “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness. . . . For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me” (*Ps. 51:1–3*).

Discuss With Your Class: Why would God show so much mercy to King David and still allow the terrible consequences of his sins to happen? How do mercy and justice relate to each other?

Scripture and Illustration: “Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked. . . . Arise, O God, judge the earth” (*Ps. 82:4, 8*).

The Psalms reveal that people struggle to make sense of injustice and inequity in the world (*see, for example, Psalm 73*). Numerous, continuous, and senseless tragedies all over the world cause people to ask questions such as: Why do innocent people suffer at the hands of evil people? Why does God *not* prevent the violence from happening? When will the oppression and violence, which only seem to increase in intensity and frequency, ever end?

In the United States alone three exceptionally brutal mass shootings

¹ (1) Infant son (*2 Sam. 12:13–19*), died seven days after his birth; (2) Amnon (*2 Sam. 13:28, 29*), murdered at the command of his half-brother Absalom; (3) Absalom (*2 Sam. 18:9–15*), killed by Joab; (4) Adonijah (*1 Kings 2:19–25*), executed on Solomon’s orders.

rocked the nation within 17 months, from late spring 2016 to the autumn of 2017, as follows:

- November 5, 2017—A gunman walked into a worship service in a small church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, and shot and killed 26 people, leaving 20 seriously wounded.
- October 1, 2017—In Las Vegas, Nevada, a gunman opened fire from his hotel room on the 32nd floor. He shot at a large crowd of people at an outdoor concert, leaving 58 dead and over 500 injured. This crime constituted the deadliest mass shooting committed by one individual in the United States.
- June 12, 2016—A gunman killed 49 people and wounded over 50 others at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida.

Invite class members to read Psalm 73:2–16 and Psalm 82 aloud. What do these psalms teach us about the harsh reality of human oppression and injustice in this world?

End your discussion by reading the rest of Psalm 73. In verse 17, the psalmist says that he did not understand why the wicked prospered “until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end” (*Ps. 73:17*). How does the sanctuary doctrine, with its teaching of a judgment in which we must face our life’s record, help put this life, with its injustice and inequity, in the proper perspective? Read also 1 Corinthians 4:5 and 2 Thessalonians 1:3–10. How do these verses, along with Psalm 73, help you with your questions about the justice of God and the injustice in this world? (For further study, read Habakkuk.)

Illustration: Psalm 146:7–9 describes the activities of our God. As His people, we are invited to join Him in His work.

In light of this psalm, consider the following: a local pastor held a retreat every year for church leaders. At the most recent retreat, they wrestled with two questions:

1. Where is God active in our community?
2. Where, and how, does God want us to join Him?

If your class is large enough, break into smaller groups to respond to the pastor’s two questions. How can your class join God in what He is already doing in your community through other people and organizations? On a board, if available, list the good things that are happening in your church’s community. Ask your class how their church can join and support the good things that already are happening. Begin to lay plans. If you do not know what is transpiring in your community, make appointments to visit community leaders. Ask them about what is happening and how your church can help.

Illustration: As a train was leaving a large railroad station, the conductor began making his rounds to take tickets. He looked at the ticket of the first passenger and said, “Friend, I think you’re on the wrong train!” The man replied, “But the ticket agent told me this was my train.” The conductor decided to check with the ticket agent, and he discovered that *he* was on the wrong train!²

Discuss With Your Class: When a leader is lost, how can followers stay on the right track? In the aftermath of his sin against Bathsheba, how did King David stay on the right track, ruling with justice and mercy? Review Psalm 101 with your class.

Scripture: Drawing from John Stott, one advocate for justice and mercy lays out a portrait of the poor as found in the book of Proverbs. The portrait of the poor is based on three verses in Proverbs: Proverbs 14:31, 29:7, and 31:8. If possible, a few days ahead of time, assign each one of these three passages to different class members; ask them to prepare some comments on what their verse means to them. Invite them to share their comments with the rest of the class.

1. Proverbs 14:31—“He that oppressteth the poor reproacheth his Maker: but he that honoureth him hath mercy on the poor.”

Our attitude about the poor is reflected in our attitude about God. Our attitude about God, in turn, is reflected in our attitude toward the poor. *The poor have God-given dignity, and are of inestimable value.* Take a paper money bill that has become worn and show it to the class. Ask them, “How much is the worn bill worth? Is it worth any less because it is creased and faded?”

2. Proverbs 29:7 (*EXB*)—“Good [Righteous] people care [know] about justice for [the rights of] the poor, but the wicked are not concerned [do not understand].”

Read this verse together, putting emphasis first on *good (righteous) people*, then on *care*, and then on *justice*. Discuss what each highlighted word looks like in action. How does this verse clarify what it means to be righteous or wicked?

Read 2 Corinthians 8:13, 14 in class. Notice: equality appears twice. The Greek word *isoteis* is used here for equality, and can mean *fairness or justice—which, in turn, must be applied to all people*. Show a picture of the scales of justice to illustrate the concept: equality = justice.

3. Proverbs 31:8 (*NLT*)—“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed.” The King James Version poignantly renders the last part of this verse as: “in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction.”

These verses clearly portray the third feature of the biblical portrait of the poor: *The poor are powerless and voiceless.* How can we, and our church,

² “Leadership,” Sermon Illustrations, accessed March 5, 2019, <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/1/leadership.htm>.

Speak up for the powerless and voiceless? What place does advocacy in behalf of the poor and oppressed have in the mission of the church? Note how the Holy Spirit and Jesus play the role of Advocate in behalf of powerless humanity. See John 14:26 and 1 John 2:1. The Greek word *paráklētos* in John 14:26 is sometimes translated Advocate, Comforter, or Helper. Advocacy is a characteristic of God, and His Church should reflect His character.

Part III: Life Application

As you move to the application part of your class's lesson study, here are two stories to share and apply:

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a courageous advocate for justice and mercy and was imprisoned as a result. He wrote from prison: "Here and there people flee from public altercation into the sanctuary of private *virtuousness*. But anyone who does this must shut his mouth and his eyes to the injustice around him."³

Ask Your Class: What does the above statement by Bonhoeffer mean to you? What implications does it have for living as an Adventist Christian where there is injustice and a lack of mercy?

2. Alex and several men in his church took turns spending the night at a homeless shelter. That is where Alex met Greg. Greg had just been released from prison and said, "Forgive me if I don't smile a lot; I'm missing a tooth from a jailhouse fight." The Holy Spirit nudged Alex to do something about Greg's smile. Alex told Greg's story to his Sabbath School class and to a compassionate dentist in the congregation. The generosity of the class and of the dentist resolved Greg's problem. Greg tearfully said, "I don't want to mess up my new look, so I'm not using tobacco anymore." Then he added to his friend, "Look Alex! I've got my smile back." Alex concluded that there is a relationship between Sabbath School and compassion. How can your class cause a story like that to happen?

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison: The Enlarged Edition* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), p. 5.